The Macksey Journal

Volume 1 Article 49

2020

Embracing the Monster: The Films of Guillermo del Toro

Alexandra R. Gaines
North Carolina State University, alexandragaines1021@gmail.com

Embracing the Monster: The Films of Guillermo del Toro

Alexandra R. Gaines

North Carolina State University

Abstract

Classic monster fiction such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* portray monsters as creatures that can never be fully accepted into the world that surrounds them, despite their continuous efforts to enter society. As early as the publication of *Frankenstein*, there is an emphasis placed on the sympathetic plight of the Monster, who longs for a world that can accept him. Ultimately by the end of these famous novels and later films, most of these monsters are defeated. Films especially in the 21st century have reinvented and revisited these classic monsters in a new light, in a way that addresses the inherent liminal nature of the monster. The films of Guillermo del Toro, such as *Hellboy* and *The Shape of Water* demonstrate how there is often a connection between the monster and the outcast, such as the orphan, the differently abled, and the unfamiliar to overall society. By having his protagonists recognize that the differences between themselves and these often frightening creatures are in fact minimal, del Toro's films allow for a new and beautiful interpretation of historically feared creatures to come to light. This paper suggests that with the films of Guillermo del Toro and more diverse voices in the filmmaking world in general, monsters have changed from something used to espouse xenophobic or other discriminatory beliefs to ones that can be understood and sympathized with.

Keywords: Monsters, sympathy, Frankenstein, Guillermo del Toro

As early as the classic monster novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, there is a feeling that monsters are outcasts, never able to be fully accepted into society and therefore wreaking havoc on it, before ultimately being destroyed. Though the monster may make attempts to integrate into human society, sometimes earnestly, they are deemed too different by the other characters to fully be accepted. The monster is defined by being a figure that stands alone, crossing uncomfortable categories and defying strict definitions. The classic monster films of the mid-20th century reestablished these monsters in the cultural imagination, dazzling spectators in some unexpected ways, often focusing on the horror of a woman pursued by a monster. Some, like director Guillermo del Toro, fell in love with these monsters.

One classic monster film or novel trope is the pursuit of an innocent, often a girl or woman, depicting as incredibly vulnerable, such as Dracula's pursuit of Mina Harker or Frankenstein's Monster's infatuation with an innocent family. Scenes like these exhilarate the audience, raising the tension as the audience anxiously watches the woman try and escape from the clutches of the monster. These monsters are eventually denied these connections, and the objects of their interest, oftentimes women, flee into the arms of a masculine, traditionally heroic figure, especially in the works of classic Hollywood. These monsters, especially ones created in the Victorian and later even mid-1900s, often suggest explicitly or implicitly undertones of racism and xenophobia. "The monster" writes Jefferey Cohen, "is difference made flesh" and monstrous differences tend to be cultural, political, racial, economic, and social (7). The Monster represents an "Other" in society, that is kept apart by their differences and demonized for them. In the films of del Toro however, his characters often flee *into* the embrace of the monstrous figures, and not just in a romantic context. Many key scenes of his films feature embraces between humans, typically women, with the monsters. The word even appears in the script of

one of his earliest demonstrations of his love for monsters, with the 2004 film *Hellboy*. In the opening scenes of *Hellboy*, where an infant red-skinned ape-like child appears following a failing summoning of ancient demons, he is discovered by a character named Dr. Broom, already ostracized from his fellow men serving in the army alongside him, for his eccentric belief in folklore. The frightened creature, coaxed from a hiding place through the use of candy bars, climbs into the arms of Dr. Broom. The script reads: "Broom smiles like a proud new father and embraces the creature" (qtd. in Milwaukie, 33). This eagerness to embrace and adopt a creature that outwardly resembles something monstrous demonstrates how the ostracized and "Others" in del Toro's films often seek each other out without fear.

Monsters in history did cultural work, as throughout medieval times they were used to "police the boundaries of the possible" as described as Jeffrey Cohen (15). In medieval maps they often populated areas considered unknown or uncivilized by the European cartographers, with creatures like cynocephali or cyclops scattered throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. English accounts of werewolves populating and roaming throughout Ireland demonstrate how prejudice against peoples even slightly different lead to this extreme othering of people. This function of monsters is also seen in the horror and gothic Victorian era novels, many of which lead to the early Hollywood successes, including *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, as they raise questions and anxieties of moral and social issues of the time, including Darwinism, the relationship of man and nature, and anxiety over immigration. The monster then acts, as Cohen states, as a "vehicle for prohibition", transforming people or differences into something monstrous "whether to validate specific alignments of masculinity and whiteness, or simply to be pushed from its realm of thought" (15).

Angela Smith describes a principal function of monsters as being a vessel for: “questions about social injustice that the monster animates” (Smith). In an interview with NPR, del Toro also echoes this perspective on the existence of monsters, stating that “it’s a social function, a basic function of mankind and our brain and our soul to invent monsters” (“Guillermo Del Toro's 'Eternal' Monster Obsession”).

Del Toro, described by Zalewski as a “playfully morbid child” whose earliest toy was a stuffed werewolf he created with his great-aunt, has held a fascination and love for monsters since childhood (Zalewski). One moment often referred to by the director that struck him in childhood was the pursuit of the female protagonist by the creature in the black lagoon: “I remember seeing the creature swimming under her (lead actress Julie Adams) and I thought it was a beautiful image. I hoped they would end up together but they didn’t,” (qtd. in Grater). In connection to the later depictions of the relationships between children and monsters, Vargas describes how in the films of del Toro, “children form strong bonds with monsters that are transformed into benevolent and liberating figures” (Vargas, 184). Del Toro also stresses the beauty he finds in these creatures, stating in his Guardian article “I find monstrous things incredibly beautiful” (del Toro). When designing his monsters, there is clearly an extensive amount of care taken into them, and the designs often take elements from humans, animals and fantasy.

Del Toro’s films suggest the differences between monsters and his protagonists is minimal at best, presenting two seemingly different beings as being mutual if not in their differences, at the very least in their marginalization. His attitude toward his creatures is: “We’re told constantly to fear the other. I tried to say, can we embrace the other?” (qtd. in Radish). His human protagonists exist in worlds where they are excluded in some fashion, making them more

likely to co-exist with the Monster, or as del Toro refers to them, the "Other". By using this word, del Toro has the monster act as a stand-in for any person who was excluded throughout history. His humans are "Others" as well. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, protagonist Ofelia is the only child in the camp of a fascist leader in Spain's civil war, someone more concerned with fairytales than the horror of war. Liz Sherman of *Hellboy* possesses dangerous powers capable of mass destruction, and at the beginning of the film she is isolated in a mental institution of her own choice. Elisa of *The Shape of Water* is disabled, not being able to speak, and communicating solely through sign language and often music as well. All of these human protagonists can connect to their respective monsters, be it a Faun, a demon from Hell itself, or an amphibian man worshipped as a god.

Historically, this shift is not surprising if we look back at Mary Shelley's monster masterpiece, *Frankenstein*. Along with this idea that monster is defined by their difference, they are also, according to Jeanne Britton "defined by the desire for a sympathetic experience" (5). Frankenstein's Monster attempts and almost succeeds at befriending a family and he develops his understanding of humanity through observation of a brother-sister relationship and later that of a refuge girl, Safie. Though the Monster does not interact directly with this ostracized woman, his desire for a female companion, which is interpreted (and perhaps misinterpreted) by his creator as an evil act, has been the subject of much scholarship. Martine Mussies even suggests the novel's staying power is "this identification of the female with the monstrous – with what has been shunned, ostracized and labelled as 'Other' –has given Shelley's novel its lasting power" (Mussies, 49). Mussies suggests that the experience between the woman and the Monster is not dissimilar, and this possibility for a connection is one reason why Shelley's novel continues to fascinate readers.

Frankenstein's Monster demonstrates how both society's others and the Monster often hold a desire for a sympathetic experience. The monster in this novel is not born a malicious killer but instead hardens from an innocent hopeful creature to a killer as a result of continued rejection from society, especially his creator. In his narrative of his history after being abandoned by his creator, he describes himself as "wretched, helpless and alone" (Shelley, 110). After his rejection from the family from whom observing becomes a master of language and mannerism, the monster states: "I, like the arch-fiend bore a hell within me, and finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me" (116). Seeing this as a sign human society will never accept him, the Monster then precedes to ask his Creator for a companion, which at first moves Dr. Frankenstein. After the Monster pleads "let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing" (125). Dr. Frankenstein himself admits that "his words had a strange effect on me" and he very nearly completes a second monster, which he interprets as a mate, while the Monster's language refers to the potential second creature as a companion to live in peace with, until his horror leads to him destroying it (126). Despite the fact that the female monster is never fully created in the novel, the long-standing fascination with her potential demonstrates a sense of connection or fascination with her possibility, or the possibility of the Monster gaining a companion. Despite her lack of appearance in the novel and a very brief one in the 1935 film sequel, "the Bride has become a creature of cultural memory" (Hawley). There seems to be a desire to see the Monster be able to find a creature to relate to, to share in his differences by both his Creator in the novel, and readers, and audiences' decades and centuries later.

The novel was incredibly powerful to Guillermo del Toro as well, and he states the reason it was so important to him in his teenage years was "because what Mary Shelley wrote

was the quintessential sense of isolation you have as a kid" (qtd. in Telligman). This sense of isolation is especially seen in the creature Shelley illustrates, and his own protagonists also often share in this sense of loneliness, which contributes to their connection with Monsters. Isolation in his films is often a result of difference, whether it is the social isolation as a result of a protagonist's muteness or self-imposed isolation due to a character's appearance.

Frankenstein is a film he hopes to direct himself one day. Despite Shelley's sympathy to her innovative Monster that defined the science-fiction genre for decades later, the film portrayals largely seem to be a contrast to her portrayal. Instead the focus is in the terror and grotesqueness of the Monster, where the woman and the monster are turned into "two objects of cinematic spectacle" (Williams, 63). Just as Cohen argues that the monster is a "glyph" for cultural anxieties at the time of its creation, anxieties of the culture in which the film was made seem to be transferred onto these monsters. Dracula, a foreigner, spreads his contagion of vampirism throughout beautiful white women in London. Many have used the trope of an innocent being pursued by the monster as one to excite and terrify readers and moviegoers. In Linda William's essay, "When the Woman Looks" she highlights how this connection has often been misinterpreted in a sexual manner, while it's more of a sympathetic one. She argues, that as a result of the predominantly male and non-diverse filmmakers at the time of the height of the monster movie that the connection between woman and monster has been misinterpreted. Williams writes "the strange sympathy and affinity that often develops between the monster and the girl may thus be less an expression of sexual desire and more a flash of sympathetic identification" (63). The two women who share relationships with monsters share this sense of identification with their monster counterpart, further suggesting the Monster is not so Other as the audience may initially perceive.

These films, while focused more on the sexual aspect of the relationship between woman and monster, usually just a threat of dominance by a being deemed too "Other" to function in society, were a defining aspect of Del Toro's life. His desire to see the female protagonist and the Creature from the Black Lagoon to find happiness with each other, created an urge to see the Monster, the "Other", not just survive but flourish, directly inspiring *The Shape of Water*. In an interview with Peter Debruge, he also expressed a wish to a see a story in the vein of : "a fairy-tale that is sort of 'Beauty and the Beast' but where the beast never turns into the prince" (Debruge).

The female protagonists of del Toro's films, especially in *Hellboy* and *The Shape of Water*, exist in a world that others them as a result of their differences, making them more inclined to identify with the othered monster. With their relationships with monsters, there is a suggestion of a recognition between them that both are inherently liminal in their societies, and they can recognize each other as mutual in their struggles. This is first established by the first look or first encounter between the woman and the monster. As William writes: "The female look…recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference" (63). These relationships hinge on their shared differences, and the fact that they are able to recognize this fact.

Hellboy touches on themes later explored further in *The Shape of Water* and it illustrates perfectly the relationship between woman and monster with Liz Sherman and titular Hellboy. Hellboy, though clearly othered by his supernatural origin and physical appearance resembling a demon, is described by del Toro as incredibly relatable, stating: "With Ron Perlman playing Hellboy, your heart goes out to him because he's such a wide-eyed, big-hearted creature" (del Toro). Though he does possess superhuman powers in his free time Hellboy takes care of his

countless pet cats, practices boxing and jokes with his coworkers. *Hellboy* also demonstrates the desire for a sympathetic experience, as Kim Newman describes a major accomplishment of the prologue of the film:

> The key moment in the comic, reproduced perfectly here, comes after Hellboy has been snatched from the Nazis who would raise him as an Antichrist: the demon baby poses for a photograph with a crowd of smiling World War Il-era GIs and the academic foster father who will raise him to live like these regular-Joe heroes. (Newman)

Hellboy is almost the complete opposite of Frankenstein's Monster, with a loving father he develops into a character capable of heroism, understanding and love. Liz, who has fire powers she struggles to control, finds herself ostracized in a way very similar to Hellboy, the adopted son of Professor Broom who works for the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense, summoned in the opening of the film from another dimension. Both find themselves hidden from the majority of the world, Liz attempting to spend the majority of the film locked where she can't harm with her powers and Hellboy working in the top-secret BPRI with a few companions and cats, his devil-like appearance already othering him even without his supernatural origin. Due to their shared otherness, they come to support each other, with Hellboy telling Liz: "I can promise you two things. One, I'll always look this good. Two, I'm not giving up on you." Kept away from fully entering normal society by their differences, their relationship feels incredibly natural. They both feel self-conscious about their differences yet find comfort in each other because of them. In a subversion, del Toro has Liz, despite human male protagonists Agent Myers interest in her throughout the film, embrace and kiss Hellboy in the final shot of the film, with the script reading: "Liz looks at Hellboy for the first time as what he is: the man she loves" (qtd. in Milwaukie, 199).

Elisa, the protagonist of the 2018 film *The Shape of Water*, is a disabled protagonist, being mute. Working in a government facility, she fosters a connection to the captive amphibian man who cannot speak either, and in an innovation with del Toro's directing, both connect not through words but instead through music and movement, which later evolves into dancing. Sally Hawkins who portrays the character, states on the development of their relationship: "she recognizes something in him…she doesn't quite understand it, I think, but it's just a growing feeling of recognition and familiarity" (qtd. in McIntyre, 103). This sense of familiarity Hawkins emphasizes that her character has goes along with Williams idea of the woman's look to the monster being caused by that of sympathetic recognition of shared differences. Del Toro suggests with the film that the Monster in the film is Elisa's other self, in the Monster she shares a fellowship and to him exists as an equal. The Monster is captured from South America, worshipped as God there, and his existence relying on that of living in water establishes him as undeniably different. Yet he is also very human like in his movement, stature, and affinity for music. Del Toro's inspiration for the film was the idea of "a fairy-tale that is sort of 'Beauty and the Beast' but where the beast never turns into the prince" (qtd. in Debruge). Instead he takes the opposite route with his finale, by having Elisa join the amphibian man. These two characters are not just the only marginalized figures in the film, as Tom Grater notes: "*The Shape Of Water* puts the spotlight on marginalized characters, or as del Toro says, "invisible people" - the janitors played by Hawkins and Octavia Spencer; Jones' imprisoned creature; Richard Jenkins' unheralded poster designer; and Michael Stuhlbarg's ignored scientist" (Grater).

All of these characters find themselves drawn into the Monster's plight, his potential to be held captive and experimented, as they all share their own sense of marginalization or prejudice. Throughout the film there is a suggestion that there is an attraction between these

invisible people, and it is made clear when Elisa manages to free the amphibian man and later joins him in an embrace in the final minutes of the film.

The female protagonists of these two films long for someone who can understand them, as everyone does, and they find that with a figure other dub "Monsters". Instead of fearing these figures, instead Liz and Elisa find fellow beings that share experiences in their own struggles and are able to relate to these inhuman creatures more than their fellow human beings. His protagonists, and even the side characters who interact with them, all carry differences that set them apart from complete acceptance from the human society from where they come. Liz, not in complete control of dangerous powers, is isolated in both social relationships and physically, trying to contain herself within a mental institution. Elisa's disability means she must use sign language to communicate, which the amphibian man readily accepts while others in the film struggle to understand it, with the exception of her two exceptional friends, African-American Zelda and gay Giles, both of whom also face prejudice throughout the film. If del Toro's creatures are superhuman, so then are his protagonists. Elisa is the only to truly befriend and relate to the god-like amphibian man, and Liz's fiery powers when controlled are powerful weapons.

Guillermo del Toro as a child longed for the monsters, like the amphibian man from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* and the female protagonists to find happiness with each era. The films of his childhood emerged from an era where filmmakers did not fully understand or refuse to experiment with the sympathetic structure of Shelley's foundational monster text. However today, as more diverse filmmakers emerge, the understanding of the meaning and connection between women and monsters is being fully explored, and Del Toro especially demonstrates this in his happy endings for his monsters in *Hellboy* and *The Shape of Water*. Del

Toro also suggests the beauty that is inherent in difference, as he emphasizes his design for the amphibian man was fueled by the goal that he "wanted an intelligent, beautiful, compact creature" (qtd. in Grater). These human women and the monsters are connected by the fact that they are different, desire sympathy and share in a sense of isolation, all of which are quintessential human emotions and experiences.

As Liz and Elisa illustrate this sympathetic identification of their own difference with these Monsters, there is a suggestion of a more accepting and kinder perception to the idea of "the Other" entirely. With these films, there is an unapologetic attitude of kindness to those who are different, in a way that prompts not just other characters in the story but the audience as well to receive the Monster as a figure that shares a lot in common with them, going along with director del Toro' belief that: "I believe we can love each other and believe we can move away from those who want to shame us for being "different", for being "Other" (qtd. in McIntyre, 7). With these monsters and the embraces del Toro's films show, there seems to be hope for the Other.

Works Cited

Britton, Jeanne M. "Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2009, pp. 3–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25602177.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. NED - New edition ed., University of Minnesota Press, 1996. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsq4d.

Debruge, Peter. "With 'The Shape of Water', Guillermo del Toro Realizes a Lifelong Monster Dream". *Variety*. 31 August 2017, http://variety.com/2017/film/features/director-guillermo-del-toro-1202543106/.

Del Toro, Guillermo. "How I made Hellboy in my image". *The Guardian*, 26 July 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/jul/27/guillermodeltoro.

Grater, Tom. "Guillermo Del Toro on how 'the Shape of Water' Reflects Today's "Casual Racism and Sexism"." *Screen Daily*, 8 December 2017, https://www.screendaily.com/features/guillermo-del-toro-on-how-the-shape-of-water-reflects-todays-casual-racism-and-sexism/5124817.article

Guillermo Del Toro's 'Eternal' Monster Obsession. NPR, Washington, D.C., 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/10/24/141657899/guillermo-del-toros-eternal-monster-obsession.

Hawley, Erin. "The Bride and Her Afterlife: Female Frankenstein Monsters on Page and Screen." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2015, pp. 218-231. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43799028?seq=1.

Hellboy. Dir. Guillermo del Toro. 2004. Sony Pictures Releasing. DVD.

McIntyre, Gina, and Guillermo del Toro. *The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times*. Insight Editions, 2017.

Milwaukie, Ore, and Guillermo del Toro. *Hellboy: the art of the movie, including the final shooting script*. Dark Horse, 2004. Print.

Mussies, Martine. "Frankenstein and The Lure: Border Crossing Creatures through a Feminist Lens". *Foundation*, 47 (130), 2018, p. 47.

Newman, Kim. "Reviews: The Main Attraction: Beauty in the Beast: "Hellboy". *Sight and Sound*, vol. 14, no. 9, 09, 2004, pp. 50-51, 65.

Nuzum, K. A. "The Monster's Sacrifice- Historic Time: The Uses of Mythic and Liminal Time in Monster Literature". *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Volume 29, Number 3, Fall 2004, pp. 217-222. Print.

Radish, Christinia. "Guillermo del Toro on 'The Shape of Water', the Beauty of Monsters, and Connecting with 'Lady Bird'". *Collider*. 12 February 2018, https://collider.com/guillermo-del-toro-the-shape-of-water-interview.

Riley, Jenelle. "Guillermo del Toro on His Love Affair with Monsters, 'Crimson Peak' and Being a Fanboy". *Variety*. 29 September 2015, https://variety.com/2015/film/spotlight/guillermo-del-toro-crimson-peak-monsters-1201603998/.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Signet Classics, 2001.

Smith, Angela M. "Walk this Way: Frankenstein's Monster, Disability Performance, and Zombie Ambulation." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2018, pp. 412-438.

Telligman, Megan. "Guillermo del Toro's monstrous inspiration". Indiana Humanities. March 1, 2018. https://indianahumanities.org/monstrousinspiration.

The Shape of Water. Dir. Guillermo del Toro. 2017. Fox Searchlight.

Vargas, Juan Carlos. “Between Fantasy and Reality: The Child’s Vision and Fairy Tales in Guillermo del Toro’s Hispanic Trilogy.” The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro, ed. Ann Davies, et. al., Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014.

Williams, Linda. “When the Woman Looks.” Re-vision: essays in feminist film criticism, ed. Mary Anne Doane, et. al., American Film Institute, University Publications of America, 1984, pp. 83-99.

Zalewski, Daniel. “Show the Monster”. *The New Yorker*. 30 January 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/.