

Movie: The Babadook (2014)

Synopsis

The Babadook (2014) is a horror film written and directed by Jennifer Kent about the trials of Amelia and her six-year-old son, Sam, following the death of Sam's father. Sam is afraid of monsters, prompting a nightly ritual of waking Amelia up to check the bedroom closet and under his bed before he finally falls asleep in her bed. Amelia – who works as a full-time nursing home aide for patients with Major Neurocognitive Disorder (NCD). – appears socially isolated. Apart from visits with her sister and niece (Claire and Ruby), she only talks to Mrs. Roach, a widowed neighbor who sometimes babysits Sam.

One evening, Sam asks Amelia to read a book, *The Babadook*, about a sinister presence invading their home. The rest of the movie depicts the struggle that ensues with the babadook that Sam believes is real, and the evolving relationship between mother and son. The movie takes on added intrigue depending on the viewer's perspective of who is telling the story: Amelia, Sam, or their neighbor, Mrs. Roach. With each possible perspective, details of the film may be interpreted differently, thus transforming the film into a case study rich in psychiatric themes.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Amelia's Story

This film brings together – among others -- the themes of complicated bereavement, denial and Major Neurocognitive Disorder (NCD). Early in the movie, it appears Amelia's complicated bereavement has evolved into Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) with psychotic features. But out of all her symptoms fulfilling the diagnosis for MDD - unable to sleep, constantly fatigued ("nothing 5 years of sleep wouldn't fix"), constricted affect, irritability (e.g. yells at Sam), feeling guilty (about being a bad mother) – her deficits in concentrate and memory are the most striking. Amelia doesn't remember buying Sam firecrackers or where the Babadook (book) came from (per Sam, it was always on the bookshelf). After killing Buggy (the family dog), Amelia pulls out her tooth; an allusion a primitive cure for mental illness.¹)

Denial also features heavily throughout the movie, particularly around the book's reappearance ("the more you deny, the stronger I get"), and Amelia's way of coping with her husband's death (described to Claire as "by not talking about it"). The film's ending is an external manifestation of Amelia's denial.

Last but not least, movies have long been utilized to highlight the stigma toward people with mental illness, and this film resonates with examples; Amelia fights for her son to be treated with compassion when his teachers suggest he be treated differently; Sam constantly reminds Amelia throughout the movie of the need to protect each other, as if knowing that only they can

¹ Khazan, O. (2014, October 22). Pulling Teeth to treat mental illness. The Atlantic. doi: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/the-tragic-sadistic-mental-illness-treatment-from-the-knick-is-real/381751/>

understand each other's inner struggles. In the bathtub scene, it is six-year-old Sam who understands the depth of the situation, "I don't want you to go away."

In the end, the *Babadook* is not just about the monsters lurking under our bed, but about the experiences in life that continue to haunt our minds.

Key Words: The Babadook, neurocognitive disorder, dementia, grief, PTSD, parasomnia, sleep medicine, sleepwalking, sleep-related rhythmic movement disorder, REM sleep behavior disorder

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