

Movie: Halloween (1978)

Synopsis

Halloween begins with six-year-old Michael Myers killing his seventeen-year-old sister, Judith, on Halloween 1963. Michael is subsequently hospitalized at Smith's Grove Sanitarium. Fifteen years later, he escapes and returns to his hometown where he stalks the people of Haddonfield. The film is set in Haddonfield, Illinois, a fictional Midwestern town that is actually an ode to co-writer, Debra Hill's, hometown of Haddonfield, NJ.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Michael Myers serves as a case study of Conversion Disorder, a type of somatic symptom disorder. The common feature of the somatic symptom and related disorders is the presence of physical symptoms that suggest a general medical condition. What's defining is that the symptom or deficit (e.g. mutism) is not fully explained by a) a general medical condition (e.g. aphonia), b) the direct effects of a substance or c) another mental disorder. Following the murder of his sister, Michael loses his ability to talk. Through the entire franchise which includes the original film, seven sequels and two remakes, Myers doesn't utter a single word. There is no physical explanation for his motor deficit. The film and its many reproductions are illustrations of a conversion reaction stemming from the trauma of murdering his sister. Michael's violent behavior may therefore be interpreted as nonverbal communication resulting from the defense mechanism; acting out.

The film is similar to other slasher movies such as *Friday the 13th* and *Scream* in that it depicts the prohibitions against "inappropriate babysitting." Judith Meyers's fate is the consequence of her having sex with her boyfriend when given the responsibility of supervising her younger brother (the stuff urban legends are made of).

Halloween serving as a case study for the somatic symptom (primary gain) and related disorders (secondary gain) allows for the discussion of Factitious Disorder versus Malingering (disorders related to the somatic symptom disorders). The urban legend of "The Halloween Sadist" inspired many literary works including *Candyman*, a short story by Clive Barker. The legend is about the treat of tainted candy being given out on Halloween night. The legend stems from dog biscuits given to children on Halloween on Long Island in 1964. Ronald Clark O'Brien, the "Candy Man," used this urban legend as an alibi when he poisoned his own son by lacing a pixy stick young Timothy O'Brien got trick-or-treating with cyanide. If an external incentive (collect insurance money) motivated Ronald's behavior, Malingering would be likely than Factitious Disorder.

An interesting subplot of *Halloween* is that there are multiple references made to deviant sexual behaviors (paraphilias). When Michael first returns to Haddonfield, he stalks Laurie Strode. Stalking is a variant of voyeurism/voyeuristic disorder. While his motivation (sexual fantasies or

urges) is unclear, Michael's stalking behavior clearly results in Laurie's mental distress. Later in the movie, Tommie hides behind the curtains to scare Lindsay when he sees Michael across the street carrying the body of his dead sister. The scene has voyeuristic undertones, and is similar to movies depicting peeping toms as key eyewitnesses to murder (*Disturbia*, *Mr. Brooks*, *The Burbs*).

In another early scene, a reference is made to an obscene phone call. Telephone scatologia is a variant of exhibitionism/exhibitionistic disorder which centers on the need to expose one's genitals to other people (typically strangers caught off guard) in order to achieve sexual pleasure. With this subversive context, it's no mistake that the sexually-inhibited Laurie is the only teenager to survive Michael Meyers' vengeful rampage.

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