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One Monster, Three Revolutions

Monsters have been common characters in cinema for decades, inspiring fear in audiences with their grotesque physiques and heinous actions. Inhuman creatures have not only been used to scare viewers, however. In fact, unnatural beings have also represented aspects about our world that frighten us. In Guillermo Del Toro's 2017 film *The Shape of Water*, the Amphibian Man enters the life of our mute protagonist, Elisa Esposito. The creature interacts with her two companions, Zelda and Giles, and a mission to return the monster to the wild ensues. The director was purposeful in choosing a black woman and a closeted gay man as Elisa's closest confidants. In this paper, I argue that the presence of the Amphibian Man inspires these three characters to push back against their oppressors and to become more than just one attribute.

First, we have the main character of the film, a white, middle-aged woman who has been unable to speak since childhood. She bonds with the Amphibian Man while she and Zelda clean his containment chamber. What begins as a unique friendship develops into a loving romance, with the film concluding with Elisa joining the creature in the wild. Elisa stands out as a character due to her rich personality. She may not talk at all throughout the film, but viewers are still able to clearly understand her desires and emotions. This is accomplished through the usage of sign language, with both Zelda and Giles understand, and through Sally Hawkins' engaging performance as the protagonist. From the first few scenes of the film, we already know that Elisa

has sexual wants and that she adores dancing. As the movie continues, the audience watches as her comedic and daring nature shines through in every scene she's in. Her disability does not hinder her energy or her relationships with her loved ones. In fact, halfway through the film, Elisa becomes confident enough to look down upon her supervisor, Strickland, who earlier admitted his perverse attraction to her muteness. Our heroine does not struggle with her inability to vocalize. She is instead portrayed as a jovial character who risks it all to save a monster's life.

Elisa is depicted as more than just a woman with a disability. Her complex character is aided by her inherent connections to the supernatural realm that the Amphibian Man hails from, which is established in the opening sequence of the movie. Within these first few minutes, we navigate a river, submerged in water. We then float right into Elisa's apartment, where we witness furniture floating all over and even see our protagonist sleeping soundly despite being underwater. This moment is meant to show viewers that Elisa has an affinity for the magical world that exists alongside the human realm in this film. She is able to establish communication with the Amphibian Man thanks to her sign language, but also because she does not fear his appearance whatsoever. In her article, Lagarón states that stories that explore magical realism give powerless characters power through their ability to perceive things others do not.¹ Elisa's deep connection with the fish creature is made loud and clear when she and Giles argue over freeing the monster from captivity. Our heroine signs phrases such as "I move my mouth, like him, I make no noise, like him" and "He does not know how I am incomplete." Elisa is able to see the humanity in the Amphibian Man and relates to him in that no one understands either of them. Their bond argues that mute peoples, and by extension, those with any kind of disability, feel ostracized by society. Indeed, it's not often that characters with handicaps are seen on

¹ Lagarón, "Blessed are the Pure of Heart", 6

screen, and it is especially rare that they take the helm of protagonist. Despite being “othered” by the public, both Elisa and the film’s monster find comfort in one another. Our heroine sees past the Amphibian Man’s otherworldly appearance and the creature loves her for who she is. While ignorance and fear may dissuade some people from seeing those with disabilities as anything more than what they lack, *The Shape of Water* crafts its gorgeous narrative around a woman unable to speak yet able to unconditionally love. Elisa is a strong-willed woman, as she will not stop until her lover is finally free.

Next, we have Elisa’s coworker at the secret base, a black woman named Zelda Fuller. She is a boisterous woman, always talking about her life and keeping an eye out for our protagonist. Both women complement each other well throughout the film and, despite her initial hesitation, Zelda assists her friend in liberating the Amphibian Man from the facility. Throughout the film, we have multiple references to the Civil Rights Movement occurring behind the scenes. We first see a quick broadcast of protestors being hosed down by white police and then witness Walter turn away a black couple from eating at his pie shop. These incidents allow the audience to understand the change happening within the United States at the time *The Shape of Water* takes place. The black community is fighting for equal rights, but the movement is still in progress. Zelda might have a paying job at the government facility, but it is clear that prejudice is still in the air within the establishment. Strickland makes some particularly racist comments toward her throughout the film, one of which is directed at the “uncharacteristically” small number of people within her family. She is later threatened by him right as Elisa is about to return the Amphibian Man back to the wild. Despite the traumatic experience, Zelda is still able to warn her friend about Strickland and buys Elisa enough time to get to the docks.

Zelda's character, while certainly affected by the social and political tensions underling the film's story, is written in a way that delves into her experiences as a POC woman. It is true that her race does affect how others see her in the movie, but her identity as a black woman is particularly explored within *The Shape of Water*'s narrative. As defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term 'intersectionality' serves as "a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects."² As audience members view the film, they pick up on the somber aspects of Zelda's life. She complains about her husband, Brewster, during various points in the film. She voices her disdain over his laziness, comments which at first seem like harmless banter. However, as we later see after Strickland's invasion of the Fuller home, Brewster tries to bully Zelda to do as he says. When she tries to warn Elisa about Strickland, Brewster tells her to not involve herself further, attempting to halt any action she may take. While Zelda has remained complacent with her husband's wishes up to this point in the movie, she lashes out at him for suggesting she should abandon her friend. She tells him she's had enough of his attitude and that she will be warning her friend of the impending danger.

The harmful stereotype of the "angry black woman" is, unfortunately, a common trope that we see in mainstream media today. In *Shape of Water*, Zelda's anger is depicted in a more nuanced way. Her refusal to abide by her husband's wishes adds credence to her loyal nature. She remains true to her one friend, whom she hesitated to help earlier. Despite being a side character, Zelda is given her own development, an arc that illuminates her attributes as a strong woman who will by no means allow evil to triumph. The appearance of the Amphibian Man does disrupt her life, but its presence leads her to stand up for herself against Strickland and her

² Crenshaw, "On Intersectionality".

husband. She may be oppressed due to being a black woman, but she is nevertheless illustrated as someone capable of enacting change.

Finally, there's Giles, Elisa's homosexual neighbor and best friend. He's an aspiring artist, constantly painting within his apartment and is the first of Elisa's friends to agree to help her free the monster. As this movie takes place in the early 1960s, homosexuality is frowned upon in the public sphere. We see an example of society's close-mindedness when Giles approaches Walter at his pie shop. What initially appears as a promising chance at romance is destroyed in an instant when Walter reacts adversely to the older man's interest. The worker then tells Giles to never return to his shop again, declaring, "this is a family establishment." While we don't see Giles trying to find other partners throughout the rest of the film, this sequence is enough to clue us into how the masses see a man of his sexuality. From this one unfortunate interaction, the painter is labeled as a menace to youths and he ultimately returns to being a recluse within his home. In spite of this event, Giles becomes an important asset to Elisa and their friendship grows stronger as they hide the Amphibian Man from the rest of the world.

Giles' connection to monsters can be tied to the United States' complicated history in regard to the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. In one article, the term 'monstrous' is defined as "a construction - a figure who signifies selves and ways of living the world cannot 'bear to see'".³ In short, the idea being monster-like is tied to what makes others uncomfortable. Giles is monstrous in the sense that he is perceived negatively in the society he lives in. He struggles to find happiness via his search for a partner and continues to fight for a purpose after his art career takes a downturn. At first, it seems that all of his attempts to find contentment are in vain. However, once Elisa brings the Amphibian Man back to her home, Giles' world begins

³ Jones, "Monsters, Desire and the Creative Queer Body", 518

to change. Not only does the creature gift the man youth by helping him grow back his hair, but the painter also becomes inspired by the monster's relationship with Elisa. He does not try to sell his new collection of works. Instead, he keeps them in his home, creating more and more art at his own pace. *The Shape of Water* focuses in on Giles' hobbies and his inner turmoil over his age. He is written as a sympathetic character who always does what he can to help Elisa, not just as a gay man. Through his time with the Amphibian Man, he comes to understand how loners need to band together and resist the ideas of those who oppress them.

The Shape of Water is a complex movie, one that discusses multiple social issues at once. Elisa, Zelda, and Giles each represent a community that has been silenced by society. Each character is fully developed, with their respective disability, race, or sexuality being only just one aspect of their identity. Each of these characters' ties to the Amphibian Man allow for these individuals to learn more about themselves. In the end, Elisa, Zelda, and Giles choose to act instead of remaining on the sidelines. In the end, the main moral of this film is that acceptance can lead to happiness. This makes one wonder: if a fish-man is able to accept each of these three characters as they are, why shouldn't the world as a whole accept others just like them?

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