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*Jennifer’s Body* and the Evolution of the Vampire

*Jennifer’s Body* (2009) is a film about vampires. It is unique in that it is an incredibly modern take on a myth that got its start in the colonialist era nearly 200 years ago. By analyzing *Jennifer’s Body*, one can observe some of the changes that the vampire myth has undergone over its extensive lifespan. In particular, the colonialist themes of primitivism, male gaze, and the gender double bind, while present in one way or another, are included in a way that subverts expectations presented by traditional uses of the themes. Needy is built up to be a character that reflects both the angel stereotype from the gender double bind and the “invisible” gay character type, while Jennifer is made to reflect the demon stereotype and the “monster” gay character type.The film continues to subvert expectations by having women be the characters that drive the plot forward, with men watching from the sidelines, ineffectual in most aspects of the film. This is evidenced through numerous examples of men not only being emasculated, but also through the objectification of Chip through use of a masquerading gaze. All of these aspects culminate in a film that is undoubtedly a vampire movie, but a vampire movie that challenges the status quo, changes the prototypical vampire, and empowers women, all at the same time.

Colonialism is the view that a dominant culture has on a group they deem as "Others", defined as anyone that is deemed different from what is accepted by the norms of the dominant culture. Usually, colonialism takes the form of the dominant culture "looking down" on the Others in order to maintain superiority, power, and control. In film this is achieved by giving Other characters certain traits that allow audiences to perceive that they are different from the status quo, while also implicating that this difference is something that makes them inherently worse. In the vampire films discussed in class, colonialism is typically used on the vampire character, although the use of colonialist themes also targets a lot of female characters, like Mina from *Dracula* (Browning, 1931), and the photographer from *Blacula* (Crain, 1972) both being victims of male gaze. In class, three colonialist themes were discussed, those being the aforementioned male gaze, as well as the gender double bind and primitivism.

Male gaze refers to the inherent power people (typically men) have by simply observing others. The argument comes from the idea that those who observe have the power to stop observing whenever they want, while those who are observed have no such privilege. In addition, those who are observed often feel pressure from those observing to conform to their expectations or flatter them in some way. This stems from the implications of comparison that the male gaze presents. The observer has the power to objectify and compare different subjects, and consequently place value on those who are perceived as appealing, while simultaneously devaluing those who are not as appealing. Amanda Friz and Marissa Fernholz highlight this phenomenon’s potency when intersected with other types of gazes in their article *The Male Gaze in the Medical Classroom: Proximity, Objectivity, and Objectification in “The Pornographic Anatomy Book”*. In particular, they looked at a medical textbook using pinup photos as opposed to scientific diagrams, and made the argument that because all the models used were white women appealing to straight white beauty standards, anything that deviated from this, such as those of a different skin tone or body shape, were implicitly seen as less desirable, at least in the eyes of the straight, white, male authors of the “Pornographic Anatomy Book” (Friz, 302-303). As previously mentioned, the photographer from *Blacula* (Crain, 1972) was portrayed through a lens of male gaze for most of the movie. She is first seen at the club, wearing a very revealing outfit as she takes photographs of Mamuwalde’s party. After flirting with Skillet, she leaves to develop photos, where she is murdered by Mamuwalde in a manner that can be seen as an attempt to sexualize her for a male audience (Crain, 40:50-45:15).

Primitivism is when someone is made to seem inferior to the group in power (usually straight white people). This can be done by associating them with animals, portraying them as being more body over mind, hypersexual, “Other”, or anything else that would make them seem less evolved or less civilized than the dominant group. Count Dracula is primitivized in *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) through his association with animals throughout the movie. Specifically, the opossum, wasps, mice, spiders (or spiderwebs at the very least), and rats that are shown to swarm Dracula’s castle as he emerges from his coffin at the start of the movie (Browning, 5:24-6:30) highlight Dracula’s association with animals, and therefore his primitivism, quite well.

Male Gaze is evident in *Jennifer’s Body*, a more contemporary vampire film compared to both Blacula and Dracula. A lot of the more provocative scenes in the movie utilize shot composition in a way to further sexualize and objectify their characters. Noteworthy examples include the close-up and pan down along, well, Jennifer’s body, while she unzips her top in the woods in an attempt to seduce, and then kill Jonas (Kusama, 33:14). This objectifies Jennifer by fragmenting her and focusing on her torso, shifting the focus from Jennifer as a character to Jennifer as a body meant for Jonas’s (and the male audience’s) enjoyment. A more unusual example is presented when Colin tries to hook up with Jennifer. Interestingly enough, Colin is the character framed by the suggestive shots here. As Colin searches through an abandoned, run down house in hopes of finding Jennifer, a cheesy love song plays softly in the background, juxtaposing the uneasiness the building provides against the potential of a romantic encounter with Jennifer. As Colin shifts through the house, wooden beams and plastic sheets fragment him, while only the moonlight silhouettes him against the shadows of the house. Finally, he comes across a candlelit room with quite a panicked look on his face, and after a short exchange of pleasantries, Jennifer kills him (Kusama, 50:28-50:52). Typically, fragmentation and silhouetting is used to dehumanize the subject, making them seem like less than the sum of their parts and incapable of doing anything for themselves. In a subversion of expectations, this film applies these techniques to a male character, as opposed to a woman. However, one could argue that the function of these techniques played out slightly differently in this scene. The fragmentation of Colin can still be seen as a reduction of him, but in a way that makes him appear small and insignificant, as opposed to a sexual object. In addition, Colin being silhouetted can also be seen as a way to disempower him, while the shadows that surround him can be taken to represent all his fears and anxieties as he searches for Jennifer, or they could represent the almost suffocating presence Jennifer has, seeming to present a threat in all areas of the house, not just the candlelit room where she kills him. However, in both the typical case of male gaze being applied to women and the unique case of male gaze being applied to an emo high-schooler, the overall effect of the gaze is one that reduces the character on screen to something less than a full person. While women are reduced to their bodies to appeal to men’s sexual desires, Colin’s inefficacy simultaneously Others him (and the emo community at large), while also making the imagined straight white male audience feel good about their masculinity by having them think “I could do better, I’m stronger than he is!”.

The gender double bind is another colonialist theme, whereby women are effectively seen on the binary of angel versus demon. The angel stereotype is categorized by an overarching sense of helplessness, weakness, asexuality, loyalty, and a general association with the color white and cleanliness. On the other hand, the demon stereotype is categorized by strength, hypersexuality, and an association with the color black and dirtiness, as well as mutants and monsters. An easy example of how Needy demonstrates the angel stereotype is how after almost running over Jennifer in the middle of the night and being frightened as Jennifer, covered in blood jumps on the car and smashes the windshield, Needy speeds back home and cries out “Mommy? Mommy!”, instead of doing anything to actually stop Jennifer or figure out what was going on (Kusama, 56:18-57:04). This highlights Needy’s helplessness and weakness as relevant to the angel stereotype. To her credit, later in the movie, Needy actually takes initiative, reading into her school library’s occult section (because all school libraries in 2009 have an occult section), and is actually the one to kill jennifer, but these actions, especially the murder, are framed at a time in the movie to suggest that Needy is going through a transformation from angel to devil, which would explain her newfound initiative that is uncharacteristic of the angel type. In addition, throughout the film, Needy’s actions towards Chip are very similar to how a stereotypical angel would behave. In particular, Needy stayed loyal to Chip until the very end of the film, going so far as to kill Jennifer in her own bedroom with a bowie knife to avenge him (Kusama, 1:31:52), and Needy even has a framed picture of Chip in her cell after she gets sent to prison for murdering Jennifer (Kusama, 2:40). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Jennifer is almost the prototypical example of a demon. Her hypersexuality is evident in numerous scenes throughout the film, ranging from short quips of wanting to try Ahmet’s “sea cucumber” at the bar (Kusama, 10:39), to grabbing Roman by the balls, also at the bar (Kusama, 11:05). In addition, there’s a nearly minute long scene of Jennifer making out with Needy in her bedroom after she nearly got run over (Kusama, 58:49-59:48). Jennifer’s demonic strength is also evident when she not only starts levitating, but also shortly after when she survives being impaled with a pool rod as she tries to kill Chip at a rundown pool during the spring formal in order to get her energy back (Kusama, 1:24:00 - 1:26:54). The juxtaposition of Needy as an angel and Jennifer as a demon highlights how strange it is that the two are (or at least were) “best friends forever” with necklaces to match. Similarly, the stark contrast between the two serves to underscore the changes that Needy goes through throughout the film. During the pep rally at the start of the film, it is almost impossible for one to imagine the pure and angelic Needy going on to kill Jennifer, but by comparing her to her “BFF” who normalizes murder throughout the film, the extensive lengths to which Needy has changed is given scope and context.

Of the four gay character types looked at in class (the sissy, butch, invisible, and monster), *Jennifer’s Body* has excellent examples of both the invisible and monster type. As a quick recap, the invisible character type is used to describe a character coded to be gay, but they have a repression or denial of their same sex attraction. This may include a sort of internalized homophobia leading to self-hatred and guilt as they grapple with their self-identity, a very over-the-top, dramatic, almost life-or-death coming out experience, and these characters often experience a tragic ending. The monster, on the other hand, is used to describe gay characters who revel in killing other people. Typically, a monster’s victims are of the opposite sex, they gain a sort of sexual arousal and excitement from their killings, and they have a stubbornness about getting things their way, as they have a strong desire for control.

Needy is a great example of the invisible character type. There are two important examples that show that Needy is attracted to Jennifer. The first is when they are both at Melody Lane, before it’s burned down and Jennifer is sacrificed to Satan. The indie rock band Low Shoulder is in the middle of an emotional performance of their soon-to-be famous single, “Through the Trees”. The lyrics “I will heal the ruins left inside you” are heard as the camera cuts to Jennifer with a childish wonder in her eyes, flanked by an unenthused Needy. Another cutaway shows Jennifer slowly going in to hold Needy’s hand. Needy cracks a smile as Jennifer refocuses on the band, and continues to stare at Jennifer in what can only be described as adoration and attraction. Jennifer lets go of Needy’s hand, and the feeling immediately fades. (Kusama, 15:44-16:14). This example is enough to imply Needy’s same-sex attraction to Jennifer, but the makeout scene described above when combined with this adoration is enough evidence to make a case that Needy is, at least to some extent, gay. An interesting note about the makeout scene is that although Jennifer was the one to initiate the encounter, Needy actually reinitiates after Jennifer backs out. Shortly after, Needy jumps off of and away from on top of Jennifer, shouting “What the fuck is happening”, while shaking in shock (Kusama, 59:19). This dramatic inner conflict that Needy has when confronted with her attraction to Jennifer is a key example of the coming-out experiences typical of the invisible type. Finally, Needy is also the recipient of a tragic ending, also in line with the invisible character type. The movie’s opening scene is of Needy from the ending scene. She is seen in a bright orange jumper getting thrown into solitary confinement for kicking an orderly (Kusama, 3:34). Being locked in solitary confinement is about as lonely and tragic as it gets. However, the end of the movie reveals that Needy has gained superhuman strength, and she levitates to the window at the top of her cell, kicks through the metal grating holding it in place, and walks through the chain link fence like it was nothing, so her ending is not completely tragic. As a quick side note, this prison has awful security, the last line of defense is a chain link fence that slopes in at the top. There’s no guards or anything. Anyone with even a shred of upper body strength could climb that and be free.

Again, Jennifer is almost the ideal representation of the monster character type. Her same-sex attraction for Needy is evidenced in her initiation of the makeout scene as described in the paragraph above. This scene is a key example of what Andrea Weiss describes as a “fetishization of women’s bodies” (76). She makes the argument that this phenomenon defuses the threat of lesbianism to straight male viewers. This is relevant because although *Jennifer’s Body* makes great strides in empowering women, it is still prone to the traps of the film industry it is a part of. Throughout the film, Jennifer is seen seducing and then killing several people, a key aspect of the monster. Jennifer’s first killing shown on screen is of the high school’s star football player Jonas. A long distance shot shows Jennifer approaching Jonas from the right, then a cut reveals her arriving on the left of him. Jennifer says that she is “crazy sorry about your [Jonas’s] profound loss”. Jonas, holding his tears, explains that Craig, one of the victims of the burning of Melody Lane, was “my best friend”. Jennifer, selfishly remarks “You know, I was there last night, and I was probably the last person to talk to him, like, ever… Craig said that he always thought you and me would make a totally banging couple”. Jennifer then puts Jonas’s hand on her chest, and asks him to follow her into the woods, where she manages to rip off his jersey, unzip his pants, take off her own top, throw him against a tree, and then kill and eat him, while all of the creatures of the forest watch (Kusama, 31:02-33:58). This checks all the boxes of how a monster character type would kill someone. There was a sexual energy present, the victim was male, and Jennifer was in control the entire time. Another quick idea that paints Jennifer as a monster is found in her response for why she kills. After Jennifer and Needy make out, Jennifer explains to Needy that she was sacrificed by Low Shoulder, and now she has supernatural powers. She says that “When I’m full (i.e. just killed someone), like I am right now, I’m like, unkillable”, stabs herself with a pencil and drags it across her forearm, then instantly heals (Kusama, 1:07:35). Contrasting this scene with a scene of Jennifer when she is not “full”, shows that while Jennifer may not always kill for sexual pleasure, like with Ahmet, she is still killing for her own self interest and addiction to murder. A great example of a scene where Jennifer is not “full” is when she is in her room, getting ready for the spring formal, her hair falls out as she brushes it, her face is lifeless and unenergetic, and she smears concealer over her face in a desperate, dejected bid to appear like the normal, attractive Jennifer she pictures herself as being (Kusama, 1:15:55).

*Jennifer’s Body* is a film whose events are largely driven by female characters. The one notable exception is Low Shoulder’s sacrificing of Jennifer. Other than that, the absence of impactful male characters in the film, combined with female characters that have the most agency out of any film covered in class, is a subversion of traditional film expectations. This works not only to show that there is no need for male-dominated films to be the norm, while simultaneously empowering women in the process. Male characters are emasculated continuously throughout the film. As Needy is in her room getting dressed to go to Melody Lane, her boyfriend, Chip, voices his concern for what she is wearing, going so far as saying he “can see, like, your womb, so-” (Kusama, 7:32). Needy completely ignores Chip’s concern, emasculating Chip in the process by showing that he does not have the power to control what she wears. Another example of women emasculating men comes just after Jennifer rejects Colin at school. As she and Needy walk through the school hallway, Jennifer trashes Colin’s music taste, nail polish, and says that her “dick is bigger than his,” directly calling out Colin’s manliness, or lack thereof (Kusama, 44:41). Finally, reanalyzing Chip reveals that he is the subject of a masquerading gaze from Needy. The masquerading gaze is when a woman tries to use a “male gaze” of their own on a man, but ultimately fails for one reason or another. In the sex scene between Needy and Chip, Needy asserts dominance and control by cutting off Chip’s small talk beforehand and making the first move on him (Kusama, 46:06). Later, Needy is seen in a dominant position on top of Chip right before he puts on his condom (Kusama, 50:08). Later still, Needy is shown to be in control when she tells Chip to “put it in” (Kusama, 52:17). These three examples show the first prerequisite of a masquerading gaze, a woman attempting to play the traditional part of a man. However, shortly after, Needy hallucinates and has a panic attack, seeing blood dripping from the ceiling, and the ghost of Jonas with Jennifer lurking over him. (Kusama, 53:46). Needy, in the middle of sex, runs out on Chip, completing the second prerequisite of a masquerading gaze, having both her gaze and sexual encounter ultimately fail.

The vampire myth has changed and evolved a lot since its conception in the colonial period. In general, the vampire has evolved to be more apologetic (and similarly sympathetic) over time. Dracula from 1931 was as irredeemable as they get. He was a rapist, he was a murderer, he virtually enslaved Renfield, and he was spreading his Otherness to the upstanding citizens of London. Blacula, while still a murderer, was much easier for audiences to identify and sympathize with. He was a victim of Blacula, and he seemed to genuinely care for Tina. Similarly, Jennifer can be seen as just an ordinary girl who is a victim of some larger evil (in this case indie music). She may not be the most likable character, but it is easier for audiences to sympathize with her and the experiences she goes through as an all-American teenager. Another interesting evolution of the vampire myth is that more modern examples of vampires are much more graphic in their violence and implications of sex. While Nosferatu only got as far as almost being shown sucking some guy’s thumb, and Mamuwalde was seen throwing boxes at people like Donkey Kong, Jennifer is seen vomiting up eerie, indescribable tar. Jonas’s body is shown being eaten by a deer, and Jennifer is shown slurping up the blood of a mangled Colin. Of the three colonialist themes discussed, the myth of the vampire largely retained both the gender double bind (as evidenced by the extensive section of Needy as an angel and Jennifer as a demon), and primitivism, as evidenced by Jennifer’s association with animals as she kills Jonas (Kusama, 32:45), as well as the very primitive pose she’s in as she slurps up colin’s blood after killing him in the abandoned house for their date (Kusama, 55:25).

*Jennifer’s Body* is a film loosely based on the novella *Carmilla* (1872). By comparing the two, more insight can be gleaned into how the vampire myth has evolved over time. Across both works, Carmilla and Jennifer represent both the demon and monster stereotype. They are both femme fatales in that they seduce in order to kill, and they are both associated with the phallus. Carmilla has her fangs, while Jen gets stabbed by a pool rod as she tries to kill Chip at the abandoned pool (Kusama, 1:26:35). Both Laura and Needy represent the angel and invisible character type. They are overly concerned with the monster’s safety and well-being, with Laura misinterpreting her mother’s warning of an assassin as posing a threat to Carmilla, rather than Carmilla being the threat herself. Similarly, Needy is concerned for Jennifer at multiple points in the movie, a quick example is when she abruptly stops having sex with Chip in her bedroom because she is worried about how Jennifer has been acting (Kusama, 53:53). As far as things have changed, while Carmilla was ultimately defeated by men driving a stake through her heart while she bleeds out in a tomb, Jennifer was stabbed with a bowie knife through the heart by a woman in her bedroom as revenge for killing her boyfriend (Kusama, 1:31:52). Another difference is that in *Carmilla* (1871), the underlying threat Carmilla posed to male characters and the imagined male audience was achieved through her characterization as a lesbianis. At this time, lesbianism was not seen nearly as appealing to the male fantasy, but was rather seen to threaten men’s masculinity by effectively stealing their women. Contrarily, Jennifer poses a threat to men and their masculinity not only by emasculating them, as discussed above, but also by directly killing them in a very graphic and violent manner.

Personally, I believe that these changes were made by the crew behind *Jennifer’s Body* in order to challenge the status quo of having men be at the forefront of everything, and also in order to empower women by telling a story about how powerful and complex they can be. In my mind, everyone's idea of the "vampire myth" can be seen as a reflection of a sort of weighted average of all vampire media ever created. Some will obviously be weighted more heavily (and thus have more sway on the overall myth) than others, like how *Dracula* (1931) is much more prevalent than, say, *El vampiro* (1957). While most vampire films will have some non-zero influence on the myth, the more socially relevant a movie is, the more impact it will have on a genre's norms. And this goes for any genre/myth, not just the vampire. Personally, I have no desire to reshape the vampire myth to reflect my own personal views. I do not have a talent for writing fiction and do not really feel any want to get better at it. If anything, I guess I would change the elements that vampires use to be horrifying to reflect more modern fears. Instead of my vampire being gay solely because "gay is bad" and "gay is scary", maybe I'd have them be some sort of online predator because of the anonymity the internet provides. This could lead into interesting plot lines where people end up getting paranoid and playing off of paranoia and vampires sounds much more interesting than just vampires.

*Jennifer’s Body* is a film about vampires. It incorporates elements of the vampire myth from its colonialist origin, namely, primitivism, male gaze, and the gender double bind. Needy is a good example of both the angel stereotype and the “invisible” gay character type. Jennifer is a great example of both the demon stereotype and the “monster” gay character type. Men are constantly emasculated throughout the film, and Chip experiences the masquerading gaze from both Needy and Jennifer. The vampire myth has evolved over time to be more apologetic, sympathetic, and graphic, and *Jennifer’s Body*, while leaving many elements from its source material, *Carmilla* (1871), the same, changes are made to appeal to the desires of both modern day audiences and production staff.

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