

# Abjection to Desire: The Journey from “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” to *The Shape of Water*

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*The video that accompanies this essay can be found at:*  
<https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays>

This presentation examines two texts, H. P. Lovecraft’s 1936 short story “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and Guillermo del Toro’s 2017 film *The Shape of Water*. Each work centers on a merman, a visitor from an aquatic realm who disrupts how we define our bodies in reference to the body of the other. It looks at the artistic goals of the authors, and how Lovecraft’s cosmic horror, racism, and xenophobia contrast with de Toro’s love of monsters and outsiders, and his desire to give a “happy ending” to a classic monster story form. The differences between them demonstrate a change in how our entertainment portrays the Other. The monstrous merman has transformed from a source of danger, whose defeat and abjection reinforces the status quo, to one where he is a guide to an escape from an oppressive reality, the discovery of our true self, and the retreat to an undersea fantasy world.

Many cultures around the world, particularly those that have close interactions with the sea, have traditions of part human, part fish creatures that live under the water. There are often entire races of such aquatic beings. The merman is a natural inhabitant of his world, but when he enters our world, he is a monster. Jeffery Jerome Cohen’s *Seven Theses of Monster Theory* states as Thesis III: “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis.” He writes: “the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). The merman brings category crisis because his fundamental nature is as something that crosses boundaries. He breaks the barrier between the realms of land and water. He threatens our views of ourselves and our place in the order of things. We try to

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answer what the merman is, but always fail, leaving us with even more questions about what we are. The monstrous merman is always a discourse.

Modern writers and filmmakers use this discourse to tell stories that express their own visions of what the existence of the merman means to us, and what it says about us. One of the most recent uses of the monstrous merman is in Guillermo del Toro's Academy award winning film *The Shape of Water*. Director del Toro grew up watching monster movies and has stated that ever since seeing the 1954 film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold 1954), he wanted to tell a version of the story where that movie's merman, the Gill-man, lives happily ever after with the swimsuit wearing human female he falls in love with. (McIntrye 2017) *The Shape of Water* includes many reference to *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, but also resonates with an earlier story of monstrous mermen: H. P. Lovecraft's short story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." The two texts have parallel endings but present a fundamental reversal of what those endings are expected to convey to their audiences, and in what they communicate about the values of their creators and the eras in which they were made.

H. P. Lovecraft was a relatively obscure author during his life, but today he is a major inspiration for fiction, comics, games, movies, and internet memes. His stories are often built around two major themes: the cosmic horror of a vast, uncaring, universe and that civilization – or at least Western, white, European civilization – is under constant threat from outside forces and alien cultures. Lovecraft embodied both these themes into unspeakably horrible monsters and vast alien deities. One of the most enduring and inspiring of these monsters are the Deep Ones.

These monstrous mermen appear in his 1935 story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." This is a first person account of the narrator's visit to a decaying New England fishing town. He finds the citizens have been corrupted by interbreeding with ancient aquatic beings in exchange for commercial prosperity. Hybrid children are born looking human, but slowly transform into immortal horrors, the Deep Ones, as they age. The narrator later discovers that his own ancestry is linked to this town and that he too will eventually metamorphose and join his aquatic relatives. The narrator is writing his story as part of a terrible internal struggle (Lovecraft ([1936] 2014): "I have an odd craving to whisper about those few frightful hours in that ill-rumored and evilly shadowed seaport of death and blasphemous abnormality." (574-575) He is facing what Julia Kristeva describes in her book *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1982) as the abject. The abject is what must

be vomited or otherwise expelled in order to maintain “one’s own clean and proper body.” (71) Kristeva writes of the abject: “It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4).

The danger of being engulfed is the core dilemma the narrator of “Innsmouth” faces: Did what he experience truly happen, or has he just gone mad – but if his account is true, shouldn’t he kill himself, abject his own body, before becoming a Deep One himself? But a third voice in the argument will eventually arise from the “odd craving:” yes, the events were real and he should embrace them rather than fight against them.

And that is the choice the narrator ultimately makes: to give up humanity and join his Deep One family beneath the ocean. To Lovecraft this was clearly intended to be a bad thing, the worst outcome of the situation. He felt that tradition, culture, and custom were the only things that made life bearable. His view of proper culture though was strictly defined by his own white, English, aristocratic background. “Innsmouth” is a demonstration of his racist fears of foreigners corrupting and diluted the Aryan culture he believed was the highest form of civilization.

Despite this, or perhaps in response to the story’s discourse, “Innsmouth” has to this day been a source of inspiration to other writers who try to explore and expand on his ideas. These stories often take the side of the the Deep Ones, portraying them sympathetically, or as representation of the persecution of minorities, rather than as the threat of immigrant invasion. In a similar response to an earlier text, Guillermo del Toro tries to give *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* film a happy ending. He revises, references, and inverts many narrative elements from the film. In *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* and its two sequels, human scientists capture the Gill-man from his home in the Amazon river delta, make him an exhibit in an oceanarium, and subject him to experimental surgery. When we meet a merman in *The Shape of Water*, he is already in the clutches of the U.S. Government, who view him as an “asset” with the potential to place the USA ahead of the Soviet Union in the Space Race.

The only person who sees this being as more than a resource to be exploited is the janitorial worker Elisa. She is a lonely orphan left mute from, what is assumed to be, a childhood injury to her throat, and has always felt a deep attraction and affinity to water and all things aquatic. When she encounters a monstrous merman it is not so much a shocking discovery as the achieving of something she has been looking for all her life. She feels a powerful and erotic bond with this Amphibian

Man and puts together a scheme to rescue him. Del Toro reverses the central drama of the classic monster movie narrative, where the helpless woman must be saved from the attentions of the monster: in *The Shape of Water*, the woman rescues the monster from his captors. The audience is no longer expected to fear the merman, but to sympathize with him and to desire him.

In del Toro's film, the dominant white, heteronormative order that Lovecraft revered is called out as the true monster of the story, embodied in the sadistic agent of the oppressive, military-industrial complex, Colonel Strickland. Elisa and her friends – the gay, movie-loving neighbor Giles, and her African-American co-worker Zelda – are all outsiders, abjected by American culture of the era when del Toro has set his story, the 1960s. The central discourse of their encounter with the monstrous merman is escape. The Human world is nothing but abuse and humiliation. Elisa's desires for sexual fulfillment and for freedom are both realized through the Amphibian Man.

After helping the Amphibian Man escape, Elisa discovers that she's drawn to the water because she herself has always been a submarine creature, trapped in a dry world inimical to her true self. The scars on her neck have always been waiting for a chance to open into gills, allowing her true life to begin. *The Shape of Water* opens with Elisa dreaming of a life under the sea. The narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" ends his story with a dream. But unlike Lovecraft's story, where the loss of humanity is depicted as ultimate horror, Elisa's rebirth is portrayed as liberation and fulfillment.

H. P. Lovecraft feared and rejected the modern world, particularly the ways that world was bringing together different types of people and different cultures and ways of life. These people challenged his fantasies of a return to an era where he, his family, his race, and his personal tastes were the supreme, justly dominant culture. Those he saw as diluting and corrupting that way of life he embodied as monsters to be abjected, labelled as ugly, bad smelling, and morally corrupt. To join them, to renounce his Lovecraft's ideas of human culture, was to give in to horror and doom the world.

In the 1950s, the time of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, middle class white America wanted to believe in a scientific, rational future. The Other, in the form of the merman and other movie monsters, could be controlled, or if not controlled, destroyed, in order to maintain the status quo. Later in the 20th Century, and continuing today, movie audiences seem more disillusioned. Institutions and government have failed to fulfill the dreams they offered, and those in power are

only interested in securing their own status, dominance, and decaying ambitions.

With so much wrong in the world, we don't look to entertainment for the thrill of seeing our values endangered by monsters, or to see reason and authority control and kill those monsters, but to find hope in those monsters. If we can find someone such as the Amphibian Man whom we could save, we might save ourselves, discovering who we really are, and returning to where our real home was all along. Our entertainment now offers the appealing fantasy of escaping an oppressive surface world for an undersea fantasy where, as the narrator says at the end of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (Lovecraft ([1936] 2014): "We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever." (641-2)

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- The Shape of Water*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

## Presentation Art Credits

### *Slide 1*

Fan art by @patart-illustrations-stuff. <https://www.tumblr.com/patart-illustrations-stuff/153830235892/deep-one-shadow-over-innsmouth>

Still from *The Shape of Water*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

*Slide 2*

Cover of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. Issue #120, 1975.

18th century illustration of a "ningyo." Utagawa Toyokuni.

DVD cover for *Splash*. Directed by Ron Howard. Touchstone Films, 1984.

*Creature from the Black Lagoon* inspired toy.

*Slide 4*

Cover of *Guillermo Del Toro's The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times*. Insight Editions, 2017.

*Slide 5*

Publicity Still featuring Julie Adams from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

Directed by Jack Arnold. Universal-International, 1954.

*Slide 6*

Cover of *Weird Tales* magazine. Jan. 1942. Art by Gretta (Joseph Clemens Gretter).

*Slide 7*

Cover of *The Complete Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft*. Art by Mister Sam Shearon. Eireann Press, 2018.

*Slide 8*

Art from *Arkham Horror: The Card Game* by Fantasy Flight Games.

<https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/arkham-horror-the-card-game>.

*Slide 10*

"Innsmouth" fan art by Pete Von Sholly. <https://vonshollywood.net/>

*Slide 11*

Art from *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*. Fantasy Flight Games, 2016,

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Cover of *Winter Tide (The Innsmouth Legacy #1)* by Ruthanna Emrys. Art by John Jude Palencar. Tor.com, 2017.

Horror photography by Joshua Hoffine. <https://darkregions.com/en-ch/products/joshua-hoffine-horror-photography>.

Cover of *The Lovecraft Anthology: Volume 2*. Art by Francesco Francavilla. Self Made Hero, 2012.

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*Slides 12, 13, 14*

Stills from *The Shape of Water*.

*Slide 15*

Poster from *The Shape of Water*.