

ESSAY

The unclassifiable “monsters” of Guillermo Del Toro’s ‘Pinocchio’

When master-carver Geppetto passes out, a freakish, blue-feathered deity or wood sprite with multiple pairs of wings and a fishtail appears. Besides being an impossible hybrid—part-mermaid, part-bird, she has myriad eyes on her wings and the extensions protruding from her head.

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Guillermo Del Toro’s stop-motion animation, *Pinocchio* (2022) is loosely based on Carlo Collodi’s novel, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883). The film’s striking portrayal of deities as unsettling entities challenges the viewer’s past notions of both deities and monsters. It is nothing like Disney’s *Pinocchio* (1940) because instead of the beautiful fairy who has blonde hair, blue eyes, cherry-red lips, rosy cheeks on flawless fair skin, a petite and slender physique, a glittering blue dress, angel wings, a soft-spoken voice, and a magical wand, the viewers of Toro’s dark fantasy film will see not one, but two sister goddesses—phantasmagoric, aberrant beings whose grotesque appearances and realms are Kafkaesque even though their attributes and actions are far from being monstrous.

The film is set in Italy, during and after World War I, and a major portion is set during Mussolini’s time. It shows us how Geppetto grieves over his dead son, Carlo (a victim of an aerial bombardment), for two decades, until in a state of drunkenness, he cuts down a pine tree and carves an ill-formed, wooden, Frankenstein-esque boy, in a fit of desperation to bring back a semblance of his dead boy.

When master-carver Geppetto passes out, a freakish, blue-feathered deity or wood sprite with multiple pairs of wings and a fishtail appears. Besides being an impossible hybrid—part-mermaid, part-bird, she has myriad eyes on her wings and the extensions protruding from her head. These eyes can dislocate from her body and roam the woods, making her an all-seeing goddess. Her depiction may have been partly inspired from the seraphim, an angelic creature described in Abrahamic religions as having six wings studded with eyes. Her expressionless, pupil-less eyes (the ones that are actually in the place of eye sockets, not the other innumerable ones on her



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

body) are made of bright light and she has an unmoving mouth even when she speaks. This deity with a feminine form gives life to the macabre wooden copy of Carlo, dubbing him Pinocchio.

Later, we witness Pinocchio “dying” many times and each time, he meets the deity of Death, who is an eerier sister of the wood sprite. Death is presented as a sphinx-like/chimaera-like hybrid with a hominoid face, a lion’s mane, a buffalo’s horns, a lion’s body, a pair of majestic wings, and a two-headed snake tail. The gigantic, curled horns and ethereal wings are studded with blinking eyes. She has the same brightly lit, pupil-less eyes and unmoving mouth as her sister. She also has the same voice as her sister—that of the actor Tilda Swinton’s, which seems to have been technologically altered to make it entrancing in a non-human way. This blue deity, Death, is surrounded by the sands of time and every time Pinocchio “dies” a temporary

“death”, his hourglass becomes a little bigger, meaning, he has to wait a little longer to be able to go back to the earthly realm.

The portrayal of the aforementioned deities in Toro’s *Pinocchio* disallows viewers to put them into a certain category, which is where Jeffrey Cohen’s third thesis (from his paper “Monster Culture: Seven Thesis”) comes in: the monster is the harbinger of category crisis. Are we talking about monsters though? Let’s take the goddess of Death into consideration. While she’s not monstrous in her actions, she’s surely monstrous in appearances, as she’s one of the “disturbing hybrids, whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration”. The deity of Death is an amalgamation of so many creatures and more: partly humanoid, partly bovine, partly feline, partly avian, partly serpentine, and partly magical. We simply cannot compartmentalise

her into a specific category.

Stephen Neale argues that the monster “signifies the boundary between the human and the non-human” and we see this quality of monstrosity in both goddesses in Toro’s *Pinocchio*. Normalcy/naturalness doesn’t come to mind. Scientifically and biologically impossible, their physical forms defy logic; classifying them becomes a futile task. They are threatening because they smash distinctions.

It’s all the more impossible to understand the conceptual space within which the deity of Death resides, as it’s not a realm where any human has gone to and come back from. It’s a space where other immortals exist—four black, skeletal rabbits—undertakers of sorts, who have the same pupil-less, brightly lit eyes as the sister deities. These ghoulish rabbits seem to be wearing tailored coats made with their own fur! Furthermore, this realm

challenges our expectations of an afterlife described in religious scripture. The dead are simply left abandoned in coffins, there’s no depiction of heaven, hell, or purgatory, there’s no higher power to judge one’s deeds/misdeeds, and the ruler of this realm, aka the deity of Death, sits in her room surrounded by the sands of time. This inability to classify or categorise the feminine deity and her kingdom makes her and her jurisdiction intimidating; after all, we tend to be afraid of the unknown, the alienesque, or the bizarre.

Toro’s *Pinocchio* is quite dark and the deities make it even less child-friendly, despite being an animation film and despite being based on a fairytale. However, neither of the goddesses is cruel/evil, unlike most conventional monsters. While we don’t expect the life-giving wood sprite to be monstrous, she’s quite horrific to look at, but we do expect her to be kind, like the angelic fairy in Disney’s *Pinocchio* (1940), which she is. Despite her grim appearances, the deity of Death is not the antagonist; she’s in fact one who grants Pinocchio a life-changing choice during his final temporary “death”—mortality and a living father over immortality and a dead father. Pinocchio breaks his hourglass in response, giving up his blissful immortality in his urgent and selfless attempt to save his drowning father from the engulfing sea. Unlike portrayals of rulers of the underworld, such as Hades in Disney’s *Hercules* (1997), the deity of Death in Toro’s *Pinocchio* is neither manipulative nor unkind, yet her appearances are nightmarishly deviant. Toro challenges the viewer’s preconceived notions of deities and monsters and shows us that the line between them, as far as appearances go, is quite porous, i.e. deities can be as visually unsettling as monsters.

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HIGHLIGHT

This time, just the bare bones

ABAK HUSSAIN

Horror master Edgar Allan Poe believed a really good scary story should be read in one sitting.

No wonder he was in love with the short fiction format—the more bloodcurdling his stories, the shorter they get. In fact, just about his entire life’s work comprises short fiction and poems, with only one novel in the mix. The novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), one might argue is the least scary of his works.

Most of Poe’s legendary short stories, from “The Black Cat,” to “The Fall of the House of Usher,” to “The Pit and the Pendulum” range somewhere from 10 to 20-ish pages. One of his best, “The Tell-tale Heart,” a story about a heart-beat that just never stops, a story that has been hailed by Stephen King as “the best tale of inside evil ever written,” runs for barely six pages. That was it—six pages was all that Poe needed for this masterwork of exploration into the guilt-ridden psyche, a work that has been homaged again and again in literature, television, and cinema.

Horror, more than other genres, lends itself to the flash fiction or micro-fiction format; send a chill down your reader’s spine, and end it before they have too much time to think about it and the scary thing starts to appear ridiculous in the light of day, or before other activities have intervened, drowning the atmosphere in the mundane.

Horror, by its nature, is immersive. Once you are in it, you don’t want to be pulled out, because then it can be hard to get back in. There is nothing more annoying than being in the middle of a really good



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

horror film and then having a commercial pop-up—thankfully most Millennials and Gen Z no longer watch traditional TV and are firmly in control of the pause button when viewing on our computers.

But it’s not possible to stay immersed in a fictional world for hours without the interruptions of the modern world, so a bite-sized blast or two of a good scare after dinner might be just the trick, and (hopefully) won’t harm your sleep, even without a doctor’s prescription.

Consider the following, which I collected off the internet:

You hear your mom calling you into the kitchen. As you are heading down the stairs you hear a whisper from the closet saying, “Don’t go down there honey, I heard it too.” (33 words)

Let’s look at another one. After struggling desperately to move any part of his paralytic body just to alert the doctors

that he was conscious before the first incision, he was relieved to see that one of the nurses had noticed his pupils dilating from the bright light. She leaned in close, and in a whisper that tickled his ear, said “you think we don’t know you’re awake?” (63 words)

OK, one last one, because burial-obsessed Poe would have loved it:

I can’t move, breathe, speak, or hear and it’s so dark all the time. If I knew it would be this lonely, I would have been cremated instead. (28 words)

The Triwizard Tournament, hosted by Talespeople

If these compact-but hair-raising doses of fear are your drug of choice, then we warmly welcome you to the upcoming Triwizard Tournament, which is an annual Halloween team flash fiction challenge hosted by Talespeople—the same group that brings you the *Shehri Tales*

challenge every Ramadan.

Here is the gist of how it works: Participants are sorted into four “Houses” or teams, and have two days to complete a bingo board of prompts for maximum 250-word horror stories (*Shehri Tales* participants will be deeply familiar with this word limit by now!). The first House to complete all 25 prompts will be declared the winner.

This year, Kratz is sponsoring us, and the members of the winning house will get a 10% discount off their board games. We are also happy to have *Daily Star Books* choose a Grand Winner from the tournament, who will win a board game from Kratz. Participation is easy, just go to the *Talespeople* group on Facebook and instructions for being sorted into a house are all there.

As part of the *Talespeople* team, it has always been a pleasure to see the amazing quality of the

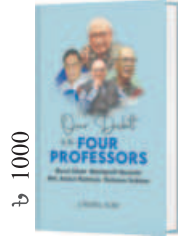
work, and the immense enthusiasm that comes out during these *Talespeople* flash fiction events. Our goal here, as always, is simply to foster a sense of community, encourage creative work, and have a bit of fun. As always, writers retain the rights to their own work, and *Talespeople* does not profit from it.

But that’s enough of me talking: We want to hear from you! There’s no time like

the spooky season to start working those story-telling muscles once again, and if you are already a seasoned writer who is writing all year round, this may be a good time to just have some spine-tingling fun and flex your range. So let’s see it—may the skeletons in your closet come and join us...

Abak Hussain is a writer, and a director of *Talespeople*.

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