

THE SWAMP AND THE MONSTER: SPACE, LIMINALITY, AND EMPATHY IN
MALEFICENT AND THE SHAPE OF WATER

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|-------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iv |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. WETLANDS AND THEIR MONSTERS: THE FUNCTION OF MONSTERS IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE..... | 1 |
| Monster Theory and John Gardner's Grendel..... | 1 |
| The Swamp and the Swamp Monster..... | 7 |
| Four Simple Steps to Happily Ever After..... | 13 |
| II. THE THORNS OF THE MOORS: THE POLITICS OF EMPATHY IN <i>MALEFICENT</i> | 17 |
| Charles Perrault's The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood..... | 18 |
| Walt Disney's <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> | 22 |
| Robert Stromberg's <i>Maleficent</i> | 26 |
| King Stefan: True Love Does Not Exist..... | 27 |
| Aurora: I Know Who You Are..... | 33 |
| III. EROS AND THE AMPHIBIOUS: TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES IN <i>THE SHAPE OF WATER</i> | 40 |
| Benito Jerónimo Feijóo's Account of the Fish Man of Liérganes..... | 41 |
| Jack Arnold's <i>Creature from the Black Lagoon</i> | 45 |
| Guillermo del Toro's <i>The Shape of Water</i> | 51 |
| Strickland: A Not So Decent Man..... | 52 |
| Elisa: How Much I Love You..... | 58 |
| IV. CONCLUSION..... | 64 |
| REFERENCES..... | 66 |

I. WETLANDS AND THEIR MONSTERS: THE FUNCTION OF MONSTERS IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

It is the nature of the beast for fictional monsters to be both timeless and formless—existing in a variety of conceptual roles that pervade all genres and cultures. Monsters reflect human flaws and fears, and, as fictional figures, they address these topics without directly evoking their reality. Whereas a literal representation limits the philosophical potential of a fictional figure, the relative structure of monsters negates the issue of a limited narrative and opens up to a broader debate between what we are doing wrong and how we are being wronged. While there is nothing inherently wrong with directly addressing these issues, the monster’s potential for multiple sprawling metaphors allows for multiple interpretations that can benefit broader audiences without overt exclusion. This malleability is essential even within the confines of a specific culture and era, because individual experiences and issues vary.

Monster Theory and John Gardner’s Grendel

The monster is like the broad, philosophical statements hiding inside a fortune cookie—able to serve the individual by utilizing the individual’s personal bias and idiosyncrasies. So, while every monster can represent something, no single monster only represents one thing. Jeffrey Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” offers multiple broad postulates that consider possible relationships between the monstrous form and their relevance in culture (without giving monsters specific designations). The parameters Cohen creates around the symbolism behind monsters are adjustable and reconfigurable because monsters are “the formation of all kinds of identities—personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular (even if that “particular”

identity is an embrace of the power/status/knowledge of abject itself); as such it reveals their partiality” (Cohen 19-20). Thus, the monster can be technology as represented by a malevolent AI or a creature born from unethical experimentation. A monster can be the news media as personified as a beast that can hypnotize consumers or a spectre always looming nearby. A monster can even be mental illnesses as represented by demons hiding under beds or parasites crawling underneath the skin. Ambivalence and bias allow the monster to exist as an infinite cultural projection that zeroes in on a specific focus when needed—a need that is as hungry for entertainment as it is for didacticism.

At one point or another, it is likely everyone has experienced a situation where someone hated them, blamed them or called them a monster and they did not understand why. Maybe it was their sexuality, race, ethnicity or gender. Maybe they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But for whatever reason, they are cast as a monster—an unforgivable antagonist without remorse or morality—and those pointing the finger are unusually confident in their accusations. A person will sit and watch as they are demonized and transformed into the convenient scapegoat for some larger uncontrollable issue and think: if only people knew the truth, the heart hiding below the monstrous form. The real monster is not the one who appears to be one, but the person who casts others as monstrous. The need to humanize monsters in contemporary fiction makes a lot more sense in this context.

The turn of the millennium brought forward a global society interconnected through social media, entertainment, news outlets, politics, shared cultural appreciation and the convenience of contemporary modes of travel. With connections that reach to almost every corner of human civilization, there is value, both internally and externally,

in self-awareness and empathy. The 21st century world is a place where cultural borders blur through migration and globalization, and people are divorcing themselves from the concept of a national identity that is both homogenous and unchanging. This is reflected in entertainment, which aligns with Diane Finnegan's idea that "we can create a far more harmonious and healthy" global society by changing the condition of our inner selves as a pivotal step in "bringing about real change in the world...Neither social nor environmental justice is possible without significant changes in our" emotional behavior toward others (Finnegan 14). Entertainment of the 21st century often creates narratives that address cultural, social and political issues that could be partially solved through a more progressive mindset geared towards empathy. Humanized monsters thrive in this world because an ambiguous form can inspire people to ask questions and consider that situations are not as black and white as out-dated fairy tales and prejudices make them out to be.

The fictional narrative of a humanized monster follows a general structure where the story introduces them as an ambiguous and frightening figure, and after their initial classification "as monsters...[they] are transformed into readable victims, for whom the monstrous is a label imposed from the outside and not an essential identity" (Marting 142). The audience discovers there is more to the monster than stereotypical assumptions would imply, which creates a situation where the characters involved will either accept or reject a heterogenous, hybrid form as valid and natural. French philosopher Georges Canguilhem wrote how "the step from hybridization to monstrosity is easy" and that "monstrosity was less a consequence of the contingency of life than of the license of living beings" (Canguilhem 30). Monstrosity and hybridity is often rejected and feared

because its value is not linearly or positively perceived. Monstrosity acts as a source of negative value, which does not mean that its value is nothing or less than nothing. On the contrary, its value is equally marvelous and great, but positioned much like a negative photograph— highlighting what society does not like to acknowledge. In this case, monsters highlight the natural existence of disorder, and therefore reveals human's unfortunate and unnecessary habit to both create limitations and proclaim a limited existence as natural order. When monstrosity and hybridity is recognized as a natural part of life, life becomes "less sure of itself than we thought. On the other hand, it gives value: since life is capable of failures, all its successes are failures that have been avoided. The fact that successes are not necessary depreciates them en masse, but it enhances the individual success" (29).

Fictional monsters worthy of sympathy and empathy have existed for a long time as famously seen in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Ovid's retelling of Medusa in *Metamorphoses* (8 AD). However, their popularization in mainstream entertainment may have picked up momentum after John Gardner's novel, *Grendel* (1971), which re-tells the tale of *Beowulf's* infamous monster, gives Grendel consciousness, and allows readers to become direct spectators to everything he thinks and feels. This is supported by Jeffrey Weinstock who also believes "how a central contemporary trend in monstrous narrative has been to let monsters tell their own stories, rendering them comprehensible and often sympathetic... beginning arguably in 1971 with John Gardner's telling of Beowulf"(28). This connection is essential because Grendel from *Beowulf* is a hybrid swamp monster, which is a monstrous form more amenable to the possibility of humanization.

Having said that, the original version of Grendel that appears in *Beowulf* may look like a humanoid hybrid, but all connections to humanity end there, and he is portrayed as a violent, unthinking bestial figure. Grendel is described in a variety of ways throughout *Beowulf*, but is first introduced in the poem as an ‘*ellengæst*’ in Line 86. This is a compound word made up of *ellen-* (Strength, power, vigor, valour, courage, fortitude) and *-gæst* (a guest, a stranger, an enemy or The soul, spirit, mind), which does not necessarily designate Grendel as mythical monster but keeps him in a position as an ambiguous figure. Because Grendel is described as unattached to anything but the moors and fen, there is a mysterious element to him that casts him as monstrous and dangerous. Grendel’s descriptors only escalate from there as a “grim spirit...mighty stalker of the marshes, who held the moors and fens,” and depending on the translator, Grendel is assigned descriptions much more harsh and unforgiving (Liuzza 101-04). Overall, he only makes an appearance to violently slaughter and devour the men in Hrothgar's mead hall, Heorot, which only comes to an end when the hero, Beowulf, rips off his arm in their first confrontation and cuts off Grendel’s large head to bring back from his swampy moors. Grendel is confined to a role as Beowulf’s obstacle to prove Man’s strength and superiority, and any connection to the human form is limited to a quasi-humanoid physicality (two legs, two arms and a head with a face). Grendel’s isolation, his inability to communicate, his bestial apathy and homogenous existence as Beowulf’s adversary ultimately create an unsympathetic monster, which is partially debunked by John Gardner’s adaptation.

John Gardner’s *Grendel* deviates from its original depiction of the hybrid swamp creature by creating a monster that considers fighting against the role human society has

cast him in. Gardner gives Grendel the consciousness needed to acknowledge his role as a figure meant to disrupt human society's peaceful state of existence, which leads Grendel to both resenting and reveling in the inevitability of it. He is lonely and misunderstood, even expressing how he is "terrified at the sound of [his] own huge voice in the darkness" as he "sigh[s], depressed, and grind[s] [his] teeth" (Gardner 10). Humans cannot understand Grendel's spoken language, so upon their first interaction with him stuck in a tree, they grow confrontational. When Grendel laughs out of joy, they think he is angry, that this creature has "always been angry," and are all too eager to beat Grendel based on this misunderstanding (26). Grendel begins to fall back on a nihilistic way of life, and the more he frightens, hurts and kills the humans, the less he thinks it matters. When Grendel accepts that he cannot exist outside of his limited roles as Man's combatant, audiences feel some pity for a hybrid monster that is trapped in a situation not solely of his own making. Nevertheless, this does not excuse the fact that Grendel's actions and thoughts are more often than not morally wrong and violently extreme. Gardner's *Grendel* does not change what the monster does, but provides a narrative that explains the motivations and emotions beyond what might otherwise be perceived as abject violence. Though, if there is anyone who truly believes that Gardner's Grendel is deserving of sympathy, their pity is misplaced. A hybrid monster's mental consciousness does not guarantee morality just as a human's ability to think and feel does not ensure they will be moral human beings. This is because being humane is not an inherent trait of humanity, but a choice made by the individual and shaped by their environment. John Gardner's *Grendel* may have failed to deliver an unreservedly sympathetic image to the hybrid swamp monster, but in the years to follow, many monster narratives emotionally

and empathetically elevate the monster above its monstrous facade. This is seen in the way Robert Stomberg's title character from *Maleficent* (2014) and The Asset from Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) project a deep capacity for love and compassion, which allows the hybrid swamp monster to evolve beyond its previous narrative repute.

The Swamp and the Swamp Monster

There are depths of the ocean and an endless vacuum of space that are inaccessible to humans. By comparison, the swamp seems much more within our reach, but every corner of it hides a secret like a shifting labyrinth that turns readers and viewers around before they can get a good look. The presence of swamp monsters lurking in this peripheral habitat has been popularized in novels and films, and with this prevalence comes the solidification of specific images and expectations of what qualifies a monster as swamp-dwelling.

It seems obvious to think that a swamp monster's habitat is literally that of a swamp. After all, the location is in the name, but the specifics of where exactly fictional swamp monsters reside is a little more complicated. This is because the term swamp is oftentimes interchangeably used to name a variety of ecosystems that appear similarly and are all classified as a wetland. A swamp, marsh, bog, fen, watery moor, floodplain, mangroves forest, lagoon, peat and so forth all have ecological differences that set them apart, but in relation to the swamp monster, these differences are rendered inconsequential. All of these locations are home to the swamp monster and they all represent something more than just "a general background setting. It is always semantically charged and acquires a meaning of its own" (Doroszewska 2). The literal

interpretation of what qualifies a specific habitat as a swamp within a fictional setting takes a backseat to the metaphors that swamps embody through their shape. When we think about the swamp monster emerging from the shadows we do not speculate over the specific salinity of the water or the level of soil saturation; we imagine a habitat that forms a hybrid and ambiguous space transitioning seamlessly between the aquatic (water) and terrestrial (land) systems. It is green and murky, flush with life and decay, and we are just as likely “to disappear into deep water” as we are “to disappear toward a far horizon—to become a part of depth or infinity” (Bachelard 13). It exists as a liminal space: a transitional area in which we stand at the threshold and are made as fluid as the water that makes up so much of it.

Society’s perception of the swamp has varied and evolved over time in order to fit the specific emotional and social needs of the group and the individual. There are multiple interpretations associated with wetlands and swamps, and as a diverse set of ecological structures, it is difficult to assign a single meaning to them. For example, there are some people who associate wetlands, and therefore swamps, with the feminine body. From a patriarchal perspective, the swamp exists as an untamed territory that represents “bad female genitals” (Giblett 138). It is leaky, and the flow cannot be controlled or contained by men like water in canals can be. The swamp becomes an ecological personification of women’s menstruation and their right to exist outside the control of a patriarchy, which is then seen as unacceptable and dirty. Ironically, the swamp can also represent a woman's abundant fertility—the hidden womb, the natural wonders of childbirth and breastfeeding. In a way, the liminality of the swamp and wetlands allow the individual to interpret as they see fit.

According to David Miller in *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, early interpretations of the swamp have seen it as a “domain of sin, death, and decay; the stage for witchcraft; the habitat of the weird and ferocious” (3). But as time has gone by, the symbolic meaning of this environment has shifted towards the image of a transformative and enlightening space. The swamp begins to illuminate “emergent attitudes and half-repressed emotions,” and emerge “as a metaphor of newly awakened unconscious mental processes” (3). The reason for this mental shift is for a number of historical reasons that all point to the swamp acting as a sanctuary for people persecuted and openly oppressed by society. This is specifically seen with enslaved African Americans flooding into the Great Dismal Swamps in the years preceding the American Civil War. These marshlands became a place of refuge for slaves in which “Dismal’s maroon communities were less a permanent population and more multiple semi permanent settlements that shared the common goal of a meaningful existence” (Nevius 6). The swamp’s daunting terrain and the dangerous animals that lurk just below the murky surface constitute an intimidating place to escape to, but nature is not a consciously malicious entity. The prospect of fleeing to the dark cover of the swamp can be preferable to what human society is willing to inflict on to others in broad daylight. Therefore, the swamp is both accessible for people who truly need it and inaccessible to those whose intentions are immoral and malevolent.

These beliefs align with the overarching function of Maleficent’s and The Asset’s respective swamps. Both characters exist within a physical space acting as a liminal space that can “move and change and age and die [as] a transvaluation of values” and shift loyalties away “from the old order that valued transcendence, changelessness and

control” (Lioi 448). For Maleficent, the Moors are a space with an equal distribution of a forest area and bodies of water. There are even parts of the Moors that are half submerged and create muddy banks. And even though The Asset from *The Shape of Water* is removed from his Amazonian floodplains before the film begins, the water that permeates most of the film is a justifiable substitute for the lack of actual wetland. This is because the water still exists in a state of liminality and “serves as a form of protection of life for him from the hostility and cruelty of the outer world” (Bui 311).

Similar to the traditional perception people had about the liminality and ambiguous nature of the swamp space, early opinions on physical hybridity were also negative. It was generally believed in medieval Europe that

an indication of both human and animal presence in one being represented a direct violation of social and divine laws...[and] the monstrous human-hybrid both acts as a warning of the consequences of behavior that contravenes social codes and reinforces the importance of the codes, or laws, that bind a society together (Wright 182).

Maleficent’s essence is partially judged based on these societal standards by many of the humans in the film. However, as a contemporary and humanized monster, not only is Maleficent’s monstrous form not innately indicative of immorality, but the harsh judgment of her physical form is a misplaced assessment based on unfounded fears.

Maleficent has many humanoid characteristics, but the most striking parts of her physical form are her animalistic, non-human features. Her hybrid form is highlighted by physical attributes such as an extremely angular face, pointed ears, sharp molars and claw-like nails. Maleficent also has a pair of eyes that shine a greenish yellow color to

show the power within her physical form. In many scenes where Maleficent is glaring into the camera, her eyes remind viewers of her physical Otherness as they are not only markedly different compared to the humans, but also amongst the other monsters and creatures that dwell in the Moors.

Although Maleficent is often referred to as a fairy, her wings, a central focus in the narrative, make her physical form almost avian. They do not have the delicate physiology of stereotypical fairy wings that look like dragonfly or butterfly wings. Instead, they are heavy, thickly feathered and similar to those of a harpy, “a fabulous female monster from Greek and Roman mythology, having a woman’s face and body and a bird’s wings and claws, and supposed to act as a minister of divine vengeance” (Findlay 176). I do not think that Maleficent’s physical form was specifically based on harpies, but I believe avian hybrid monsters share a commonality with the implication that the avian part of their form is based on birds of prey or raptors, a category of birds that are natural hunters (both physically powerful and intimidating). The allusion may have been made to make Maleficent appear threatening through her hybridity even though she is not necessarily an inherent threat.

The Asset’s Otherness is even more noticeable than Maleficent’s hybrid body is, but it still serves the same purpose. The monstrous parts of the body create a divide between the hybrid monster and the antagonists, while simultaneously attracting the protagonists towards a more fluid state of existence. In *The Shape of Water*, the Asset’s physical hybridity is seen as a threat to mentally homogenous characters because “the monster’s hybrid body” supposedly “breaks the law of nature, combining impossible forms. It threatens humans with monstrous sexuality, culture and religious deviation”

(Merkelbach 11). Within the context of the film, this concern is based on unfounded fears, but it is understandable that people would have some aversion to his appearance. The Asset is tall, intimidating, and covered in fins, gills, and scaly blue/green skin. His muscles and elongated reach project physical power even when he is lounging in the water. Based on this description, The Asset is supposed to be physically unappealing to much smaller and weaker humans, but he was purposefully designed so that his face had enough human appeal to it that viewers could empathize with the female lead's sexual desire for him. His nose is not too big or small, his eyes are wide enough that they are expressive instead of fish-like, and the design crew made his lips have a natural tilt to them that was meant to be endearing. The hybrid form, especially that of the human-reptile, is usually meant to be in "opposition of cultural categories... that might be thought of in terms of thematic conflicts" (Carroll 141). But The Asset's attractive humanoid features in combination with his animalistic Otherness actually contribute to our ability to empathize with him.

So while the relationship between swamp and swamp monster is striking and metaphorically rich on its own, Maleficent and the Asset's roles as hybrid-monsters within the liminal swamp create a unique dynamic between a space and a body that both mirror hybridity. The dual combination of a liminal space and hybrid body is not an accident. In "Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love," John Wylie explains how the "landscape is an inexorable movement-toward presence, a building-up-to presence. Invoked here in terms of a 'literal connection' [is the] self and world [coming] close together" (Wylie 278). The relationship that these hybrid creatures have with the liminal space is inevitably intimate. As reflections of each other, the liminal space and the

hybrid monster signify a loop where each represents the other emotionally, sometimes through the changing of their physical state.

Between the hybrid body and the liminal space exists a dual front of influence in which transformations within themselves and others may occur. In a natural state of liminality, “the old self dies so that a new self can be born... the state of liminality, is therefore a stage of transformation where... transformations are allowed to happen... [even] imaginary transformations that model and possibly bring into being new ways of thinking and being” (Viljoen and Merwe 11). This is a common attribute of the liminal swamp and hybrid form as seen in fictional settings like Luke Skywalker and Yoda in Dagobah’s swamp in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) or even Alice Cable and the transformed Alec Holland in the Southern American swamps in *The Swamp Thing* (1983).

It is important that the space and the body mirror each other because this reflection places the monster as the personification of the liminal space: both reinforcing a heterogenous and equivocal existence, while compensating for what the other is incapable of doing. The swamp—whether it does or does not have consciousness—cannot interact and communicate the way the swamp monster can, so between each other, the swamp and the swamp monster create a dynamic that covers both active and passive influence over the individuals that begin to enter the space.

Four Simple Steps to Happily Ever After

The Shape of Water and *Maleficent* challenge characters to not only form connections with people who appear vastly differently from themselves but to step out of a limited social structure. In both films, four factors most affect the characters’ ability to

create a bond with the swamp monster: distance, communication, the emotional state and self-concept. Table 1 organizes these four factors and describes what they look like when characters either exhibit productive or unproductive behavior. For example, when characters are given the opportunity for communication, their behavior is seen as productive and conducive if they choose to be forthright, curious and willing to speak and listen to others. On the other hand, their behavior is unproductive and self-destructive if they choose to communicate in a way that is perfunctory and confrontational.

Though the criteria may seem to oversimplify the emotional dynamics between the characters in *Maleficent* and *The Shape of Water*, they constitute an effective way to examine the success or failure of characters' well-being and relations with others based on these behavioral decisions. Achieving a stable and amicable dynamic is not easily achieved, and "empathy is both an attitude and a practice: it attunes our minds to the needs of others; it permits people who are arguing to discover, not just premises, but premises that work...it also generates a social climate that is conducive to the long-term health" of everyone else involved (Lynch 5). That is also why the implementation of productive behavior for all of the factors is necessary to succeed in fostering good and beneficial relations.

That being said, the idea that personal behaviors can shape and change an individual characters' internal and external conditions is contingent on the theory of tabula rasa. These characters are born as blank slates, and they are largely shaped by their environment and personal choices. That's why we can argue for productive behavior versus unproductive behavior because no character is truly incapable of stepping out of a sphere of action that limits their character development. This concept shifts away from

how many older fairytales have their characters shaped by innatism where people are not only born either good or evil, but have specific physical and behavioral traits that indicate their moral propensity. Both the hybrid swamp monster and the human characters are given the ability to acknowledge and accept each other with the opportunity to achieve personal and external success as long as they are willing to step out of a limited self-concept and social environment. Ultimately, empathy for the hybrid monster within the liminal space is expected to yield positive results, which works as a way to show audiences how constructive behavior is more than worth their time and effort. It is rewarding and essential to a global society in need of more healthy, cohesive relations.

Table 1. DCES MODEL: FOR FOSTERING GOOD AND BENEFICIAL RELATIONS

| Criteria | Productive Behavior | Unproductive Behavior |
|-----------------|---|--|
| Distance | Consistent and close proximity within an established space | Inability to integrate and participate within an established space |
| Communication | Forthright and curious of the other's wants and needs | Perfunctory and confrontational of the other's wants and needs |
| Emotional State | Empathetic and aware of the other's pain and desires | Apathetic and unaware of the other's pain and desires |
| Self Concept | Perception of self is hybrid, transformative and percipient | Perception of self is homogenous, limited and distorted |

II. THE THORNS OF THE MOORS: THE POLITICS OF EMPATHY IN *MALEFICENT*

When imaging the swamp monster, one does not think of Maleficent. However, in her 21st century incarnation, this avian woman is both hybrid in her physical form and in the swamp space she dwells. The divergence from Disney's characterization of Maleficent in Stromberg's 2014 film is significant because it represents a point of view previously unexplored in its predecessors. This shift in Maleficent's narrative signifies society's need to move past the stark black and white conceptualization of what makes someone good or evil and whether empathy is allowed to occur so redemption can follow. This essay does not discuss any other adaptation of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale (Brothers' Grimm, etc.) or Disney's sequel, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), because they are either a slight variant of Perrault's version or a plot continuation. Instead, I have consolidated the adaptations that inspired Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent* (2014) to a simplified line of influence: before *Maleficent*, there was Disney's animated *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and before *Sleeping Beauty*, there was Charles Perrault's "La Belle au Bois Dormant" (1697) (also known as "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood"). The source material is not only the base for every subsequent adaptation, but it is also a product of its time—showing societal behaviors that prevent humans from exploring their full potential. This chapter will then show how *Maleficent*, as a 21st century film, is shaped to reflect people's need to empathize with cultures outside their own in order to support good relations in a global society.

Charles Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*

Charles Perrault's fairy tales, much like many fairy tales in 17th century France, were shared in salons as a way to entertain people while still reflecting upon the ethics and values young men and women were meant to uphold. As these fairy tales "became part of a general body of storytelling material," modified and translated in multitudes, they were produced with the expectation that they would still uphold a didactic moral foundation as they were "carried throughout Europe over linguistic, social and geographical borders" (Devinney 680). Thus, these early adaptations of fairy tales had to maintain a rudimentary and universal framework to survive the variation of cultural ideals. Social and moral standards in the 17th century were based on each individual country's biases, and the French lived in a society "built upon the principle of social esteem" and divided by social "groups with profoundly unequal and mutually antagonistic relationships" (Beik 8). In keeping with this attitude, Perrault flattened fictional characters, and then restricted them to specific spheres of action that fulfilled a simplistic purpose: villains are evil, heroines are good, helpers assist in diminishing evil, and so forth.

Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" first appeared in his *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, Avec des moralités* (1697) (*Histories, or Tales of Times Past, with Morals*), and, much like other fairy tales of this time, its narrative structure does not allow for characters to step outside their sphere of action. There is no opportunity for empathy and redemption because empathy requires a person to question existing limitations and perhaps blur boundaries. In Perrault's version, the king and queen, upon the long-awaited birth of a princess, throw a grand christening. The ceremony is followed

by a banquet with seven young fairies of the kingdom in attendance. As godmothers to the princess, each of the young fairies receives a lavish golden case full of jewel-encrusted cutlery and is prompted to bless the princess with gifts of virtues and talents. However, before they begin, an old fairy (Maleficent) arrives unexpectedly.

Perrault's depiction of the elderly fairy falls into all the unproductive behavioral characteristics in the DCES Model (Table 1). There is an unbridgeable gap represented by the physical distance of the old fairy's residence, which shows how she is completely removed from all other humans and young fairies in the kingdom. No one has heard from her in fifty years, so they assume she is either dead or under a spell within her tower. This tower, in and of itself, is isolating, and the old fairy's choice to stay there for five decades indicates an extreme antisocial behavior that spatially highlights her Otherness. Carolyn Fay's "Sleeping Beauty Must Die: The Plots of Perrault's 'La Belle Au Bois Dormant'" describes how Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" is

...a tale about problematic women. In turning away from the outside world, [both the princess and the] old fairy who curses the princess [are] part of the pattern... Sleeping Beauty is targeted with the very fate of which the old fairy is suspected: death first, and then enchantment in a tower. Now we can understand the seeming disappearance of the old fairy from the tale... The original antisocial woman is replaced by the sleeping princess (Fay 271).

The old fairy's curse is an attempt to draw an individual across the unbridgeable distance and into a liminal space with a fate that mirrors what people assumed she suffers from: enchantment and death. However, this attempt fails for many reasons.

Her communication skills are also lacking. She is petty and confrontational when dealing with others, and even as the king and his people attempt to accommodate the old fairy at the banquet, she is quick to mutter threats. The old fairy's antipathy towards the king and queen's sincere gesture is apparent in the severity of the curse placed on the infant princess. The king's faux pas in not inviting the elderly fairy is an understandable misunderstanding. It is therefore an extreme overreaction to punish them for this mistake with a near-fatal curse. The old fairy, with "her head trembled more with malice than from old age... decreed, 'The princess will die after piercing her finger with a spindle'" (124). The old fairy does not reappear, so presumably she expects the curse will have some lasting damage. Had it not been for a young fairy's suspicion of the old fairy, the opportunity to alter the curse of death into a hundred years' slumber would not exist.

There is nothing about this old fairy that is appealing, so there is nothing to empathize with. But this antagonistic dynamic is not completely one-sided. This version of Maleficent does not have a name but she is described consistently as old and elderly, which physically isolates her from the good, young fairies and the young princess. This age divide begins to establish a more definite line between what good and evil look like. This is made even more apparent when the sixteen-year-old princess, visiting a country residence with her family, comes across "an **old** woman... at work with her distaff and spindle" who never "learned about the king's prohibition on using spindles for the work of spinning" (Perrault 124). It is not this old woman's fault that the princess pricks her finger, seeing as it "had all been ordained that way," but an *elderly* woman still plays a part in the inevitable influence of the old fairy's curse (124). By using old as the primary

description of an evil fairy and a thoughtless woman, Perrault creates moral distance through an age difference.

The old fairy is judgmental, petty, and dangerous enough to cast a spell that would have been irreversible without the divine intervention of another powerful force. Even with a mitigating enchantment that keeps the princess alive, the possibility of empathy between the old fairy and any human within the kingdom is an impossibility due to the nature of the good fairy's counter-spell of a hundred years' slumber. The princess is surrounded by creatures and monsters different from herself, yet she never consciously experiences their presence. Her unconsciousness leaves her physically and mentally unchanging and unaware of anything past her youth and naivety, so the monsters (the Other figures) roaming her haunted castle never have direct influence over the state of her being. Seungyeon Lee explains how,

...sleep isolates [the princess] from society and prevents her from learning to cope with the trials and tribulations of the real world. The princess's lifestyle and societal expectations continue until her demise, whether asleep or awake. Social forces and gender role expectations shape all of her actions from her curse, through her comatose sleep, and into her encounter with a prince afterward (Lee 129).

Once again, the Otherness is left at an unreachable distance even when they are in close, physical proximity. The good fairy has ensured that in her sleep, the princess is untouched by the problematic and monstrous Otherness of the world. The princess is infantilized in this scenario. She never develops the mental or emotional capacity to understand the hybridity of her form, so the princess and the old fairy are unable to

understand each other's nature. There cannot be resolution without each individual at least interacting, and with neither princess nor evil fairy achieving this, a liminal space is left unused, and the fairy tale leaves the old fairy as a simplistic representation of unquestionable evil.

Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*

Many of the characteristics and obstacles present in Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" reappear in Walt Disney's animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The film was in development in the United States from 1950 until its release at the tail end of the decade—a decade that gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War with the Soviet Union and eventually gave way to Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s. The social and political conditions created a tense atmosphere that called for empathy among different races, genders, and foreign entities but often fell back on discontent and paranoia over social change and the reorganization of the world. In an American society suffering from socio-political conflict and division, the characterization and animated style in *Sleeping Beauty* were flattened and simplified to remove any incidents of moral conflict in their viewers. Animators relied on a style that was "clean and clear," and drew their villains and heroes, "whose characterization drew on popular visual and oral associations," based on the criteria of the United States' pre-established and continued prejudices (Woods 28). In an effort to create a conspicuous divide between good and evil, Disney portrayed their protagonists as overly idealistic models of behavior, in contrast to antagonists who were made to be overly dark and unrepentant of their immoral actions. The stark contrast in visualization and characterization between good and evil was a subliminal way for the United States to take fairy tales and impose morals and social

ideals on their global audiences, as well. In Jack Zipes' *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, he explains that Disney often promoted the idea that the version of goodness they presented in their films was also a standard that was good enough for the rest of the world. Also, while Zipes acknowledges that "this generalization may seem simplistic....it refers to a practice that is continually exercised by major corporations throughout the world, whether they are American, European, or global" as a way to reinforce stereotypes that "encourage domestication of the imagination" (206). There is no room to empathize in these fairy tale adaptations because the difference between what is so clearly good (Aurora, the good fairies, Prince Philip etc.), and what is so glaringly evil (Maleficent) is unquestionable. The characters' inability to create good and productive relations with each other in *Sleeping Beauty* once again depends on DCES Model criteria. The physical and spatial distance from civilized society, communication between Maleficent and characters, the emotional state and self-concept all play essential roles in the impossibility of empathy and resolution.

While present throughout *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent only comes into contact with Aurora twice: once as a baby and another time as an incorporeal, hypnotic voice luring Aurora into pricking her finger on a conjured spindle. In both of these situations, Aurora is not fully aware or conscious enough to interact with Maleficent directly, and so the opportunity for empathy and awareness through the princess is impossible. Maleficent is only physically present in order to hurt others, and these unreasonable actions, which distance her from the humans that fear her, mirror the conditions of her domain: The Forbidden Mountains. Forbidden is an apt description seeing as no humans willingly cross over into her space. Even the good fairies, endowed by powerful magic, are hesitant

to sneak into Maleficent's foreboding and isolated fortress. Much like the old fairy's tower from Perrault's fairy tale, Maleficent's dark castle atop a jagged mountain is in an almost unscalable location. The castle is dark and filled with dungeons, gateways, drawbridges, and a myriad of dark creatures meant to keep captives in and invaders out. One of the hallmark features of this fortress is the grotesque gargoyles in the background of many scenes (reminiscent of French Gothic architecture). This use is ironic, seeing as gargoyles were not created for malevolent reasons. Traditionally, they were installed on cathedrals as a way to siphon water and protect people within from evil spirits, so there is an inherent contradiction in the use of this feature in the castle design. From the point of view of many Gothic Horror narratives, the use of "Gothic architecture—gargoyles and crazy loops and spirals" created monsters and imagery which contained "multiple interpretations...realization that meaning itself runs riot," symbolic of "interpretive mayhem in the body of the monster...in which boundaries between good and evil, health and perversity, crime and punishment, truth and deception" are practically non-existent (Halberstam 149). However, the possibility of exploring the deeper meaning behind Maleficent's decrepit fortress and her unhappiness is disregarded. Maleficent's continued use of barriers, like a towering and thorny wall of brambles, is instead only meant to intimidate and separate good, moral characters from entering or leaving the unknown space without her control. The humans interact solely with good people without monstrous features and Maleficent is left to keep consistent company with her monstrous and disfigured minions.

Maleficent's inability to reach out to human society also hinges on her lack of emotional goodness. She is consumed with anger, frustration, arrogance, and at best, a

smug satisfaction when she succeeds in her immoral ventures. Maleficent casts her emotions outwards like an unyielding and unforgiving barrier and blocks out the opportunity for mutually productive communication. This, in turn, causes the morally good characters to stop themselves from communicating, as well. This is shown when Fauna suggests they should reason with Maleficent, but is met with horror and skepticism by Flora and Merriweather. Even though Fauna expresses that "she can't be all bad," Flora immediately rebukes her with a definite "oh yes, she can" (Disney 1959). The way Maleficent communicates is one-sided and severe—especially when the curse she casts on Aurora, as in Perrault's old fairy, is meant to result in death. But unlike the previous adaptation, this version's Maleficent does not cast the curse because she feels insulted, nor does she do it as punishment for any specific action. She does it simply because she can, and that is who she is. The good, moral characters are then left unable to reason with someone so carelessly unreasonable, and the film implies that the monstrous Other neither needs nor deserves empathy or sympathy.

Maleficent is ultimately an unhappy antagonist who "doesn't know anything about love or kindness or the joy of helping others" and is proclaimed, even by herself, as the "mistress of all evil" (Disney 1959). Lauren Dundes describes how the words "compassionate" and "enthusiastic" were the top adjectives people of the 1950s believed represented the most essential traits for women to have because they indicated the value in emotional warmth. Children who watch these Disney films pick up on these behavioral patterns and then learn to accept these restrictive definitions of good and evil. Dundes further explains how "communal traits related to connectedness and expressivity (like supportiveness, compassion, and warmth) are associated with" virtuous femininity, which

is a role Maleficent cannot occupy (3). Empathy cannot transform into compassion when actions are unjustifiable, and Maleficent's choices are purely to assert power over others as she casts wicked tricks and creates disruption in the lives of good people. The narrative sustains a divide that teaches people that empathy with the monstrous Other is unproductive because without overt proof of goodness, it must not exist. Instead, empathy is meant for characters that are unquestionably good, compassionate and warm in all ways. Maleficent's homogenous image as pure evil in direct opposition with all that is good ensures that *Sleeping Beauty's* representation of the monster stays within controllable, understandable borders. Without an existing liminal space to foster empathy and human compassion, there is no resolution between this version of the monstrous Other with human society.

Robert Stromberg's *Maleficent*

Neither the old fairy from "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" (1697) nor Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) are swamp monsters. They inhabit a space that is far removed from human intervention and have personalities that are emotionally repellent and quick to reject the possibility of a connection. The distance created has no middle ground in which empathy, sympathy, or resolution can be fostered. This is why Robert Stromberg's directorial decision to reject these absolutes fundamentally changes the moral foundations and expectations in *Maleficent* (2014) through the hybrid monster and the liminal space of the Moors. The watery moors Maleficent inhabits are a central location between a kingdom of magical creatures defending themselves from human greed and a Human Realm that openly fears the unknown represented by the physically monstrous. At the introduction of *Maleficent*, the watery moors are presented as a

thriving paradise holding natural wealth and power within every fiber of its topography. The Moors are bright with jewel-like flowers, crystalline bodies of water, and devoid of mist or fog. The atmosphere is peaceful and playful, and the vast blue skies give the impression that the swamp creatures inhabiting the Moors have the freedom to move about without constraint. Maleficent, even at a young age, is the appointed protector of the Moors and is actively "concerned with the coexistence of two worlds, set next to one another, divided by beliefs in power and by a great woods. One world is occupied by humans, and it is defined by hierarchy and greed. The other, the Moors... is defined by trust," despite the uncertainty and ambiguous state of that environment (Hastie 53). But it is through this uncertainty, created by the diversity of swamp creatures and magically-endowed terrains, that encourages "the transformation of one's beliefs" (53).

As the Moors' guiding leader, young Maleficent is an overflowing force of happiness, trust, and moral fairness, which further connects all creatures into a unifying community. Everything about the Moors exudes positivity and acceptance. This is the liminal space: liberating, unrestrained and ever-flourishing. The Moors exist as the primary location of the preeminent interactions between the monstrous hybrid figure and those who venture out from the direct influence of human society. The choice to either empathize or suppress the natural beauty of hybridity within the world (and the individual) determines whether a character thrives or suffers. This is shown through King Stefan and Aurora's respective interactions with Maleficent in the liminal space.

King Stefan: True Love Does Not Exist

Stefan's initial relationship with the liminal space and the hybrid monster is a cursory glance at what a good relationship with Maleficent looks like, and for all intents

and purposes, there are not any drawbacks to it. At the beginning of the narrative, Stefan temporarily leaves human society as a way to escape the dull and limited life he is forced into as an orphan and a peasant. While the arrival of young Stefan within the Moors may have incited suspicion and concern amongst the fairies and tree warriors, Maleficent is quick to reach out to the human boy without aggression. The liminal space of the Moors fosters the ability to consider the world beyond face value. Although Stefan is initially frightened and reluctant to interact with the idea of hybrid entities, he is reassured by Maleficent that no one in the Moors intends to harm him for stealing because they "don't kill people" over this (Stromberg 2014). Within the Moors, it is okay to make mistakes and admit to them as long as the person is willing to make things right.

Upon the swampy banks leading into the mouth of a cave, Maleficent and Stefan's open curiosity allows them to begin forging a bond based on the commonalities of their youthfulness and their tragedies (i.e., the death of their respective parents). The liminal space is accessible to this human boy, and Maleficent openly encourages his comings and goings, which often lead to playful interactions in the Moors' waters. Through this friendship, "the old hatred between men and fairies had been forgotten" between them (Stromberg 2014). This would not have been possible outside the safety of the liminal space, which creates the opportunity to "alleviate feelings of marginalization and to stimulate the idea that juggling cultures and mixing identities is a beautiful way to internally process a new form of consciousness" (Cabrera-Polk 82). They are seen close together within the Moors, speaking openly about their wants and desires, empathizing, and eventually considering their interactions essential to their happiness. This is what self-acceptance, empathy, vulnerability and compassion look like.

In contrast, King Henry believes that "the mysterious Moors" is a place "where no one dares to venture for fear of the magical creatures that lurk within" (Stromberg 2014). A part of Stefan therefore begins to believe that the Moors, as a "marginal and transitional space that is ambiguous in terms of value and spatial organization," will not give him power or strength within human society because they are associated "with the demonic" (Doroszewska 21). On the cusp of manhood, Stefan decides to physically distance himself from the influence of the liminal space as a way to reshape, and therefore reduce, himself into the kind of man acceptable in a prejudiced society. Stefan "becomes a prisoner of his ambitions, slowly drifts away from Maleficent" as a way to stay close to King Henry "for an opportunity to impress him and win his trust" (Üner 378). The human king's trust is more valuable to Stefan than that of Maleficent's because Maleficent's status as a creature of the Moors does not give him a clear path towards power. Positive self-actualization is not a simple process, and while Stefan could have been a force inciting change and acceptance between two worlds with Maleficent (bridging the distance and void made by fear of the unknown), it is much easier to conform to pre-instated societal paradigms. Stefan's need for power and status far exceeds the idea of standing up for those who exist as themselves—unrestricted by these parameters. He does not realize that in rejecting Otherness and hybridity, he is rejecting himself and handicapping his true potential.

Stefan's poor and manipulative communication with Maleficent represents his next failure to foster strong relations even though he still cares for her. Although Stefan's bond with Maleficent has deteriorated from lack of proximity, he is quick to take advantage of the small amount of trust Maleficent still has for the memory of Stefan as a

young boy. The younger version of Stefan (even as an orphan peasant) was willing to cast aside an iron ring when it burned Maleficent's skin. Maleficent giving Stefan the benefit of the doubt upon his return makes sense when her recollection of him is of her first love willing to give up material possessions and spend time with her. Stefan also uses the swamp's pre-established nature as a safe space to ultimately lull Maleficent into a false sense of security to violate their trust, empathy, and love—cutting off her wings while she is drugged and unconscious. So-Jin Park explains in her article, "What/Who Is Sleeping? Sexual Violence against Adolescent Girls and Revenge in Contemporary Film Versions of 'Sleeping Beauty,'" how Maleficent's wings "symbolize her abilities and freedom, of which Stefan robs her. The experience of betrayal and the violation of her wings are the turning points" of Maleficent's, and therefore the Moors', transformation into a defensive landscape (Park 11). Stefan projects his limitations—his willingness to make himself less than he truly is—onto Maleficent. He makes her responsible for what he lacks, and they both suffer in the process. They are both trapped in a limited form caused by Stefan's unwillingness to accept hybridity openly.

With Stefan's appointment as king of the Human Realm—therefore the opposing position furthest from the Moors—Maleficent creates another structure of defense: a towering barrier of thick and sharp brambles that cannot be cut or burnt down. It is seemingly impenetrable, and the opportunity for resolution begins to wither with the liminal space now at such a great distance so "the Moors might never again suffer the touch of any human" (Stromberg 2014). The Moors are altered by Maleficent into an oppressive and restricted realm—ironically transforming into what the humans initially feared the Moors were. The swamp is now dim and foreboding with a thick mist cast over

black waters and an eerie stillness previously nonexistent. It is a shadowed monstrosity purposely altered as a way to scare away humans plagued by prejudice. In other words, the liminal space still exists, but a self-defensive barrier is placed around it to protect the vulnerability of a heart falsely perceived as monstrous.

Stefan mirrors and encourages this behavior for sixteen years. He similarly shuts "himself behind the walls of his castle" and eventually orders his men to build a bramble-like iron barrier to keep Maleficent out (Stromberg 2014). Much like Maleficent's mental and emotional state darkening the Moors, parts of the Human Realm are visually shadowed as a way to mirror Stefan's fear of the unknown closing in around him and the possibility it will draw out evidence of his hybridity in front of his subjects and courtly peers. If the part of him that is suppressed breaks free, he must acknowledge the monster within, and to Stefan, that might mean losing control of his social position.

Stefan's fear of failure, and the unconscious part of him that knows he has already failed, is what births his apathy towards the pain and desires of others. It is important to acknowledge that Stefan's apathy did not come until after he leaves the liminal space for the last time. Apathy was not what caused Stefan to cut off Maleficent's wings. Cutting off her wings was Stefan's grotesque compromise, so he did not have to kill her. Underneath Stefan's desperate grab for power, he still wishes to feel liberated and unburdened by society, so his inability to kill Maleficent preserves his empathy towards the hybrid existence. However, it is a cruel, distorted version of empathy that is flightless and restricted to the cage of his subconscious, just as Maleficent's wings are caged within a glass structure. His empathy torments him with guilt and causes his mind and his body to deteriorate into a sickly state of paranoia, knowing that Maleficent is more than

justified to seek retribution. It is "man's own incompetence...our paranoid fear" of the Other and "the potential chaos it could create [that] triggers [an individual's] own destruction" and "only faith...can restore humanity" (Packer and Pennington 297). Through his self-destruction, Stefan uses apathy to distance himself from the hybrid (and therefore guilt-ridden) man within. Stefan's apathy is meant to numb the guilt he has over the immorality of his actions, and over the course of sixteen years, this distorts his self-concept. Because he refuses to empathize or feel guilty for what he has done, he gives birth to bestial, unrestrained violence.

If Maleficent is monstrous in physical form, then many of the humans, including Stefan, are monstrous based on intent, and the nature of their intentions inverts the stereotypical role of the evil monster and virtuous human. Out of self-defense and protection of the Moors' sanctity, Maleficent attacks humans and keeps them out of the liminal space. She knows the humans attempting to enter the Moors do not have any interest in promoting solidarity. On the other hand, Stefan's violence and fortification of the Human Realm is unreasonable, and he is defending himself from an evil that already exists within the borders of his domain. He cannot recognize that the evil monster he is fighting against is actually himself.

In the climactic battle between Stefan and Maleficent, Maleficent chooses not to kill Stefan. She knows killing him is not the solution to the more significant issues that plague the relationship human society has with the concept of experiencing liminality, and she has learned this through her relationship with Aurora within the liminal space. But Stefan's mental and emotional deterioration has chipped away at his humanity, and he believes not killing Maleficent sixteen years previously is a sign of weakness. To Stefan,

it points towards his empathy for hybridity as well as proof that it exists within him. By attempting to kill Maleficent, Stefan makes a final move to eliminate the evidence of his compassion and socially place himself as a homogenous, uncompromised figure. This is an impossibility, and he fails—his death self-inflicted—because he cannot kill what exists within everything and everyone, whether they choose to accept it or not.

Stefan is a part of a long line of humans that act unilaterally in opposition to what they refuse to accept out of fear. Stefan's fear is that he will be condemned for supporting Otherness and that his natural hybridity will surface from within him in response to the liminal space's unrestrained social freedoms. This would contradict the framework of the prejudiced institutions he is trying to gain power in. His amicable relationship with Maleficent and his ability to enter the liminal space suffers, and he exhibits all signs of unproductive behavior in the DCES Model. This eventually leads to a failure to foster good relations that would have benefited him, Maleficent, and the kingdoms they each represent. However, "by simply using and occupying [a liminal] space," people can "make subtle but powerful statements about how this space is viewed, valued, and (should be) used" (Mitchell and Kelly 321). Had Stefan stood by Maleficent, the conflict would have been avoided. Luckily, where Stefan failed, his daughter, Aurora, would most certainly succeed.

Aurora: I Know Who You Are

Aurora's relationship with Maleficent is immediately established upon her birth through her position as King Stefan and Queen Leila's biological daughter and heir. This is a difficult position to be in for a long list of reasons that have nothing to do with Aurora outside her status in human society. For one, Maleficent loathes King Stefan for

his betrayal and the brutalization of her body, and Queen Leila is the daughter of the previous king, Henry (who was all too eager to attempt to conquer the Moors for their riches and resources). Biologically, Aurora is related to a line of destructive men and a society who is either actively hostile or indifferent towards the continued and unwarranted conflict thrust on Maleficent's kingdom. Aurora also represents the possible birth of another generation of humans that would try to carry on the cycle of violence and suppression towards the liminality of the Moors and the freedom of the hybrid creatures that exist within them. And on top of all of this, it is also supposed proof, from Maleficent's point of view, that King Stefan can thrive and be happy even as Maleficent is left to suffer just outside the peripherals of his corrupt world. So it makes sense that Maleficent would react negatively to Aurora's birth, and it gives her just enough reason to leave the safety of the Moors in order to punish Stefan.

This is why Maleficent is so willing to cast a curse on a baby instead of directly attacking King Stefan at the christening ceremony. Maleficent may not be an inherently evil individual, but her "evil" is attributed to her trauma and her attempts to avenge [Stefan's] brutal betrayal" (Oliver 33). To strike where it will cause the most damage, Maleficent knows she must target what Stefan cares for above all else: his position of power. The curse placed on Aurora is symbolic and a threat to Stefan's stability as king. Stefan no longer exists as a singular entity, but represents a body of people, so by threatening the health and safety of the heir, Maleficent is disrupting a line of succession, and therefore castrating the kingdom. While King Stefan does love Aurora to a certain extent, he's shown behavior in the past that indicates how love and compassion take a back seat to his need for power. He does not seem overly distressed over Aurora's safety

specifically, but reacts in a way that is similar to how “international conflict can induce the fear of removal from office—or, worse, governmental collapse—in the minds of political leaders. Governments and leaders often react to this threat by attempting to clamp down on the factors they can control” (Heffington 6). This is shown through King Stefan removing all the spindles and Aurora out of view. By hiding the kingdom’s point of weakness, he can keep control over the situation. Ironically, neither Stefan nor Maleficent realize that their actions would not only bring Aurora closer to the liminal space, but would eventually make Aurora “the vehicle through which Maleficent is able to reconnect with herself, confront her trauma, and begin to heal... gradual moments [becoming] the foundations for a complex relationship that is forged through deep emotional ties rather than mere blood relation and familial obligation” (Wehler 108).

These gradual moments which lead to the sustained good relations between Maleficent and Aurora continue to follow the order and structure of the DCES Model, which begins with shared proximity. Aurora is placed in the care of three fairies much like in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*, but Stromberg’s version of them is shown to be incompetent and negligent in relation to the health and safety of Aurora as she grows older. And as such, Aurora plays unrestrained in the wilderness, wondering “at the world around her and at what lay beyond the fearsome wall of thorns” that separate her from the Moors (Stromberg 2014). Maleficent’s dilemma in dealing with Aurora is that the kind girl has been displaced from the high walls of human society, and instead raised in the woods just outside the reaches of the liminal space. Maleficent’s moral transformation is not a linear journey because “she only wanted to defend her rights to protect the Moors,” and with Aurora’s proximity to the liminal space closing in, Maleficent no longer sees

Aurora as a part of an oppositional force (Nurhalidasia 147). Aurora is therefore in a hybrid state of being, which positions her closer to Maleficent than it does to her origins in the Human Realm. Without the restrictions of human expectations, Aurora is naturally attracted to personal liberation, empathy and vulnerability—all that the liminal space encourages and everything that Stefan and the Human Realm is not.

In the many years they have together, Maleficent, though reluctant to openly care for Aurora, still stays close by (but out of sight) just in case Aurora needs anything. Maleficent only decides to bring her into the liminal space when she is under threat of humans. As mentioned previously, Aurora is considered a hybrid entity stuck between one kingdom and another (neither a creature of the Moors nor a destructive human of Stefan's kingdom). So Aurora's ambiguity makes it easy for her to directly interact with Maleficent in the Moors in a way that even Stefan struggled with long before he cut off Maleficent's wings. The Moors are foggy and dark, but Maleficent has made them much less intimidating so Aurora can feel more comfortable and welcome. And when Aurora begins to consistently interact with Maleficent within the liminal space, they are surrounded and enclosed by bioluminescent lights and flush flowers, which signify the start of Maleficent's transformation back into her original state.

Communication becomes a new variable in their dynamic and strengthens their bond through vulnerability and empathy. The emotional state is immediately present in their conversations and they confide in each other in a way that Aurora never got to experience before. Maleficent has become central to Aurora's happiness and Maleficent, through Aurora's positivity and openness, is less volatile and morose. Maleficent was quick to anger after the initial betrayal within the moors, but Aurora's kindness towards

everyone in the liminal space begins to rebuild the trust Maleficent had discarded out of self-defense. She even confides in Aurora her most intimate memory—the loss of her wings and the beauty of them. Maleficent explains that the wings, “never faltered, not even once. [She] could trust them” (Stromberg 2014). The loss of her wings then partly signifies her loss of trust and it is a difficult topic for her to be vulnerable about. Aurora is patient and attentive, showing that she is more than just listening, but processing the significance of this pain. Maleficent’s and Aurora’s personalities as women are “not revolutionary at all, but developmental. The signs have been unmistakable: [Stromberg’s] fairy-tale view of gender has finally reached puberty” and in an era geared towards social acceptance and awareness, the revival of certain classic fairy tales is consciously creating “enlightened stories that [revise] or [abandon] the old formula” (Justice 196).

Eventually when Aurora is older, she does not want to divorce herself from what she knows is good and beautiful, so she expresses to Maleficent that she wants to live in the Moors with her so they “can look after each other” (Stromberg 2014). Aurora accepts natural hybridity of form and to her, Maleficent is not a monster. She never once considered it. Aurora’s open acceptance of the ambiguity within the liminal space is everything the Human Realm needs from a leader, and nothing they have with King Stefan. So when Maleficent invites her to permanently stay within this space it is with the horrified realization that the one person who loves her limitlessly, and could unite their kingdoms, will eventually fall under the curse Maleficent cast. When she fails to take back what she has done, Maleficent knows that in her hate, she may have done irreparable damage to herself and the Moors. They would have thrived under the good relations of “an accepted member of the human community who has witnessed” the

goodness of hybridity “first-hand [and] is essential to credibly challenge the villainous label that has been ascribed to [the Moors]” (Donnelly 11). Eventually, when Aurora learns who people say Maleficent is (and not as Aurora knows her as), she runs away from the liminal space to the Human Realm. This represents a temporary fall into a homogenous view of the world that no longer fits into the liminality of the Moors.

At the tail end of the story, Maleficent’s and Aurora’s fates are then hinged on their respective self-concepts and how that affects their perception of each other. For Maleficent, she must accept that she loves Aurora as “the mother substitute... Maleficent herself will be the key to breaking the spell that she cast (and seemingly cannot undo) by choosing love and granting the ‘famous true love’s kiss’” (Toth 201). For Aurora, she must accept the hybridity of the circumstances surrounding who she is, and to forgive Maleficent for an act of evil that was not done for the sake of evil. Lucky for them, the many years of productive behavior preserves their bond and withstands the conflicts. This teaches people that when there is conflict, building strong foundations of trust and empathy can

deconstruct established simplistic binaries –such as insecurity/security or war/peace – and recognises the inherent instability of political and social orders. Instead, it embraces the fluid, performative and ambiguous aspects of world politics. Hence, it criticises those approaches to politics and society that assume natural and moral hierarchies (Thiel 99).

Aurora is Maleficent’s ‘Beasty’ and Maleficent is Aurora’s ‘Godmother’, and this unification moves past the expectations bearing down on them.

With Aurora uncaging Maleficent's wings from Stefan's iron chains, the narrative comes full circle, and Maleficent's wings, as a symbol of a part of her monstrous form being suppressed result in the subsequent "overthrow of King Stefan's violent reign" and are "necessary to ensure a happy ending" (Polish 21). The return of her wings reinstates Maleficent's ability to thrive—her fluidity and hybridity an integral part of her previous propensity for empathy. Stefan's violation of Maleficent's physical and mental form may have left her isolated as "a fairy creature without wings in a world where [she doesn't] belong," but Aurora's love for Maleficent creates the circumstance for which Maleficent can liberate herself (Stromberg 2014).

With Aurora's placement as Queen of the Moors, the two kingdoms become connected and thrive through this diplomatic merger. As a representative of human society, Aurora does what men before her failed to do. Even though "the world is resilient, it will repair itself" only through the actions of characters with the love and devotion to "maintain their faith in the face of [a] paranoid and violent world. They understood the wrath would come," and instead still chose not to be a part of that destruction (Parker and Pennington 297). Aurora's unfaltering goodness realigns Maleficent as a significantly special contemporary swamp monster. Maleficent is a powerful being that can bend the natural world to her will, command an army of supernatural creatures and strike fear into the hearts of men. But at her core, the monstrous figure desires to be loved and to give love in return.

III. EROS AND THE AMPHIBIOUS: TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES IN *THE SHAPE OF WATER*

The physical characteristics most associated with the swamp monster is that of an amphibious man. While the amphibious figure's physical and mental state, more often than not, lean towards the amphibious part of his hybridity than that of his more humanoid side, the very nature of the hybrid monster tempts audiences into speculating just how little or much self-awareness and humanity exists within these monsters. Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) takes what we know about the swamp monster, and re-shapes it into something romantic. In an attempt to explain the significance of the evolution of the amphibious man, I will first address Benito Jerónimo Feijóo's historical account of a Fish-Man lurking in the bays, rivers and villages of 17th century Spain. Though this folktale is obscure in comparison to many other adaptations of the amphibious hybrid, it shows the hybrid man's struggle to exist outside the liminal space just as much as human society struggles to explain his hybrid existence within their known world. Furthermore, for the sake of brevity and accuracy, I will not be analyzing any other sequels that follow Jack Arnold's film, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) as a way to directly examine a story so morally different from Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017). Despite the huge popularity of an amphibious man as a fictional character in 20th and 21st century novels, films and comics, "del Toro is on record as saying that he watched [Jack Arnold's] inexpensively made Universal feature as a child and wished that its damsel-in-distress and its amphibian antagonist could be not prey and predator, but happy lovers" (Hunter 592). Acknowledging other adaptations would disregard the fact that Guillermo del Toro's film was created in response to what he felt

Creature from the Black Lagoon lacked—empathy for the amphibious man as a way to acknowledge the humanity within the monstrous form.

Benito Jerónimo Feijóo's Account of the Fish Man of Liérganes

Even in the 21st century, new organisms are being discovered in the blurry folds of cloud forests, the high tops of the Himalayas, and just a few miles off from human civilization—reachable but undiscovered for so long. This may seem unusual with the assumption that we have explored "all limits of the known world," but "limits can be infringed... the end is also a threshold," and our rejection of these possibilities is partially fueled by "anxieties of the nation towards the uncontrolled peripheries" (Tally 5). So during the Age of Enlightenment, an era that valued rational thought and the empirical study of science, zoology, biology, natural history, etc., the appearance of a Fish-Man is made even more distinct because it seems significantly out of place. But in the process of discovering and explaining the unknown, human society will always struggle to discern fact from fiction, reality from myth.

Benito Jerónimo Feijóo recorded the appearance of a peculiar Fish-Man (El Hombre Pez) in his *Teatro Critico Universal* (1726-1739). Feijóo was a well respected Spanish scholar who "styled himself as the voice of reason, thus subscribing to the core Enlightenment idea of thinking for oneself, and supported his novel views by reviewing and referring to vast quantities of the latest literature of his time" that would address "questions of empiricism...natural history" and the "problem of superstition" (Traninger 28-36). His reputation as a credible source of truth and rationality makes his acceptance of an amphibious man peculiar. And yet Feijóo explained "that he would not have given it place in [his] work, if he had not found that the truth of it was atte[s]ted by almo[s]t all

the inhabitants of a whole province, many of whom, were eye-witne[ss]es, and per[s]ons of great credit" (T. H.E. 86). Though Feijóo's credibility should not necessarily be considered contradictory to the seemingly absurd. As Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff state in their book, *Myth in History, History in Myth*, "the dichotomy between history and myth is a complex one that is often crudely drawn" and "the role of the historian is to expose the truth behind the seductive fabrications of the myth" even though they "are not immune to mythmaking themselves" (2-3). Many things recently discovered seem so beyond the scope of reality, so Feijóo supporting the existence of a hybrid creature was also him acknowledging that which exists beyond pre-established beliefs of the conventional.

Feijóo's work was shared and translated in a variety of reading material in the 18th century—one of which was *The Annual Register, For the Year 1767, The History of Europe* (1795)—a compilation of impartial records and accounts assembled by T.H.E. to both entertain and inform readers. An extract from Feijóo's *Teatro Critico Universal* appeared in the "Natural History" section, which explained the strange circumstances that birthed an early representation of the amphibious man moving back and forth between the borders of a liminal space. The story began on June 24, 1674 (St. John's Day), when a seventeen-year-old carpenter apprentice, Francisco de la Vega from Lierganes, went to bathe in a river in Bilbao, Spain, with several other people. But when his "companions lo[s]t sight of him," everyone believed that he had drowned (87). It was not until 1679 that "[s]ome fi[s]hermen in the bay of Cadiz [s]aw [s]omething [s]wimming on the water and diving at plea[s]ure, that resembled a man," and although they soon discover that he certainly looked human, "he expre[ss]ed no emotion nor did he utter a word" (87). When

it was discovered that this man—who had solely been seen in the water before they fished him out—was the missing Francisco, they tried to re-integrate him into Lierganes' society. Instead, the people became witness to a scaly man who spoke few words and existed in a strange state of abnormality in his hybridity. Beyond an initial exorcism performed on him in response to his hybrid Otherness, his family and neighbors seemed willing to happily bring him back into the fold. Or, at least, they attempted to. The people of Lierganes tried to give him little jobs to occupy him, but when assigned to deliver a letter, there was an incident where, instead of waiting for the ferryboat, Francisco "threw him[s]elf into the river, and [s]wam" almost three and a half miles to Saint Andero (87). It was not long after that this strange man—who was just as comfortable on land as he was in the water—would leave behind human society once more for the sea.

Society's fascination with Francisco's "unusual and atypical behavior" had much to do with his "unique social position... not an object of simple admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening" (Grosz 274). This obsession would sustain the presence of the Fish-Man in many people's minds. Feijóo later learned that people's accounts of Francisco's existence within the known space of society and the unknown space of the wilderness conflicted. Some said that he was never seen again, and others claimed to have seen him swimming in bays or rivers. Claims to the latter were supported by multiple letters Feijóo came to possess saying Francisco was still alive and just the same as before: a water-dwelling, scaly man. Feijóo had collected a letter from the marquis of St. Andero to a minister of Oviedo's royal council, and one between two Spanish men, claiming to have seen Francisco. On top of that, these claims were later supported by a

letter delivered to Feijóo from a gentleman of consequence from Solares. The trail of letters would continue to accumulate, and many separate accounts (from well-known and legitimate people) contended the continued existence of this water-dwelling hybrid. For example, Feijóo received a letter from the archbishop of Saragossa, Don Thomas de Agüero, explaining how the archbishop had often seen "this man-fi[s]h (hombre pez is the archbi[s]hop's expre[ss]ion)," and one more from a marine specialist in Spain, Don Joseph Dias Guitran, who also admitted to having "[s]een the man-fi[s]h frequently" (88).

The origin of a monster is a strange amalgamation of historical facts and speculative myth. Perhaps Feijóo's willingness to accept the possibility of a hybrid creature in a liminal space was because he also was a man who "straddled two worlds and two traditions of intellectual discourse" (Traninger 29). In this case, the Fish-Man is more believable to people like Feijóo as a way to cope with a society that demands and strives towards objectivity but is still made up of inherently subjective humans and experiences. By the 21st century, in a quaint municipality in Cantabria, a statue of *El Hombre Pez* watches over the river next to the Old Bridge at Liérganes as a way to memorialize Liérganes' most famous urban folktale. There is no evidence that Feijóo's account directly influenced Jack Arnold's 1950s monster film—especially since amphibious hybrids have appeared in written works as early as Babylonian mythology. But the interactions between Man and Monster in Feijóo's Fish-Man shows confusion on whether duality and Otherness can coexist within society and within the individual. Is it acceptable to empathize with the hybrid Other when we do not know what may appear out of the unknown and affect our state of being?

Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon*

Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954) was made less than a decade after the end of World War II. Post-war fear of the unknown—caused by the seemingly limitless and destructive nature of technology and paranoia of foreign powers—encouraged an unreasonable and unhealthy expectation of the human form (emotionally and socially). A need to create excessive order in American society during the 1950s was about establishing and favoring well-known images and thoughts. This would eliminate and suppress the individual's natural hybridity as a way to create enforceable and predictable guidelines for behavior. The restrictive nature of masculinity and femininity of the post-war world was dehumanizing, and attempting to create the ideal man or woman, only highlighted the monstrous parts of humanity. With a society overrun with fear and prejudice, multiple points of views on Jack Arnold's monster film was bound to manifest.

Sympathy for the swamp monster in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) was not only intentional on the director and screenwriters' part but present amongst audiences upon the film's first release. Lois Banner even explains how Marilyn Monroe was noted to having "felt sorry for [the gill man]. 'He wasn't all bad' Monroe states. 'I think he just needed a little affection—a sense of being loved and needed and wanted'" (Banner 5). When the Gill-man shows audiences his worst, his actions are given reasons through the audience's perception of him. However, the film walks a fine line in allowing sympathy for the Gill-man even though he still holds a primary role as a villain in the film. While the Gill-man is not the only figure in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* that holds an antagonistic position (i.e. Mark), the monster's motivations are not verbally or explicitly

communicated. Therefore, people are left to guess and assume the swamp monster's mindset instead of having concrete confirmation.

While the director, Jack Arnold, has a history of creating science fiction and horror films with monstrous, but sympathetic figures, giving reasons do not always excuse the severity of the actions. Having sympathy is not nearly good enough. In the context of this essay, the goal is not just to recognize that there is humanity and goodness in the Other, but that it is possible to foster good relations and improve oneself alongside entities with both similarities and differences. That being said, there are parts of *Creature from the Black Lagoon's* narrative that seem to celebrate the submission and destruction of the hybrid form, which is unfavorably depicted through the Gill-man's violent and confrontational existence. The humans standing in opposition to the monster all participate in unproductive behavior (distancing themselves from the influence of the liminal space, refusing to communicate with the monster, feeling apathetic towards his pain, assuming a superior position in a territory not theirs to dominate), but the swamp monster is just as unproductive in his actions. Although David and Kay may be perceived as partial exceptions to this grouping, David still functions in opposition to the Gill-man through a struggle to claim Kay, and Kay is more often than not horrified by the monster. *Creature from the Black Lagoon's* ending is tragic because there was no positive resolution shared, which is caused by the unproductive behavior exhibited by the characters.

The distancing from the liminal space is enacted by the men participating in the expedition through their belief that the lagoon is theirs to invade or change based solely on their needs. They only explore the lagoon when absolutely necessary, despite the

Black Lagoon's initial impression as a beautiful paradise, and wondrous in its undisturbed and liminal state. Even David, Kay's romantic partner and the male lead, who is unaware of the hybrid monster lurking out of sight, is enjoying his time collecting rocks at the bottom of the lagoon—describing the lagoon as "another world" and worthy of his efforts and time (Arnold, 1954). But the inability to foster positive relations with the hybrid Other in the liminal space, begins with the geographical distance the characters place between themselves and the swamp monster. This distance is largely established by the ferryboat, *Rita*, which acts as an invasive human power structure existing separate from the supposed dangers of the lagoon even as it physically exists within it. The boat keeps the humans from having to integrate with the liminal space, and creates a perceptual distance that encourages hostility. When they trap the Gill-man in a cage after a violent confrontation, the swamp monster is paradoxically treated like a terrorist within his own territory, and "the terrorist [is] both a monster to be quarantined and an individual to be corrected" (Puar and Rai 377). From a contemporary point of view, Man's attempt to separate the hybrid entity from the liminal space (by caging him and attempting to take him back to human society) is wrong. But within the context of the film, Man's back and forth battle with the hybrid man in the lagoon's liminal space and on their ferry boat (the defensive bunker), is working towards destabilizing an antagonistic force through subversive techniques to reinstate order and control into human existence. The men are all too eager to take the fossilized skeletal claw and claim it as their own in the name of science, but when this offends the Gill-man enough to kill two men, they are astonished by the monster's retaliation. What right does the monster have to show discontent? None, apparently. When the scientists attack the swamp

monster in retaliation, they broach upon the Gill-man's territory without consent, chase him through the watery foliage at the bottom of the lagoon, and their actions are mostly depicted as justified. While there are characters who question the morality and necessity of hunting down the Gill-man, they are ultimately given an ultimatum due to the Gill-man trapping them into the swamp space.

The impossibility to empathize or sympathize is also fueled by the Gill-man's inability to speak a human vernacular—growling and roaring in response to confrontation and eerily silent as he watches from the shadows. The opportunity to communicate is lost because none of the men on the expedition take the time to engage the Gill-man nonverbally through nonviolent physical gestures. They likely assume the Gill-man does not have conscious thought the way humans do because he cannot speak a human language. In the fictional novel, *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), Dr. Moreau asserts that "the great difference between man and monkey is in the larynx... in the capacity to frame delicately different sound-symbols by which thought could be sustained" (Wells 73). In other words, without human language, thoughts cannot be sustained in the rational mind, and even if "transforming people's language will transform their consciousness" it is also "insufficient to produce significant, lasting change in a creature's mind" (Otis 502). The human men have a very general, homogenous view of the swamp monster and the liminal space, and like looking through a telescope from the larger lens, they are given a distorted and limited image of what is happening. The ferryman, Lucas, explains that the Black Lagoon is a paradise, but locals have said "nobody has ever come back to prove it" (Arnold 1954). Without truly knowing why nobody has returned (since there was never a literal explanation), it is possible that people came to the lagoon to understand and

experience it and stayed because it was a place where they could flourish within liminality outside the structure of society. We will never know for sure because the film villainizes the hybrid monster and implies that all who wander within the liminal space are killed or drowned in its dark depths.

Kay's interactions with the liminal space and the hybrid monster are also essential in how the film condemns the use of empathy for the monster. When she first stands on the dry banks of the Black Lagoon, the Gill-man's hand slowly reaches out towards her from the water (a common visual seen in the film as a way to show the Other existing in the peripheral). But contact never happens because she is called back from the borders of the liminal space by the men that make up her small, immediate circle of human society. This separation happens once again when Kay decides to swim in the lagoon alone. The men immediately admonish her for swimming out too far from the boat—the lagoon suddenly too dangerous to explore. For the men, the exploration of the liminal space was temporary and based on scientific study, but Kay's exploration is an emotional state of liberation the others feel that they cannot afford in the face of the unknown. In fact, they are apathetic and aggressive towards it. In both instances, the swamp monster is non-violently reaching out towards the only sympathetic character curious of the liminal space. And despite the apprehension of not knowing what the Gill-man was going to do when he first reached out to Kay, he only teases her ankles when he is given a second chance to reach out underneath the surface of the Black Lagoon. Though Kay is unaware of his presence, the Gill-man mirrors the way she swims. It is a quasi-romantic image, and their movements in the water are like a dance: synchronized and equal to each other,

despite their differences. It is an amicable exchange within the liminal space, and this would have successfully continued had it not been for the intervention of Man's fear.

In Cyndy Hendershot's article, "The Bomb and Sexuality: Creature From the Black Lagoon and Revenge of the Creature," she expresses how the Gill-man represents a failure of Man's "masculine paradigms...thus, Kay's desire must be directed toward the creature who is both more primal and more sensitive than human men" (Hendershot 81). But the narrative does not truly condemn the men for their lack of maturity or humanity—concentrating more on the heroic triumphs of Man over the monstrous. For much of the film, Kay's positive emotional behavior towards the hybrid monster presents us with the question: should we empathize with the monstrous? Arnold, whether he intended to or not, provides the answer to this question by punishing Kay for trying to foster a connection. Kay's compassion is seen as a mental weakness. And her decision to acknowledge the hybrid monster's pain is considered wrongful when the creature subsequently murders several men, prevents them from leaving the Black Lagoon, and even kidnaps Kay—bringing her into his cave. Kay's almost-death in a semi-underwater cave within the liminal space of the Black Lagoon at the hands of a hybrid monster is a grand showing of how hybridity is dangerous to all those who try to empathize and connect with it. With this, Kay abandons empathy and compassion for the hybrid swamp monster to support black and white ideologies of society like to be different corrupts your self concept and it is a threat to good men.

Characters in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* failed to foster good relations with one another (and could not maintain morality within themselves) because they either participated in the unproductive behaviors established by the DCES Model or were

unable to uphold productive behavior by the end of the story. Arnold's film struggles in its ability to truly support Otherness beyond passing sympathy, still delivers an ending where Man triumphs over the swamp monster's ambiguity, and shows how empathy for Otherness is an impossibility because different is just too different. However, Guillermo del Toro would take this story and transform it into a romance celebrating empathy and the acceptance of hybridity.

Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

Guillermo del Toro's monster film consciously deviates from previous depictions of a hybrid man as a mindless antagonist and instead makes the monster "intelligent, capable of language [and] understanding emotions" (Toro 2017). In an interview, Guillermo del Toro expressed how "being a monster, and accepting that you are a monster, gives you the leeway to not behave like one. There are truths about oneself that are really bad and hard to admit. But when you finally have the courage and say them, you liberate yourself... monsters are a personification of that"(The Scotsman).

Acknowledging flaws within human existence is about giving individuals the power to shape the human condition outside of oppressive uniformity and therefore flourish. This freedom is what makes up the liminal space in Del Toro's film. *The Shape of Water's* liminal space is any form (or shape) of water in the narrative. It is migratory and appears as the water in a compressor tank, the swamp-like pool locked in the human's military lab, Elisa's bathtub, water leaking into rooms and theaters, and a heavy downpour that floods the canal into the sea. The film's title *is* the liminal space, which suggests that self-liberation and "desirability has no predetermined form as water's fluidity takes the shape of its container while also actively shifting the boundaries of that which attempts to

bracket it" (Mitchell and Snyder 156). Specific interactions and behaviors (DCES) concerning the liminal space and hybrid form determine characters' fates, and those who exhibit productive behavior flourish, while those in abject opposition to liminality and hybridity unravel. The polarizing roles are apparent between the two characters in most contact with the swamp monster: Colonel Richard Strickland and Elisa Esposito.

Strickland: A Not So Decent Man

The relationship Strickland has with The Asset and his access to a liminal space first begins to deteriorate when Strickland is ordered to capture him, and take The Asset far away from the watery depths of his home. Strickland explains that he “dragged that filthy thing out of the river muck in South America,” and as a result, neither got “to like each other much” (Toro 2017). Strickland is able to confine The Asset and take him to the military lab, but in the process, the swamp monster lashes out in self-defense. Despite water existing as a migratory liminal space, Strickland has greatly constricted the scope of it through the compressor cage that is used to transport the monster. Both the compressor cage and the small swampy pool in the military lab are just big enough to keep The Asset alive, which is a temporary courtesy seeing as Strickland and his superior, General Hoyt, are eager to vivisect him.

Strickland considers the hybrid man and the liminal space inferior and dangerous, and is seen multiple times standing separate, but high above the water (looking down at it in disgust). In the scenes where Strickland is positioned this way, The Asset is nowhere to be seen, and Strickland’s attempt to intimidate and destroy that which makes up the liminal space fails. But his true failure is rejecting a clear image of his inner self. Physically similar to The Asset’s compressor cage, Strickland traps himself in his car.

The difference is that his car is used to separate Strickland from the liminal space, and as he remains untouched by the pouring rain, he is confined to the social expectations barring down on him. His attempts at creating a significant division between Otherness and the known “indicate a profound anxiety about potential contamination of human identity,” (Wright 182). Even though the liminal space does not pose an inherent “threat to society,” it exists as a sanctuary where the human form can “be spectacularly reordered without apparent negative consequences... far from ‘civilized’ human society” (184). Strickland rejects this because he has a fixed standard of body and space. His home is uniform, his car is the latest popular design, and he could easily disappear in the crowd of men that make up the military lab in similar clothing and physical characteristics. So Strickland creating distance between water, the swamp monster and himself, is a barrier that plays a significant role in creating the blindspot in his perception of who the swamp monster truly is.

This barrier is further solidified by the lack of effort to communicate with The Asset. Strickland is told early in the story that The Asset is "intelligent, capable of language, of understanding emotions," but he immediately disregards this as ridiculous (Toro 2017). In fact, Strickland seems to be adverse to any form of communication because he only cares for his own wants. Speaking, squawking, or roaring usually contradict this. He does not care about what his wife has to say during sex, is unusually attracted to Elisa's muteness, and when he beats The Asset, his fury is ignited because the swamp monster's shrieks of pain mean nothing to him beyond being the "worst fucking noise [he's] ever heard" (Toro 2017).

Strickland's need for silence in others, and his habit of speaking over them, is a form of domination through verbal suppression that makes people invisible and insignificant. He is asserting a form of "aesthetic masculinity [that] establishes its power through claiming a heightened" existence in reality, and only "admits the existence of its Other in order to establish a profundity of which it alone has the power to speak" (Rose 11). To Strickland, what he has to say, what he wants from others, and what he needs to accomplish is far more important than the inconsequential lives and desires of everyone else around him. He is frustrated by verbal confrontation because conversation often invalidates his position of power, as seen when General Hoyt takes the opportunity to verbally belittle him for his failure to recapture the Asset. This fear surfaces again when Elisa uses sign language to speak to him out of turn (to defy his authority), and he lashes out even though he does not know what she is saying. In the end, his need to use physical violence to silence others is ironic because The Asset strikes Strickland in the throat as punishment, which is a fatal blow that leaves him speechless.

Between the physical distance and a lack of communication, Strickland is left in a state of apathy towards The Asset. There are moments where we can see the vulnerable man lurking underneath dissociative gazes and violent actions, but his need to suppress any sign of weakness encourages his isolation and apathy. There is no indication in the film that Strickland has clinical psychopathy in which he would have a physiological reason to be incapable of empathy. Therefore, the lack of empathy he exhibits is a choice because he believes it does not benefit him to push against societal limitations. Strickland's apathy towards the monster, in turn, prevents him from receiving the care and compassion The Asset shows people willing to accept his hybrid existence.

Characters like Elisa and Giles thrive in the liminal space with The Asset, and their willingness to accept the humanity within hybridity emotionally and physically benefits them. For example, Giles' hair, a deep insecurity of his, begins to grow back under the supernatural attention of The Asset, and when Giles speaks to The Asset sitting in a bathtub full of swampy water, Giles begins to pull himself out of the depression he suffers from. Neither Elisa nor Giles feel isolated or judged by The Asset, and everything that makes them different and unacceptable in the eyes of society is made celebratory within the liminal space.

On the other hand, Strickland physically and mentally falls apart the longer he stays isolated from the liminal space. He is convinced compassion will weaken his control over The Asset. This unconsciously translates into a fear of losing control of the suppression of his own natural hybridity. The article "Psychological Condition of Richard Strickland in *The Shape of Water*" explains how Strickland has an "insecure or unstable sense of self, low self-esteem, and fear of intimacy, which from time to time supersedes one another. As a soldier, Strickland has always been programmed to be strict, stiff, cold, and above all, masculine. Acting masculine, in the mainstream definition of patriarchal culture, means acting tough, repressing strong emotion, being fierce, and never showing any sign of weakness (Adji and Bilbargoya 170). Strickland does not seem to realize that his actions are abnormal or harmful to himself because a part of him is performing a role in reaction to the distorted image he has of The Assets as a violent, uncontrollable abomination. But the Asset "only resorts to violence when it is absolutely necessary," and emotional vulnerability "is understood as presenting a more desirable form of masculinity" (Jilkén 138). Ergo, Strickland fails where The Asset succeeds.

Strickland's distorted perception of the monster is self-destructive and physically represented by his mental and physical form deteriorating. In one of the first confrontations with The Asset in the military lab, Strickland loses two of his fingers. Even though his fingers are re-attached, they are not healing well, which is a massive concern for most of the film. In Margrit Shildrick's article, "The Self's Clean and Proper Body," Shildrick states how there is "a certain solidification of perception such that we can reflexively experience our embodied selves in more or less consistent ways," but when there is "a breach between self and body to the extent that the latter can betray" our expectations, "diseased, damaged, or otherwise unwhole... the body is now perceived but is experienced as Other" (304-305). Strickland's fear of losing a part of his body is a threat to his self-concept, and it brings him closer to the monstrous physicality of The Asset.

But Strickland's physical monstrosity is actually exhibited before The Asset tore off his fingers. When Strickland introduces himself to Elisa and Zelda in the bathroom, he urinates in front of them, does not wash his hands, and leaves behind blood on a clean white towel. He explains that men washing their hands before and after urinating "points to a weakness in character," which is something Strickland finds unacceptable (Toro 2017). Monsters in fiction often secrete "repellent liquids and substances that breach bodily boundaries: urine, feces, vomit, blood, and semen" as a representation of the impurities and uncleanness of the world (Davies 30). Strickland's uncleanness sets him apart from moral characters who are washed clean by the water of the liminal space. And when Strickland's fingers turn black and rot, they emit a foul smell even noticeable by a coworker who watches Strickland fall into a paranoid state. Strickland eventually rips his

black, rotting fingers off his hand in an attempt to physically realign himself within the boundaries he prefers to place himself in, but once again, this denial of his monstrous form only highlights its existence. It is with this same hand that he shoots The Asset and Elisa but still fails in the face of the hybrid man's retribution.

The boundary between what is justifiably right and indefensibly wrong begins to blur because Strickland engages in what he mistakenly believes are righteous actions no matter the threats, violence, and manipulation he uses to get the job done. His overarching motivation is not even all that different from Elisa's. As oftentimes with villainous figures, they begin their "journey in the same way the hero does, wanting something and being unable to achieve it for whatever reason" (Tresca 137). He is unaware his actions are not justifiable because Strickland's complete focus is on his goal, and the short-mindedness of goal-oriented mentality is preventing him from speculating the long-term morality or immorality of his decisions. It does not matter who he was or how competent he was before the Asset came into his life because according to Strickland and General Hoyt, "a good man, a decent man" must always "deliver. That's what you do. You deliver. You don't fail" (Toro 2017). Anything other than decent is monstrous, which means that according to Strickland, in order to maintain his superior position as a human being, he must not fail—he must capture, conquer and kill the Asset. Strickland's efforts to prevent the emergence of his inner monster—which he believes is the state of being undesirably Other and a failure—is what transforms him into a monstrous force that is immoral and violently intransigent. The Asset, as a humanized monster, may appear externally monstrous but succeeds in maintaining internal humanity. All that was good and given freely to more accepting people in *The Shape of Water* is

withheld from Strickland because a person cannot demand what they are unwilling to give in kind. Unable to foster empathy and good relations with the hybrid man, Strickland ultimately fails and exists as this narrative's true monster who almost destroyed the love and acceptance born through Elisa.

Elisa: How Much I Love You

As I previously stated, *The Shape of Water*'s liminal space is migratory and has an expansive reach when it is not actively suppressed. It can exist anywhere and everywhere if people allow themselves to become a part of it. Elisa's relationship with liminality and hybridity is established even before she first comes into direct contact with The Asset. The circumstance surrounding Elisa's origin and her integration into human society is water-based, and Zelda, Elisa's friend, explains how, when Elisa was only a baby, people "found her—by the river—in the water" (Toro 2017). But the specific wording of the dialogue makes it somewhat unclear whether they found Elisa on the riverbank, in the actual river, or in the riparian zone where land and water meet. It is the gill-like scars on her neck and the ambiguity of her arrival in human society, which intrinsically defines her as a hybrid individual more outwardly similar to The Asset than anyone else, and therefore more likely to empathize with him.

Elisa's connection with the Asset is first metaphorically established through a water-based dream. In the film's opening dream sequence, The Asset's underwater swamp seamlessly transitions into Elisa's apartment—completely submerged and lulling her subconscious into a comfortable state. This dream is Elisa's innermost psyche and reveals how she is fundamentally receptive to self-acceptance and the hybrid state. It is core to her very being. Even in the privacy of her home and mind, she is submerged and

surrounded by different forms of water, and this makes up every aspect of her intimate life. When she is awake and preparing for her day she turns on the water for a morning bath, masturbates in the tub, boils water for her eggs, and travels to her job through the pouring rain. She is comfortable with her own hybridity and existing in liminality, so the real issue of her existence does not come from self-denial like with Strickland but with living mostly isolated in a society that finds Otherness ugly and abnormal.

When Elisa first comes into contact with The Asset, she only sees the murky water he is lying in from the other side of a compressor container. When she taps the glass and rests her hand on it, his amphibian, human-like hand slaps the surface separating him from Elisa. Although her first interaction with The Asset is unfriendly, this is not a deterrent for her. She was the first to reach out to him by placing her hand on the glass, and she would continue to reach out because she inherently understands that hybridity and the liminal space are not just “dark [bodies] of uncertain danger: they are also realms of happy fantasy, horizons of liberation. Their monsters serve as secondary bodies through which” self-exploration is made possible (Cohen 18). Her curiosity of The Asset is also markedly different from that of other humans in the lab who are actively ignoring The Asset as an object in their possession.

She is first given the opportunity to be alone with The Asset after he tears off Strickland’s fingers, and she is tasked with cleaning the blood from the military lab. When she approaches his floating form, he does not react violently towards her as she reaches out to him for a second time. He only flees upon the reappearance of other humans. This ignites her curiosity to connect and build a relationship with the hybrid man, so she finds ways to sneak into the military lab and sit by the swamp-like pool to

interact with him. Strickland is often seen standing over water bodies in a show of faux-superiority, but Elisa always squats or sits down until she and The Asset are at eye level. She is physically establishing equality between them, and even when The Asset stands at an intimidating height above her, she calmly reaches out in a show of trust. As explained in Jamie A Gruman's *Applied Social Psychology: Understanding and Addressing Social and Practical Problems*, "Physical nearness" has the tendency "to increase interpersonal liking...increased exposure to someone generally enhances preexisting feelings towards that person" and "in the absence of any prejudgement... frequent contact usually increases positive affect" (Gruman 80). Elisa does not have to touch him to establish trust and respect within the liminal space because by just reducing the distance between them, The Asset feels less alone.

When Elisa is finally able to break The Asset out of the military lab, the liminal space is transported from the swampy pool to her apartment's bathtub: now filled with a swampy mixture to accommodate The Asset's physiology. The bathtub is a much smaller, liminal space, but it is made to feel and appear larger in several scenes because Elisa and The Asset have eliminated any distance between them by becoming physically intimate. As the Asset sits in the water, Elisa touches The Asset's fins and gills along his neck and shoulders, causing The Asset to reach out and attempt to do the same with her gill-like scars. Even though Elisa initially runs away, she returns to the liminal space, and they fill the bathroom from floor to ceiling with water. This both creates and builds upon "the fluid intimacy between Elisa and the creature, thus situating aquatic environs as spaces of intimate connection, and, conversely, non-aquatic environs as locations in which intimacy is stanchied, foreclosed, or impossible. The film demands that we understand water as the

connective tissue that might unite sexual, intimate bonds, especially given that the relationships that exist outside water are doomed” (Chow 108). When Elisa and the Asset float in the flooded bathroom, they are mirroring each other, and the elimination of distance not only brings them even closer as a united front but allows the effect of the liminal space to flood out of the bathroom and into the theatre below the apartment. They are not ashamed of who they are or what they share. So when water drips down and around the people in the theater and neighboring apartments, these people are partially subject to a world where individuals are finding opportunities to explore and celebrate what society is wrongfully prejudiced against.

Elisa’s ability to communicate with The Asset is another way she is successfully able to foster good relations and empathize with the hybrid man. And her efforts set her apart from everyone else. It is through their shared efforts to communicate within the liminal space that eliminates any doubt that The Asset is not the mindless, violent monster Strickland likes to present him as. In Edward Chamberlain’s article, “Rethinking the Monstrous: Gender, Otherness, and Space in the Cinematic Storytelling of *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*,” he acknowledges how “Elisa’s notable accomplishments include her intellectual breakthrough in communicating with the creature through utilizing her emotional intelligence and sign-language. Neither Elisa, nor the creature speak English vocally, representing the way that many people communicate in diverse forms beyond the inculcated English” (Chamberlain 7). Eliza uses a variety of ways to communicate, and they are all equally matched by The Asset’s efforts to bring her closer to him. One of Elisa’s forms of expression is a rhythmic clicking of her dancing feet—a sound that is almost mirrored by the rhythmic clicking and purring noise that often makes

up The Asset's inhuman voice when he is content. Music and dance is a non-verbal conversation of love, and it is one of the first things she shares with The Asset when they interact in the military lab. She brings music to The Asset, and dances with him, from the other side of his glass container, and later in the film, the use of music and dancing expresses all that she feels she cannot say. But Elisa is more than just empathetic, she is in love, and finds as many reasons to submerge herself in her own hybridity so she can connect with him. A person's actions sometimes speak for themselves, and "human love is the basis for a caring relationship since it reaches beyond the limits of cultural differences" (Hemberg and Vilander 822). And even as she begins to dread the day she will have to let The Asset go, she is aware that keeping him in her apartment is slowly hurting him. She agonizes over their eventual separation, but expresses in the depths of her mind how if he cannot see the love she has for him through her actions, then he will "never know just how much" she loves him (Toro 2017).

Elisa's self-concept is unshakeable, and as such she plays the primary role in bringing out the humanity lurking underneath the monstrous surface. Elisa recognizes that humanity and valuable connections are defined by the internal state, so her dedication towards improving the lives of everyone around her is "her strong subjectivity as an agent of change," (Wilde, Crawshaw, Sheldon 1532). Empathizing with another person is not just beneficial for yourself or the person this empathy is direct towards, but society as a whole. Elisa's empathy helps her friends to come together and reconsider their worth, and characters like Giles are moved "by Elisa's heart-wrenching, eye-opening, forward-directed monologue on how the creature sees her for what she is—and comes around to agree that breaking the law is the right thing to do. Seeing

himself in her seeing herself in the creature, he is emphatically moved to act out” (Sielke 13). She wants people to see the humanity that co-exists and thrives in hybridity, and both Giles and Zelda emotionally thrive within their own acceptance of the hybrid nature of their existence.

Through Elisa, the monster of the film is able to finally show the depth of compassion and intelligence that always existed within. In the end, *The Asset* takes Elisa away from the toxic pressures of social constructs and into a space where freedoms and the naturally hybrid self do not have to be compromised or reduced. Strickland’s refusal to step away from a controlled environment full of prejudices (harmful to others as well as himself) is a contrasting parallel to Elisa’s fluid openness. Guillermo del Toro takes stereotypes and expectations and flips them so people can learn to view the monstrous, hybrid Other as being more than what prejudice institutions force you to believe. He purposefully “integrates the principles of Hollywood’s Golden Age – since the principal storyline shares definite echoes with *Creature from the Black Lagoon* – with a narrative constructed to appear universal to differing cultures in the world, thus resulting in a fantastical allegory about the relationship between an individual and the ‘other’” (Adji 57). The relationship between the individual and the Other brings awareness to the social or self-imposed limitations being enforced, and begs people to break free. Just as the swamp monster and the hybrid girl submerge themselves in the emotional and wondrous possibilities of the liminal space, if you are willing to push against boundaries, you can love and be loved in the only way it should take form: limitless and formless.

IV. CONCLUSION

In both *Maleficent* and *The Shape of Water*, we are given two characters that directly interact with a hybrid monster, but the way they interrelate with this individual is radically different, and subsequently, so are their fates.

For characters like Stefan and Strickland, they exhibit unproductive behavior in relation to their hybrid monster. Their destruction is self-caused and it is a representation of Man's rejection of a natural state of hybridity and liminality that makes up all of human existence. Stefan and Strickland fail to acknowledge that the homogenous state they cling to is an illusion. It never existed in the first place because, in our internalized state and in the globalized world, we are endlessly crossing over thresholds and transforming ourselves as needed. Stefan and Strickland's distorted sense of self and their mistreatment of those that accept who they truly are eventually results in a physical and mental deterioration leading up to a painful death.

For characters like Aurora and Elisa, they exhibit productive behavior in relation to their hybrid monster and this results in a mutually beneficial exchange. Doing the right thing for yourself and others is not any easy thing to do. In the short-term, it is simpler to disregard the pain of the world in order to keep yourself from getting hurt. But complacency is a form of internalized stagnation, and both Aurora and Elisa refuse to stand by in the face of injustice. While they both initially suffer due to hardship, their efforts are rewarded with the ability to receive and give love, to flourish as individuals and live alongside people they can depend on. Their success is a representation of the individual's choice to open themselves up to a world that exists in multitudes and fluidly transforms with it.

From a contemporary mindset, we live “in an age of polarizing views and rigged categories that stall diplomatic processes on a transnational level,” so when people “are able to bridge the gap between their cultural difference(s)” and “form an alliance,” this serves to enlighten us and others, and therefore condemn the apathetic “societal circumstances that separate” us (Hatfield and Dionne 90). Successful human interactions are not hinged solely on one person. It is a mutual exchange that relies on the ability to communicate, empathize and have a clear perception of oneself. The globalized, multicultural society of today requires that people look beyond what they are familiar with and ask the question: am I doing all that I can for my fellow human being, and if not... why not?

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