

Hillary Hunt
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Environmental Rhetoric and *The Shape of Water*

Here we are. Cognizant creatures born onto a rock hurtling through space. We must work to fend off hunger, seek shelter from the cold, defend our safety, and wonder what it's all for anyway. Earth's environment provides the tools we must work with to live, but also the canvas upon which we figure answers to our ontological questions. When looking upon the vastness of space, the fragility of our short lives, and the difficulty in negotiating our social relationships, the sensation of loneliness haunts human beings. Loneliness drives our desire for connection, security, and stability. Loneliness can be described as feeling unseen, unheard, and unknown—it can be described as fear. It is the empty feeling that we struggle to live and live only to die. Even those comforted by the certainty of their faith can be dogged by these doubts. To combat these existential questions, we use the tools available to us: dichotomies of identity including male/female, black/white, gay/straight, human/non-human, real/un-real, civilization/wilderness—divisions that shore us up against existential meaninglessness. However, these same divisions also justify the prejudices that lead to the degradation of not just each other, but of our environment as well.

Assisted by the theories of contemporary environmental rhetors, I will analyze the film *The Shape of Water* to explore how our orientation to nature, or the environment, is shaped by socially constructed metaphors. I contend that the 2017 Oscar winner for best motion picture directed by Guillermo del Toro plays with the fish out of water trope by contradicting it: there is no “out of

water,” only the illusion that we were ever on solid ground to begin with. We are veritably swimming in metaphor, all the time—and this has profound implications for our relationship with our environment. With the crisis of global warming and our cultural want to worship at the throne of progress, expansion, and consumption, *The Shape of Water* invites us to re-imagine our Ariel-like trajectory out of the water and onto “dry” land. A return to the water—to a more holistic vision of our place on this earth—is intimately linked to our ability to disarticulate divisions; an endeavor that requires new ways of imagining how to be less alone in this world.

The film begins with the viewer being shown down a hallway and into an apartment submersed in water. Everyday objects float weightless and displaced: a lamp, a couch, and even a slumbering woman, hinting at the possibility that we are inside her dream. Every scene that follows is awash in hues of greenish blue to let us know that even in waking hours, we are immersed in an other-worldly, dream like state. The unfolding tale is of a mute woman named Elisa who works the night shift as a janitor at an aquatic research facility. During her time there, Elisa encounters an amphibious man-like creature being kept at the facility and slowly builds a relationship with him. Through their interactions, she discovers that he can communicate and is capable of intelligent thought. When the powers-that-be decide they want to dissect him to learn what they can for military purposes, Elisa conspires to help the creature escape. What follows is the blurring of the line between human and non-human with Elisa herself becoming something more than strictly human in the end. The setting for this tale is cold-war era Baltimore, so the politically tense divisions of nationality, race, and gender play like a low buzz in the background.

In short, our social divisions are indicative of how we will treat and view the environment, and these approaches are shaped by rhetoric, the very language we use. Rhetorical scholars Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer confirm that

. . .the environmental dilemma is a problem generated by the way people think and act in cultural units. Since human thought and conduct are rarely, if ever, unmediated by language and other kinds of signs, it is understandable—possibly inevitable—that rhetorical scholars enter the environmental discussion through the gate of humanism. (Killingsworth 3)

The Shape of Water is an excellent examination of how language—which is an essentially a system of metaphors—shapes our relationship with not just each other, but also the environment.

Scholars Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown posit a model of environmental discourse that mirrors the classic rhetorical triangle of ethos, pathos, and logos. Their model “is designed to identify the dominant tendencies or orientation of a piece of environmental discourse” (10). Occupying the position of ethos is the ethnocentric which “represents the discourse of the powerful institutions that make decisions and set environmental policy” (10). This position regards nature as a resource “to be managed” (10). In the logos position is anthropocentric discourse, which views nature as an object that should be studied for the advancement of humankind and for the sake of knowledge itself. This discourse is “grounded in its faith in the human ability to come to know nature’s secrets” (Herndl 11). Pathos contains the “poetic discourse” that “we use to discuss the beauty, the value, [and] the emotional power of nature” in order to appeal to our emotions (Herndl 12). Herndl and Brown call this ecocentric discourse because it “considers humanity as part of nature and seeks to

locate human value in a harmonious relation to the natural world” (12). Each of these orientations towards nature is exemplified in key characters in *The Shape of Water*, helping us understand how various forces orbiting the amphibious creature “construct their views of the natural or nonhuman worlds” (Killingsworth 4).

The Ethnocentric Strickland

Occupying the ethnocentric position in *The Shape of Water* is Richard Strickland, the ruthless supervisor overseeing research of the amphibious creature. Herndl and Brown say of ethnocentric discourse that its “political power. . . comes from its institutional context, but its rhetorical power emerges from the rhetorical notion of ethos, the culturally constructed authority of the speaker or writer who represents these institutions” (Herndl 11). Strickland as a military man embodies the authority to decide how nature—represented by the fish-man—will be used. Strickland is the prototypical rendering of the classic American male of the 1960’s: a successful career man, a zealous patriot, and patriarch over his own little nuclear family. However, he is also racist, sexist, has contempt for other cultures and his inferiors—which includes the creature. He distinguishes humans as above the creature because “we are made in the Lord’s image” (Toro), but also quips that God looks a little more like him than his African American subordinate at the facility. Strickland’s rhetoric is grounded on the “solid ground” of what he accepts as facts, or capital T truth—in short, he believes in divisions just as he believes in hierarchies. This mentality justifies his cruelty to the creature, and to anyone else he deems beneath his authority; he has divided himself from others in order to exert his dominion. Killingsworth and Palmer counter this mentality when they articulate that,

. . .we are not divided against our world but rather. . .human consciousness contains the world. . .For Evernden, a person 'does not really experience the boundary of the self as the epidermis of the body, but rather as a gradient of involvement in the world' (64). To divide self from world is to divide consciousness against itself. In this sense, the environmental dilemma is as much an internal, psychological problem, a problem of self alienation, as it is an external problem involving the self's control over its external resources. (Killingsworth 5)

I argue that self-alienation, or loneliness, is exactly why Strickland is such a menacing character capable of treating the creature as a mere object, or resource. In retaliation, the creature bites off two of Strickland's fingers, which are later reattached. However, the attachment procedure doesn't take and over the course of the movie we see his fingers blacken and fester upon his hand. His severed fingers that are rejected by his body are symbolic of Strickland himself: he has severed himself from nature in order to be its master, and in the process, he is sick and rotten within. He is made as lonely as the fingers that he eventually casts onto the floor. While Strickland resembles many attributes of what we consider "natural" to masculinity, the movie gives us to understand that his behavior is counter to being a healthful member of the whole that is humanity. In trying to live up to constructed masculine ideals that place him above others, Strickland has become something counter to nature—in short, he is the monster, not the creature.

When a superior ranking officer comes to check on Strickland's progress in recapturing the creature, the pressure of the situation pushes a stressed and ailing Strickland to muse, "When is a man done, Sir? Proving himself?" (Toro) The answer he receives from his superior is that if he does

not deliver results, “Our universe will have a hole in it with your outline. . . You will be lost to civilization. And you will be unborn. Unmade. Undone” (Toro). A strikingly honest moment of masculine anxiety denoting the pressure to provide, to deliver, to progress, to maintain your place on top of the food chain—or else you may as well not exist. This pressure is an existential anxiety, a fear of loneliness, of being lost, informed by the social constructs of masculinity and institutional authority.

The Anthropocentric Dr. Hoffstetler

Dr. Hoffstetler is the scientist studying the creature and represents the anthropocentric approach to nature. Herndl and Brown describe anthropocentric discourse as having “immense cultural power” due to “rationalist faith in science and in the productivity of the scientific method” (11). Anthropocentric discourse positions itself as standing on solid ground, apart from the metaphorical nature of rhetoric, as it proposes to use “objective fact and reason” (Herndl 12). In *The Shape of Water*, Dr. Hoffstetler decides to help Elisa rescue the creature because he insists there is so much more to be learned from its study. His motivation to preserve nature comes from his desire to gain more knowledge, which makes him seem more objective than Elisa and Strickland. However, scholar Alan G. Gross contends that “the disciplined denial of emotion in science is only a tribute to our passionate investment in its methods and goals” (15). In other words, science is not without its own form of emotion, which entails employing metaphorical tools of persuasion. Gross further argues that “epistemological and methodological issues cannot be separated from the social context in which they arise” (14). Such is the case with Dr. Hoffstetler, whose research is financed by the military during the cold war, which influences the direction and aim of his research. He also

happens to be a Russian spy, so his research is further complicated by the directive to steal information for his home country. All of this is to say that his scientific approach is complicated by the social context in which he finds himself, a social context built from metaphorical constructs. He does attempt to persuade his Russian superiors to help him rescue the creature, arguing again that there is so much that they can learn from him. Their response is telling, “We don’t need to learn. We need the Americans not to learn” (Toro). The socially constructed divisions of his time, the ones meant to help us feel less alone, impact his ethnocentric approach and thus undermine the objective nature of his discoveries, which Gross would say are more accurately called “inventions” (7).

The Ecocentric Elisa

Of the three rhetorical appeals, pathos has historically been construed as the weakest in traditional western rhetoric. As the thinking goes, pathos is irrational, silly, not to be trusted—and it is no coincidence that its connotations are like the arguments we hear against women. To my mind, this makes the ecocentric character of Elisa especially poignant; she is female, mute, and doing domestic-like janitorial work that affords her no authority over the creature’s predicament. However, she accomplishes something the anthropocentric and ethnocentric fail to achieve—namely, the ecocentric can dissolve divisions that hinder connection. Herndl and Brown argue that ecocentric discourse “largely considers humanity as part of nature and seeks to locate human value in a harmonious relation to the natural world” (Herndl 12). As an example of this, Elisa floods her own bathroom with water in order to be with the fish-man, symbolizing not only her desire to connect, but her willingness to transgress normative boundaries. Significantly, it is Elisa and not the

scientist or the authoritative military man who learns the most about the creature's remarkable abilities. It is the relationship she builds with him that not only saves his life but answers the mysteries of her own existence as well: it is inferred at the conclusion of the movie that Elisa may have been an amphibious creature herself all long. She was found orphaned on a river bank with slashes on her neck that presumably destroyed her ability to speak—but the fish-man transforms those slashes into gills, hinting at the possibility that Elisa wasn't so much mute as she was voiceless in a world that didn't accommodate the fluidity of her nature. The implications are that pathos, the typically muted discourse of the ecocentric, the one that doesn't hold water in most environmental debates, is in fact water itself that cannot be held by the containers we have socially constructed. It defies hierarchies, and our faith in resolute fact, and so defies loneliness in favor of connection.

In a pivotal scene in which Elisa pleads with Giles to help her save the creature before Strickland kills him to unlock his secrets, Elisa argues that the creature is the "loneliest thing I have ever seen." At first, Giles is unmoved and unwilling to help. He replies, "So what if he's alone. We're all alone." He then goes to a pie shop and witnesses that the waiter he has adored from afar is not only racist, but homophobic too. Distraught, Giles returns to Elisa saying, "I have no one, and you are the only person I can talk to. Now, whatever this thing is, you need it. So just tell me what to do." His change of heart was precipitated by the realization that he is lonely, that Elisa is lonely, and that prejudice and discrimination make everyone all the lonelier still. It is as if to say that connection between humans is just as difficult as the connection between a woman and a fish—why should we make it more difficult by clinging to our divisions? The love story in the movie is not so myopic as to

be about bestiality. Rather, Elisa's love for the creature is a metaphor for connection to that which seems alien—which is to transcend divisions and be a little less lonely in this world.

Immersion in the Politics of Metaphor

"We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet."

-Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

Ever present throughout *The Shape of Water* is the visual rhetoric promulgated through marketing, cinema and television—the director never lets you forget that overlaying the character's lives is the ongoing proliferation of fantasy and dreams as presented by Hollywood, that both abstracts the characters from reality, and informs their desires. A film critic for *The New Yorker* confirms this theme in the movie: "So what if 'The Shape of Water' is flooded with other films? What matters is not that del Toro is a fanatical scholar of his medium but that . . . he understands how fantasy invades and invests our waking lives" (Lane). These fantasies and dreams are essentially metaphors, and they permeate everything. It is fitting when, in a moment of profound feeling towards the creature that she cannot adequately communicate, Elisa fantasizes herself and the creature into a Fred and Ginger style dance sequence complete with the song, "You'll Never Know." Despite the uncertainty of never knowing, which is the limitation of metaphor, Elisa still loves and still fights on behalf of the creature's safety. She accepts the limitations of her fantasy yet allows them to propel her actions that lead to the preservation of life—this is in keeping with arguments made by Rom Harré et. al. regarding the use of metaphors in environmental rhetoric. They state, "Metaphors. . . when applied skillfully, knowingly, and in the full knowledge that they are tools and not mirror images of reality, can considerably advance the knowledge and understanding of

environmental matters” (Harré 114). However, Noël Sturgeon cautions that “metaphors and narrative frameworks about nature. . .have often been used to naturalize and therefore justify social inequalities” (17). But this means they can also be used to *de-naturalize* social inequalities. In accepting our immersion in metaphors, and its attendant limitations, we employ metaphor as a tool to challenge “commonplace assumptions” that “the natural and the artificial (or ‘manmade’) are identifiably and completely separate, and should be so” (Sturgeon 18). Which is to say the shape of water—the shape of metaphor—is shapeless, fluid, all around us, to be used for ill or for good.

While it’s true that Elisa’s relationship to the fish-man is equally as constructed by fantasy as the ethnocentric Strickland and the anthropocentric Dr. Hoffstetler, the significant difference is that the creature’s failure to match her fantasies doesn’t stop her attempts to preserve his very life. She doesn’t need to know him in the way Strickland does, a way that necessitates violence and subjugation. Unlike Dr. Hoffstetler, she doesn’t view him as a text book from which she can gain knowledge. Her desire to preserve his life is unconditional—it is *pathos*, love. It is possibly irrational. As Giles puts it in the movie, “He’s a wild creature. We can’t ask him to be anything else” (Toro). Like Giles, Elisa doesn’t require the creature to be anything more to her than what he is, as further evidenced by her willingness to give him up. In *The Shape of Water* the pathos of Elisa’s ecocentric position helps us to imagine and appreciate new ways of approaching our relationship to the environment—relationships not constricted by the seemingly solid ground of the ethnocentric or anthropocentric. The ecocentric approach necessitates immersing ourselves just like Elisa does, which is to embrace the metaphors in which we swim, recognizing their fluidity, and utilizing them to create a more harmonious relationship to nature.

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