



BRILL

The Monster, Delilah and Liberation in *The Shape of Water*

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Abstract

This article analyses Guillermo del Toro's 2017 film *The Shape of Water* as a case study for the proposition that monsters may generate liberated, alternative ways of being. In the film, one of the main characters recounts the story of Samson and Delilah from Judges 16. I critique this biblical reception in the film using Liberative Reception Criticism and intersectional lenses. Using insights from monster theorists this examination of the film demonstrates that the monster does offer alternative ways of being which liberate those who have been oppressed and dehumanised by hegemonic patriarchy, itself constructed and perpetuated by certain biblical interpretations. The oppressive use of biblical interpretations is presented in the film as abject, while the monster is presented as potentially liberative from those oppressive legacies.

Keywords

The Shape of Water – Samson and Delilah – Judges 13 – monster – liberative reception criticism

Introduction¹

It may seem surprising to some to think about monsters, or the monstrous, alongside liberation. The word monster originates from the Latin '*monstrum*', meaning 'that which appears' – from which we get the word 'demonstrate' – and is also related to the word '*monere*', to warn or portend.² Traditionally, monsters are understood to be horrifying, disgust-inducing creatures because they do not fit into our constructed categories which provide us with order and control in the world, and because they represent that which is absolutely not us, they are completely Other; 'difference made flesh'.³ Monsters threaten us as they demonstrate that our ordered systems, our normative ways of understanding the world, are no longer efficacious.⁴ Because of this, the monster can be read as a construction arising out of a particular cultural context which it simultaneously calls into question. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen theorised that the monster 'resists any classification built on hierarchy' and instead demands non-binary or polyphonic response to crisis.⁵ At the same time, according to Cohen, as entities from 'the Outside', or as external viewers of our cultures, monsters force us to reflect on how we may have been wrong in our ordering of the world, and specifically 'ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference'.⁶ It seems then that there may be something the monster offers for the liberative project of resisting the systems of oppression of minoritised and dehumanised communities. Indeed, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock comments that 'The monster threatens, but also promises liberation – a liberation that itself can seem threatening'.⁷ This 'promise' is what I wish to explore using a case study, the monster from the film *The Shape of Water*.

David Janzen has called for a new ethic of interpretation in biblical scholarship. He maintains that if biblical scholars do not actively engage a liberative agenda, they effectively provide tacit approval and participation in

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers of this article whose feedback has helped develop my thinking on this topic. I would also like to thank my students on 'Monsters in the Bible and Beyond' whose insights and passion only enhanced my own. Additionally, I would like to thank Jonathan D. Morgan for also reading this work, engaging with me in stimulating conversations, and providing me with generative feedback. Any remaining errors or deficiencies are my own.

2 Timothy Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 6–7.

3 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' in J. J. Cohen. (ed.) *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25 (7); Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory' in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.) *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 1–36 (19).

4 Beal, *Religion and its Monsters*, p. 116; Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', p. 3.

5 Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', pp. 6–7.

6 Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', p. 20.

7 Weinstock, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory', p. 20.

the current systems of oppression to which biblical texts and interpretations have helped create.⁸ Thus, he asserts, 'The ethics of liberation, rather than [the historical-critical] method, will have to be the basic principle that grounds our work, and our readings will have to be guided by an emancipatory ethic that resists dehumanization.'⁹ The study of biblical receptions, films being one example, has recently come to be seen as vital for the project of liberation because of the ways in which biblical texts and their interpretations have been, and continue to be, used to construct and uphold the oppressive structures of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism. As Alison Gray states:

Biblical reception history is well placed to add a vital corrective to the ivory-towered enterprise of white, male, Western scholarship, to kindle awareness not only of the interpretations or readings we may have unconsciously accepted but also of the transformative potential of our own interpretations and readings.¹⁰

Such an approach has been developed more rigorously as a method by Siobhán Jolley, named Liberative Reception Criticism, which carries out intentionally intersectional critiques of biblical receptions in order to identify how they may Other and harm men and women under hegemonic patriarchy on the basis of intersecting social locations and identities.¹¹ The critical lens of intersectionality, combined with reception history theory and liberation theology, offers biblical scholars an important framework for unpicking the complexities of living under patriarchy and providing new and oppositional readings of biblical texts.¹² Given the perceived potential for the monster to be of aid in the pursuit of liberation, attending to the monster and what it reveals accords with the agenda of Liberative Reception Criticism.

Erin Runions has noted that both the Bible and film are influential in our cultures in similar ways, and therefore the study of the Bible in film may well be generative for resisting different forms of oppression such as colonization, patriarchy, wealth and whiteness.¹³ In Runions' work, *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film*, the concept of hysteria is

8 David Janzen, *The Liberation of Method: The Ethics of Emancipatory Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), p. 93.

9 Janzen, *The Liberation of Method*, p. 94.

10 Alison Gray, 'Reception of the Old Testament' in John Barton (ed.), *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 405–430 (426).

11 Siobhán Jolley, *Reimagining the Magdalene: Feminism, Art, and the Counter-Reformation* (London: T&T Clark, 2025), p. 2.

12 Jolley, *Reimagining the Magdalene*, p. 3.

13 Erin Runions, *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1–2, pp. 3–4.

used to interrogate expressions of opposition to the oppressive status quo. She states: 'Not only is hysteria caused by resistance, however; it also enables resistance by revealing the possibility of alternate identification to others.'¹⁴ The same may be said of monsters; the monster is created out of resistance and opposition to the current order, but it also demonstrates that there are alternative ways of being, different ways of relating to others. Both hysteria and monsters are ambivalent, however. Runions observes that while some may see hysteria as subversive towards the patriarchy, others may say it only perpetuates the patriarchy by giving it something to point to for its legitimate requirement. This ambiguity is something to be aware of when we read the monsters that are constructed in our cultures, they may pull in more than one direction; resistance and capitulation.

This article argues that Guillermo del Toro liberates two figures from earlier filmic representations: Delilah from Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and the monster from *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). In doing so, the film also offers a portrayal of the abject use of the Bible by those who seek to uphold dehumanising, patriarchal power structures, and thus suggests that embracing or entangling with the monster may lead to alternate, liberated ways of being. In the film, a (human) villain uses a biblical text as a tool to enhance his power and domination, and also seeks to utilise the monster for his own egotistic self-empowerment. The Bible is not used for good in this film's story-arc. Instead, the use of the Bible highlights how certain readings of biblical stories contribute to systems of oppression and matrices of domination in our societies that have dehumanised those marginalised by patriarchy. The film particularly draws attention to intersectional experiences of oppression under patriarchy such as misogyny, ableism, racism, classism, and homophobia. The monster of the film, however, is portrayed as embracing difference and diversity. The monstrous thus impinges on us as potentially liberative for those who have experienced intersectional oppression.

The Shape of Water and *Samson and Delilah* (Judges 16)

The Shape of Water (2017), directed and co-written by Guillermo del Toro, is set in 1960s Baltimore, in the middle of the Cold War and Space Race between the United States and Soviet Union. The narrative follows the life of a non-speaking cleaner named Elisa Esposito, who works at a secret government research institute called the Occam Aerospace Research Facility with her

¹⁴ Runions, *How Hysterical*, p. 9.

African-American colleague Zelda D. Fuller.¹⁵ The head of the institute, Colonel Richard Strickland, has captured an amphibian creature from the Amazon River in the hope that American scientists will be able to learn from the creature's two breathing systems and give their astronauts an edge over the Soviets.

This non-human creature appears, due to physical difference, to be a monster. Indeed, traditionally monsters have been conceptualised as entities which do not fit our systems of categorisation, they may be hybrids, or gigantic in size, and thus evoke disgust and represent something disordered, which infers a real or perceived threat.¹⁶ Noël Carroll refers to 'fusion' as one way of constructing monsters in film, that is, a combining in one being of two opposing aspects, such as living-dead, insect-human, or flesh-machine.¹⁷ Essentially, a monster formed via fusion 'is a composite that unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in unambiguously one, spatiotemporally discrete entity.'¹⁸ In *The Shape of Water* the monster appears to be a human-amphibian fusion; he can walk on two legs, breath in and out of water, his skin is iridescent, and his eyes are large and golden like those of a frog (Figure 1).

The creature is treated violently. Strickland is cruel in his attempts to tame what he calls 'the asset', regularly using a cattle prod as a teaching aid – an approach that results in the creature's biting off two of his fingers in self-defence. The creature does not consume the fingers; they are found later on the floor. Humans are not prey for this monster. It is after the two female cleaners have recovered the detached fingers for Strickland that the first discussion of the Bible and God occurs. The story of Samson and Delilah from Judges 16 is retold by Strickland here and later in the film.¹⁹

¹⁵ In the film, the characters use the term 'mute' to refer to Elisa's non-speaking.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory' in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.) *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 1–36 (19). See also Noël Carroll, 'Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings', *Film Quarterly* 34 (1981), pp. 16–25 (22).

¹⁷ Carroll, 'Nightmare and the Horror Film', 21.

¹⁸ Noël Carroll, 'Fantastic Biologies and the Structures of Horrific Imagery' in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.) *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 136–147 (137).

¹⁹ *The Shape of Water* has also been read with the book of Ruth, due to the film theatre in the film showing Henry Koster's *The Story of Ruth* (1960). See Jonathan Lyonhart and Jennifer Matheny, 'The Monstrous Other and the Biblical Narrative of Ruth', *Journal of Religion & Film* 24, Article 3 (2020), pp. 1–22. However, the retelling of Judges 16 in *The Shape of Water* is as significant for scholarly discussion given its explicit and extended use in the film.



FIGURE 1 The monster is an amphibian-human fusion.
THE SHAPE OF WATER DIRECTED BY GUILLERMO DEL TORO, FOX
 SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES © 2017. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Strickland: What does that “D” stand for?

Zelda D. Fuller: Delilah, sir. On account of the Bible.

Strickland: Delilah, she betrayed Samson. Lulled him to sleep, cut his hair. Philistines tortured him, humiliated him ... burned his eyes out.

Zelda: Guess my mama didn’t read the Good Book close enough.²⁰

Zelda comments that her mother may not have read the Bible, pointedly using its alternative title, ‘the Good Book’, to remind the audience of its socially accepted status.²¹ Strickland’s view of the biblical Delilah as a deceptive and dangerous *femme fatale* reflects her depiction in popular culture as the woman responsible for the downfall of Samson.²² One of the most influential pieces of

²⁰ All film transcripts created by the author.

²¹ On this concept of ‘the Good Book’ and its subversion in horror films see Steve Wiggins, *Holy Horror: The Bible and Fear in Movies* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2018) esp. pp.62–80. This conception of the Bible has also been referred to by Yvonne Sherwood as the ‘Liberal Bible’: ‘the vague modern chimera of Bible where the Bible conveniently and usefully becomes a vague container for morality ..., the civil, the democratic and the humane.’ Sherwood also states that the right kind of religious activity, when combined with the performance of good citizenship perpetuates ‘the belief that the Bible and the modern state are, *loosely speaking, on the same page*’. Yvonne Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2012), p.6. Emphasis in the original.

²² Cheryl J. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 175–176; Caroline Vander Stichele, ‘Samson’s

this popular culture is Cecil B. DeMille's film *Samson and Delilah* (1949). The film was a commercial success, won multiple awards, and inaugurated the appetite for biblical epics on the silver screen in the 1950s.²³ DeMille's rendering of Judges 13–16, including his particular portrayals of the eponymous characters, is considered to have become as dominant a source of the tale as the biblical text in the minds of the general public.²⁴ Following his American Christian ideology, DeMille presented Samson in his film as heroic, or even 'as a rustic Christ-figure' or 'proto-Jesus'.²⁵ In tandem with this, DeMille also rendered Delilah as a *femme fatale*, a deceitful temptress pushed even to the point of a serpent or devil figure, using plums as her forbidden fruit of choice in the film.²⁶

In the biblical story of Judges 16 Delilah is not actually depicted as a deceitful *femme fatale* and Samson is not quite the righteous hero that DeMille's representation suggests. Stephen Wilson calls Samson 'a perpetual man-child'²⁷ and highlights his multiple violent over-reactions:

Samson destroys the Philistine harvest in reaction to having his amorous intentions thwarted (Judg. 15:4–5). He slaughters the Philistines as vengeance for the death of his betrothed (15:7–8) ... In his final, suicidal act of massive destruction and death, Samson's predilection towards disproportionate violence reaches its culmination, considering that his stated motive is only to avenge his blinded eyes (16:30).²⁸

Likewise, Wil Gafney characterises Samson's life as 'one of twisted games, riddles, and blood sport',²⁹ with the riddle in particular leading to 'the brutal

Hair and Delilah's Despair: Reanimating Judges 16 for Children' In Caroline Vander Stichele and Hugh S. Pyper, *Text, Image, and Otherness in Children's Bibles: What Is in the Picture?* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), pp. 291–310, (295–296, 300, 302). See also Mark Lackowski, 'Victim, Victor, or Villain? The Unfinalizability of Delilah' *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 6 (2019), pp. 197–225 (198), and the sources cited there.

23 Anton Karl Kozlovic, 'Making A "Bad" Woman Wicked: The Devilish Construction of Delilah Within Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949)', *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 7 (2006), 70–102 (73).

24 J. Clinton McCann, *Judges* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), p.92.

25 Kozlovic, 'Making A "Bad" Woman Wicked', p. 78.

26 Kozlovic, 'Making A "Bad" Woman Wicked', p. 83. See also Anton Karl Kozlovic, 'Subtle Serpent Symbolism within Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949)', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 39, (2022), pp. 1716–1734.

27 Wilson, *Making Men*, p. 133.

28 Wilson, *Making Men*, p. 136.

29 Wil Gafney, 'A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game' In Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Eds.), *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), pp. 49–72. (51).

deaths of thirty innocent men and later the bride and her father followed by an untold number of Philistine people in addition to their crops and the tortuous deaths of wild foxes burned alive.³⁰ Robert Alter describes him as someone ‘whose formidable brawn will not be matched by brain, or even by a saving modicum of common sense.’³¹ Many similar criticisms of Samson have been observed by scholars and commentators as meticulously documented by Anton Karl Kozlovic.³² Even Judg. 15:10–13 suggests that his actions were not always perceived as heroic by his own people, as a group of Judahite men criticise Samson for his violence against the Philistines, and bind him up to deliver him into the hands of the enemies. DeMille’s legacy in the distorted reception of Samson as righteous hero, and Delilah’s character-assassination, is remarkable.

According to Cheryl Exum, the *femme fatale* is a male construct, a projection of male fears of inadequacy; she is an expression of the need to protect a man’s self-esteem by feeling superior to women.³³ The *femme fatale*’s ‘unknowableness’ and ‘mystery’ is why she is feared by men.³⁴ In *The Shape of Water*, Strickland represents the all-American power male whose desire to remain in control and be recognised as a man by his superiors must be aggressively enforced through his control of the disempowered beings beneath him.³⁵ Strickland is threatened by Zelda and Elisa because they are unknowable to him, and later in the film he eroticises and disempowers them just as the biblical Delilah is eroticised and disempowered into the *femme fatale* figure. In doing so he neutralises the threat they pose to his self-esteem, masculinity, and power. Strickland’s recounting of the biblical story is in line with DeMille’s film version, and given the setting of *The Shape of Water* in the decade following DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah*, Strickland shares the wider culture’s version of the characters as proffered by DeMille. Maybe Zelda’s mother had read the story closely, it was just DeMille’s film that she was unaware of.

30 Gafney, ‘A Womanist Midrash of Delilah’, p. 59.

31 Robert Alter, ‘How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible’s Annunciation Type-Scene’ *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), pp. 115–130 (124).

32 Kozlovic, ‘Making A “Bad” Woman Wicked’, pp. 77–78.

33 Cheryl J. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 224.

34 Exum, *Plotted*, p. 226.

35 Strickland embodies the idea of the American Dream, he is depicted in the film as having the perfect nuclear family which conforms to normative gender roles. As horror films such as *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) have done, *The Shape of Water* critiques the idea of the perfect nuclear American family and American hegemonic masculinity. See Brandon R. Grafius ‘Horror and Bible (Six Theses)’ in Natasha L. Mikles and Joseph P. Laycock (Eds.), *Religion, Culture, and the Monstrous: Of Gods and Monsters* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), pp. 29–39 (33); See also, J. Lyonhart and J. Matheny, ‘The Monstrous Other and the Biblical Narrative of Ruth’ *Journal of Religion & Film* 24 (2020), pp. 1–22 (9, 12).

Later in the same scene, Strickland begins to talk about the creature in the lab which bit off his fingers. He criticises the women's use of a paper bag to transport his two severed fingers which have now been surgically reattached:

Zelda: It's all we had, sir— I answer mostly, on account that she can't talk.

Strickland: She can't? She deaf?

Elisa: MUTE IX_{ip} HEAR³⁶

Zelda: Mute, sir. She said she can hear you.

Strickland (to Elisa): All those scars on your neck. That's what did it. Cut your voice box. Right?

Elisa: HAPPEN IX_{ip} BABY

Zelda: She said "since she was a baby"

Strickland: Who'd do that to a baby? The world is sinful, wouldn't you say so, Delilah? Well, let me say this up front, you clean that lab, you get out. The thing we keep in there is an affront. You know what an affront is, Zelda?

Zelda: Something offensive?

Strickland: That's right, and I should know, I dragged that filthy thing out of the river muck in South America all the way here. And along the way we didn't get to like each other much. Now, you may think that thing looks human. Stands on two legs, right? But we're created in the Lord's image. You don't think that's what the Lord looks like, do you?

Zelda: I wouldn't know, sir, what the Lord looks like.

Strickland: Well, human, Zelda. He looks like a human, like me. Or even you. Maybe a little more like me, I guess.

The process of negative characterisation reflected in Strickland's description of the amphibian man (an 'affront', 'a filthy thing' which originated in 'river muck') is often referred to by Monster Theorists as monsterisation.³⁷ Such a process was often used in Medieval rhetoric and art about the so-called Monstrous Races, whose monsterisation by Christian thinkers was frequently linked to their 'godlessness'.³⁸ Physical difference, regarded as physical deformity, was associated with inward moral character deemed unacceptable, as medieval art historian Debra Higgs Strickland observes: 'Men of the East, then, [were

36 My thanks to Eric Jarrad for alerting me to the correct way to represent American Sign Language in the transcript.

37 Weinstock, 'A Genealogy of Monster Theory', p. 25. See also Alexa Wright, 'Monstrous Strangers at The Edge of the World: The Monstrous Races' in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.) *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 173–191.

38 Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 8.

seen as] both products and perpetrators of sin ... We are attractive, They are ugly. We are civilized, They are wild. We are moral, They are sinful.³⁹ In this scene, Strickland observes that the lack of similarity in the amphibian man's form to the *imago Dei* marks him as non-human. It is by dint of being made in the Lord's image that defines humanity, for Strickland. As the amphibian man does not look similar to Strickland, who is assumed to be made in the *imago Dei*, then he cannot be one of us, he is Other from Strickland's perspective. Not only does the amphibian man exhibit physical difference, he is also rendered godless in form by Strickland.

Strickland invokes God as part of his self-identification. Strickland views his humanity as directly linked to God, because he believes (white male) humans were made to look like God. For Strickland the amphibian man is an affront to God's creation, something filthy that does not belong and so should be eradicated once its usefulness has been extracted. This monster is abject for Strickland, who is repulsed. However, Strickland also offers an illustration of Cohen's sixth thesis on monsters, that the fear of the monster is also a kind of desire: 'The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint.'⁴⁰ Through dissecting the monster's body, and potentially improving American male bodies with the body of the monster Strickland can manifest his 'fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion', because the monster, according to Cohen, also functions 'as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self.'⁴¹

Strickland's last word, however, is not a comment on the amphibian man but an Othering of black women through Zelda. Strickland says God looks like humans, but more like humans who look like Richard Strickland, a white man, than those who look like Zelda, a black woman. This remark reveals the unsettling legacies of certain theological interpretations which have propped up white male privilege by rendering non-male and non-white people less godly: colonialism, slavery, racism.

Strickland also equates Zelda with sinfulness; he refers to her using her middle name, Delilah, when commenting on the sinful nature of the world, implying that she would know about sin due to her namesake. Strickland then associates the amphibian man with sin in his segue from the sinful world to the 'affront' being kept in the laboratory, but the association between outward appearance

39 Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, p. 7. Capitalisations in original.

40 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' in J. J. Cohen. (ed.) *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) pp. 3–25 (16–17).

41 Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', p. 17.

and sinfulness is emphatically confirmed in a later scene with his superior, General Hoyt, in which Strickland describes the amphibian man as 'ugly as sin':

Strickland: General Hoyt, welcome, sir. Everything's ready, glad to have you.

General Hoyt: Good to see you, son. Good God Almighty! Is that it? Hell of a lot bigger than I thought.

Strickland: And ugly as sin. You know the natives in the Amazon worshiped it like a god.

General Hoyt: Doesn't look much of a god now does it?

Strickland: Well, they're primitive, sir. You know they would toss offerings into the water, flowers, fruits, crap like that. Then they tried to stop the oil drills with bows and arrows, that didn't turn out too well.

General Hoyt: [laughs]

The phrase 'ugly as sin' explicates the idea mentioned earlier that "Monstrous Races" were thought to display physical difference because they were perceived as godless and morally inferior.⁴² The Amazon peoples who apparently worshipped the amphibian man as a deity are also rendered inferior by Strickland, who mocks them for their food offerings as well as their weaponry which stands little chance against the tools of Western colonialism. For him, the Amazon peoples must be godless and sinful (like other so-called Monstrous Races), because they worship this amphibian being, not the Christian deity.

Medieval Christian thinkers intriguingly used the unclean animal species in Leviticus 11 as justificatory evidence for the uncleanness, and thus sinfulness, of some "Monstrous Races" that were thought to present bestial features.⁴³ Thus, Strickland's earlier speech presents a coalescence of the ideas of sinfulness, filthiness, animal-hybridity and godlessness which displays his sense of abjection towards the amphibian man.

Strickland's racist superiority and obsession with physical difference, as conveyed in his interactions towards Elisa and Zelda throughout the film, returns when he discovers the amphibian man has been removed from the laboratory. When Strickland confronts Zelda in her home about the disappearance, he returns to the Samson and Delilah story and explicitly conveys the notion that he is the Samson figure, and Zelda is the Delilah figure:

Strickland: The thing in the lab. Where is it?

Zelda: I'm sorry, sir, if I knew anything I would surely tell you.

⁴² Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, p. 29.

⁴³ Strickland, *Making Monsters in Medieval Art*, p. 65.

Strickland: The story about Samson, I never told you how it ends. After the Philistines torture him and blind him, Samson asks God for the strength he needs. And at the last minute, he is spared. And the Lord gives him his strength back one last time. And he holds the columns of the temple with his powerful arms and he crushes them [Strickland tears the reattached fingers off his hand and throws them on the floor]. And he brings the whole building down on the Philistines. He dies, but he gets every single one of those motherfuckers! That is his will! Now, do you know what that particular story means for us, Delilah? It means if you know something you're not telling me, you're gonna tell me either before or after I bring this particular temple down on our heads.

Brewster Fuller: Gal stole that thing right out of the lab whatever it is. Mute girl took it. I heard my wife talking on the phone about it.

Strickland: Thank you very much, Mr Fuller, for your assistance. [He leaves]

Zelda: What have you done?

Brewster Fuller: Zelda?

Zelda: I gotta warn her, he's going after her

In the way he addresses her, Strickland explicitly aligns himself with Samson, and Zelda with Delilah, and implies that the biblical story (mediated by DeMille's film) predetermines the outcome of their social interaction. In the biblical story, Samson is able to use his strength to realise his will, thus Strickland, viewing himself as Samson, assumes that he too will be successful. Samson is popularly regarded as a heroic figure who efficiently dispatches Philistines with the jaw of an ass and has God's favour, enabling him to pull down the columns of the Philistine temple.⁴⁴ Strickland's interpretation does not deviate from this perspective and seems to inform Strickland's sense of superiority over the amphibian man, and the two female cleaners, one black and one non-speaking. His privileged position in the patriarchy has its roots in his belief that the Bible confirms the hierarchical structures of the world in which he finds himself at the top. Seeing himself as made in the image of God and positioning himself as the righteous and favoured Samson justifies Strickland's mistreatment of those whom he deems inferior.

44 Stephen Wilson, *Making Men: The Male Coming-of-Age Theme in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 134. Josephus, for example, states that Samson is 'deserving of admiration for his valour and strength' (*Antiquities of the Jews* 5.317).

Delilah and the Monster

In addition to DeMille's popular and influential film, other media have exacerbated the negative *femme fatale* portrayal of Delilah, and a righteous warrior portrayal of Samson. For example, animations of Bible stories for children often depict Delilah as a betrayer or Judas character, who uses her femininity or sexuality to bring Jesus-like Samson to his downfall.⁴⁵ Other modern media such as pop songs and musicals also use this stereotype of Delilah as a common cultural reference, which reinforces these misconceptions of the story.⁴⁶ Caroline Vander Stichele comments in her work on Delilah that it is easy to despair about these portrayals of Delilah, but that because there are many textual gaps in Judges 16, there is also hope for portrayals of 'a different Delilah'.⁴⁷ *The Shape of Water* responds to such a hope. Because the film presents Strickland as the villain, the popular, though inaccurate, understanding of Samson and Delilah is subverted. Zelda is presented in the film as a loyal friend and a self-declared bad liar. Indeed, the biblical Delilah is truthful to a fault in Judges 16 – she never actually lies to Samson, and she may well have made her decisions knowing Samson was a visceral threat to many innocent people.⁴⁸ Through Strickland, Samson's treatment of the Philistines becomes cast more as an act of terrorism than one of valour.

It is well established that del Toro, as the director and co-author of this film, wanted to retell the 1954 film *Creature from the Black Lagoon* with his desired ending; the monster is good and ends up romantically with the female

45 Caroline Vander Stichele, 'Samson's Hair and Delilah's Despair: Reanimating Judges 16 for Children' in Caroline Vander Stichele and Hugh S. Pyper (eds.) *Text, Image, and Otherness in Children's Bibles: What Is in the Picture?* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), pp. 291–310 (300–301).

46 David Fishelov, 'Why, Why, Delilah? Textual, Pictorial, Musical and Filmic Portrayals of Delilah', in Inmaculada Medina Barco (Ed.), *Literature and Interarts: Critical Essays* (Logroño: Universidad de La Rioja, Servicio de Publicaciones, 2013), pp. 129–143; Cheryl J. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 175–327; Dan W. Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable and Devout: Interpreting the Hebrew Bible's Women in the Arts and Music* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2009), pp. 65–77.

47 Stichele, 'Samson's Hair and Delilah's Despair', p. 309.

48 Wil Gafney, 'A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game' In Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Eds.), *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), pp. 49–72 (54, 59–60); Susan Ackerman, 'What if Judges had been written by a Philistine?' *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000), pp. 33–41 (34).

protagonist.⁴⁹ However, del Toro also appears to have retold another story: DeMille's *Samson and Delilah*. In depicting Zelda as an honest and loyal friend while Strickland, as Samson, is nakedly driven by egotism and violence, the film appears to rehabilitate and liberate the biblical Delilah from her popular interpretation (just as the monster is liberated from his earlier 1954 depiction). In both retellings, del Toro switches the good character and the bad character with their inversions. It is Zelda's husband, Brewster, who ends up betraying Elisa's secret, and it is Strickland who tries to seduce Elisa, subverting the usual tropes of woman as betrayer and seductress. Zelda/Delilah does not fulfil the role of the foreign, deceitful *femme fatale* she has commonly been seen to inhabit, her role in this film is liberated from DeMille's popular misogynistic and racist interpretation. Thus, this film creates an alternative and unfamiliar rendering of Samson and Delilah for the majority of viewers. Delilah is no longer a *femme fatale*, the being men should fear, rather Strickland, or Samson, is the repulsive figure that should be reviled. Strickland uses the Bible not as a force for good, but as a text of terror; he actively intimidates Zelda in her own home through his retelling of Samson. Portraying the Bible in this way, as a force for violence and discrimination, demonstrates ways in which appeals to biblical authority have been used historically in the (re)constituting of power dynamics between white males and everybody else.

Strickland and the Abject

In Strickland's construction as the villain of the film his rotting, blackened fingers generate a visceral sense of physical abjection towards him at multiple points in the film. One of the scientists comments on the smell emanating from his reattached digits, his wife recoils as his finger bleeds on her face while they have sex, and finally he tears them off in gory rage towards the end of the film. These oozing, offensive fingers generate what Julia Kristeva names as 'the abject', an intense experience of intolerable disgust.⁵⁰ Abjection is the experience of something which cannot be sublimated, cannot be incorporated into the self and its understanding; 'the jettisoned object ... radically excluded'.⁵¹

49 For example, Elizabeth Jane Garrels, 'Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017): Trump Era Update of Cold War *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and Civil War Reckoning *El laberinto del fauno* (2006)', *Periphērica: A Journal of Social, Cultural, and Literary History* 1 (2019) pp. 11–35 (23–24).

50 Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching the Abject' in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock ed. *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 95–107 (95).

The bitten off fingers do not successfully rejoin Strickland's body, they are rejected absolutely. The people around him react to the sight and smell of the unsuccessful reattachment, they represent death, defilement, the infecting of life.⁵² But for the viewer they are also an outward symbol of Strickland's inner abject morality. Kristeva also attends to this moral aspect of abjection, she comments that while there can be grandeur in crime or rebelliousness which is liberating 'abjection ... is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles'.⁵³ With a spurt of blackened blood, Strickland rends the two fingers from his hand and throws them on Zelda's floor just at the point where he recounts Samson's final act of strength from Judg. 16: 29–30:

Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the ruler and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.⁵⁴

The two columns of the temple that Samson topples to kill the Philistines appear to be evoked by Strickland's fingers. Strickland's abject fingers, used to disgust and intimidate Zelda, are the abjection of Strickland's actions and Samson's killing of hundreds of people. Strickland's retelling of the biblical story, his attempted distortion of Samson as righteous hero, thus becomes associated with his decaying, abject fingers. He is willing to self-destruct, like Samson does, in order to bring the 'Philistines' to their deaths, to foil the plans of those he has Othered. Strickland lost his fingers because he physically harmed the amphibian man with a cattle prod after he had captured him from his home against his will. The amphibian man then acted in self-defence, not innate violence or hunger. Strickland's abjection is a direct result of his dehumanising treatment of the Other. The film renders Strickland's version of the Samson and Delilah story abject, as evoking disgust through Strickland's oppression and dehumanisation of any being who is not a white male. The use of the Bible in this way, is condemned as abject.

⁵¹ Kristeva, 'Approaching the Abject', p.96.

⁵² Kristeva, 'Approaching the Abject', p.97.

⁵³ Kristeva, 'Approaching the Abject', pp. 97–98.

⁵⁴ New Revised Standard Version.

The Monster Demonstrates Liberation

The monster in this film may fulfil Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seventh thesis on monsters, that is, that monsters prompt us to question 'how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place' and 'to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression.'⁵⁵ In doing so, the monster points towards the possibility of alternative, liberated, worlds. Forms of Otherness, or intersectional experiences of oppression under the patriarchy, saturate *The Shape of Water*: Elisa's best friend and neighbour, Giles, is a gay man who feels he was born in the wrong era, Elisa herself is a non-speaking woman who was orphaned as a child, and Zelda, a black cleaner married to an abusive husband. Unbeknownst to others at the science facility, one of the lead scientists is an undercover Soviet, representative of the most Othered and maligned identities in the Cold War era. These intersectional identities find liberation through the monster in the film. The amphibian miraculously enables Giles's hair to grow, providing him with confidence and joy, Zelda stands up to her husband to save Elisa and the monster (and breaks free from the *femme fatale* interpretation of Delilah), the Soviet scientist resists both American and Russian chains of command to protect the monster, and Elisa enters a whole new liberated life with the monster (discussed further below). During a 2017 interview, del Toro commented that the movie is 'about our problems today and about demonizing the other and about fearing or hating the other, and how that is a much more destructive position than learning to love and understand.'⁵⁶ As a Mexican, immigrant, filmmaker, it is not difficult to imagine how del Toro's South American monster's story took shape against the backdrop of Donald Trump's announcement speech in 2015. In that speech, Trump promised tighter controls on 'illegal immigration', a Mexican border wall to keep 'rapists' out, and also called for ban on Muslims entering the country after the 2015 Paris attacks. Indeed, commentators of this film have regarded it to be a Trump-era update to del Toro's earlier works.⁵⁷ While the film is set in the 1960s, del Toro has explicitly stated that America has not actually progressed in terms of

55 Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', p. 20.

56 Haley Bennett, 'Review: *The Shape of Water*', *Minnesota Daily* (December 15, 2017). <https://mndaily.com/246218/arts-entertainment/aetheshapeofwater/>. Accessed 19/08/2022.

57 Elizabeth Jane Garrels, 'Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017): Trump Era Update of Cold War *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and Civil War Reckoning *El laberinto del fauno* (2006)', *Periphērica: A Journal of Social, Cultural, and Literary History* 1 (2019) pp. 11–35; John Richardson, 'The Shape of Water: An allegorical critique of Trump', *The Conversation* (2018).

equality and liberation since 1962 and so the film is really about the present, rather than the past.⁵⁸

The romance storyline of *The Shape of Water* offers an illustration of Cohen's sixth thesis on monsters, that the fear of the monster is also a kind of desire.⁵⁹ Elisa, Zelda, Giles, and the Soviet scientist band together to rescue the amphibian man from the secret laboratory before he is due to be dissected. He is hidden in Elisa's bath where their romantic relationship is explored further into a sexually fulfilling coupling, which culminates in the final scene of the film. For Elisa, her erotic relationship with the amphibian man liberates her from the constraint of her minoritised status as a "mute", female cleaner. Indeed, Strickland refers to the two cleaners as 'piss wipers' and 'shit cleaners', and the implication of the film is that as a differently abled woman, Elisa can only get the work that black women might get.⁶⁰ Strickland likely views Elisa as inferior because biblical texts privilege "normatively" abled bodies. Yael Avrahami demonstrates that speech is regarded as a sense in the Hebrew Bible, and that having fully working senses carries socio-religious consequences:

... that God controls the senses teaches us that the functioning of the senses is an essential part of human vitality ... The absence of the senses, on the other hand, and especially the absence of all the senses, is compared to the absence of any real existence or power.⁶¹

The Hebrew Bible promotes an ideal of physical wholeness or perfection.⁶² Indeed, texts concerning the senses, including speech are often used metaphorically or literally to identify a person without a sense as less independent, lacking in God's support, or sinful.⁶³ Avrahami even notes that this biblical perception of sensory difference dehumanises: '[it] could also lead to people without all their senses being regarded as essentially inferior, as

<https://theconversation.com/the-shape-of-water-an-allegorical-critique-of-trump-93272>. Accessed 13/08/2025.

58 Josh Rottenberg, 'Q&A: Guillermo del Toro's highly personal monster film 'The Shape of Water' speaks to 'what I feel as an immigrant', *Los Angeles Times* (2017). <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-guillermo-del-toro-telluride-20170905-htmlstory.html>. Accessed 13/08/2025.

59 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' in J. J. Cohen. (ed.) *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) pp. 3–25 (16–17).

60 Garrels, 'Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*'; p. 23.

61 Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012) p. 195.

62 Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture*, p. 222.

63 Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture*, pp. 220–221. See also Saul Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009), esp. pp. 119–121.

almost “non-persons”.⁶⁴ This is the way Strickland appears to view Elisa. He also dehumanises Elisa by animalising her lack of speech during his inappropriate sexual advances: ‘I bet I can make you squawk a little’. The normative body is often modelled on God’s body – another legacy of the *imago Dei* – God walks and feels (Gen. 3:8), God speaks, thus humans made in his image should too, and if not, they are less than. Jesus too carries out his “normalising” acts of healing by restoring speech, sight and other somatic functions to characters perceived as disabled in the gospels.⁶⁵ Difference is not allowed, physical “perfection” of the human body must be rigorously reinforced.

Elisa and the amphibian man, however, communicate and show feeling to each other beyond words. Elisa’s lack of speech is not a deficiency here but a productive means of connectivity. Elisa teaches the amphibian man sign language and uses body language, acts of giving, and touch to communicate with the amphibian man in a way that none of the speaking characters have been able to achieve. The dominance of the spoken word as the primary and privileged vehicle of communicating is re-ordered. Other ways of sensing, knowing, and being are possible. In the beginning was the Word (Jn 1:1), but perhaps it does not have to be the end. Logocentric, Christian America is wordlessly critiqued.

After being injured by Strickland’s gunshot, Elisa is led into the sea by the amphibian man who heals the bullet wound and enables her to breathe underwater using gills transformed from the scars on her neck. This has been read by scholars of disability studies as a return to Elisa’s natural form, rather than a transition into something she was not previously.⁶⁶ Elisa is reported to have been found as a baby abandoned (or exposed, left Outside), by a river with the scars on her neck, and she has lived much of her life as a ‘fish out of water’.⁶⁷ The monster’s ability to heal Giles’s baldness and a wound on his arm suggests that the divine amphibian is a healer, rather than a transformer. Elisa therefore is returned to her truest state, one which allows her to fulfil her desire for her monster. I would resist viewing this as equivalent to Jesus’s healings, wherein the wholeness of the human body based on the *imago Dei* is reified. The monster’s healing is an alternative to the restoration of the God-Human form, that which is viewed as “normative”. Elisa’s healing is to a form which is absolutely different, amphibian and human, fusion and hybridity, monstrous. She is liberated from the restriction and oppression imposed by the *imago Dei*.

64 Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture*, p. 221.

65 Louise J. Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 42–43, p. 125.

66 Alison Wilde, Gill Crawshaw and Alison Sheldon, ‘Talking about *The Shape of Water*: Three Women Dip Their Toes In’, *Disability & Society* 33 (2018), pp. 1528–1532 (1530).

67 Wilde et. al., ‘Talking about *The Shape of Water*’, p. 1530.

This emotive climax is Elisa and the amphibian man's fairytale ending, their 'happily ever after'. Just as the monster doesn't make Elisa more human, Elisa too does not try to humanise or civilise the monster as if the only way for the Other to be acceptable is if it meets some sort of predetermined standard set by the dominant, privileged group. Elisa's 'desire for the monster' demonstrates that the amphibian man's difference is to be welcomed as an alternate way of being in the world, rather than being demonised. The amphibian man's body is not colonised into acceptability, and Elisa's life is saved by his monstrous healing powers and the Otherness of her scars, those marks which indexed her status as "mute", as different. That which was seen as disempowering before (likely based on biblical scripts of bodily wholeness and perfection), now, through her desire of the monster, becomes the source of her empowerment and liberation in their watery world. Traditionally, the fear of the monster signified the cultural anxiety of sexual practices deemed to be deviant,⁶⁸ but in Elisa's desire and sexual relationship with the amphibian man the audience's expectations of exactly what we should fear is realigned. As Dawn Keetley observes, these kinds of entanglements are a feature of recent horror films, where desires to become human-plant, or human-animal, hybrids imply a rejection of our normatively ordered world.⁶⁹ Entanglement with monsters may be terrifying but it can be embraced in order to enter new worlds or become something new. The monster and Elisa entangle; their sociality and celebration of their difference, the *imago Monstrum*, is revealed within the film to be a potentially efficacious means for liberation.

Weinstock, in his introduction to *The Monster Theory Reader*, comments that 'The monster threatens, but also promises liberation – a liberation that itself can seem threatening.'⁷⁰ It is indeed threatening for Strickland; this liberation would unravel the structures on which his privilege and power are founded. Strickland embodies men's fear of emasculation by the unknowable and mysterious woman, and the amphibian man – a monster which represents an alternate way of being, or 'being a man', than that prescribed by the patriarchy and the *imago Dei*. This anxiety about proving himself a man is explored between Strickland and General Hoyt when the amphibian man has gone missing and Hoyt is putting pressure on Strickland to relocate him:

68 Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', p. 14.

69 Dawn Keetley, 'Monsters and Monstrosity' in Stephen Shapiro and Mark Storey (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Horror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 183–197 (194).

70 Weinstock, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory', p. 20.

Hoyt: At this point, our only concern is the asset. Do you have it?

Strickland: Still in the wind, sir.

Hoyt: Well, that won't do.

Strickland: Yes, sir, I know. You've known me how long, sir?

Hoyt: Thirteen years. Battle of Pusan.

Strickland: Yes, sir. A man is faithful, loyal, efficient all his life. All of it. And he is ... useful. And he expects ... He has certain expectations in return and then, he fails once. Only once. What does that make him? That make him a failure? When is a man done, sir, proving himself? A good man. A decent man.

Hoyt: Decent? A man has the decency not to fuck up. Now that's one thing. That's real decent of him. But the other kind of decency? It doesn't really matter. We sell it, but it's an export. We sell it, because we don't use it. Thirty-six hours from now this entire episode will be over. And so will you. Our universe will have a hole in it with your outline. And you will have moved on to an alternate universe. A universe of shit. You'll be lost to civilisation. And you will be unborn. Unmade. And undone. So go get some real decency, son. And unfuck this mess.

General Hoyt confirms that 'a decent man' is simply a man who successfully carries out the orders of other men above him, the embodiment of obedience and efficacy. Strickland's failure to find the amphibian man will lead to his unmaking, he will be unmanned, a non-person. Hoyt claims that the other type of decency, implied to be synonymous with morality, goodness, or faithfulness, is not useful in their context, and it is therefore sold. It acts as a façade, a simple advertisement, for Christian America, but it has no real worth or value, according to him. Strickland is thus also at the mercy of patriarchal hegemony, he is not quite at the top of the hierarchy because he is currently failing to meet the bar set by his male superior, the father figure. The only way Strickland can grasp at retaining his position of superiority is through the successful capture and oppression of the amphibian man and those who helped him escape: Elisa, Zelda, the Soviet spy and Giles. These subordinated Others embody the difference with which Strickland, and Hoyt, refuse to reconcile. In order to maintain the status quo of their biblically endorsed power they consistently maintain an understanding of the subordinated Other, because their male superiority is contingent on this difference being preserved. The liberation that the monster offers is indeed threatening for them, as it is for many still today. Strongmen, like Samson, cannot always come out on top, and if they do not, they will take down whoever they can with them.

Gods and Monsters

Timothy Beal observes that we often respond to monsters in one of two ways: demonization or deification.⁷¹ Strickland witnesses the monster heal his own body before resurrecting from the blood-soaked ground after he had shot him several times. He looks at the amphibian man and declares, 'You are a god', conceding to the same appreciation of the creature as the community in the Amazon which revered him. This monster is deified, while Strickland is demonised. Mikles and Laycock note that 'Demonized monsters challenge the social order but paradoxically reinforce it as the community rallies against them. Deified monsters appear as a manifestation of the transcendent or the holy that calls the accepted order into question.'⁷² In *The Shape of Water* the amphibian man demonstrates that Strickland's accepted order, his worldview and its hierarchical structures, cannot continue to be efficacious or productive. Simultaneously, the demonization of Strickland perhaps rallies audiences against hegemonic structures of racism, ableism, misogyny, homophobia and other expressions of discrimination and Othering.

Strickland's final comment that the monster is a god is significant given his earlier rhetoric of the amphibian man as an affront, not made in the Lord's image, and sinful. Strickland's capitulation to the monster as a god signifies his apparent revelation that there are alternate forms of godliness. We may consider this revelatory moment that Strickland experiences in light of Rudolf Otto's idea of the *mysterium tremendum*,⁷³ or as Beal puts it, 'religious experience as awful encounter with monstrous otherness'.⁷⁴ Strickland sees the divine in this monstrous being and we see on his face 'the stupefying combination of fascination and terror, wonder and dread.'⁷⁵ The amphibian-man-as-deity appears to Strickland as 'wholly other', incommensurate with his own self-identification with the *imago Dei*, thus he recoils and yet also is drawn to it. The knowledge is undeniable and also irrational. Strickland's confirmation of the monster's divinity in this moment of *mysterium tremendum* discloses that there are cracks in the world constructed by monotheistic American Christianity.

71 Beal, *Religion and its Monsters*, 6; See also Mikles and Laycock 'Five Further Theses', p. 15.

72 Mikles and Laycock 'Five Further Theses', p. 15.

73 In Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1923]).

74 Beal, *Religion and its Monsters*, p. 53.

75 Beal, *Religion and its Monsters*, p. 7.

The final words of the film are del Toro's rendering of a 13th century Sufi poet: 'Unable to perceive the shape of you, I find you all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with your love. It humbles my heart, for you are everywhere.' The poetic words of another marginalised group, the Muslim community, are left here for the viewer, and it is perhaps another move towards the embrace of difference and liberation. The narrator who reads the poem tells us they were whispered a long time ago by someone in love. This ancient, sacred text, a message about love, is not from the Bible. There are alternatives. There are other voices to which we should listen.

Conclusions

W. Scott Poole notes that while stories about monsters have been used in the past as 'exhibitions of power over the oppressed', monsters can also be engendered 'by the oppressed and socially marginalised to unsettle and challenge the powerful.'⁷⁶ I argue that *The Shape of Water* does just this. Del Toro liberates both the monster and Delilah from earlier film versions, in which they were vilified, evil, monstrous. Strickland's characterisation of Samson and Delilah is not true to the Hebrew text, but it is true to the Christianised version made by DeMille who wanted to render Samson as a Christ figure. The ways in which biblical stories have been distorted in American Christian culture, to uphold white American male dominance, is depicted in this film as abject. Through Strickland's retelling, and his abject, rotting fingers caused by his dehumanisation of the amphibian man, he shows that this use of the Bible is truly abject, horrific. Strickland's distortion of the Bible into a tool for the reconstituting of the patriarchal hierarchy alongside his abject treatment of others and his abject fingers may make explicit to the viewer the causal relationship between biblical interpretation and oppressive, dehumanising patriarchal structures. The liberative power of the monster disintegrates the popularised narratives culture clings to that justifies histories of inequality and exploitation.⁷⁷ The monster, as both Cohen and Weinstock have observed, represents an unexpected potential for ways of relating to difference that promote liberation. Viewers may recognise that if we pay critical attention to these alternative ways of being that the monster demonstrates, and embrace or entangle ourselves with the monster, there could be liberated futures ahead.

⁷⁶ W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), p. 220.

⁷⁷ Poole, *Monsters in America*, p. 226.