

Movie: Jennifer's Body (2009)

Synopsis

Jennifer's Body (2009) is a black comedy that takes place in Devil's Kettle, a Wisconsin town named after an anomaly of nature. The movie chronicles the exploits of Jennifer Check, her BFF Anita "Needy" Lesnicki, and their infatuation with a cryptic indie rock band (Low Shoulder).

The film's setting; a town named after a waterfall with a whirlpool is homage to Homer's *Scylla and Charybdis*. Being "between Scylla and Charybdis" is an idiom derived from Greek mythology, meaning having to choose between two evils. The town's name then is symbolic of the teenage angst that defines the relationship between its two principle residents.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

At Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, the first module – titled *Necromancy* – of our year-long resident Psychopathology course incorporates ghosts (wraiths) and demons. While the former references disorders that are episodic in nature, tales of demonic possession serve to reinforce teaching points of chronic and persistent illnesses such as the Dissociative Disorders.

Jennifer's Body may be viewed as a case study of Dissociative Identity Disorder, the hallmark characteristic of which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession (DSM-5). The film introduces the notion of *demonic transference*, an untoward consequence of a virgin sacrifice gone wrong. Since Jennifer lost her virginity in junior high, a demon will possess her soul. Jennifer's body will therefore forever feed on flesh. She describes herself as a different person - disruption of identity - when she doesn't feed.

The Dissociative-Eating Disorder Continuum

The movie's ending parallels that of *Carrie*, and therefore may be viewed in the context of the Eating and Feeding Disorders (see our Week 1 blog). During the climax at the dance (similar to Carrie's prom), it is disclosed that Jennifer abuses laxatives. Her misuse of cathartics defines purging behavior that may be seen in Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa.

The Eating Disorder-Borderline Personality Disorder Continuum

One sign of an eating disorder is a disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced. This quality is shared with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Interestingly, Jennifer demonstrates many characteristics that define BPD: unstable self-image; dissociative states under stress ("I feel so empty" said to Chip in the pool scene); lack of empathy (laughing at the death of Melody Lane patrons); intense, unstable intimate relationships; and self-injurious behavior (burning tongue, cutting).

The Dissociative-Eating-Borderline Personality Disorder Continuum

Some clinicians conceptualize the DID-Eating Disorder-BPD continuum as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). After Jennifer and Needy narrowly escape a horrific fire, Jennifer leaves with the band and is sacrificed at a satanic ritual. Since the fire, Needy demonstrates evidence of PTSD with perceptual disturbances, the first of which is seeing a carnal Jennifer previously thought to be dead. She also describes herself as numb, consistent with feelings of detachment and an inability to experience positive emotions that define PTSD.

The film therefore allows for discussion of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in both of its main characters. After Jennifer and Needy narrowly escape a horrific fire, Jennifer leaves with the band and is sacrificed at a satanic ritual. Despite her name representing Dependent Personality Disorder, Needy begins to demonstrate evidence of PTSD as evidenced by perceptual disturbances (the first of which is seeing a carnal Jennifer previously thought to be dead). She also describes herself as numb, consistent with feelings of detachment and an inability to experience positive emotions.

Finally, Needy likens Nikolai to the twisted petrified tree she saw as a kid. While *Jennifer's Body* takes place in Wisconsin, perhaps Needy grew up in Bernards Township, NJ where locals tell the urban legend of The Devil's Tree. There are many stories (<http://weirdnj.com/stories/devils-tree/>) about the origin of the petrified oak including human sacrifices and a portal to hell.

Key Words: Jennifer's Body, Devil's Kettle, Low Shoulder, Scylla and Charybdis, Necromancy, Dissociative Disorders, Dissociative Identity Disorder, virgin sacrifice, demonic transference, Carrie, Eating and Feeding Disorders, Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Borderline Personality Disorder, Dependent Personality Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, Bernards Township, The Devil's Tree.

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