Metamorphosis Behind the Closet Door: Analysis of Queer identities through Monstrous Transformations

Introduction

Harry M. Benshoff writes in *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* that queer individuals are frequently perceived as 'the Other' and thus, 'the Other' that exists in the imagination of writers frequently take on queer characteristics (Benshoff 4). However, to examine these monsters, their transformations, and the communities that connect to them further, we must step away from the cis, straight view of 'normality' and attempt to discuss the creature from within. In doing so, we can hope to gain a better understanding of the experiences of individual queer identities as they transition out of assumed heteronormativity and into 'the Other' themselves.

The queer community, like all other marginalized groups, benefit from finding characters in pop culture that reflect their identities and experiences in the media they consume (Elbaba). When we examine sexuality, we are not just examining how an individual of a particular sexuality navigates the world, but how they conceptualize that sexuality into a sexual identity (Hilton-Morrow and Battles 8). The media often takes a role in shaping that conceptualization, as no individual gains an understanding of their own self purely through self-reflection, but rather through a process of identifying and associating their sense of self to others around them (8). With the increasing proliferation of media into modern society, that association is more and more frequently found through exposure to media (8): movies, TV shows, books, podcasts, etc.

In the introduction of his book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall asserts that "culture is about 'shared meanings'" (1) and that culture is built within a community by the sum of its popular ideas (2). With no predominate raised culture

to draw upon like other marginalized identities, the queer community must find culture through the exposure to queer media, or what they perceive to be queer media. Many of these such connections can be found in the monstrous and terrifying world of the horror genre (Benshoff 2). This can result in queer people seeing an association between the fear and disgust these monsters prompt and their own identities, perpetuating internalized bigotry and self-hatred. The monster can be as much a positive vehicle for self-understanding as it is a device that causes hurt to the community that connects to it most. This is why we cannot consider monsters positive or negative representation, but we can analyze them for the purpose of self and community evaluation.

It is imperative that queer scholars and theorists gain an understanding of queer literature as it relates to the experiences of those consuming it. By limiting our study of the queer community to its predominate identities, its numbers, factual experiences, or even literary fiction, we ignore the many, legitimate and critical connections that young, queer individuals use to define and understand their own identity later in life. Thus, we must explore every avenue of self-identification, even those considered less desirable.

Methodology

In this paper, I will characterize the thematic patterns of monstrous metamorphosis that the following queer subgroups most commonly relate to; male-attracted men, female-attracted women, transgender individuals, and asexual individuals. While these groups are not the entirety of the queer community, they represent the large subgroups that can be used as parameters for this discussion. No queer individual's experience is identical, but there are shared thoughts and experiences among similar identities that will help serve as guidelines.

The experience most unique to the queer community as a minority group is the unending process of 'coming out,' meaning the choice to reveal oneself as queer to the society surrounding you. This decision, regardless of what queer identity an individual associates with, is a defining one in a queer individual's life.

When examining the queer communities' relationship to monsters, coming out is most aptly compared to the metamorphosis from human to creature. This is a well-known metaphor previously employed by many pieces of media. "Phases," an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* created by Joss Whedon, addresses this idea directly when teenage protagonist Xander attempts to interrogate a fellow teenager, Larry, about the possibility of Larry being a werewolf, without directly referencing lycanthropy. The truth is revealed in the following exchange:

Xander: I don't want anything! I just wanna help!

Larry: What, you think you have a cure?

Xander: No, it's just... I know what you're going through because I've been there. That's why I know you should talk about it.

Larry: Yeah, that's easy for you to say. I mean, you're nobody. I've got a reputation here.

Xander: Larry, please, before someone else gets hurt.

Larry: Look, if this gets out, it's over for me. I mean, forget about playing football. They'll run me outta this town. I mean, come on! How are people going to look at me after they find out I'm gay. (Whedon)

This dialogue, despite its supernatural setting, reflects a truth about the fear that young queer individuals face about how they will be perceived after they come out publicly. The choice

to self-identify with a group that is frequently characterized as lude, deviant, and dangerous, is a

difficult one. That perception is rapidly changing, especially since 1998 when this episode aired,

but experience continues to be terrifying, it is still a remarkably common experience to lose

friends, family, and entire communities after coming out. And, as American theorist Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, the process of coming out

is never-ending because of a predominantly heterosexual society (67). Sedgwick writes that for

many queer individuals, "…[the closet] is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there

can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the

support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence"

(68).

Thus, coming out is not a single narrative as it is often portrayed to be in media created

with larger, possibly non-queer audiences in mind. Sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters writes in

The Tolerance Trap that "Part of what coming out does – either in its real-life forms or in its

cultural representations – is to put a singular and intimate face on 'gayness,'" (64). One that has

been embraced by modern queer creatives and individuals alike with t-shirts sporting slogans

like 'Out and Proud,' and 'Nobody knows I'm a Lesbian,' (64). This version of the coming out

narrative supposes that it is an ordeal that ends. A process with an ultimate conclusion that only

really concerns the individual and the immediate community surrounding them.

Through the analysis of American court cases like *Acanfora v. Board of Education of*

Montgomery County (69) and *Rowland v. Mad River Local School District* (70), Sedgwick

proves in *Epistemology of the Closet* that coming out has much larger implications for the

individual (70). For both Acanfora and Rowland, the queer individuals in these court cases, the

disclosure of their sexual identity led to the loss of their livelihoods as well as their communities, one that involved court rulings and government jurisdiction.

Even in so-called progressive areas, there continues to be a danger in visibly identifying as queer. In the United States alone, the rate of violence against lesbian and gay individuals from 2017-2020 was more than twice the rate for violence against heterosexuals (Truman and Morgan). For transgender populations, the rate of violence was 2.5 times the rate of their cisgender companions in the same years, and rates of domestic violence against bisexual persons was eight times that of heterosexuals (Truman and Morgan).

Sedgwick also notes that these public admonishments of queerness are not, in fact, quickly suppressed by the heteronormative public. Instead, "…the freshness of every drama of (especially involuntary) gay uncovering seems if anything heightened in surprise and delegability, rather than staled, by the increasingly intense atmosphere of public articulations" (Sedgwick 67). Suggesting that the public punishment for supposedly 'degenerate' queer behavior is another means by which the heteronormative society reinforces its own values, much like the death of the creature reinforces the status quo of a monster narrative.

While there are, of course, no statistics to compare to the rate of violence against werewolves, within a narrative, the two labels serve a similar function when being revealed in a scene: they communicate that an individual is simultaneously dangerous and in danger as well as provide the narrative with a means by which to reassert the norm.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer's obfuscation of whether the characters are discussing lycanthropy or sexuality is a deliberate choice to make ambiguous the exact type of danger that the protagonist, Xander, is in. The tension in the episode is drawn from the dual conflicts of Buffy and her friends attempting to protect themselves and their classmates from the werewolf,

while also attempting to protect the werewolf from a werewolf hunter who has no regard for the humanity inside the creature.

This is the double-bind that many queer individuals face. After coming out, they are perceived as a danger to others, and so they are isolated from larger communities, and they are in danger from those who would seek to harm them, so they isolate themselves from communities with individuals likely to attack them.

For some, the issue is avoided best by not coming out at all. Others choose instead to face the derision of their society for the sake of their own expression. Both sides of the queer community, however, can find connection in a fictitious monster who disguises itself as human, or who once was human.

Still, the experience from one identity to another is, as stated previously, not identical. This paper aims to discover the narrative commonalities by which different queer identities select the creatures they connect to most, and in doing so, surmise how these subgroups experience their queerness through fictional portrayals of the monster.

Review of Literature

The challenge presented in this argument is to identify various texts, across many mediums, as relating to or connecting with a specific queer identity. To do this, it is imperative to acknowledge that it is the fundamental relationship between a queer audience and the content they are consuming that defines what is 'queer' content, not the creators or the text itself (Benshoff 15). When queer audiences identify with a text or character, said text or character becomes queer, regardless of authorial intention or its more broadly accepted reading (15).

As such, I will not be limiting my literature to texts with explicitly queer characters, authors, or creatures. I will focus instead on stories with common and widely distributed queer readings, some of which have explicit references to queer identities and some of which have none whatsoever.

To acquire the body of literature needed to discuss a wide range of queer identities, it is necessary to explore outside of one existing medium. As many queer identities have still yet to be collectively accepted by the public, there are a number of smaller, more obscure texts, that have a far more well-defined relationship to a queer audience. These relationships are often best exemplified by the content created by queer fans of the text, as they are extensions of the audiences' collective reading.

In total, this paper will explore films, books, television shows, poems, essays, and podcasts in the interest of gathering a wide range of experiences and characters to draw from. To find the total collected works, refer to the annotated bibliography.

Background

Monsters exist primarily in horror content, a realm in which sex and death are often coexistent. Margaret Tarratt's essay "Monsters from the Id" notes that, often, monsters appear in science fiction and horror content as an expression of sexual repression or fear for both men and women. Tarratt observes parallels between the hands and gaze of the male romantic lead and the monster in *The Thing from Another World* (1951) directed by Christian Nyby, suggesting that the sexual violence the male protagonist could enact with his hands on the female protagonist is similar to the true violence the titular thing from another world could enact on the male crewmembers ordered to keep watch over it (382). Similar themes arise in other science fiction

films like *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957), directed by Nathan Juran, where an alien creature with a long, thrashing tail grows rapidly and poses a violent threat to the main protagonists. In both films, the action sequences with the monster are interspersed with antagonistic, romantic scenes between the male and female lead (382).

While Tarratt focuses on science fiction, this view can be easily applied to horror films. Jack Arnold's *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) contains a similar dispersion of action and romance, often leading to the monster interrupting romantically tense moments between the heterosexual couple. This creates a secondary tension throughout science fiction and horror films of this time period where the audience is asked to worry over not just if the protagonists will survive, but if they will be able to navigate the events of the film to eventually have a successful romantic and sexual relationship with one another.

Removed from a queer reading, this could suggest a heterosexual need to prove worth and overcome challenges before 'earning' sexuality. Overt sexuality, as is displayed by any creature in these stories who desires the female lead (*King Kong, The Creature*, etc.), is monstrous and not fit to exist within the society heterosexuals live within. This distaste is only further exacerbated by traits given to the monster deemed abnormal by the white, straight, cis audience. These could be traits borrowed from cultural, ethnic, racial, or queer minority groups.

King Kong (1933), directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, is a well-documented example of one such text. The film, which famously follows the rampage and eventual killing of a massive ape, "stirred racial consciousness and stereotyping of the black male as a lascivious savage obsessed with possessing the white woman as an object of desire," *King Kong* perpetuated white audiences' fears about interracial relationships at the time of its

release (Frazier 189). While also drawing upon colonial-era beliefs that whiteness could be equated to civilization, and Blackness to savagery (Hall 243).

As a creature, King Kong is coded as Black, "emblematizes the otherness and threat that whites want to suppress" (Frazier 189). Later adaptations of the story would only exacerbate this coding and draw attention to the racial undertones. The film was released in Germany with the title *King Kong and the White Woman*, further drawing attention to the implied threat of Blackness (191). *King Kong* was not created with the discriminatory stereotype of a dangerous, aggressive Black man in mind, but the widespread acceptance of the prejudiced idea that Black men are threats to white women and white families informed the creation of the monster within the text.

Outside of horror, some monsters in folklore exist purely as a caricature of real minority groups. Goblins, who are often given long noses and overwhelming greed, have been a stand-in for Jewish individuals for much of history, although most notably those exact traits were featured heavily in antisemitic Nazi propaganda (Di Placido). Other caricatures, like that of a "coon" in the American South post the Civil War which portrays Black people as lazy, idiotic, and unproductive (Pilgrim), are so widely considered offensive that they have largely been eliminated from modern media.

Yet the traits used to define these characters remain. Black minstrel performances evolved into the silhouettes of Disney characters like Mickey and Minnie Mouse (Sammond 270). Goblins, with virtually no changes made to disguise their antisemitic origins, exist as an othered population in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise (Di Placido). While the creators and audience for these major media companies and franchises likely don't intend to communicate or consume prejudiced messages, members of the ostracized group still feel that estrangement. In

doing so, they often relate more closely to the estranged creature or caricature than to the 'normal' protagonist.

As the barriers to entry for content creation have lowered in the modern era, more members of minority communities are able to become the authors of widespread stories and communicate that feeling of 'otherness.' This has led to a rise in content that is significantly more self-aware about the placement and fear of a monster or creature within a text. With the release of films like Guillemo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017), what was once subtext intended to cause fear has become text created with the intention of being analyzed.

In creating the film, Del Toro noted that he wanted "to correct" the lack of romance for the monster in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). He set out to rewrite the story from the monster's perspective, reframing the classic, white, cisgender, straight male hero as the villain.

"If this was the 1950s," Del Toro said, "the hero would be Strickland [the villain in question]. Strickland represents three things I find terrifying: order, certainty and perfection. He wants those three, which are impossible and they represent the torture of a life, because no human can have any of them." (Gray, "Love and Danger on the 'Water' Front)

The Shape of Water places characters who cannot live up to the idealized, white, heteronormative society that Strickland comes from as the sympathetic protagonists. The lead of the film is a disabled woman, her best friend is a Black woman, and her neighbor and ally is an older gay man. All these individuals represent communities that have been ostracized by the worldview of 'normality' and can therefore find some common ground with the creature.

Del Toro is not alone in this mission to reframe the monster, paving the way for a new generation of stories written from the perspective of 'the Other'.

The queer community as also susceptible to this societal ostracization, as the response to deviant gendered and sexual behaviors has always been intensely tied to cultural norms of the day. Distinct from racial or cultural minorities, however, the queer community is a "self-identifies minority and generally only or announce [their] status at adolescence, or later … by their very existence, sexual and political minorities constitute presumed a threat to the "natural" (sexual and/or political) order of things" (Gross 13).

This departure from a traditional heteronormative sociological structure has historically contributed to monster narratives ingrained with the fear of queer behavior (13) for far longer than other minority groups. Even amidst more positive portrayals of the queer community such as *Will & Grace* (1997) and *Ellen* (1994), the majority of the American media-making industry assumed that the public was "suffused with prejudices that must be catered to" (14), resulting in an industry that suppressed queer identities in its creatives and laborers well into the 2000's.

Still, the suppression of queer identities in media could not keep them from the public eye entirely. Instead, prejudice banished queer identities to the subtext of media, to be interpreted alone by viewers who could personally connect with the queer themes. According to Benshoff, the advent of the modern horror genre in the early days of cinema aligns with a major shift in the popular culture's understanding surrounding queer individuals (31), suggesting that as the horror narrative developed, the creators of it gained more awareness of queer identities to draw upon.

The first 'boom' of horror films came in the 1930's, during the Great Depression and immediately post-Prohibition in the United States (31). During Prohibition, the elite American queer community had found a semi-stable position amid underground parties and entertainment as staple of night life, one that was immediately revoked when the country was economically

disenfranchised en masse (33). A wide sweeping return to the traditional family unit was a

survival response for many individuals. Benshoff notes that:

> Economic imperatives curtailed the possibilities of middle-class lesbian relationships
>
> (women were expected to give up their jobs to men), while the newly created (legal)
>
> alcohol industry, whose previous prohibition was understood to have led to all sorts of
>
> lawlessness, both inebriate and sexual, helped to ensure that unprecedented numbers of
>
> gay men and lesbians would be legally persecuted (33).

In his further observations, Benshoff notes that queer creators could not be entirely

eliminated from popular culture (34). They continued to write plays for Broadway, author novels

and short stories, and participate in the rapid development of film industry that would eventually

define Hollywood. Responses to this content varied across the country, with some content, such

as Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, being outright banned from public

consumption (34-35).

The world of film faced similar varied responses for the content it was creating

throughout the 1920's. As a result, rather than face inconsistent legislation and enforcement from

different regions, production companies agreed to their own production code (35). Commonly

known as the Hays Code, this ruleset prohibited a wide variety of acts and visuals that would

have been considered offensive to the target audience of white, Christian, heterosexual viewers.

It was officially introduced in 1930, but not strictly enforced until 1934 (35).

The Hays Code did not eliminate explicit content from the stories Hollywood created. It

merely moved them from on screen to off screen, hiding everything from supernatural violence

to queer relationships under a layer of ambiguity (35). Benshoff argues that this forced audiences to speculate, when one character is clearly about to be attacked by another before the film cuts away, the exact nature of the attack is left up to the audience's interpretation (36). It could be purely violent, or it could be sexual, regardless of the genders involved.

It is also important to note that there was little understanding of queer identities during this time period. Most psychological examinations of same-sex attraction were still in their infancy and often censored from public view (31), examinations of transgender identities were even less widespread, as they were often only understood through the lens of homosexuality, and other queer identities like asexuality were virtually nonexistent (31). More complex understandings of sex and gender were generally reserved for discussions among socially elite queer individuals and the isolated urban pockets that housed smaller queer communities (33).

To the heteronormative public, the cause of queer behavior was distant, mysterious, but not absent. Given the visibility of queer individuals in the 1920's through the 'Pansy Craze,' the theatergoing public associated effeminate traits in a male character, or masculine traits in a female character, with deviant behavior, and condemned same-sex attraction and love as taboo (31). These transgressive ideas were used like any other to attract audiences to horror films. Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) was released to theaters across the country on Valentine's Day and advertised with the phrase "The story of the strangest passion the world has ever known!" indicating that transgressive nature of the content was part of the appeal (Gray, "A Valentine to 1931's 'Dracula': Universal Touted Film as a Love Story"). The same is true of horror content today.

Regardless of how much audiences enjoyed the monsters they were viewing, the dominant attitude to the monsters' real, queer counterparts was that they were odd, potentially

dangerous anomalies. Often, these films use more innocuous, identifiably queer traits to foreshadow future danger, a practice that has not disappeared from modern film. In Browning's *Dracula* (1931), this iteration of the vampire takes the form of a refined, European man who is well-mannered and well-groomed. These were features of male homosexual subcultures of the time.

Today, those features are still used to indicate villainous intent across the genres. Mark Mylod's *The Menu* (2022) employs a male villain who is endowed with many of the same traits, and although the film portrays him as more sympathetic while also explicitly making him straight via a reference to his harassment of female employees, he is nonetheless a crazed, violent antagonist poised as a threat to the young, female protagonist in much the same way that the original Count Dracula was.

In modern content created with queer audiences in mind, this codification is borrowed from and rejected in equal measure. A Mexican comedy horror television show, *Los Espookys* (2019), created by Fred Armisen, ties the odd features of its three central protagonists to their love of monsters and horror, while framing their sexualities as largely normal. Andrés and Úrsula, a gay man and lesbian woman respectively, are shown to be queer without truly disrupting the lives of their families or community. In fact, Andrés is being married to another man at the behest of his parents and it is his decision to pursue horror special effects as a business that usurps their life and their plans for his future, not his sexuality at all.

The only queer identity that is at all disruptive is that of Renaldo, who, in the first season of the show, is framed as asexual and aromantic. His mother is constantly asking when he will get a girlfriend, to which he usually responds by saying that horror is the only love he desires. None, however, are framed as villainous. If anything, it is straight, white, hyper feminine

American Ambassador Melanie Gibbons who is framed as the greatest antagonist in the first season of the show. So, although the coexistence of horror and queer has not been eliminated, the show is aware of the relationship and deliberately subverts the narrative of monstrousness by framing the most 'normal' character as the real evil of the narrative.

In other, more horror-driven monster content, the monster reflects a character's explicit queerness. This can be best exemplified through Andy Mushietti's 2017 and 2019 *It* films, an adaptation of Stephen King's *It* novel, released in 1986. Queer readings of the original text supposed that characters Eddie and Richie were repressing queer identities as gay or bisexual men (Brands). For Eddie, a hypochondriac enforced by his abusive, overly controlling mother, this reading stems from the specific combination of fears that the creature 'it' presents him with. It takes the form of a male leper who offers blowjobs to the thirteen-year-old for a dime (King 439). Eddie is the sole protagonist of the seven children that 'it' uses explicit sexual references to terrify. This would suggest that Eddie is most scared of illness born from specifically male sexual encounters. Which, given that the novel was released amid the AIDS epidemic, is very much a reference to the queer community at the time King was writing. The 2017 film adaptation directed by Andy Muschietti makes the AIDS reference more pertinent by setting the film in 80's and having Eddie make an explicit reference to the disease and his fear of it, but removes the leper's offers of a blowjob.

Yet that change is nothing compared to the overhaul of Richie's queer coding. The novel seems to hint at Richie's bisexuality. He is the most sexually knowledgeable of the young protagonists: he is constantly referencing specific sexual acts and diseases through crude jokes, but his humor heavily obscures his romantic interests. To the characters Bill and Beverly, he jokes about a romantic relationship with both words and physical gestures, making mock kiss-

faces at Bill after declaring that he will earn Bill's love (King 956), and crawling on his hands and knees in front of Beverly before mock-proposing to her (982). He worries about being perceived as gay when comforting Bill alone, and refers to Eddie as "Cute, cute, *cute!*" (421). The fear It shows to Richie is a werewolf (530), a common symbol of repressed desire, homosexual or otherwise. While the novel never confirms anything about Richie's attraction to the other characters, the 2019 film *It: Chapter Two,* also directed by Andy Muschietti, makes clear that not only is Richie queer, he is afraid of his own sexuality and has repressed it for his entire life, culminating in the loss of Eddie and his character's eventual breakdown at the end of the film.

These modern changes allow the characters to be more openly queer, but they still are not allowed the same happy ending as the straight protagonists of the film. Ben and Beverly, who parallel Richie and Eddie by repressing their feelings for one another as children, are allowed to fulfill their relationship and end the movie at peace with the events and each other, while Eddie is killed and Richie is clearly destroyed by his death.

Finally, this codification is used to create monsters who are explicitly queer. Popular television show *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019), created by Jermaine Clement, follows a group of three classic vampires and one energy vampire (a creature original to the show that feeds on boredom and frustration), as well as their human familiar. All three of the classic, blood-feeding vampires are shown to be explicitly bisexual, having absolutely no preference between male and female partners or victims. They also have incredible sexual appetites, a trait that has codified a character as bisexual since the early days of cinema. The vampires are further codified as queer through the presence of their human familiar, Guillermo, who begins the series as a closeted gay man who desperately wants to become a vampire. His desire to transform is

framed as a want of identity. He is looking to become more like Antonio Banderas's portrayal of Armand in Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), a story that is famous for its underlying queer messages. Guillermo's desire to become a vampire could also be read as a desire to be openly and unapologetically queer in the same manner that the vampires are. Once again, modern creators are borrowing from existing queer horror tropes and using them to discuss explicitly queer ideas.

As the queer community and the codification of queer ideas in media has grown increasingly complex, the need to differentiate the coding of one identity from another has grown as well. While many critics and theorists have attempted to address queer readings of the monster as it exists in many works of fiction, they often fall short because they fail to acknowledge the broad spectrum of queer beyond just same-sex attraction. In order to adequately analyze modern works for their existing queer themes, we must be more deliberate in our approach and choose particular identities to examine these works with. In doing so, we will be able to identify queer coding in transformative monster narratives that align with specific queer identities.

Queer Sexuality in Men: The Monster Loving the Man

The villainy of effeminate men is not an unfamiliar trope in modern storytelling, nor is it unique to the monstrous caricatures of the horror genre. From the classic image of a Bond villain turning around in his chair, stroking a cat with a sly smile, his leg crossed as he looks on at a (usually restrained in some manner) secret agent to the colorful faces and overly dramatic expressions of a singing Disney antagonist like Hades in Ron Clements and John Musker's *Hercules* (1997) or Scar in Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff's *The Lion King* (1994), male villainy is consistently characterized as effeminate.

That effeminate nature in turn, is used to convey that the coded character is nefarious and planning something that will benefit only himself and bring misfortune on the other characters in the story. The classic Bond reveal is usually intended as a shock reveal of the mastermind behind a series of events that have brought chaos and conflict down on Bond and his allies. 2012's *Skyfall,* directed by Sam Mendes, is a prime example of this trope. Javier Bardem plays Raoul Silva, a former agent who wants nothing but the destruction of MI5, Bond's operating organization, and its leader, M, played by Judi Dench.

Silva takes a special interest in Bond throughout the film. He touches the agent and his clothing while Bond is restrained, speaking gently to him and often making a dedicated effort to convince him that Silva's cause is just. On top of this, he wears clean, white suits and puts clear effort into his hair and teeth. All of these factors combined together creates a male villain that has been coded not only as queer, but as having a perverted fascination with Bond, a pinnacle of masculinity in pop culture. A significant amount of the unease Silva is meant to inspire stems from his queer coding.

Silva is a narrative descendant of many similar figures in pop culture. Often, they are even more common in children's media. Films of the Disney Renaissance are particularly suspect with villains like Jafar in Ron Clements and John Musker's *Aladdin* (1992) and Gaston in Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), all exemplifying a vilified form of femininity on male characters through their mannerisms, clothing, or even their relationships with other men in the narrative.

Another unifying characteristic of these examples is their ability to hide their natures behind a polite guise. Jafar, Gaston, Scar, and Hades all share a status within their societies that they worked hard to attain, while secretly planning their own nefarious schemes. That double nature hints at the latent threats that queer men are perceived to pose to heteronormative society by a straight audience, which can be separated into two categories: societal threat and physical threat.

The societal threat presented by queer men is simple: by being attracted to other men, queer men challenge the traditional heteronormative family structure. Instead of seeking solely women for their pleasure and eventual procreative purposes, they may seek out men for solely their own enjoyment, which removes the need of women and family for sexual and romantic validation. To a straight audience, a queer man has a secret agenda while maneuvering through a heteronormative society in the same way that many queer-coded villains mingle with the protagonists while planning their destruction.

The physical threat has its origins in the AIDS epidemic that ravaged the queer community, primarily men, starting in 1981. The disease gained a reputation as a gay man's disease, because, according to the Center for Disease Control, "Gay, bisexual, and other men who reported male-to-male sexual contact are disproportionately affected by HIV," which

perpetuated fears of AIDS spreading to vulnerable groups like children from queer men ("HIV and All Gay and Bisexual Men") Often, these fears became more monstrous, transforming the average queer man from a normal individual into a rabid creature ruled by sexual desire.

Both of these suggested threats can be found in the werewolf character Fenrir Greyback from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, "Remus Lupin"). Greyback deliberately spreads his lycanthropy to other individuals, including children, as a way of threatening people. He does this to the character Remus Lupin, infecting him as a child after Lupin's father took issue with Greyback. Neither Greyback nor Lupin are explicitly queer, but the interaction is deliberately similar to heterosexual fears exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic.

The author herself confirmed this connection. In *Short Stories from Hogwarts of Heroism, Hardship, and Dangerous Hobbies*, published in 2016, J.K. Rowling wrote, "Lupin's condition of Lycanthropy was a metaphor for those illnesses that carry a stigma, like HIV and AIDS" (Rowling 43). Lupin, himself, is also interpreted as queer by many fans of the series, with over 43,000 fan-created works depicting him in a romantic relationship with Sirius Black as of October 2023, making it the second most popular relationship in the *Harry Potter* fandom on the Archive for Our Own, a predominate fan works site, and the most popular relationship between side characters.

It is not coincidence that Rowling assigned queerness to her werewolf character. The spread of disease is associated as much with the queer community as it is with creatures like the werewolf, who spread their monstrosity through contact. The connection existed through mutual fear of both monsters and queer men already.

Nor is it a coincidence that fans of the series read Lupin as queer more strongly than most other characters. His lycanthropy gives him a connection to the queer community that most of

the other characters lack. Even in a world of magical creatures, monsters that transform from

human to non-human are more likely to connect with queer viewers. Within these fan

interpretations, Lupin is most assigned same-sex attraction over transgender, asexual, or any

other queer identities, in part because the werewolf is a stand-in for repressed desire, the same

repressed desires that typify the experience of some queer men (Archive for Our Own).

Like Rowling's comparison between lycanthropy and AIDS, vampires are also associated

with plague and illness. In Bram Stoker's original *Dracula¸* and its unauthorized film adaptation

Nosferatu (1922), the evidence of a vampire preying on a community is mistaken for illness.

While in the latter film, the vampire Nosferatu is less able to disguise himself among the social

circles of humans, his presence brings on 'a plague' to his new community of residence.

In the written text, however,

Count Dracula encapsulates both the

societal and physical threat of queer

men. He is a well-groomed man who

can interact with humans without

arousing too much suspicion, while

working to accomplish his own

nefarious goals. After his first encounter with the Count, protagonist Jonathan Harker is sent to a

hospital in Budapest, "suffering from a violent brain fever" (94). Likewise, when Lucy, a friend

of Jonathan's wife Mina, is stalked and killed by Count Dracula, her death is preceded by bouts

of illness that leave her "ghastly, chalkily pale" (114).

In analyzing Count Dracula as a queer-coded monster, it may seem counterintuitive that

two of his primary victims, Lucy, then Mina herself, are women. However, it is important to

remember that the fear and threat of queer men does not stem solely from the potential predation of men, but also from the usurpation of women and femininity.

Horror is one of the few genres where female characters outnumber their male counterparts (Sun). Women are a staple of the genre in a way that is rare within entertainment and are thus a pivotal audience. For straight women, an effeminate predator is frightening not because he may seduce or kill a man, but because he may replace and supersede her role as a feminine figure in her social circles, representing a societal threat to the status of women. Count Dracula is that fear transformed into a monstrous form.

Within these examples, we can see the beginning of two distinct patterns: first, the monster coded as a queer man is able to disguise himself in human society, concealing or suppressing his monstrous nature so that those around him are unaware of the danger they are in. Second, the 'other' nature of the monster is transmissible and disease-like, able to hurt or transform humans in proximity to the creature.

Queer Identities in Vampiric Transformation

More modern narratives take the connection between queer men and monstrous transformation a step further, forcing a human character to face the fear of their own sexuality and identity via the confrontation with, and eventual transformation into, a monster.

Amazon's 2022 television adaptation of Anne Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* does so by reframing protagonist Louis as a closeted Black business owner in New Orleans. In the very first episode, it is made clear that Louis fears his own identity more than he fears the monster that stalks him throughout the story. He avoids church like he's already a vampire

despite his brother's insistence that he attend, and his life takes place almost entirely at night due to the nature of the business he runs, sex work, and the company he keeps.

Louis is isolated from any other queer individuals who might support him in his attraction to other men. Instead, he buries the secret inside himself and refuses to acknowledge or act on it, fearing the consequences for himself and his relationships if he ever does. Louis's family, especially his brother, is religious, and already dislikes the work he does as a businessman. To come out as a queer man would be to lose everything of value to him, an unfortunate truth that many queer men still face today.

Lestat, in contrast to Louis, is allowed to live his life freely, both as a vampire and as a queer man. He flirts with Louis openly and becomes visibly outraged at Louis's brother's devotion to Christianity, both actions enhanced and enabled by his supernatural abilities. Lestat has no need to fear the reactions of the humans around him, with both hypnosis and super strength, there is very little they can do to him.

The freedom Lestat experiences also makes it difficult for him to understand the position that Louis is trapped in. Just before transforming him into a vampire, Lestat shouts at Louis "All these roles you conform to and none of them your true nature. What rage you must feel as you choke on your sorrow!" (Jones). This quote demonstrates both how deeply Lestat relates to the isolation Louis feels, and how much it angers him.

To Louis, Lestat represents a life he is ashamed he even desires. Again, just before his transformation, he tells a priest in confession that he is "a sodomite, Lord! [He] laid down with a man." Louis then calls Lestat "the Devil" (Jones) and tells the priest that he has his root in him. Louis's reference to 'his root' could mean the supernatural or sexual power that Lestat has over

him, or even, perhaps, the inherent power Lestat holds over Louis just for seeing Louis as he is instead of as what he pretends to be.

Either way, the narrative within *Interview with the Vampire* (2023) demonstrates how monstrosity, when used as a direct metaphor for queerness in a text, can be used to convey the complicated, conflicting feelings of both a closeted queer man longing for open identity, and an out queer man looking back into the closet he emerged from.

Yet the coding that surrounded Dracula is not eliminated, even in this more modern adaptation that is actively seeking to discuss and display queer themes. Lestat's feedings throughout the story are thought to be a mysterious fever by the human residents, connecting Lestat's monstrous nature to illness. The cinematography of the show also demonstrates time and time again, through Lestat's longing, hungry gazes, that his agenda with Louis is not platonic, but nor is it romantic.

Lestat desires Louis, he wishes to make him monstrous in the same way that Lestat already is. That is the secret plan that he maintains throughout the first episode of the show, the meaning behind every intense gaze and action he takes. Even though the show is aware of its queer audience and message, Lestat has what is fundamentally, a homosexual agenda.

<u>Werewolf</u>

In his essay from Joe Vallese's *It Came From the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror*, "The Wolf in the Room," Prince Shakur uses the Brazilian werewolf film *Good Manners* (2017), directed by Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra, to describe his complicated relationship with his mother, and the ordeal of coming out to her. Shakur describes his mother as both a protector, and

enforcer, someone to keep him and his brother from the evils of the world while at once teaching them how she believed they were meant to behave in it (Vallese 100).

The complication of his queer identity within that dichotomy, however, forced both him and his mother to confront the question of "what happens when we, the children, become the monsters, the very things meant to be cast out" (100).

Shakur's mother did not react well to his sexuality. She discovered it on her own, reading through his journal secretly at night, and waking him up to confront him about it. Like a werewolf, Shakur was not given a choice about coming out, it was instead "an inadvertent reveal of an elephant—or a wolf—in the room" (101). His reveal to his mother was not his own, but a forceful witnessing of a hidden identity. He was pushed into a state of vulnerability that he was not ready to be in.

To Shakur, this incident with his mother is like *Good Manners*. The film follows the story of a woman's adoption of a boy, Joel, whom she knows to be lycanthropic, and her attempts to prevent his inevitable transformation into a werewolf. Shakur describes how "Joel begins to rebel against [his mother]. He thirsts for both human flesh and a deeper understanding of who and what he is. A desperation to ratify his own identity, whatever hurt that might bring, to others, to her, to himself" (101).

For those queer men like Shakur, who were not given a choice about when to come out, either because of a personal invasion, or perhaps because their own proclivity for femininity simply could not be disguised, the werewolf's forceful transformation is similar to the narrative of their queer journey. Their identity is not chosen, nor is it capable of being hidden, even if fearful parents attempt to suppress it.

In *Good Manners*, Joel's mother, Clara, attempts to suppress his lycanthropy in much the same manner a straight parent might suppress their child's sexuality. She feeds him only vegetables, lies about his birth, and attempts to keep him from going out during the full moon.

Again, Shakur emphasizes the familiarity of Clara's actions. He recognized, "so much of [his] own mother in Clara's ability to wade between chilliness and warmth, her resourcefulness, and her unexpected bouts of affection" (100). Clara's relationship with Joel is defined by her desire to suppress his lycanthropy, much like any homophobic parent has a maintained interest in suppressing the queerness and perceived femininity of their queer son throughout their life at home.

Like the *Interview with a Vampire* (2023) TV show, *Good Manners* is a more recent release that does understand its queer theming. The parallels between the experience of suppressed lycanthropy and repressed sexuality are not accidental. Even though Joel is not queer in the film, Clara is. She had an affair with Joel's birth mother, Ana, while she was pregnant with Joel, and was there to take him in when he tore through Ana's stomach as a newborn wolf pup. Thus, Clara understands how it feels to be othered by society, which may contribute to her eventual acceptance of Joel's nature at the conclusion of the film.

Still, the horror of the werewolf in *Good Manner* stems from the unknown and uncontrollable nature of the creature's bloodlust. In his search to understand his suppressed identity, Joel goes out with his friend Maurício, only to transform and eat his friend whole. It is

only while he is on his way to a dance with a girl named Amanda that he realizes his true nature as he is about to transform. Joel manages to warn her, leading to her escape and survival. The danger of Joel's lycanthropy specifically kills another little boy, no one else. He is Joel's sole victim until the end of the film when Clara releases him onto the entire community.

Regardless of the film's awareness of its queer themes, the message being communicated in the subtext is still that the 'otherness' Joel is suppressing, enforced by Clara, is dangerous. The film does not suggest that it should be repressed, but it does not argue that it should be accepted either. Joel and Clara exist in their own space of queer otherness, separated and still a danger.

Conclusion

Throughout the examples discussed, a dichotomy has emerged surrounding the word 'monster' in the context of gay and bisexual men. The acceptance of a queer label provides protection against the suppression and forced masculinity that society expects of its closeted queer men, while at once opening the door for a new danger as a persecuted individual.

"A monster is not such a terrible thing to be," queer author Ocean Vuong writes in his semi-autobiographical novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous.* "From the Latin root *monstrum,* a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once." (Vuong 13)

A shelter, like Lestat attempts to be for Louis, a warning like Dracula is. Vampires appear repeatedly, simultaneously demonstrating the appeal of a monstrous lifestyle while putting themselves at constant risk every time they emerge to feed among humans. The vampire has power, but not enough to keep it safe from the harm of an entire community.

Werewolves too demonstrate the constant bind of male queerness. No matter how repressed an individual may be, their queer desires will eventually manifest, leaving the man in question exposed and vulnerable to attack from outsiders. Returning to Shakur's experience with *Good Manners*, even as his family was openly homophobic in front of him as a child, "the monster grew inside of [him], and [he] continued to feed it" (Vallese 101).

The ability others to see someone for what they are, man or monster, and love them for it, not in spite of it, is something that everyone desires. Among queer men who are made to feel predatory and disgusting, the journey out of the closet can feel very much like Louis's transformation into a monster, or Joel and Clara's implied rampage against their community. Not as a peaceful acceptance or a realization that leads to a better life, but as a violent destruction of one's family, church, career, and neighborhood only to emerge on the other side as a new being that is viewed as dangerous, diseased, and yes, monstrous.

The narrative overlay of disease and sickness is unique to the coding of male queer identities in horror and monster fiction, but the overarching perceptions of danger and threat to a heteronormative society is not. Throughout the following sections, each of the individual queer identities discussed will have their own recurring themes, imagery, and tropes that present their own reflections of cisgendered, heteronormative fears.

Queer Sexuality in Women: Feminine Wiles

It can be tempting to overlay the same analysis of same-sex attracted male identities onto same-sex attracted female identities. This thinking would lead us down the path of analyzing masculine women in horror and monster fiction, examining them for the latent societal threats that they represent within the narrative.

Yet, within classic monster films such as *King Kong* (1931), *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), and James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), the female leads are exceedingly feminine, with long hair, full lips, and perpetual positions as damsels in distress. Historically, these female leads do little to challenge the role of women in heteronormative society. Even in queer-coded monster narratives where the monster is female like Lambert Hillyer's *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), and, more recently, Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009), the monsters continue to be characterized with similar levels of extreme femininity. These portrayals of the feminine are visually like those of a classic heterosexual love interest, seemingly defined at least partially by what men expect to see when they are presented with a desirable woman.

Instead of challenging the presentation of womanhood and femininity like many queer-coded male monsters do, the queer-coded female monster relies on sexuality and sexual agency as the means by which she disrupts heteronormative expectations, commonly manifesting as a demon or witch.

Feminine sexual agency is, on its own, laden with queer ideas. A queer woman, in or out of the closet, is handed sexual agency the moment she realizes her own desire for other women, as it provides her with an alternate to the traditional narrative of heterosexual relations. The ability to satisfy sexual and romantic desires while rejecting men is sexually empowering on its

own; allowing a queer woman to distance herself from male-driven ideas of pleasure and sex and determine her wants on her own terms.

Outside of monstrous texts, the 'femme fatale' is an archetype who is closely related to the feminine monster. She knows that her own sexuality is a powerful tool to influence those around her and is willing to wield it to achieve her goals. In doing so, she presents a major threat to a patriarchal society, just as a queer woman does. Both have sexual agency that challenges the dominance of men in the traditional heteronormative relationship in a way that a fainting, damsel-in-distress lead does not.

Film noirs like *Double Indemnity* (1944) demonstrate how the femme fatale, and the sexual agency she has, is presented as a threat to the traditional heteronormative dynamic. In the film, Phyllis Dietrichson, played by Barbara Stanwyck seduces an insurance agent to assist in the murder of her husband, literally using her sexuality to disrupt and put a murderous end to her marriage, a staple of heteronormative enforcement.

After Dietrichson is first introduced, insurance agent Walter Neff, played by Fred MacMurray says in his narration that:

> She liked me. I could feel that. The way you feel when the cards are falling right for you, with a nice little pile of blue and yellow chips in the middle of the table. Only what I didn't know was that I wasn't playing her. She was playing me, with a deck of marked cards, and the cards weren't blue and yellow chips. They were dynamite. (Wilder).

In seducing Neff and convincing him to murder her husband, Dietrichson has demonstrated the threat of female sexual agency to the heteronormative audience. Neff has bent

his will to hers in an effort to fulfill his own sexual desire for her, and other women could potentially do the same. When women step outside their prescribed gender roles, they become dangerous, able to influence men into acting against their own interest and driving them to violence and destruction.

A queer woman is a similar threat. Being queer, she is endowed with sexual agency by the very nature of her existence. She is aware of how men look at woman because she too looks at woman, giving her even more insight into how to be seductive in the male gaze. Her threat to the heterosexual relationship is also doubled because she can seduce not just the man, but also the woman in the relationship. She is an active agent against traditional heteronormative values. Her ability to stand on her own is a threat to the male position of status.

When feminine sexual agency is transformed from a woman into a monster, the result is a similarly seductive creature. Her sexuality and independence become exaggerated, distended to the point of monstrosity.

This rampant sexuality often takes the form of a female demon, one intent on satisfying an endless appetite for sex and, sometimes, blood. By transforming a queer woman's awareness of her own sexuality or her desire for sex into an uncontrollable lust, heteronormative narratives can reinforce the perceived dangers of queer womanhood.

In comparison, the desire for sexual independence and agency is manifested as a woman with enough power to separate herself entirely from heteronormative society, often taking the form of a witch. While the demon has a mindless want to fulfill its own needs, a witch often has intention and goals. Even if they remain mysterious to the audience, her wants are contrary to the expectations of heteronormative society, making her a latent threat to its values.

Blood and Lust in Demonic Transformation

Cult classic film *Jennifer's Body* (2009) directed by Karyn Kusama is not a film known

for its subtlety. The titular character, Jennifer Check played by Megan Fox, is transformed into a

bisexual demon hell-bent on eating her fill of teenage boys. She kills, flirts, and kisses her way

through the film, all while exchanging increasingly intense gazes with her best friend Anita

'Needy' Lesnicki, played by Amanda Seyfried.

Even before her transformation, Jennifer is well-aware of her sexuality and its power over

the people around her. When Needy asks her how she intends to get alcohol as a high schooler

while they are at a bar, Jennifer tells her that she plans to play "hide and titty" with the bartender

(Kusama). Later in the film, she tells Needy not to worry about the cops, claiming that she "has

them in her back pocket," because she slept with a cadet (Kusama).

Jennifer exerts a similar power over Needy, kissing her midway through the film, an

action that is reciprocated intensely. When Needy pulls away, confused, Jennifer laughs and

proceeds to taunt her, asking why they can't play "boyfriend-girlfriend," like they used to

(Kusama). The narrative teases this dynamic, never fully committing to either of the girls'

attraction to the other, but always keeping them in physical contact with each other, both

affectionately and violently.

Queer author Carmen Maria Machado uses *Jennifer's Body* and her own experience with

one of her first homoerotic relationships to discuss women exploring their sexuality in her essay

"Both Ways", originally published in Joe Vallese's *It Came From the Closet: Queer Reflections*

on Horror. She believes the film explores "what it means to experience parallel sexualities with

your best friend as you punch through the last vestiges of childhood" (Vallese 28), going on to

describe how, in her own experience as a queer woman, affection between women, even

explicitly sexual affection, can occur among women who would define their relationship as 'a friendship'.

Machado experienced one such relationship herself. She confessed her feelings to a woman she had been on dates with, kissed, and slept with, only to be told, "I think I'm straight" (29). Machado goes on to describe how she saw many women in her youth crossing similar romantic and sexual boundaries with their female friends, with only some going on to identify as queer later in life. To Machado, "a girl kissing her best friend … is the acceptance of loss, the veering from the path. No matter where she goes afterward" (31).

In narratives like *Jennifer's Body*, the ambiguity of homoeroticism between female friends reflects the confusion Machado and the young women she describes seeing feel. When affection is already abundant in a relationship, how is any young, queer woman meant to know what is romantic, what is sexual, and what is entirely platonic?

This is the sapphic space in which female demons often operate. Within monster narratives, the ambiguity is an opportunity for a monster to become close with a female victim in a way a male predator could not.

Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novel *Carmilla* is an early example of this idea. The human protagonist Laura becomes incredible close with a young guest named Carmilla. The danger that Carmilla poses is interwoven with the question of platonic and romantic intent. Laura does not understand what Carmilla's motives are or what her boundaries with a close female companion should be, which allows Carmilla to get close to her, far closer than any man would be permitted.

Jennifer is also allowed to exist and interact with Needy in ways that a man or male friend would likely not be. This is best exemplified when she first emerges as a demon and goes

to Needy at her house in the middle of the night. Despite terrifying Needy, Jennifer is permitted to stay with Needy only ever really expressing concern for her.

While still covered in blood and carnage, she shoves Needy into a wall, puts her mouth to Needy's neck, biting softly, before deciding against hurting her. She later tells Needy that she "couldn't bring [her]self to hurt [her]" (Kusama). After this encounter, she leaves to devour a male classmate.

In a literal sense, Jennifer has redirected her desire for Needy to the closest boy she can find. A strategy that is not unfamiliar to queer teenage girls looking to avoid their attraction to a female friend.

Power and Control – The Witch

As a label, what separates the 'witch' from the other creatures discussed in this text is the ability of contemporary individuals to literally apply the term to themselves. There exists a connection between queer feminine communities and witchcraft, not just because it appears in literature that the population relates to, but because they put the label on themselves.

In the foreword of *Becoming Dangerous*, Kristen J. Sollee, author of *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* writes, "The witchy femmes, queer conjurers, and magical rebels in this volume know that there is nothing more dangerous than the self-possessed. Those who know power lies in their ability to channel and harness the tools at their disposal" (West and Elliot xiii). Sollee and the essayists in *Becoming Dangerous* have usurped the once-derogatory image of the witch to display their own power.

Given the inherent queerness of feminine agency, the communities of queer femmes and practitioners of witchcraft are inherently connected. Oxford queer studies PhD student and

researcher Mara Gold describes how the histories of both communities "have to be considered in relationship to one another in order to be fully understood. Whether it be queer astrology, lesbian witches on mainstream television (such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Willow and Tara) or real wiccan practices, Esotericism and queer culture remain inextricably linked" (Gold).

Gold uses the example of Willow and Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as it was among the first to positively showcase a lesbian relationship. In the world of *Buffy*, there are countless demons, monsters, and other magically created creatures that the protagonists face off against, so it is not merely circumstance that the only two queer characters are also the only two witches in the main cast.

Still, to describe either Willow or Tara as a 'monster' seems unbefitting. They are, after all, as human in their appearance and mannerisms as the rest of the cast.

At least until season six, when, after Tara's death ("Seeing Red"), Willow transforms from herself into Dark Willow, gaining black hair, eyes, and veins that stretch across her face ("Villains"). This moment in the series is the culmination of a fall arc for Willow, as slowly over the course of the four seasons that she has been practicing magic, she has gradually been becoming more and more selfish in her use of it.

This fall from grace is much more prominent in seasons four through six and the actions Willow takes generally pertain to her personal relationships. After her boyfriend Oz leaves her in season four, for example, Willow casts a spell on herself that brings her desires to life if she speaks them aloud ("Something Blue"). In doing this, she curses each of her friends in a unique way and causes the main conflict of the episode. In two separate episodes of season six, Willow uses magic to erase Tara's memory of conflict in their relationship, an act that borders on magical abuse ("Once More with Feeling", "Tabula Rasa").

Willow's increasingly selfish use of magic is, on its own, an embodiment of the fear of female agency and power. She has power, but she misuses it, introducing the sexist notion that maybe she should not have power at all. In comparison, Tara never pushes the boundaries of her magic to fuel her own wants. She does not cause conflict in episodes with her magic, instead playing largely an emotional support role for Willow and the other cast members.

Tara is never made monstrous, but the culmination of all Willow's power, fueled by her queer desire for her girlfriend, is undeniably so.

Willow's power only reaches its peak when she is consumed by one all-encompassing selfish pursuit; her queer love for Tara. The resulting message is a tangled thematic mess of power, queerness, love, and selfish, unyielding want that is not an overwhelmingly positive reflection of Willow's queerness. What is a queer viewer meant to take away from that except that their own queer desires are as capable of becoming monstrous as Willow is?

Conclusion

Just as a demon temptress uses her body to seduce men and women around her or a witch wields magic to exert her will, the power queer women possess by having sexual agency in a world determined to rob them of it is often treated as a threat to the dominant heteronormative, patriarchal values in the society around them. The associations with the monstrously feminine creatures of the night can be used as both a means to diminish the sexuality of queer women, but more often they are reclaimed and used to empower lesbian, feminist groups.

An example of this can be found in the 1974 founding of *Womanspirit,* a quarterly feminist and spiritualist magazine (West and Elliot xi). While not directly associating themselves with demons or witches, the magazine covers routinely made use of occult imagery and nudity.

"Feminism tells us to trust ourselves," One of the founders of the magazine, Jean Mountaingrove wrote. "We began to trust our own feelings, we began to trust our own orgasms. These were the first things. Now we are beginning to have spiritual experiences and, for the first time in thousands of years, we trust it." (West and Elliot xi)

Mountaingrove illustrates in this quote the relationship between queer feminine power and sexual agency. In learning about their own sexual agency, this lesbian publication was able to empower themselves, and used occult imagery and ideas to communicate that empowerment to others in their community.

At the same time, this imagery isolates the queer women from the heteronormative majority, making them more foreign and intimidating to their straight compatriots. The witch and her coven are, after all, generally isolated figures in media. They are hostile to the dominant way of life, thus invoking them is a double-edged sword. They both empower those who use them and take them further away from heteronormative culture.

Transgender Identities: The Most Monstrous of Men

Examining identities that fall under the transgender umbrella varies slightly from other queer identities because the label of 'transgender' is significantly more stigmatized (White Hughto). Horror films have explicitly used villainous transgender characters in the place of a monster before, and while those films absolutely warrant discussion for how they portray their murderous transgender characters, that depiction on its own is not a creature of transformation that has a place among those we are seeking to explore.

Instead, we will examine how queer coding in monster transformation narratives aligns specifically with transgender identities in stories of possession and resurrection.

Gender fluidity can be found in the myths and legends of many cultures all around the world. From Norse mythology (Self) to Hindu epics (Srinivasan and Chandrasekaran), the ability to transition between genders, or to exist with both masculine and feminine aspects of the identity, was not necessarily viewed as abnormal in all ancient societies. Generally, it was not universally villainized or lauded, it simply existed.

Today and in the recent past, the dominant cisgender society is heavily governed by gender roles. Thus, societal structures like marriage, parenthood, and patriarchy that are built on those gender roles are threatened by the ability of transgender individuals to shift gender identities.

To delegitimize the threat of transgender individuals, heteronormative society responds by framing the fluidity of gender as fundamentally unstable, evidence of a person's insanity, which can be further villainized with the addition of predatory or violent behaviors. Media, in all forms, is one of the best tools that this can be accomplished through.

According to film scholar and author Lindsay Ellis, the association between predatory behavior and the transgender identity in Hollywood films has steadily increased over the course of the 20th Century, culminating in much of the fear and transphobia seen today in the reactionary gender critical movement (Ellis and Meehan).

Heather Duerre Humann writes in her book *Gender Bending Detective Fiction* that crossdressing appears in the detective novels of the 1940's and 50's. Humann notes that in *Vengeance is Mine* by Frank Morris, published in 1950, features a female love interest who is eventually revealed to be a male killer in disguise, displaying an early example of the sexual and gender confusion that cis, heterosexual authors felt at the concept of transitory gender.

However, the conflation between the transitory gender and predatory behaviors likely gained the most visibility through the release of Alfred Hitchcock's iconic film, *Psycho* (1960).

In this classic thriller, Norman Bates, a lonely young man runs a motel along a near-empty stretch of highway. When a young woman stays at the motel who sexually arouses Norman, the "personality of his mother" (Hitchcock) takes over, feeling threatened by the presence of another woman in Norman's life. To cope with this internal stress, he dresses as his deceased mother and kills the girl who has inspired the mental conflict.

After Norman has been apprehended, the detective who assisted in his capture briefly refers to him as a "transvestite," only to be corrected by a psychologist who instead diagnoses Norman with a personality disorder (Hitchcock). The film supports this conclusion with a scene of Norman in a holding cell, conversing with his mother in his head, relayed to the audience via voiceover.

Even in narratives like *Psycho* where characters explicitly state that someone is not a 'real transvestite,' the desire to change one's gender is still an indicator of mental unsoundness that comes out in the form of violence, often against women.

A similar, if more drastic example of this can be seen in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). The killer in this film is Buffalo Bill, who kills and skins young women with the intention of building a woman suit out of their skin. This, he believes, will fulfill his desire to become a woman.

Like *Psycho*, *Silence of the Lambs* describes Buffalo Bill as "…Not a real transsexual, but he thinks he is, he tries to be." (Demme)

Yet this description is in stark contrast to the horrifying depictions of Buffalo Bill's coveting of femininity. As a girl screams in his basement, he imitates her cry back at her. He puts on makeup while saying "I'd fuck me. I'd fuck me so hard," before beginning to dance while recording himself (Demme). While the film states that Buffalo Bill is not "a real transvestite," it's story and visuals continue to suggest that the transgender identity is fundamentally unsound (Demme).

Other narratives are even less willing to offer transgender identities grace, instead explicitly making a transgender person the source of horror simply because they are transgender.

Films like Robert Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980) both feature antagonists who are explicitly transgender. In the former, the female protagonist, Angela, is revealed to be both the killer and, supposedly, a man in a shock twist at the end of the film. The film does this by depicting Angela fully nude and humming while holding a knife she has used to decapitate her love interest (Hiltzik). This twist is framed in the

same manner that a monster movie might reveal its creature, clearly intending for Angela's anatomy to be the indicator of monstrosity.

Dressed to Kill similarly frames being transgender as the monstrous trait of its villain, 'Bobbi,' a transgender male to female therapy patient of Dr. Robert Elliot, played by Michael Cain. After witnessing a murder by a mysterious blonde, protagonist Liz Blake, played by Nancy Allen, attempts to track down the killer, leading her to learn that the transgender killer was Dr. Elliot all along. The film's explanation for Elliot's killing spree is that the attraction the female 'Bobbi' personality was spurred to kill any woman that sexually aroused 'Elliot', the male personality (De Palma), taking clear inspiration from Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Emerging from these films, we can interpret two distinct ways in which the transgender identity is coded as 'monstrous' in horror and thriller narratives.

The first, as seen in *Psycho* and *Dressed to Kill*, assigns a supernatural psychology to gender dysphoria, an internal battle of male and female personalities or spirits that result in violence when they conflict. This narrative can be seen as almost possession-like. In both of these films, the 'female personality' overpowers the masculine body and mind to enact violence on other women it perceives as threats.

The second, as seen in *Sleepaway Camp* relies on the perceived unnatural nature of the transgender body. 'Angela' is monstrous *because* she is a woman with a penis. She has constructed a female identity despite her 'correct' body. Similarly, Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* is working to construct a female body from skin. Both have deviated from the intended use of a body, their own or others, in order to deviate from their assigned genders.

When translating these two distinct methods of coding from the horror and thriller genres into monster narratives, two types of creatures predominantly emerge.

From the coding of supernatural psychology, the battling male and female personalities can be reimagined as two spirits fighting for control of one body as commonly seen in possession narratives like William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018).

The coding of the unnatural body can be envisioned instead as the body of a creature brought to life through the unnatural means of science or magic. Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is a central text for this type of creature, with inspired work in the world of *Dungeons and Dragons* using similar coding surrounding the constructed body to create its own monsters.

Possession and Unnatural Psychology

William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) is notorious for its visceral, disturbing effects, even among horror films. This may be partially due to the youth of its main protagonist and central source of horror: 12-year-old Regan Macneil. The daughter of a single, but well-off mother, the story of *The Exorcist* begins when Regan starts acting strangely, saying things she shouldn't have knowledge of and doing unnatural acts. After doctors and scientists fail to provide an explanation, her mother turns to the church. A priest concludes that Regan has been possessed by a filthy-minded and foulmouthed demon, and thus begins the titular exorcism.

Like with *Psycho* and *Dressed to Kill*, the subject of the horror, Regan, is shown to have disturbing behaviors. The central difference being that Regan is sympathetic, the goal of the film is to cure her of the unnatural psychology that plagues her instead of apprehending her.

Dr. S. Trimble, a genderqueer professor of feminist and transgender studies, describes how they related to Regan's possession as child and teenager when viewing *The Exorcist* in their essay "The Demon Girl's Guide to Life". Instead of seeing a girl and a demon, Trimble "saw a

revolting girl revolting against the little-girl box in which she was stuck —and [they] saw an army of men working to put her back in" (Vallese 15).

To a queer viewer experiencing gender dysphoria or gender confusion, the narrative of a possession—of a demon or spirit causing strange behaviors to manifest and the body to change— could remind them of the conflict they feel internally. This would make it easy to perceive an exorcism as the forced removal of those deviant feelings.

Trimble goes on to write that "Like Regan, [they] became monstrous around the age of twelve, when [they were] dubbed Manwoman by [their] seventh-grade classmates and spent the year getting schooled on what girls are supposed to act, look, sound, and smell like" (16). Like the priest, Trimble's classmates sought to expel what they viewed as unnatural about Trimble's performance of gender.

Even without intentional coding, *The Exorcist* connects with transgender viewers through its portrayal of normalcy for the gender of the possessed individual, condemning any deviance, both minor and supernaturally extreme.

More recent narratives, like Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) can utilize the more nuanced, modern understandings of gender and psychology to create more complex depictions of cross-gender possessions, while still communicating to the audience that something is wrong.

In *Hereditary*, the younger child of the Graham family, a girl named Charlie, is imbued with the spirit of Paimon, a king of Hell, by her grandmother and the cult her grandmother led while alive. The film implies that this occurred while Charlie was still very young, and that Charlie's grandmother "wanted [her] to be a boy" so that Paimon would have a male host body. In order to provide Paimon with the body he requires, the cult must transfer the demon from Charlie's body into her older brother, Peter (Aster).

As a more recent film, *Hereditary* can use more modern indicators of gender deviance to hint at the male Paimon's existence inside Charlie, a girl. Her clothing, for example, is oversized and baggy, entirely devoid of 'feminine' items like skirts, jewelry, or lower necklines. Her nickname is a traditionally masculine name (Aster).

Functionally, Charlie appears like how some gender nonconforming preteens might before they are able to question their gender or openly identify as transgender and dress in a manner that they are comfortable with. Baggy, oversized clothing can disguise gender, obscuring whether Charlie is more comfortable as a girl or a boy.

These deviations in gender expectations are paired with behaviors that are outright disturbing or concerning. Charlie refuses to sleep in her own bed, insisting on staying in the freezing cold, triangular tree house instead. She habitually 'clicks' using her mouth and tongue. In a particularly worrying scene, she decapitates a dead bird and uses its head to make a doll (Aster).

In both *The Exorcist* and *Hereditary*, external behaviors that break gender expectations communicate that the possessed individual is experiencing an altered state of mind created by a supernatural entity, reinforcing the idea that refusing to conform to gender norms is necessarily unnatural and monstrous.

Constructed and Created Bodies

Across different mediums, the recurring presence of the created body as different monsters connects to different aspects of the transgender identity's lived experience.

Susan Stryker, a transgender American theorist, describes the relationship between the transgender body and the created, monstrous body with far more understanding than any analysis

from a cis individual could. In her essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix," she writes:

> The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist (245).

Stryker's comparison between herself and Frankenstein's monster demonstrates how similar the story of Frankenstein's monster can be to the experience of a transgender individual. While Stryker herself finds connection to one of the originators of the constructed body, monsters like Frankenstein's famed creation exist in a variety of forms throughout different types of media, frequently with death as the threshold for their new, monstrous body.

Similar to Frankenstein's monster as he exists in the original novel is the lich, a legendary creature from the lore of *Dungeons and Dragons*, a tabletop roleplaying game created by Gary Gygax. In the established lore of the game, liches "are the remains of great wizards who embrace undeath as a means of preserving themselves" (Mearls 202). They must die as a mortal only to reemerge as an even more powerful, undead mage.

Within the lore of the lich, we see an even stronger tie to the narrative of the transgender experience. The lich's transformation, unlike that of Frankenstein's monster, is self-motivated and self-directed. They retain their memories of their mortal life, and it is common for a lich to rename themselves when they emerge, a feature that is unique among the undead creatures in *Dungeons and Dragons*.

When explicitly queer texts do usurp the existing coding of the constructed body, the transgender identity can also be found in the narrative. Notoriously queer play *The Rocky Horror Show* written by Jonathan O'Brien and its Lou Adler film adaptation *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) is, in fact, a musical parody of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. While it does not feature a creature's transformation from human to nonhuman, it is notable that Frank N. Furter is an evil, alien "sweet transvestite" obsessed with scientifically creating a perfect man, the so-called 'Rocky' (O'Brien)(Adler).

In all these examples, there is an emphasis on the unnatural power of the created body. Frankenstein's monster is strong, the book emphasizes his physicality with descriptions like "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath" (Shelley 71). The disembodied body parts of the most famous lich in *Dungeons and Dragons* canon, Vecna, are imbued with incredible magical power (Gygax, et al.), and Rocky is desired for his body by his creator and others.

In examining created bodies across different monster narratives, a pattern of the body itself holding power begins to emerge. This is simultaneously the result of cisgendered fears of the transgender body and how some transgender individuals come to understand their own estrangement from the cisgender population.

Conclusion

In the same manner that a possession or resurrected body disrupt and threaten the daily lives of the individuals in a monster narrative, the gender deviations found in the behaviors and bodies of transgender identities disrupt and threaten the lives of the cisgender individuals around them. When cisgender audience consume content where a possession or resurrection occurs, they largely react with the fear and disgust that the creator intended.

When a narrative like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or *The Exorcist* calls for sympathy, heteronormative viewers may react appropriately to the movie character, but that sympathy does not necessarily translate onto disruptors in their own lives. However, to a transgender consumer, these pieces of media are reflections of their own experience. These narratives can demonstrate the isolation they feel from cisgender society, including the cisgender queer community, encapsulating how others respond to the variations in their behaviors and body, sometimes with devastating consequence.

In Stryker's essay, she references the 1993 suicide of Filisa Vistima, a 22-year-old transwoman living and working among Seattle's queer community. Two months before her death, Vistima wrote "I wish I was anatomically 'normal' so I could go swimming…But no, I'm a mutant, Frankenstein's monster" (Stryker 246). Vistima's death is a tragic consequence of the isolation and rejection that transgender individuals face from cisgender society, it demonstrates the power a monstrous narrative has over the mental wellbeing of the people that cisgender, heteronormative society deems 'unacceptable.'

At the same time, however, it is possible for some transgender individuals to be empowered by their connection to the possessed and resurrected. Stryker herself uses the imagery and language of *Frankenstein* to challenge the cisgender perception of her body,

writing, "the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie…You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both" (247).

If not power, the transgender coding in monsters can nonetheless make transgender individuals feel seen when the rest of the world does not recognize them. Trimble found both comfort and horror in the portrayal of Regan's possession as a teenager. They state that they "wanted demon-Regan to survive the casting out of her demon … [They were] exhilarated by the sights and sounds of girlhood gone awry" (Vallese 18). When no one else can understand the confusing, disturbing feelings that arise inside, a monster may be the only depiction that makes sense.

Therein lies the power of these encoded portrayals of both possession and resurrection. Done well, the narratives they live within can fuel a rhetorical power that both sees and invigorates transgender people. At the same time, cisgendered horror creators who use coding in transformation narratives without any awareness of their underlying meanings can unintentionally create incredibly harmful messages.

Asexual Identities: Coding for the Invisible Orientation

Author and long-time asexual activist Julie Sondra Decker describes asexuality's

distinction from other queer identities as "not an experience of outward oppression so much as

it's an experience of omission—of being left out and unable to participate in something that's

supposedly central to life" (Decker 105). This presents a unique challenge to the analysis of

asexuality and other identities under the banner of asexuality. It is less present in the public

conscious, often referred to as the "invisible orientation," but it is nonetheless encoded into

narratives like other queer identities, often being framed as something that makes an individual

less adult or inhuman entirely.

These, however, are not monsters of transformation. They are instead a reflection of an

author's lack of knowledge about asexual identities, or their lack of belief in their existence

entirely. Because asexual individuals lack the same direct threat to heterosexuality via sexual

action that other queer sexual identities do, they are less likely to be portrayed as outright

monsters. Instead, the lack of sexual desire is communicated as a lack of humanity or soul by

straight creators. If transformation occurs in these narratives, it is often from the perceived

inhumanity of asexual identities to an acceptance of sex or sexual attraction as an indication of

change.

Yet these uninformed depictions of asexual identities form the stereotypes that inform

asexually coded monsters of transformations as created or perceived by the asexual community,

so it is important to form a solid understanding of these portrayals, however inaccurate they are.

One response to the increasing visibility of asexuality in the early 2000's by straight

media was to suggest that the orientation was inherently immature. In 2003, for example, CBS's

Late Late Show had a recurring, comedic character named Sebastian, the Asexual Icon created by

Craig Kilborn. The basis of these jokes lay in Sebastian's immaturity and lack of awareness of

sexuality in the world around him. For example, in Sebastian's opinion, "the most erotic film of

all time is TRON." (Kilborn)

Other depictions include that of an asexual couple in "Better Half," a 2012 episode from

the 2004 medical drama *House M.D.,* created by David Shore. While the couple both claim to be

asexual, the protagonist, Dr. Gregory House stakes one hundred dollars on disproving her

asexuality. When he finds no medical reason for her disinterest in sex, he turns to her husband,

claiming that she must be pretending to be disinterested in sex because the husband is

disinterested in sex. Dr. House discovers a tumor lowering the husband's sex drive, and the wife

reveals that she's been holding off for his sake, proving Dr. House right.

Both portrayals reinforce the idea that asexuality is immature, a mark of someone who

has not yet developed into a fully functioning adult. Worse, the latter suggests that asexuality is

something that can be corrected, promoting the notion that interest in sex is necessary for a

person to be fully mature and fully human.

The ideas from these media portrayals translate into the real-life experience of asexual

people, who are frequently told that they will experience sex and sexual attraction at some point

in their life. That their own transformation is inevitable. Some have even faced attempts at

corrective rape, a phenomenon that is not uncommon among other queer identities.

Decker herself was assaulted while actively working on her book about asexuality. After

the incident, the perpetrator told her that he was only trying to help her, "basically saying that

[she] was somehow broken and that he could repair [her] with his tongue and, theoretically, with

his penis. It was totally frustrating and quite scary" (Mosbergen).

About her own assault and others, Decker said "[Asexuals] are perceived as not being fully human because sexual attraction and sexual relationships are seen as something alive, healthy people do. They think that you really want sex but just don't know it yet" (Mosbergen). The persistent, heteronormative want to 'correct' asexuality is a transformation on its own, one that is an inherent threat against the asexual community.

Adding to this threat of transformation and the isolation asexual identities experience is the fact that asexuals are not universally accepted as part of the queer community either. According to Decker, many non-asexual members of the queer community argue against the inclusion of asexuals in queer spaces, so much so that "it's a rare mainstream article or widely circulated piece of media that doesn't feature a war on this topic in its comment section" (Decker 101).

Like their heterosexual counterparts, some queer individuals doubt the legitimacy of asexual identities. The fundamental tie between sexuality and personal identity may contribute to the vitriol against asexuality and the insistence that they do not share spaces with other queer individuals, despite the similarity in the challenges they present in a heteronormative society and heterosexual relationships.

While there is no single, universal experience of asexual identities, Decker argues that the asexual communities "often feel omitted, erased, and excluded and that they move through life facing consistent challenges to their sexual orientation" (106); a feeling that is reinforced by a heteronormative world constantly seeking ways to correct their perceived wrongness. As such, asexual identities are similarly fearful of transformation, but not in a manner that is identical to other queer sexualities. Instead, they fear the threatened transformation from the 'inhumanity' of asexuality into the heteronormative definition of humanity.

As such, when this idea is translated into monster fiction, the transformation is reversed from the previous discussions of asexuality that have taken place. An asexually coded narrative is more likely to feature a monster transforming into a human than the more traditional transformation from human into other.

It is also worth noting that while asexual identities are justifiably terrified of attempts to transform or correct them, many simultaneously desire the supposed normality that a non-asexual identity would bring. As Decker puts it, "It's isolating and lonely to be the only person around who lacks sexual attraction or interest in sex" (17). Heteronormative society is built with heterosexual relationships in mind, and although the world has grown more accepting of queer identities, it has yet to grow to a point where sex is not a societal expectation. As a result, asexual identities often feel isolated from the world itself.

With the experiences of asexual individuals and the media portrayals of asexuality in mind, it becomes clear that a monster looking to become human and the extreme isolation from a surrounding society are two traits that can be used to identify asexual coding in a given text.

The Isolated Monster

Given the asexual community's distance from sexual themes by the nature of what the identity is, it is no surprise that the first monster of transformation worthy of examining does not originate from a piece of horror media. Instead, we must focus on one of the oldest texts to be read as possibly asexually themed: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid.*

There is a common misconception in the reading of this story, one that suggests the little mermaid's primary motivation for becoming a human was to marry the prince she was in love with. In fact, while the prince plays a major role in her exposure to the human world, the little

mermaid is truly seeking an immortal soul, something only humans have. In the original telling of the story, the little mermaid says to her grandmother "I would gladly give all the hundreds of years that I have to live, to be a human being only for one day and to have the hope of knowing the happiness of that glorious world above the stars" (Andersen 17).

The little mermaid seeks out the help of a sea witch to transform her. The witch agrees but warns her that "[She] will feel great pain, as if a sword were passing through [her]…Every step [she takes], however, will be as if [she] were treading upon sharp knives and as if the blood must flow" (21). In addition to this, the witch cuts out the mermaid's tongue, removing her ability to speak or sing, forcing her to rely on her body alone to communicate with the prince. All of these pains inflicted on the little mermaid's body are framed as necessities for her pursuit of a human, immortal soul.

The narrative is functionally communicating that to become 'human' the little mermaid must endure pain and transformation within her body and learn to communicate solely with her body. While the story itself may not call her a monster or inhuman, that is the implication of mermaid form. She, like many asexual individuals are forced to learn in life, is attempting to change her nature to connect with a society drastically different from her.

Her transformation is unsuccessful, however. Even with all the blood and pain that the little mermaid puts into her own transformation, the prince only "loved her as one would love a little child. The thought never came to him to make her his wife" (26). He even treats her like a pet, giving her a velvet cushion to sleep on at this door. In every one of their interactions, the prince belittles the little mermaid, treating her like an inhuman child and referring to her as one as well. He does not see her as a person, let alone a potential wife.

While not identical, this is fundamentally similar to the treatment of asexual identities. Like the little mermaid, asexual individuals are infantilized, assumed to be lacking maturity and therefore unable to love like adults do.

This similarity makes it all the more tragic that the story ends with the little mermaid rejected, facing death because she cannot bring herself to hurt the prince on his wedding night. The little mermaid is saved from death, transforming into a daughter of the air, who gain immortal souls through good deeds. Still, they are not human.

Even with all of her pain and effort, the little mermaid was never going to become human like she desired, just as no amount of sex will change asexual individuals' lack of sexual attraction.

Similar themes of inhumanity craving what they perceive as humanity appear in a wide variety of texts, even if they don't all fall under a banner that might be typically described as monstrous. Two prominent examples can be seen in the television franchise *Star Trek*, where characters like Data, an android (Roddenberry), and Seven of Nine, a former part of a cyborg collective (Berman), experience character arcs that show them actively seeking out ways to connect with humanity.

Data in particular is an apt example of this. His own pursuit of humanity in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* features two separate sexual pursuits. He does not seek them out on his own, but in the episodes "The Naked Now," and "In Theory," female crewmembers pursue either a romantic or sexual relationship with Data, and despite his best efforts to become the human partner they are desiring, neither work out long-term. Both women choose to break off their relationship with Data, who is unable to return their affections.

While a true transformation never takes place for Data, he, like the little mermaid, is actively seeking out a change that will never come. Despite the show's insistence that he does not feel emotion, it is made clear through the narrative that he desires a connection with the human society around him that he currently lacks. Whether he perceives it as such or not, Data experiences the same isolation that many asexuals feel.

In both narratives, however, the inhuman creature cannot deny their nature in order to become human. Neither the little mermaid nor Data will be able to succeed in a traditional, heterosexual relationship despite their best efforts to participate. In both narratives, the characters that the protagonist seeks a relationship with desire traits in a partner that the little mermaid and Data are fundamentally incapable of giving, further proving their perceived distanced from the heteronormative perception of humanity.

The Asexual Abomination

In narratives where the asexual identity is explicitly addressed, the coding of an asexual character as inhuman and able to be corrected is directly addressed to subvert the audience's expectations for the narrative and the character.

Horror podcast *The Magnus Archives* follows the journey of canonically asexual protagonist as he transforms unwillingly from the innocuous Jon Sims, the newest archivist of the Magnus Institute, into The Archivist, a voyeuristic monster that survives on the fears of others. While the narrative initially surrounds Jon's transformation into a monster, past the midpoint of the show, The Archivist and the supporting characters are primarily concerned with his humanity, and how he can return to it, if he can at all.

As a human, Jon is already isolated. His only 'friend' is an ex from college he barely speaks to and his coworkers. He has no living family. His life is his work, and he often comes across as rude and standoffish to others. In the first thirty episodes of the show, Jon interacts with roughly five people, three of which are his coworkers, one of whom he refers to as a "useless ass" ("Piecemeal"). In essence, Jon is a stereotype of how asexual people are often thought of by non-asexual communities, distant and disinterested in relationships with other people.

Yet over the course of the narrative, it is revealed that although he may have acted in that manner, Jon cares deeply for other people, he has just been distant after a lifetime of rejection from the world around him. In childhood, he was raised by a grandmother who did not want him, and struggled to connect with others, so much so that even as an adult he would describe himself as "a deeply annoying child" ("A Guest for Mr. Spider").

Jon is the asexual experience taken to an extreme. Decker states in her own examination of asexual experiences that "If everyone treats you like you're broken, you may eventually crack" (Decker 17). As someone so fundamentally isolated for the majority of their life, Jon has already cracked. He believes that he is not suited for relationships with other people, despite caring about them deeply internally.

As he gains monstrous qualities, the isolation begins to grow more and more extreme as the remaining indicators of humanity that Jon had begin to disappear. The further he gets into his transformation, the less he needs to eat, sleep, and breathe. Eventually, his only remaining source of energy is other's fear, at which point he is decidedly inhuman and monstrous. At this point, Jon's relationships are the last remaining connections between him and his humanity. Despite his years of fighting against them, he begins to reach out to the people around him, seeking anything

that might help him regain the humanity that has been taken from him. By this point, however, most are either dead or unwilling to help him.

Alongside Jon, the other characters in the story also become less human. His coworkers are tied to the same supernatural entities as Jon, they just gain fewer abilities and maintain their humanity more than he does. Nonetheless, very few of them are allies to him, some of them are even openly hostile towards his transformation, continuing to isolate him even as he shares traumatic experiences with other characters that would, in most other narratives, create bonding moments among the main cast.

Basira, a character who Jon is introduced to as an ally and potentially even a friend, is particularly guilty of this. She tells Jon in the fourth season of the podcast that "The key is to *not* force people to feed you their trauma. You know – just don't do it?" ("Extended Surveillance"). When Jon tries to tell her that it is not that simple for him, she simply responds, "No. It is. Or I put you down" ("Extended Surveillance"), threatening him like the monster she perceives him to be.

Like the broader asexual community faces rejection from the queer community, Jon is rejected by even the people who are most likely to sympathize with him in the midst of a struggle to be seen as human by the world at all.

Conclusion

As of November 2023, *The Magnus Archives*' Jon Sims represented 6.2% of the fan work tagged with 'asexual character' out of the over 31,000 pieces of fan work on the website Archive for Our Own, with another 5.2% represented by his canon love interest, Martin (Archive of Our Own), far surpassing other tagged fan work of more prominent properties like the Marvel

Cinematic Universe or *Harry Potter*. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* has been reimagined

several times over as a fairytale of asexuality by asexual authors, more so than any other fairytale

of similar transformative content.

Regardless of authorial intention, the theme of longing for humanity and of isolation from

the world of people suggests asexuality to both asexual and non-asexual audiences. Yet it is only

in the last ten or so years of narratives that fans have been able to engage with characters who are

openly asexual, and to discuss what those portrayals mean to them.

Anonymous Tumblr user jester-step describes in a post how, as a queer fan of *The*

Magnus Archives, to them, Jon "embodies the asexual stereotype of a character who's too cold

and inhuman for sex, and yet who subverts that stereotype over and over again by being a

complex character struggling with his disconnection from other people in a way that beautifully

ties into the unfortunately common asexual experience of feeling broken and yet who remains so

very human" (Tumblr).

The Little Mermaid has also been reimagined to feature more explicit asexual themes like

The Magnus Archives. Author Dove Cooper reimagined the original tale in her verse novel *Sea*

Foam and Silence, stating that the book is for "all the asexuals who get told we don't get to have

fluffy, cute, queer stories or happily ever afters" (Amazon). Cooper goes on to say "Ultimately, I

wrote this story for me, because I wanted one story—just one—that resonated marrow-deeply

with me" (Amazon).

Author Elizabeth Hopkinson also retold *The Little Mermaid* in her book *Asexual Myths*

& Tales. Hopkinson said that as she reread the original story, she "was struck by the asexual

symbolism to be found in it," in her podcast *Asexual Fairy Tales*. She then borrowed the original

story to work into her own creative writing.

Both the fan work created for *The Magnus Archives* and the retellings of *The Little Mermaid*, suggest a want by the asexual community to engage with and find comfort in the themes presented by these more monstrous narratives. There is not evidence of the asexual community using these monstrous symbols to empower itself, necessarily, the community does not borrow the image of the mermaid in the way that queer women frequently borrow the image of the witch, but they are nonetheless interested in exploring the themes of these texts in their own writing.

Conclusion

Through the transformation of the monster, the queer community can recognize their own transition from the metaphorical human into the inhuman other; stepping out of the closet into a new label and identity that will inevitably bring scorn from an overwhelmingly heteronormative society. Every individual will identify something unique to themself in a given narrative, but by examining overlapping monstrous traits that different queer identities recognize their own experiences in, we can gain a broad understanding of how that community uses the monster to comprehend their own otherness in society.

While many scholars have examined the coding of queer identities in horror and monster narratives before, it is imperative that those examinations continue to expand outward, including more identities and experiences as the queer community continues to grow and change. The body of work that these scholars draw from continues to grow as well. In committing to its continuous analysis, we commit to learning alongside the queer community as a its literature and culture expands.

Outside of scholars, I invite the creators and future creators of horror and monster narratives to use this examination to guide the themes and imagery they select in work. Do not let the queer coding of a creature stop your creation from forming, merely allow it to inform the story you bring into the world. Challenge the perception of the other and society, analyze the relationship between the two as you have written it to be, and create new meaning rather than drawing on the same themes of queerphobia and misunderstanding.

Allied consumers of horror and monster content can also benefit from acknowledging the queer coding of the narratives they consume. Queer allyship is, after all, not merely a statement of support for queer identities, but an active effort to acknowledge and deconstruct the

heteronormative structures that harm queer individuals. These narratives, even when being used to empower queer communities, are evidence of that harm. Being able to recognize subtle queerphobia in a text is practice for being able to recognize queerphobia outside of it, in politics, education, and conversation.

Moreso than creators or consumers, I wish to call on the people these texts have indirectly labeled as monstrous. I hope to inspire my fellow queer people to examine their own self-perceptions surrounding their identity, regardless of what that identity is. Internalized queerphobia is an experience that many queer individuals struggle with, myself included, but by giving those fears a face and name like Count Dracula, Jennifer Check, Regan Macneil, or Jon Sims, we can learn to grapple with those fears. We can provide sympathy for the monster we perceive in ourselves, and, in doing so, separate the coding we have been fed our entire lives from the reality of a queer life.

The identities given here are not exhaustive. They are umbrella labels, meant to encapsulate the broad experiences of the queer community. If you, queer reader, did not find yourself among the night creatures, fiends, and villains discussed in this text, I invite you to look yourself. Scour the world of the monstrous for a reflection of your own transformation that you've unknowingly absorbed. Embrace the other that the world wishes to eradicate.

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