

Movie: Candyman (1992)

Synopsis

Inspired by Clive Barker's *The Forbidden*, *Candyman* is set in the housing projects of Cabrini Green, Chicago. Helen Lyle is a University of Illinois graduate student who sets out to write a thesis about local legends and myths. She learns about a local urban legend, Candyman, who appears after calling his name five times in front of a mirror and uses his hook to split his victims from 'groin to gullet.'

Candyman is a film depicting the rite of passage of Helen Lyle. During her evolution, her skepticism turns to fear when after summoning Candyman, a series of murders and a visit from Candyman himself cause her life to spiral out of control.

The Legend

Partly inspired by Hook Man (http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/horrors/a/the_hook.htm), Candyman was the son of a slave, whose father became wealthy after mass-producing shoes after the Civil War. As a result, Candyman grew up attending the best schools and later became a well-known artist. Highly sought out by the elite society for his talent in portraits, he was hired to paint a portrait of the daughter of a wealthy man who wanted to capture her 'virgin beauty.' After falling in love and fathering her child, his lover's father became enraged, organizing a mob to lynch Candyman. During the gruesome attack and eventual murder, the mob cut off his right (painting) hand and replaced it with a hook. They then covered him in honey and allowed him to be stung to death as the mob chanted "Candyman, Candyman." It is said that Candyman returns from his grave to take revenge when one dares to say his name five times in a mirror.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Candyman is a Psychiatric Anthropological film that shines light on the social aspect of urban legends and why they resonate in certain communities. The French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, identified myths as a type of speech through which a language could be discovered. He is renowned for his structuralist theory of mythology which attempted to explain how fantastical tales could be so similar across cultures. Urban legends are cautionary tales of contemporary folklore that identify taboos represented in all cultures that capture four common themes: a) misunderstandings, b) poetic justice, c) business rip-offs, and d) revenge. Urban legends are a large part of popular culture and often speak to the fears, anxieties, and biases of that culture. In doing so, they provide insight and give us an idea of the moral fabric of the community.

For the people living in Cabrini Green, the urban legend of Candyman is validation for the fears of people living amongst the gruesome crimes against Ruthy Jean and of the young boy. In the movie, we see that Candyman thrives off the perpetuation of this legend. Upon realizing that Helen may have caused a rift in people believing in his existence, Candyman beckons her to be his victim, with intent on killing her and in so forth, give rebirth to his legend once again.

In his seminal work, *Les rites de passage*, Arnold Van Gennep described rites of passage as having three phases:

Separation

During this phase, the individual is stripped of the social status that he or she possessed before the ritual. After challenging the authenticity of the urban legend, Candyman appears to Helen “needing to prove his existence.” After a series of murders by the hand hook of Candyman, Helen is stripped of her social status and imprisoned.

The Liminal Period

During this phase, the individual is inducted into the liminal period of transition, a middle stage of the ritual, no longer holding her pre-ritual status (but has not yet attained the status they will hold when the ritual is complete). For Helen, the discovery in the words in the apartment attic, “It was always you, Helen,” highlights the liminal period. She is betwixt and between, with Candyman’s prophesy that Helen will carry on his tradition of inciting fear into the community of Cabrini Green.

The binary motif is seen throughout the movie: Candyman is an African American slave whose ‘spirit’ resides in the ghettos of Chicago. Helen, a white middle class woman, resides in a luxury condominium. The use of bees as symbolism for Candyman is also important in that they have the capacity to make a sweet honey while also being able to induce great pain. Also, the very way Candyman kills his victims is by splitting them in two.

Re-Assimilation into Society

During this phase, the individual is given her new status. As the prophesy foretells [spoiler alert], Helen ultimately becomes the embodiment of the urban legend.

In using the mirror, Candyman forces its victims to confront the self and the non-self, or the “other” and to project internal conflict onto external images. These visual tools play with the spectator’s impulse control, and most importantly to question it; “No one ever got past four.” The notion of going past four is a common theme throughout the movie.

Candyman, with his gruesome tale, plays on humanity's infatuation with the grotesque and like Pandora's Box; its allure compels us to approach the lid. In this case the 'lid' is opened by saying "Candyman" five times in a mirror.

Key Words: Candyman, Cabrini Green, rite of passage, Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Claude Lévi-Strauss, structuralist theory, urban legend, Hook Man, summoning, necromancy

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