

The Future of Masculinity is Amphibian:  
Representations of New Masculinity in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

By

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### The Future of Masculinity is Amphibian:

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As evidenced by the October 2019 *GQ* cover story, "The New Masculinity Issue," and *Harper's Magazine* November 2019 issue, titled "Manhood in the age of #MeToo," the masculine realm is in the midst of a tumultuous transition. According to Michael Kimmel, scholar on men and masculinities, this situation is by no means new. In his book *The History of Men* he states, "American men have been searching for their lost manhood since the middle of the nineteenth century" (37). Kimmel believes it was centuries ago that men's secure sense of manhood was destabilized (37). Top headlines during the 21<sup>st</sup> century have only further confirmed this is still the case, and that the need for a different kind of manhood is becoming altogether urgent. As the *Harper's Magazine* title suggests, the 2017 #MeToo movement indisputably exposed the prevalence and pernicious impact of sexual violence that powerful men are still inflicting on women today. This movement has also demonstrated that a well-adjusted masculinity has not yet materialized. The *GQ* magazine cover story further suggests that a new masculinity is in order.

Both of these magazines' issues, through editor comments and their content, explore ways in which traditional notions of American masculinity are currently being challenged and shifted. These present-day periodicals concur that it is time for American

men to develop their emotional intelligence, especially their empathy toward themselves and others, in order to displace the toxicity that has been showcased in so many of today's headlines and courtrooms. Both magazines also specifically present articles that describe the 'Evryman' organization as a modern venture that attempts to solve the American male malaise we are witnessing today.

The *GQ* article "The Group" by Benjy Hansen-Bundy, and the *Harper's Magazine* article, "Men at Work: Is There a Cure for Toxic Masculinity?" by Barrett Swanson, detail the authors' experiences with Evryman groups. Founded by Dan Doty, Lucas Krump, Sascha Lewis, and Owen Marcus in 2017, Evryman is described as a for-profit benefit corporation that brings American men together. Their aim is to support one million men during the next five years by creating men-only weekly group gatherings, weekend retreats, wilderness expeditions, and personalized coaching. Doty, assigned the title of "Voice and Vision" within Evryman, explains what he believes to be wrong with men today in a TEDx talk titled "What the World Needs from Men Today." Claiming in this video to have spent over 15,000 hours of his life working with men and boys in close, intimate, and transformational settings, Doty pronounces that although the role of men in ancient history was to provide health and safety for their family and tribe, he now believes that, "what we need protection from today is different. We don't need protection from bears and tigers. What we actually need protection from is ourselves. It's men. The protectors have become the predators. Men are the perpetrators of an immense amount of violence that's become part of our status quo." Doty attributes these behaviors to men's

long-standing tendency to isolate themselves and repress their emotions in order to prove their strength.

These old-fashioned ideals of masculinity that Doty believes lead to predatory, sexist, and often violent behaviors in some men are clearly being challenged and condemned in modern times. Our societies and cultures are in desperate need of a new masculine paradigm that offers men a more balanced example of what it means to be a man. Scholars in masculinity studies such as Kimmel, Robert Moore, Douglas Gillette, Robert Bly, and Sam Keene have through their work tried to outline an image of what a freethinking, mature, calm, yet fiercely passionate man could offer our world. By intersecting their proposals with those of critical theory, visual culture, and queer theory scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz, and the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who believed that art offers a forward-dawning futurity that anticipates that which is eminent but not yet here, this paper will argue that the zeitgeist of a new masculinity is being presented through the character named ‘The Asset’ in Guillermo del Toro’s 2017 film *The Shape of Water*.

To illustrate this argument, this paper will first briefly address the historical issues that destabilized masculinity in the nineteenth century. Then, the toxic masculinity displayed by Del Toro’s leading antagonist, Richard Strickland, will be contrasted to the well-balanced masculine essence of The Asset, an empathic amphibian-humanoid character endowed with the power to heal, regenerate, and protect life. To further explore what a well balanced, mature masculinity could look like, and to demonstrate how The

Asset represents the potential for a new masculinity, this paper will delve into the theories that Gillette, Moore, Bly, and Keene have proposed through their observations and research. Muñoz and his considerations on Bloch will then be used to establish the importance of art in moments of transition. This essay will also study Carl G. Jung's symbolic interpretation of water as the unconscious to elaborate on Del Toro's use of an amphibian-humanoid as the potential for a new masculine identity that lies just below the surface of our collective conscious awareness. Lastly, to further explore the zygotic nature of this strange egg eating character, Marie-Louise von Franz's work on the symbolism of eggs as possibility, new life, and regeneration will also be considered in order to prove that Del Toro is offering us the symbolic seed that can impregnate a receptive and fertile moment in history for the purpose of fulfilling the quest of giving shape to the new masculinity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## MARKETPLACE MANHOOD

In order to understand how Del Toro's character, The Asset, can inform the new man of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is important to first look back and appreciate how masculinity got so toxic in the first place. No better scholar could help us understand the historical context that has led to the quagmire of the present male malaise than Kimmel. After studying the issues of men, manhood, and masculinities for almost four decades, he believes American men have been trying to rescue and retrieve a sense of their identity from a culture that continually asks them to *prove* their manhood since early in the nineteenth century.

In *The History of Men*, Kimmel details the precise historical stages that have brought men to this current identity crisis. He explains that at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “manhood” was synonymous with “adulthood,” or the opposite of childhood. “Virility was counterposed with puerility,” Kimmel clarifies (38). The two models of manhood that prevailed during this time were the “Genteel Patriarch,” who owned land and stayed close to his estate and family, and the “Heroic Artisan,” who also stayed close to his family and practiced and taught his craft to his sons (38). Then, around the 1830’s, the reign of “Marketplace Manhood” emerged in eastern cities, and everything changed. This kind of manhood spurred a “new man,” who Kimmel states, “derived his identity entirely from success in the capitalist marketplace, from his accumulated wealth, power, and capital.” Manhood during this time of urban entrepreneurship, he explains, could be described as restless, agitated, and mostly devoted to work in the homosocial public arena (38).

To further complicate matters, Marketplace Manhood created a frenzy for ‘self-made men.’ It also pushed the previous two models of masculinity, the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan, into the “realms of non-men” (38). These new ‘Marketplace’ men, unlike their predecessors, became absentee landlords at home and absent fathers to their children (38). Showcasing the impossibility and frustration that Marketplace Manhood brought to men’s lives, Kimmel states, “What a lucky man indeed – chronically restless, temperamentally anxious, a man in constant motion to prove what ultimately cannot be proved: that he is a real a man and that he is unthreatened by the actions of other men” (39). Dislodged from their traditional sense of ‘manhood,’ men

during this time were thrown into “the unstable world of economic competition,” much like they are today (38). A new masculinity has certainly not materialized in this centuries long ambiance.

#### RICHARD STRICKLAND vs THE ASSET

The 2017 film *The Shape of Water* provides clear examples of the toxic Marketplace Manhood that Kimmel describes. The movie follows the story of Elisa, a mute cleaning lady working at a high-security government laboratory who forms a unique friendship with a mysterious South American amphibian creature being held captive there. Yet it is through the interactions of all the male characters in the film that the viewer is able to confirm Kimmel’s observations. Scene after scene, we witness the men in the film scrambling to prove their worth and importance to each other. The male characters are trapped in a noxious environment in which they are unable to act independently or without fear of reprisal from their superiors.

As the film mostly takes place in a military laboratory, viewers are able to witness the homosocial public arena Kimmel describes. Colonel Richard Strickland, who captured The Asset in the Amazon River and runs the laboratory, must constantly report to General Hoyt. Fleming, as facility manager, follows Strickland’s strict orders. Dr. Hoffstetlor, the scientist in charge of studying The Asset, must obey Strickland and also secretly disclose his findings to Russian spies he believes might kill him at any moment.



The film's depiction of the suffocating and strict hierarchical structure that forms the base of these men's daily work lives allows the viewer to understand why men are unable to trust, connect, or rely on each other. We see the frustration and fear in their eyes when they interact throughout the film, and the constant need they have for their respective superior's approval. And this constant burden, Kimmel explains, is because men are not just concerned with dominating others; they are also scared of being dominated:

From the early nineteenth century until the present day, much of men's relentless effort to prove their manhood contains this core element of homosociality. From fathers and boyhood friends to teachers, coworkers, and bosses, the evaluative eyes of other men are always upon us, watching, judging. As one army general put it, every soldier fears 'losing the one thing he is likely to value more highly than life – his reputation as *a man among other men*.' (6)

Perhaps no better scene could portray this pattern of toxic male interaction than the one enacted during a conversation between Colonel Strickland and General Hoyt. After Elisa befriends The Asset and decides to save him by secretly kidnapping him from the laboratory right under Strickland's nose, an embarrassed Strickland earnestly asks the General to whom he reports:

A man is faithful, loyal, efficient all his life. All of it. And he is useful. And he expects [...]he has certain expectations in return. And then he fails, once. Only once. What does that make him? Does that make him a failure? When is a man done, sir? Proving himself? A good man? A decent man?

And as a crushing response, in which this fleeting moment of Strickland's vulnerability is destroyed, General Hoyt proclaims:

Decent? A man has the decency not to fuck up. Now that's one thing. That's real decent of him. But the other kind of decency? It doesn't really matter. We sell it, but it's an export. We sell it because we don't use it. 36 hours from now, this entire episode will be over. And so will you. Our universe will have a hole in it with your outline. And you will have moved on to an alternate universe. A universe of shit. You'll be lost to civilization. And you will be unborn. Unmade. And undone. So go get some real decency, son.

Strickland losing The Asset gets him pushed closer into an unacceptable form of masculinity, or the "realm of non-men," as Kimmel describes. Because of this, Strickland becomes a crazed, violent man. He must recover The Asset in order to prove his manhood to himself and the General. If he doesn't, he will be lost to civilization, unborn, unmade, and undone. As the victim of Hoyt's odious message and a total lack of self-identity without his superior's approval, Strickland decides to steal, murder, threaten, and injure anyone who stands in his way for the last thirty minutes of the film. His whole worth as a man is at stake, and he must find and bring back The Asset to prove his obedience, his goodness, his decency, and his manhood to General Hoyt and himself.

Another point to examine during this conversation is the fact that the authority General Hoyt exerts over Strickland, his dominance over him, is accentuated by the fact that Hoyt repeatedly calls him "son" during the film. By establishing himself as the father figure, or patriarch, he overshadows Strickland in every way. Patriarchy is certainly what

the character of General Hoyt represents in the film. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, authors of the book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover*, consider patriarchy, “the social and cultural organization that has ruled our Western world and much of the rest of the globe, from at least the second millennium B.C.E. to the present” (xvi-xvii). These two authors recognize that this social and cultural organization has not only wreaked havoc for the feminine, but also claim that it has created a masculine identity crisis of vast proportions (xv). They contend as well that the patriarchy should not be linked to the masculine in general. They instead argue that patriarchy is, “the expression of the *immature* masculine. It is the expression of Boy psychology, and, in part, the shadow-or crazy-side of masculinity. It expresses the stunted masculine, fixated at immature levels” (xvii). Gillette and Moore explain that, “the ducking and diving political leader, the wife beater, the chronically ‘crabby’ boss, the ‘hot shot’ junior executive, the unfaithful husband, the company ‘yes man,’” are in reality just boys pretending to be men (13). The insecure and harmful behaviors we witness Strickland enacting are clearly engendered by his immaturity, or Boy psychology.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Strickland is *asking* the General when a man is done proving himself. He is *asking* the general if his one failure determines his whole value as a man. The fact that he is *asking* and knows not for himself the answer to those questions makes him a perfect example of a man riddled by Boy psychology. We can even see him reading a book in the film titled *The Power of Positive Thinking*. This suggests he even needs to be told how to think. Not surprisingly, he decides to accept the General’s definition of a ‘good’ and ‘decent’ man as being someone who “does not fuck

up,” instead of maturely recognizing that such a definition has nothing to do with what being good and decent entails.

The Asset, on the other hand, is depicted as a wild, powerful, yet sensitive creature from the very beginning of the film. Elisa, in charge of cleaning the laboratory room where he is being held captive, tries to greet him when he arrives by tapping gently on his containment tank. He immediately places his hand on the glass, trying to communicate his desperation. The next day, while cleaning the men’s washroom, Elisa meets Strickland for the first time and notices blood on the cattle prod he often carries around during the film. A few moments after the bathroom scene, Strickland, gushing blood and missing two fingers on his left hand, walks out of the laboratory room where The Asset is being held. Both Elisa and her friend Zelda are asked to clean up the bloody laboratory room from which Strickland has just emerged. Elisa, concerned with the amount of blood all over the floor, walks over to the tank to see if The Asset is safe. He shows himself to her, getting close to the viewing glass on his tank, and she sees that there is blood coming from his torso. The viewer can deduce from the scene that Strickland was torturing The Asset with the cattle prod, and at some point the creature fought back and removed Strickland’s two fingers.

The Asset is clearly not defenseless, but unlike the brutal violence Strickland inflicts on him in order to assert his dominance, the violence with which The Asset retaliates is aimed at self-preservation. In a certain way, by defending himself from Strickland, The Asset is symbolically rejecting and attacking the patriarchal culture Strickland stands for and erroneously obeys. This creature is actively showing us what

Carl G. Jung considered one of the most important processes in life: that of individuation. As Giorgio Tricarico explains in his essay *The Individuation Process in Post-Modernity*, “C. G. Jung defined individuation as the process of differentiation from the general collective psychology – from the norms and the values of the society in which the individual is immersed” (461). The Asset’s action of fighting and defending himself against the noxious collective male psychology that predominates in the other male characters in the film is crucial because it invites men today to question and defend themselves from patriarchy’s insatiable need for power and subjugation.

Another important quality that distinguishes The Asset from Strickland is his ability to react appropriately to that which is different from him. Unlike Strickland, who despises him and describes him as a “filthy affront,” The Asset does not consider those around him enemies or competition because they are different from him. Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen explains:

To be a ruthless soldier or commander-in-chief, or even a modern executive or entrepreneur, a man usually must be willing to kill or repress his softer feelings, to put his quest for approval or success in the man’s world ahead [. . .] There is no place in the military or its market equivalent for vulnerability, tenderness, or innocence. Nor is there room for empathy and compassion for enemies, in a ‘Kill or be killed’ setting, or for competitors and rivals in which one wins and the other loses. These attributes are seen as weaknesses that must be sacrificed. (35)

Vulnerability, tenderness, innocence, empathy and compassion are precisely the qualities that The Asset displays throughout the film. He is able to show his wounds to Elisa and

admit that he is hurt. He displays tenderness and innocence when he decides to trust her and share meals of boiled eggs she prepares and offers him. Elisa also plays music for him during their meetings, and they enjoy choosing the music they will listen to together. He also shows empathy and compassion in later scenes when he accidentally scratches Giles, Elisa's neighbor, after being startled. In a subsequent scene, The Asset is seen kneeling before Giles, who helps care for The Asset once Elisa kidnaps him from the facility, and gently touches the wound he has inflicted on Giles in order to heal it.

These attributes Bolen mentions will not only later prove to work in the Asset's favor, but will also practically save his life. The fact that The Asset is a wild yet intelligent creature, unaffected by all the societal rules and strictures that the other men in the film must tolerate, will eventually lead him to regain his freedom. This wild essence he possesses is what affords him an emotional permeability that the other men in the film do not have. Marie-Louise von Franz, Jungian psychologist and scholar, explains in *The Golden Ass of Apuleius*, whenever someone is "cut off from his primitive, naïve deeper emotions, he lacks the possibility of simple self expression" (199). It is The Asset's ability to access his emotions and communicate simply that helps him create a true bond with Elisa. In just a few scenes, we witness The Asset learning how to use sign language in order to converse with her. His true friendship with Elisa, which is displayed in stark contrast to the lack of friendship between the other male characters in the film, is what will later save his life when she decides to risk everything to save him from Strickland's wishes to vivisection him. The Asset's vulnerable yet strong virility make him exhibit a

distinctly different, mature, and more balanced manhood which could lead the way to the new masculinity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### MAN PSYCHOLOGY, WILD MEN, AND FIERCE GENTLEMEN

Gillette and Moore propose that only a mature masculinity, one that is infused with Man psychology, can allow men, “to let go of the patriarchal self –and other wounding thought, feeling, and behavior patterns,” in order to “become more genuinely strong, centered, and generative toward themselves and others –*both* women and men” (xviii). These virtues the authors provide to describe a mature male that possesses Man psychology, ‘strong,’ ‘centered,’ and ‘generative towards others,’ are precisely the qualities The Asset displays, as previously shown. As an accurate example of what mature masculinity looks like, The Asset could then be proposed as an example, mentor, or guide, that could showcase the way to a new masculinity.

Robert Bly, poet, mythologist, leader of the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement, and author of the 1992 *Iron John: A Book About Men*, also believed men could benefit from a male mentor that could guide them towards maturity. Although Bly was a controversial figure condemned by many as pro-patriarchal and anti-feminist during the 1990s, further research into this matter establishes that his ideas may have been misconstrued. Kimmel, who considers himself a leader of Profeminist Men, a movement created by those who believe that “men have a collective responsibility to work against the violence, injustice, and inequality that define and confine the lives of women in our society,” initially thought negatively of Bly and other men participating in the Mythopoetic Men’s

Movement (*Politics* 8). But after inviting Bly to participate in a book he edited titled *The Politics of Manhood: Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (And the Mythopoetic Leaders Answer)*, Kimmel explains, "I am thankful that the work on this book has brought me in touch with Robert Bly. His initial interest in the book and his careful and conciliatory response showed me how much room there is for dialogue" (xii). This move towards a reconciliation of both movements is best summarized by Mike Dash in an essay titled "Betwixt and Between in the Men's Movement:"

Mythopoetry focuses on what is missing—a vibrant, life-affirming masculinity—but has no focus on removing what is toxic in masculinity. Profeminism works to eliminate what is toxic—a death-dealing, patriarchal, violent masculinity—but has not developed a vision of what will take its place. Neither approach can succeed by itself. (*Politics* 356)

After inviting Bly to be keynote speaker at a national Profeminist Men's conference, Kimmel further states, "I hope that my initial critical response to his ideas in this book does not completely obscure my respect and admiration for his work" (xii-xiii). He also clarifies in this same introduction that the Mythopoetic Men's Movement "does valuable work in breaking down men's isolation from one another, and giving permission for men to experience deep feelings" (10). This is precisely what Dan Doty states was the solution for today's men's crisis.

Bly's work concentrates on the loss of connection between fathers and sons, a lack of male mentorship for young men in modern times, and the absence of initiation rituals that help young men mature. Yet Bly was accused by magazines, newspapers, and



TV sitcoms as offering nothing more than a prescription for white, upper-middle-class professionals to go back into the woods to beat on drums in order to find their primitive warrior energy and masculinity (*Politics* 15). Bly also generated derision due to his belief that men needed to find their masculine identity away from women. Unfortunately, this conviction unraveled into the inaccurate idea that he wanted men to rule over women. Just like Gillette and Moore, Bly is completely against patriarchy. He was not just one of the most visible opponents of macho militaristic posturing during the Vietnam War, but also subsequently risked his cultural capital with young male followers by opposing Operation Desert Storm, a 1991 US military operation that was created to expel occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait (*Politics* 6). Bly states in an essay included in *The Politics of Manhood*, “None of us wants to reestablish patriarchy. The destructive essence of patriarchy, which I feel vividly in the story of Herod, moves to kill the young masculine as soon as it appears anywhere within range [. . .] Herod also moves to kill the young feminine[. . .]I have daughters, and the last thing I want is for this Herod energy to move against them” (272).

The young masculine, or symbolically a new masculine, is an important aspect that can be extracted from Bly’s work. As Dash and Kimmel point out, Bly is offering men something of value as he attempts to restore a ‘vibrant’ and ‘life-affirming’ masculinity, and also a way for men to connect to their feelings and each other. In his work, Bly explores the role of the Wild Man portrayed in *Iron John*. This character acts like a mentor to a young boy who must leave his parents home in order to find his destiny. In essence, *Iron John* is a maturation story. As a figure he found in the Grimm

fairytale “Iron John,” or “Iron Hans,” Bly believes this character has the ‘deep masculine’ wisdom that could mentor a young male through the eight stages of male growth. As previously shown, The Asset continuously models behaviors, attitudes, and attributes throughout the film that promote a much richer and holistic way to be a man on this earth.

There are several similarities between The Asset and the Wild Man. They both represent that which is primitive or outside the realm of established patriarchal society. The Wild Man lives at the bottom of a body of water in a remote area of a forest. The Asset belongs in the Amazon River. In the fairytale, the Wild Man is covered in hair. The Asset, although covered in scales instead of hair, is similar in the sense that both of these creatures’ bodies reveal that they belong in the wild, and that their strength and wisdom is not extracted from cultural norms or hierarchical structures. The Wild Man and The Asset both prove that the strength they represent is the key to leading men on a journey of maturity, because they are after all both gods. In the film, Strickland explains to General Hoyt, “You know, the natives in the Amazon worshipped it [The Asset] like a god.” Bly similarly explains about the Wild Man, “The being under the water is a god, namely Dionysus, who was in Greece a god for men and women” (*Politics* 273).

Dionysius is commonly associated with nature, vegetation, the grape-harvest, pleasure, ecstasy, and women. Bolen, in her book *Gods in Everyman: Archetypes that Shape Men’s Lives*, explains, “Dionysus as god, archetype, and man was close to nature and to women. The mystical realm and the feminine world were familiar to him” (251). Bolen also quotes Philip Myerson as stating “his [Dionysus’s] domain extended to all

nature, and especially to its life-giving and seminal moisture: the sap rising in a tree, the blood pounding in the veins, the liquid fire of the grape, all the mysterious and uncontrollable tides that flow and ebb in nature” (251-52). The Asset clearly embodies this wetness and organic order in nature.

By understanding that men’s inherent strength comes more from nature, and their own nature, rather than the civilization they inhabit, Bly and Del Toro both generate the idea that men need to reconnect with their original source in order to discover their true power. Bly goes one step further in *Iron John* and states, “The Wild Man is the door to the wildness in nature, but we could also say the Wild Man is nature itself” (224). The Asset certainly embodies a masculine entity that is completely tied to nature. “I think we are remembering the Wild Man now,” Bly states, “because men and women need now, more than ever in history, to protect the earth, its creatures, the waters, the air, the mountains, the trees, the wilderness” (*Iron John* 223).

Sam Keene, scholar, philosopher and author of 1991 *The New York Times* bestselling book *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*, also believes that the mature masculine should be linked to nature. He states, “The historical challenge for modern men is clear – to discover a peaceful form of virility and to create an ecological commonwealth, to become fierce gentlemen”(121). He explains that, “Men’s identity since the industrial revolution has been so closely bound up with exploiting natural resources that creation of an earth-honoring ethic will require men to make a fundamental change in our self-understanding. Not just our actions must change. Our identity must

also change” (120). Keene recognizes that an entire new paradigm must manifest for American men in order to see real change.

To evaluate this statement, it is interesting to consider the reason *The Asset* was extracted from the Amazon in the first place. The creature was of interest to Strickland, General Hoyt, and Dr. Hoffstetlor because of his two alternating breathing mechanisms. He was considered an “asset” because he was deemed valuable for Cold War advancements. Strickland wants to vivisect the creature in order to better understand his advantageous anatomy. Keene recognizes these noxious impulses displayed by Strickland as those that would be exhibited by men who insist on destroying and exploiting nature for their own egotistical needs. It is important to note that the film not only portrays men that exude these behaviors, but countries as well. America and Russia are both depicted trying to prove their “manhood” and dominance over each other. It is the same toxic patriarchal paradigm we have been tracking, again and again, being enacted at all levels of society: personal and national.

Keene explains that men today are still lost. They do not yet know, “how to take the fierce warrior energies, the drive to conquest and control that men have honed for centuries, and turn them toward the creation of a more hopeful and careful future” (121). But he proposes that the man who indeed accomplishes this will “lead us out of this ignorance” (121). Keene also anticipates, though, that the new masculine identity that has to be created must lead men out of ignorance with a wisdom that is still elusive. Maybe this is because, as Moore and Gillette tell us, “in truth, there has never been a time yet in human history when a mature masculinity was really in ascendency” (xix). Let us

consider then that perhaps this is the reason why The Asset, the amphibian-humanoid that Del Toro creates, is not fully human. The wisdom and masculinity it represents has never existed before and it is therefore a not-yet-here kind of being that lives deep in the Amazon jungle. It can for now only be somehow anticipated; a premonition of a future masculinity that for now can only exist and be revealed by stories and art.

### **ART, HOPE, AND FUTURITY**

Art plays a fundamental role in moments of transition. When an old governing paradigm is no longer serving its culture and a new one is attempting to materialize, it is often art that can provide the first inkling of a new pattern that lies still unconscious in our minds and societies. Kimmel states in the introduction to his book *Manhood in America*, “the search for a transcendent, timeless definition of manhood is itself a sociological phenomenon –we tend to search for the timeless and eternal during moments of crisis, those points of transition when the old definitions no longer work and the new definitions are yet to be firmly established” (4). Undeniably, we are at that particular junction, and it is a fertile moment when art and film can act as incubators and deliverers of that which wants to be born.

Leonard Shlain, in his book *Leonardo's Brain: Understanding da Vinci's Creative Genius*, quotes T.S. Eliot saying, “Great art can communicate before it is understood,” and Ezra Pound expressing, “The artist is the antennae of the race” (79). By imagining and creating The Asset, a male figure completely unlike the other male

characters in the film, Del Toro is offering his viewers an important, intuitive, and hopeful futurity in *The Shape of Water*. This hopeful futurity is an issue that José Esteban Muñoz, a Cuban American Professor and former Chair of the Department of Performance Studies at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, delves into in his book *Cruising Utopia*. In it he explores Ernst Bloch's ideas on hope and the utopian function of art. Bloch, a Marxist philosopher, states in his 1954 work titled *The Principle of Hope*:

Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us? [. . .] It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.

It is the artist who often ventures into imagining what is becoming. Muñoz further states that, “the anticipatory illumination of art... can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us to see the not-yet-conscious” (3). This could apply then to the not-yet-conscious mature masculinity depicted by *The Asset* and the Man psychology men so desperately need to witness right now.

Del Toro's film could also be said to accomplish a hopeful futurity by anticipating what a new masculinity could look like and depicting it through his amphibian-humanoid character. Bloch theorized, Muñoz explains, "that one could detect wish-landscapes in painting and poetry" (5). The fact that films offer a visual medium that can, and often do, provide wish-landscapes, could also lead us to stipulate that the kind of healing, generative, and protective behaviors The Asset displays throughout the film are effectively creating a hopeful wish-landscape. Wish-landscapes are important as they help us revise and re-envision what no longer works in our world. Toxic masculine behaviors enacted by Strickland in the film like torturing The Asset, sexually accosting Elisa at work, humiliating Zelda with racist and condescending remarks, and dispensing enormous amounts of rage and violence towards everyone who stands in his way for the last thirty minutes of the film, remind us of the re-envisioning that Keene argues must happen in the male psyche. Keene's almost thirty-year-old proposal is not only still relevant; it is urgent. The overabundance of the immature masculine's oppressive and humiliating behaviors recently uncovered during the October 2017 #MeToo movement, which started one month before this film was released, prove this conclusively.

Del Toro clearly foresees and ignites the potentiality of a new masculinity by offering us The Asset. Although his movie has a dream-like quality, Muñoz explains, "Concrete utopias can also be daydream-like, but they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many. Concrete Utopias are the realm of educated hope" (3). By clearly depicting both kinds of masculinity in his film, Strickland's immature masculinity and The Asset's mature

masculinity, the director of this film does offer an educated vision of what is present, and what could come to be. Once The Asset settles into Elisa's apartment, we further witness a most gentle side to The Asset that once again appears in sharp contrast to Strickland's deteriorating and ever more violent and anxious behavior towards the end of the film. As Strickland seethes for having lost The Asset and his world further collapses with each day that passes, the Asset and Elisa become sexual partners. They are shown naked and vulnerable, yet completely at peace with their new relationship. Elisa even tries for the first time to use her voice so she can tell him how much she loves him.

Del Toro also hints to the fact that his film holds something of a future vision by often having characters in his film claim that the future is "green," just like The Asset's whole complexion. When Giles attempts to draw the new advertising poster titled, "The Future is Here" with red Jello, his previous boss says, "Green. They want the gelatin to be green now." When Giles replies that he was told it had to be red, his previous boss replies, "New Concept. That's the future now. Green." When he does re-draw the poster, Giles correctly draws the gelatin green and also re-titles the poster, "The Future is Green."

Another example of the futurity that green and The Asset seem to represent in the film is in a scene where Strickland wants to buy a new car at a Cadillac dealership, but is unsure because it is green. The car salesman, to convince him otherwise, says, "It's not green my friend. It's teal. This here is the future. And you strike me as the man who is headed there. You are the man of the future. You belong in this car." The car salesman tries to de-emphasize the fact that there is a greenish tone to the car so Strickland will buy



it, and mentions teal, a greenish-blue color, which is just as The Asset's skin. The salesman also points out that the car has power windows, power breaks, power steering, power seats and claims that four out of five successful men drive a Cadillac.

Unsurprisingly and clearly representing the old patriarchal paradigm, Strickland drives the car home and by doing so again displays his insecurity. He was unsure of the color of the car, maybe thinking it wasn't very masculine, but the salesman, by explaining its many power functions and the many successful men that drive it, makes it impossible for him to resist. Unlike him, The Asset needs nothing to prove his power. He is a being that is inherently powerful. He needs no titles, jobs, objects, or purchasable products to complete his masculine identity. Marketplace Manhood has no hold over him, so The Asset, as his skin tones indicate, can lead the way towards a new masculinity and the future.

### **WATER AS THE FERTILE UNCONSCIOUS**

Both green and blue are colors often considered to represent water. The Asset's amphibian skin color, nature itself, and the need this creature has for water in order to survive is significant if we consider Carl C. Jung's theory that water represents the unconscious. Jung states in *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, "Water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious" and also explains, "It is the world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living, begins;" (18-22). The Asset, by belonging to the water, is again

portrayed as something that represents a beginning; a symbol arising from the unconscious and making its way into consciousness.

Rain is another important water aspect in *The Shape of Water*, as it constellates another 'shape' that water takes. Once she rescues the Asset from the laboratory, Elisa must care for him until the rains come in order to release him at the canal that opens to the ocean. *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* states about rain:

The water upon which all of life depends descends to earth as raindrops both gentle and torrential. Rain is a miraculous visitation of heavenly power, natural and immense, necessary and feared, cleansing, releasing, dissolving, flooding, relieving and sweet. Rain precipitates growth, change, refreshment, purification [...]the image of rain in the mythologies of many people represents the penetration of the earth below by the descending celestial, fertilizing powers and points to the sacred marriage of heaven and earth. The divine sperm falling like the golden shower of Zeus upon Danae impregnates the earth to sustain and renew all life, serving as a primal image of the bestowal of grace, mercy, and abundance (62).

Rain both cleanses and brings forth. It is an element that spurs beginnings, birth, and growth. It is therefore significant that Del Toro brings about the resurrection of The Asset in the final scene of the film while torrential rain is falling. After having been shot in the heart by Strickland, The Asset, now bathed in rain, resurrects. As he rises to his full stature only seconds after being shot, The Asset confidently heals the wound his aggressor has inflicted on him by gently swiping his own left hand over the wound. He

then walks calmly over to Strickland, seen scrambling to load more bullets into his gun, and cuts his throat right after Strickland pronounces, “Fuck. You are a god.”

Symbolically, by cutting Strickland’s throat, The Asset is also silencing his aggressor’s rage, power, and ability to give orders. It also noteworthy that he disposes of Strickland with his hands, which he has previously used to heal others and himself in the film. It is as if by using his own hands to kill Strickland, he becomes the rain: cleansing and healing the rage that inhabits the patriarchy’s core. *The Book of Symbols* states this same conclusion by offering, “Beneficial healing by the celestial influence of such rain cleanses that which is dark and trapped in emotional blindness, or in the parched earth within, inert, barren of life, stuck in unconsciousness or in certainty, and in need of the dissolving and propagating rains” (62). The Asset and the rain certainly do dissolve Strickland’s power and ignorance.

Also, unlike The Asset’s wetness and self-healing power, Strickland’s fingers are shown putrefying throughout the film. Everything Strickland represents is in decay and void of tenderness, much like patriarchy. Strickland is parched, out of touch with his true feelings, and must engage with life completely alone. One of his last lines in the film, once he shoots The Asset and Elisa, is “I do not fail.” This speaks to his need to avoid failure at all costs. The rage we see him suffer and dispense, far too often quite similar to what we see men doing in recent headlines, needs dissolving and healing. If released from their compulsion to prove their manhood, men might finally let go of the anxious, nervous, insecure, and expired model of masculinity we still see today. Instead, by

following The Asset's example, men and the future definition of masculinity might just be able to experience a rebirth.

## EGGS AND POSSIBILITY

Eggs, which have long been associated with birth and possibility, are another key element in the film that points to the zygotic and future potential that The Asset's character represents. His continuous consumption of boiled eggs, which Elisa prepares and offers The Asset on a daily basis, certainly suggests that this character is somehow linked to that which he ingests. The egg as a gift, and as a symbol associated with rebirth, regeneration, wholeness, and the possibility of something new, could also symbolize the feminine, Elisa, offering her fertility to the masculinity that The Asset represents.

Marija Gimbutas also highlights eggs as symbols of fertility by mentioning the contemporary ritual of rolling painted eggs. This ritual, still practiced in America today, is derived from the belief that rolling eggs on the earth would encourage the springtime renewal of vegetation after the hardships of winter during Easter (Ronnberg and Martin 14). This is another meaningful and symbolic interpretation of eggs as bringers of new life. *The Book of Symbols* further extrapolates that, "each spring, possibility returns in thousands and thousands of eggs. Jelly like eggs of fish and frogs shimmer in shallow waters (14). Similarly, the Asset is an amphibian humanoid that has the capacity to regenerate life, evidenced when he heals himself from wounds inflicted upon him by Strickland, and when he heals the wounds he accidentally inflicts on Giles. To Giles's

surprise, The Asset's healing touch even regrows hair on his bald, aging head. This proves that The Asset's touch is capable of restoring life, vitality, and strength.

*The Book of Symbols* also offers that the "egg evokes the beginning, the simple, the source. The egg is the mysterious 'center' around which unconscious energies move in spiral-like evolutions, gradually bringing the vital substance to light" (14). The egg speaks to our unconscious as something that holds new life and a new generation within it. *The Book of Symbols* also mentions Marie Louise von Franz's observation that "in many creation myths, the universe is hatched from an egg, which has everything within itself" (14). The egg, like a seed, holds entirely within itself the blueprint for a new organism. It is a curious and important detail that Del Toro has chosen eggs as nourishment for The Asset, and it again highlights how his character could act as the zeitgeist of a new masculinity.

## CONCLUSION

Guillermo Del Toro's film *The Shape of Water* not only skillfully depicts the toxic masculinity that has plagued men for centuries, it more importantly offers us The Asset, a new paradigm in the shape of an amphibian-humanoid that can be accessed by men as the zeitgeist and inspiration for a new and much needed 21<sup>st</sup> century masculinity. The crisis in masculinity we face today could clearly benefit by incorporating the behaviors and attributes found in Man psychology, in the Wild Man, in the Fierce Gentleman, and characters like The Asset. Del Toro has cleverly embodied his character with the qualities and virtues that point the way to a calm, mature, yet powerful masculine entity that can

self-heal the injuries dispensed by the toxic masculine. By engaging with this character, this image, this idea, this hopeful futurity, men today could finally envision a way to displace and replace the toxic masculinity that has long reigned in American men's psyches. Del Toro's film could very well be inciting the beginning of the end of the patriarchy, and inviting us to envision, like *The Asset*, an empathic, healing, and generative new virility that could supplant the toxicity of our current models of manhood.

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