

**Movie:** Jaws (1975)

### **Synopsis**

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, Peter Benchley's "remake of Moby-Dick" was adapted to the screen. Inspired by the 1916 shark attacks down the Jersey shore, *Jaws* is the tale of a rogue shark that terrorizes the small island community of Amity. *Jaws* caused many viewers to be afraid to enter the ocean in the lost summer of '75, and established the notion of the great white as nature's number one killing machine.

### **How it relates to the field of psychiatry**

First described by Walter Bradford Cannon, the hypothalamus influences various emotional responses including the fight-or-flight response. Building on Cannon's work, Jeffrey Alan Gray (1987) described a sequence of four defensive responses that occur depending on the organism's proximity of danger; a) alert or vigilant immobility, b) escape, c) fighting and c) tonic immobility. While first three have been extensively studied in humans, tonic immobility has been primarily investigated in animal models.

Once thought to be nature's apex predator, the numbers of great white sharks have diminished in recent years. There have been increasing reports of pods of killer whales hunting great whites utilizing tonic immobility by turning the shark on its dorsum. The shark then enters a natural state of paralysis and may remain in this state for up to 15 minutes. Tonic immobility is a limbic system function that therefore serves as an animal model for dissociative-like symptoms experienced in the anxiety, trauma- and stressor-related disorders including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Much like a zombie apocalypse serving as a backdrop to the Romerian group dynamic, the rogue great white shark attacks are the setting for the film's main characters to interact. Brody has a past psychiatric history significant for specific phobia, natural environment type (irrational fear of the water), and acts to mediate the conflict between Hooper and Quint, both of whom have histories of prior trauma. Hooper has an experience with a thresher shark that "ate his boat" when he was a young boy. Quint also shared his encounter with a thresher's tail when he shows Hooper a scar on his right leg. Right after, Brody points out a tattoo on Quint's left arm of the USS Indianapolis, marking Quint as a survivor of the greatest single loss of life at sea in US Naval history. Quint relates the story of the ship that was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. Of the 900-11,000 men who entered the water, only 317 survived; largely the result of the largest shark frenzy in recorded history (probably the oceanic white tip).

Despite having past traumatic experiences, both Hooper and Quint chose careers at sea. This likely represents their employing denial, and developing a counterphobic attitude (Otto Fenichel) that results in them running towards (instead of avoidance/away from) their fear. The final line of the movie, "*I used to hate the water...I can't imagine why,*" illustrates the effect of flooding in extinguishing the learned (avoidant) behavior. Of course – and ironically – Brody's "therapy" takes place while the Orca is flooded after being rammed by the great fish; a reincarnation of the rogue sperm whale that sank the Essex in 1820 (inspiration for Moby-Dick).

**Key Words:** Peter Benchley, Moby-Dick, Jersey shore, Jaws, Walter Bradford Cannon, hypothalamus, fight-or-flight, Jeffrey Alan Gray, tonic immobility, limbic system, anxiety disorders, trauma- and

stressor-related disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, specific phobia, USS Indianapolis, oceanic white tip, counterphobic attitude, Otto Fenichel, flooding, Essex

**Psycho-nicity:** ‘Synchronicity’ is a Jungian term depicting the acausal connection of two or more psycho-physic phenomena. For our purposes, it serves as the root for a neologism (newly coined word), psycho-nicity; suggestions that make a movie a transcendental experience. One should take every opportunity to watch *Jaws* as part of a ‘movies on the beach’ event.

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