# Aquatic Heterosexual Love and Wondrous Cliché Stereotypes: Amphibian Masculinity, the Beast Bridegroom Motif and 'the Other' in The Shape of Water

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the representation of masculinities in the award-winning romantic fantasy film *The Shape of Water* (2017). The study examines how *The Shape of Water* communicates with other texts and myths portraying aquatic entities such as Gill Man from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and how the movie is tied to the folkloric tradition of monstrous love interest. Further, the text investigates how otherness is portrayed and constructed through the different representations in the movie. The paper concludes that the film's diverse characters create a superficial appearance of an understanding for marginalised subjects. *The Shape of Water* is a classic beast bridegroom fairy tale with stagnated representations of feminine and masculine ideals that turn 'the other' into an instrument of self-realisation for a white subject. Moreover, the Amphibian Man is differentiated from his aquatic female counterparts through traditional masculine attributes such as a muscular body type, a reptilian appearance and being two-legged instead of having a fishtail.

**Keywords:** *The Shape of Water*, Masculinity, Media Studies

## Introduction

A mute cleaning lady and an amphibious creature fall in love in a laboratory. This might not be the most traditional set-up for a romantic film, but it is a setting which has led to commercial and critical success for *The Shape of Water* (del Toro, 2017). The amphibious creature in the film has no name and is in the closing credits simply referred to as 'Amphibian Man' (Doug Jones). Amphibian Man has a lot of similarities with Gill Man, the monster from the cult film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Arnold, 1954). The two creatures look visually akin, they both live in the Amazon River and share qualities with mythical creatures existing in cultures around the Amazon Rainforest (Verevis,

2012: 68). In *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, Gill Man, like many other monsters in 1950s films, kidnaps a woman and is in the end shot and left to die. del Toro has stated that when he watched the 1954 cult film as a child, he always wanted a happy ending for Gill Man and the beautiful woman. Therefore, in *The Shape of Water*, del Toro gave a water dwelling monster a love story of his own (Kit, 2017).

*The Shape of Water* has been celebrated not only for its production design, directing, musical score, acting and screenplay, but also for its political message of empathy towards marginalised groups. For example, Guy Lodge (2017) writes in *The Guardian* that "[*The Shape of Water*] is a film that rousingly, none-too-subtly champions marginalised minorities and outsiders, and regards conservative masculine authority with a jaundiced eye", and adds that the film constitutes "a very literal 'fuck you' to *The Man*" (authors' emphasis). These claims make the film particularly interesting to analyse from a gender theorist's perspective. For example, what is this "conservative masculine authority" contrasted with? And furthermore, how are masculinities represented in *The Shape of Water*?

## Representations of masculinities

Representations of monstrous amphibious men and mute beautiful women can facilitate the understanding of how gender is depicted in contemporary media. While film characters are not representative of real, lived experiences of women and men, media representations have an impact on, and are influenced by, society's attitudes and understanding of gender (Hall, 1997: 50). Gender studies have a long history of investigating the construction of gender. As the gender theorist Judith Butler explains (2007: 33–4), gender and sex are ongoing constructions that occur primarily in social interactions and they are governed by the heterosexual matrix. The concept of the heterosexual matrix assumes that sexual desire derives from the reproductive organs and therefore heterosexuality becomes the only acceptable sexuality (ibid: 95–6). Thus this matrix creates and recreates the idea of two genders as stable binaries which must desire each other; and must also be constructed in contrast with each other (29–30). This is a useful framework for thinking about issues of gender and will be used to unpack what different gendered positions are communicated through *The Shape of Water*, focusing on masculinities.

The plural "masculinities" implies that there are multiple ways to construct masculinity. According to Butler (2007: 9), there are as many ways to do gender and sex as there are humans. However, some ways are more accepted than others, and the accepted masculinities differ from society to society and from period to period. The masculinity theorist Raewynn Connell (1995: 77) proposed the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to refer to the most accepted and dominant masculinity in a patriarchal society. When the society and the nature of the patriarchy change, other masculinities are able to become the hegemonic masculinity by challenging and superseding the previously dominant masculinity (ibid). This continuous negotiation of hegemonic masculinities is often portrayed in media texts, such as Disney films from the 1990s (Macaluso, 2018: 3). The villain's authoritative, hyper-masculine personality is first portrayed as the hegemonic masculinity. He might be rich, handsome, powerful and/or cunning. However, the audience eventually realises that the villain is evil and what he is doing is wrong —

especially when compared to the protagonist who has a softer approach, and who may be violent but whom, the films assure us, only resorts to violence when it is absolutely necessary (ibid). As the protagonist is now understood as presenting a more desirable form of masculinity, the villain loses his dominant position.

The softer personality of male protagonists in films from the 1990s onward is referred to as 'the new man' (Gill, 2003: 37). The gender sociologist and cultural theorist Rosalind Gill describes the new man as "sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook" (2003: 37). Moreover, he is a man who is allowed to care about his appearance and be eroticised by women (ibid: 45-6). Gender theorist Susan Jeffords found that the 'new man' in films often is not initially emotionally aware and respectful, but only becomes the 'new man' after a woman teaches him (1995: 169, 171). The analysis below explores how the men in *The Shape of Water* relate to 'the new man', but we begin with an investigation of the influence of the heterosexual matrix on representations of fictional sea creatures.

**Amphibious men in media-lore**

Amphibious men have a long history in stories. In modern media-lore, the figure of a monstrous amphibious humanoid can be traced back to Russian author Alexander Belyaev's 1928 sci-fi adventure novel *The Amphibian*. Belyaev's amphibian man is a human turned into a water-dwelling creature by his scientist father who gives him a shark-gill transplantation. The theme of science is common in media-lore about amphibious men. Even if they do not always originate from laboratories, they are often captured and studied in them. Amphibious men not created in a laboratory are generally loosely linked to myths or folklore regarding water-dwelling entities.
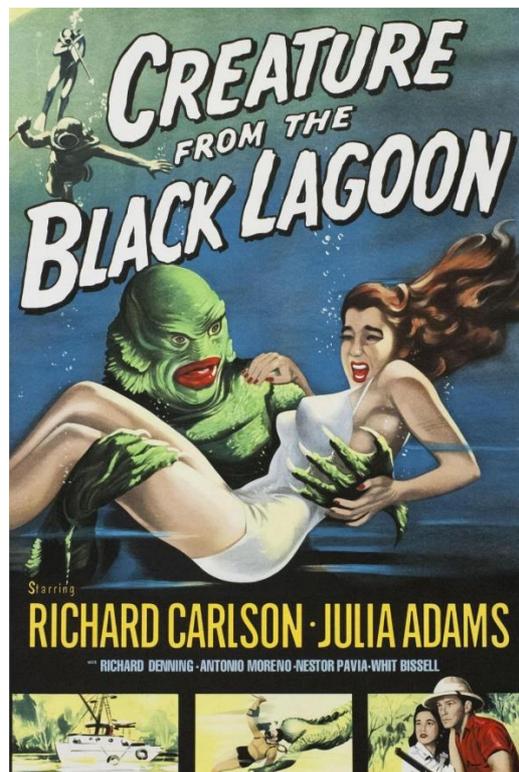
**Figure 1: Poster for *Creature from the Black Lagoon***

This is the case for both Gill Man from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* and Amphibian Man in *The Shape of Water* who are connected to native mythology of the Amazon River. In *The Shape of Water* it is mentioned that "[t]he natives in the Amazon worshipped [the Amphibian Man] like a god". Even though del Toro has stated that the Amphibian Man is not an imitation of any existing mythical creature (Lussier, 2017), Amphibian Man shares considerable similarities with folkloric water spirits, such as the mythical yacurunas of the Amazon, water people who live in underwater cities and have healing powers that shamans summon to help with shaman magic. The yacurunas also have a more sinister side — they are known for seducing humans and luring them into their underwater world (Beyer, 2009: 320-2). Amphibian Man proves to have healing powers also and although he does not seem to show any sinister motives he still succeeds in seducing the main character to elope with him into his watery domain, just like the yacurunas.

Of course, the yacuruna are not the only water spirits possessed of both healing powers and menace. Probably the best-known aquatic creature in both traditional folklore and contemporary media-lore is the mermaid, although contemporary versions play up the mermaid's beauty over her danger and tend to have happier resolutions than older tales. Compare, for instance, both the romantic mermaid comedy *Splash* (Howard, 1984) and Disney's hugely successful *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) with Andersen's original Little Mermaid. In both the modern tales, we are permitted a happy ending; in Andersen's original, Ariel loses everything, not just her voice (Andersen, 2000). In *The Shape of Water,* the main character Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) is introduced by her friend Giles (Richard Jenkins) who tells the story about the "princess without a voice", immediately linking Elisa to Ariel. References to Elisa's connect to water permeate the film — in her dream world, her apartment is underwater; the audience is also told that she is an orphan, found in the river as a baby. Moreover, Elisa has scars on her neck near her vocal cords; in the final scene those scars become gills, and she is able to breathe under water, just like a mermaid.

In much media-lore, amphibious characters like Amphibian Man and Gill Man are portrayed as male equivalents of the mermaid, despite not being mermen. This is because mermen have a more precarious position in contemporary culture, owing to their fishtail making their masculinity frail. The merman's fishtail can be regarded as having a castrating effect and can be read as a feminising component because of its curvy forms, colorful and shimmering appearance and its visual similarity to a dress that keeps the legs tight together, leaving no place for a penis (Jilkén, 2018). Some have taken this argument even further by claiming that the merman's kinship to fish removes the possibility of him having a human penis, making him symbolically non-phallic (Hayward, 2017: 158). However, masculinity is not only symbolised through the phallus but can also be communicated by other cultural means. These include a herculean body shape, masculine body language, substantial muscle mass and/or an attraction to women (Dyer, 1989: 206), all of which attributes Amphibian Man possesses. Other than the absence of a phallus, fish have other feminine associations. For example, the term 'fish' is used in drag queen communities to describe someone, most often a drag queen, who passes as a good looking cis-woman (The Queendom). Amphibian Man, however, and other water-dwelling male humanoids of his kind in contemporary media seem to be more closely related to amphibian animals and/or reptilians than fish. Gill Man's dark thick scales and his way

of lurking in the canals of the Amazon River resemble an alligator, while Amphibian Man makes reptilian sounds and has dark crocodile green scales. Moreover, both of them have legs, not fishtails. These qualities make Amphibian Man into a more masculine 'pair' to the mermaid than the merman could ever be, with or without a penis. In addition to Amphibian Man's stereotypical masculine attributes, that already serve to negate the feminising characteristics of the classic merman, the film is at pains to spell out that there is indeed a phallus hiding underneath all the scales. Elisa demonstrates this to Zelda, with hand gestures. As masculinity scholars, we were never in doubt about Amphibian Man's penis, but the filmmakers clearly did not want it to be an unanswered question for the audience.

This pairing of amphibious men and mermaids can be seen in several other texts in modern media-lore. For example, in the role-playing video game *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios, 2016), the player fights the Siren and her underlings, the Pelagics. While the Pelagics appear as male and stuck in their form as aquatic humanoids, armed with harpoons and dressed only in scales, the Siren has the ability to turn from a grotesque anglerfish-creature into an alluring maiden with naked breasts and a fishtail — the established image of a mermaid. Other examples of this pairing can be seen in the film *Dagon* (Gordon, 2001), where a demonic mermaid figure rules an island with her amphibious underlings and in the multiplayer online battle arena video game *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), where players can choose the character Fizz, an amphibious octopus-boy, or Nami, a mermaid-esque fish-woman. There is an additional example in the episode "The Mermaid" of the television series *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (Allen, 1964), where an amphibian man, who looks almost identical to Amphibian Man and Gill Man, saves a mermaid from human scientists (Hayward, 2017: 152).

Clearly, the allure of legs among mythological water beings seems to differ depending on gender — their absence is seen as seductive in the case of mermaids, but emasculating in mermen. In *The Shape of Water* Amphibian Man is a somewhat ambiguous character but maintains his masculinity through the use of standard symbols (size, strength) as well as the deliberate spelling out of the existence of his penis and heterosexual agenda.

**Beast bridegroom fairytales**

*The Shape of Water* takes inspiration from many different genres: while stories about sea creature might be the most obvious, it shares similarities with beast bridegroom fairytales. Fairytales and myths about women (beauties) who marry monstrous men (beasts) can be traced back to Psyche and Cupid. This story emerged in the second century AD (Warner, 1994: 274). Psyche is not allowed to watch her husband, Cupid, and therefore she believes that he is a monster. In this myth, Psyche has to confront being married to an unknown man, which is the underlying theme in many beast bridegroom fairy tales from around the world (ibid: 276). The folkloric scholar Jack Zipes (1983: 41) argues that commonly, in the older versions of the myth, the beauty has to forget about herself and learn to be a submissive wife. In her role as a submissive wife, the beauty educates her beast bridegroom in kindness, reshaping him into the husband she always longed for. In other words, the woman has to change in order for her man to change (Swan, 1999: 363). Moreover, the beast was, according to the cultural historian Maria Warner (1994: 280), a symbol for the male sexuality that, like the beast, had to be domesticated in order to fit

the norms of society. Fairy tales are influenced by the time in which they are told (ibid: xix) — they and their messages change over time, and contemporary stories of the beautiful woman and the monstrous beast may have different implications in the present to their traditions.

Contemporary women are no longer as economically dependent on marriage but are still expected to find a male partner with whom they can be emotionally and sexually close (Ganetz, 1991: 18; Warner, 1994: 312–13). Thus, the beast is no longer a symbol for harsh and authoritarian patriarchs, and the beauty does not have to be submissive for the beast to find her attractive. Instead, the wild and manly beast can be read as a symbol of female sexuality that women have to release in order to live a full life (Warner, 1994: 318). The beauty still needs to change in modern beast bridegroom fairy tales, but now she has to become more like a beast, and not less like one. As soon as the modern beauty encounters the beast, she sees the good in him and because of that she chooses to marry him. To stress the kindness of the beasts in the newer beast bridegroom fairy tales, a new character is often added as a foil. In Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) this is Gaston. At first, the foil is depicted as the better choice for the beauty, because he is handsome, but as the story evolves, he displays an aggressive and egoistic side. In other words, he loses his place as the hegemonic masculine. Simultaneously, the beauty sees more and more of the beast's kind and emphatic side — making his masculinity the new hegemonic masculinity. Including the hyper-masculine Gaston means the beast can still have hyper-masculine traits but because he is compared to Gaston he appears soft (Jeffords, 1995: 170; Warner, 1994: 316). However, even in the newer versions of beast bridegroom fairy tales it falls on beauty to educate the beast for him to see his own soft side (Jeffords, 1995: 171). Susan Jeffords (1995: 165) argues that one reason for the popularity of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is that the message is that we should not criticise men when they are harsh, but instead be kind and love them — only then they will find their gentle side that has been hiding deep inside them all along

Since the beast of today is a softer monster than he was before, he would be "too good" if he turned into a human. The beast should have some hardship in life for the audience to sympathise with him despite his initial boorish behavior. Therefore, it has become more common in the newer versions of the fairy tale for the beast to *not* transform into human form (Warner, 1994: 313). Warner (1994: 317) gives *Edward Scissorhands* (Burton, 1990) as an example of a film where the monster does not turn into a human in the end, and we would also add *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2001) to this category. From a narrative perspective, it is even better for the beast not to become a human, because then he will stay dark and wild but still with a soft personality, showing the opposing sides that are expected from the 'new man' (ibid: 318). Except for the beast turning into a prince in the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast*, which Warner (1994: 313) claims was a risk that Disney took in that no child liked the prince more than the Beast, almost all newer versions of a tale with a monster bridegroom do not involve a bodily transformation. Nor does *The Shape of Water*, and it does not have to, because the audience already sympathises with the Amphibian Man and loves him just as much as Elisa does. At first, he is slightly frightening because he is presented as different, but as the story unfolds he is revealed to be no more different from other humans than Elisa is. Moreover, it becomes apparent that, just as Gaston is the true villain of *Beauty and the Beast*, Strickland is the true villain in *The Shape of Water*. Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), the head of the science facility where Elisa works, abuses Amphibian Man, because he can only see him as a monster — in doing so, he shows his own monstrous form. When Elisa instead

treats Amphibian Man with kindness, Amphibian Man proves to be a creature capable of love. Consequently, Amphibian Man is, as are his beast predecessors of the 1990s, the embodiment of the 'new man'. When he needs to fight, he does, but when treated right he can perform a soft, more desirable masculinity (Jeffords, 1995: 170).

With this 'new man' to take care of her, Elisa is free to explore her sexuality, which she earlier has been controlling by masturbating in the bath every morning. By releasing Amphibian Man from the prison of the laboratory, she also uncages her own lust. As Warner (1994: 318) puts it: "The Beast stirs desire, Beauty responds from some deep inner need which he awakens." However, it comes with the price of patience with all the wildness inside Amphibian Man. Just like Beauty from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and Fiona from *Shrek*, Elisa does not scold her beast when he is bad (not even when he eats Giles's cat!). Instead, she continues to show him love, because Elisa knows that when you treat someone like a human, they will behave like a human. Although *The Shape of Water* shares many features of contemporary beast bridegroom stories, especially with regard to stereotypical gender roles, it differs in that Amphibian Man is not the only character with desirable masculine traits.

**Hegemonic masculinity in *The Shape of Water***

The framework of competing masculinities discussed above is a major theme in *The Shape of Water*, but rather than a simple duality, it is a three-way competition between the love interest (Amphibian Man), the father figure (Elisa's gay neighbour Giles) and the villain (Strickland). The masculinities of all three characters are defined through their interaction with Elisa.

Strickland is initially portrayed as a sober, sexually attractive man who takes what he wants. He is dominant at home and in charge at the facility. In other words, his masculinity is portrayed as the hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, Amphibian Man is, in his first scene of the film, locked in a metallic pod. Moreover, he does not talk, he can breathe under water and he does not seem to be fully human. His masculinity is altogether different from Strickland's and that leaves him powerless in a society where Strickland is the norm.

Giles also fails to demonstrate the masculine ideal represented by Strickland. He (Giles) is initially depicted as lazy, afraid of breaking the law, vain and escapist, preferring to inhabit the world of old films rather than confront the harsher realities of contemporary life. This is in addition to being both gay and older — he lacks physical and sexual capital.

At first, the competition appears to be between Amphibian Man and Strickland, when Strickland treats Amphibian Man with cruelty. The musical cues and the distinct depiction of Amphibian Man's pain clearly signal that the audience is meant to feel sympathy toward the amphibious creature. Elisa befriends Amphibian Man and, through Elisa's eyes, he is revealed to be a kind, inquisitive creature who, unlike Strickland, only hurts those who hurt him first. The audience, who by now dislikes Strickland because of his cruelty towards Amphibian Man, are confirmed in their suspicions regarding his aggressiveness and cold-heartedness when he plans to kill the innocent creature to extract

information. If this was not enough, he is also revealed to be a misogynist sexual predator who sexually harasses Elisa, in whom he has become interested because of her muteness.

When Elisa frees the Amphibian Man, Strickland loses his position as defining hegemonic masculinity. He does everything to find Amphibian Man, the antagonist who has deposed him, but when he screams and threatens Elisa and her co-worker Zelda (Octavia Spencer), he begins to expose a more desperate and monstrous side of himself. In the meantime, Amphibian Man, now living in Elisa's bathtub, makes Elisa happier than ever. By showing a more desirable masculinity he is rewarded with access to her vagina. In the film's climax Strickland finds Elisa and Amphibian Man in the harbour, bidding farewell to each other. Strickland shoots Amphibian Man, but Amphibian Man recovers and kills Strickland. Amphibian Man has saved both the woman and society from aggressive, misogynistic, hyper-masculinity.



**Figure 2: Poster for *The Shape of Water***

Although this makes Amphibian Man the hero of the story, he still isn't human. The other representation of *human* masculinity is Giles. While he embodies the voice of reason and is a modern man, he is nevertheless flawed, most specifically by his sexuality. When Giles is rejected by straight male society, he joins Elisa's quest to saves Amphibian Man. He is thus able to reject hegemonic patriarchy as he simultaneously climbs upward on his own ladder of masculinity, as modern man is expected to (Schoene-Harwood, 2000: xi). Giles's queerness is also rendered harmless as it is never shown as anything more than yearning glances towards a waiter who turns out to be both racist and homophobic. In fact, it could be argued that it is the 'disarming' of Giles's sexuality that allows him to represent the alternative human masculinity that the audience is invited to identify with (given that Amphibian Man's otherness remains actualised). Giles develops from being a coward to daring to defend the people he cares about. In effect, it is Giles who is held up as a better candidate for a modern masculinity than Amphibian Man, who is inescapably 'the Other'.

## Amphibian Man as 'the Other'

A common theme in more recent versions of beast bridegroom fairytales is loneliness and otherness (Hearne, 1988: 105). Both beauty and the beast feel alienated from society and therefore understand each other's hardships (Ganetz, 1991: 24). This is true for the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the TV series with the same name (Koslow, 1987) and *Shrek*. The same theme also informs *The Shape of Water*. Elisa's muteness makes her an outsider and the strange Amphibian Man has no place in the human world. While they have problems communicating with other people, they have no problem communicating with each other. Elisa makes their likeness explicit when she tries to convince her neighbor Giles that Amphibian Man is not an animal by signing: "What am I? I move my mouth like him, I make no sound, like him, what does that make me?". If Amphibian Man is an animal, then why would she be considered any different? Elisa does not feel included in the society she is living in, and therefore she senses that she has more in common with a monstrous amphibian humanoid than with other humans.

The history scholar Lois W. Banner (2008: 5–6) argues that monster films became popular in the 1950s because the monster symbolised threats from the unknown, of which, at the time, there were many in the US. The salvation from the monsters in the films told the Americans that they need not fear, because their government could take care of the threats. In a closer reading of *The Shape of Water* it becomes obvious that the film's message is the opposite — we should not fear the unknown, but rather try to get to know it. This theme can also be found in Gill Man's storyline in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Even though Gill Man poses a more distinct threat than Amphibian Man, screenwriter Harry J. Essex claims that "[a]ll [Gill Man] wants is to love the girl, but everybody's chasing him!", and the director, Jack Arnold, has said that it is only because Gill Man is "disturbed [that] he fights back" (Verevis, 2012: 68, 75). In other words, Gill Man is misunderstood and treated badly because he is different. The feeling of being misunderstood is relatable to minority groups, and therefore they tend to see themselves represented in monsters. Film studies scholar Lindsay Ellis argues that "people from marginalized communities, immigrants, queer people, people of color, would not only see themselves in film-monsters but [also] start to invert what we even expect from monsters" (2018: 00.20.10). Just as audiences' marginalised status can connect them to

film monsters, Elisa's muteness connects her to Amphibian Man and gives her the ability to see that he is misunderstood, not evil.

*The Shape of Water* has been discussed in terms of its nuanced and new ways of representing muteness (Wilde, Crawshaw & Sheldon, 2018), but it also addresses many other types of otherness, which may be a partial explanation for its success. Elisa's closest co-worker at the science facility, Zelda, is a talkative, African-American woman with a lazy husband, who has taken Elisa under her wing, while Elisa's closest friend outside of work is her elderly gay neighbor, Giles, who is unemployed, involuntarily single and troubled by his hair loss. Later, Elisa also finds an ally in the Russian immigrant, scientist and spy who goes by the undercover name Dr. Robert Hofftstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg). Elisa's muteness combined with these other representations of minority groups in the film are perhaps designed to compensate for the fact that Amphibian Man himself doesn't represent a number marginalised human categories — defending the film from the accusations levelled at *The Black Lagoon* that Gill Man represented troublesome racial stereotypes of a dangerous black man (Verevis, 2012: 72). Associating aquatic beings with the racialised other has been done before as sea creatures, such as mermaids and amphibious men, often are portrayed with facial features resembling people of colour and are strongly connected to nature by, for instance, being depicted as lost in the civilised (white) society (Sells, 1995: 178). *The Shape of Water* may have sought to avoid these associations by providing Elisa with a close African-American friend, but it could be argued that Amphibian Man's strong relation to nature and his difficulties with language, as well as his admirable physical abilities and heterosexual love-affair, position his otherness closer to a racialised position than anything else.

Amphibian Man's otherness is extreme, making him more difficult for the audience to identify with. Elisa is similarly difficult to identify with — her (slightly obsessive) dedication to Amphibian Man and her quirk personality are perhaps more puzzling than endearing.

It is this inaccessibility of both hero and heroine that leads us to question who in the film the audience is actually invited to identify with. We suggest that it is in fact Giles. He has the first and last lines in the film, and is thus effectively the narrator. Through the arc of the narrative, he is guided by Elisa and Amphibian Man to a position more representative of ideal hegemonic masculinity than where he began (although he was more privileged than either of them to begin with). We would argue that Giles is the 'politically correct hero', less preoccupied with physical accomplishments and more invested in moral an intellectual growth (Armengol, 2013: 8), a palatable ideal for a liberal white audience.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to investigate how masculinity is represented in *The Shape of Water*. Our analysis has found that the depictions of the male characters follow the same pattern as countless earlier films with themes regarding water deities and the beast bridegroom motif. In other words, the Amphibian Man embodies the stereotypes of 'the new man', the Disney-fied version of the beast and the two-legged amphibious creature who in many ways can be regarded as the male counterpart to mermaids. Moreover, by including a diverse set-up of characters, *The Shape of Water* avoids turning Amphibian

Man into a representation of a marginalised group, even though he still possesses racialised attributes. However, Amphibian Man's animalistic otherness makes him hard to identify with, which turns him into a tool for Giles' self-fulfilling quest. Yet again, it is the white male who narrates a story about 'the Other'.

Cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie argues that, "Power resides in the currents of meaning which condense at key cultural sites in society" (1997: 193). This article, by studying representations of masculinity in *The Shape of Water*, is searching for cultural meanings hidden in the film. As it was highly publicised, and received a number of prizes, *The Shape of Water* certainly qualifies as a key cultural site in society. The importance of a critical reading of celebrated films (and other cultural sites) cannot be stressed enough. However, we do not wish to detract from the experience of people who feel represented by the film — what we want is to encourage people to do a closer reading of the cultural sites they love, and through that deconstruct the stereotypes which exist in culture and media.

Nonetheless, when a film is praised for its nuanced representations of 'the other', but a closer investigation finds that it uses 'the others' as token characters, and focuses to a larger extent on a white man, we have to ask ourselves what message that conveys. First, the film tells us that it is still the white people who own the narrative and it is their feelings a film must please to become successful, even when the film is good at hiding it. Secondly, it reveals that contemporary society does not require much for defining someone as a good ally towards racialised, queer and disabled subjects. You only need to accept 'the other'. The film mirrors liberal white people's self-image. They tolerate differences and therefore they see themselves as good people. Unlike Strickland, they do not want to kill strangers, they want them to live, but only on their conditions. Since the movie ends with the strange Amphibian Man and Eliza going to the sea, 'where they belong' and where they do not disturb the (white) norm society, anyone, even racists, are able to agree with the film's essentially conservative message.

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