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Introduction:

The communication artifact that I am looking at is a 2007 horror movie called *Teeth*, which was written and directed by Mitchell Lichtenstein. The movie focuses on a young woman named Dawn O'Keefe who learns that she has teeth in her vagina and her struggles on how to cope with her newfound feature.

Teeth subverts a popular horror movie trope called the 'final girl' by making the final girl, Dawn, in his film go against expectations of what a final girl should be. She has sex, does drugs, and ends up becoming the antagonist of the film. He makes Dawn likeable and worthy of support by making her suffer, which helps her maintain innocence and purity, and makes the audience sympathetic to her plight. Likewise, he uses humor and has muted depictions of the violence that Dawn goes through to help soften the film's message.

This movie tiptoes between the fine line of horror and humor. Although the film depicts dark subject matter, such as rape and incest, the tone and mood of the film is very light-hearted. Many of the violent scenes can be considered hilarious, and do not evoke a sense of fear or dread in the viewer. The scenes that depict Dawn severing men's body parts use a lot of erratic camera work that focuses mainly on the character's reactions to what happened. There is not much emphasis on the gore of the scene, instead, we see Dawn and a male character screaming as the camera shifts back and forth between their horrified faces. This camerawork and stress on facial reactions add to the comedy of the film—it becomes slapstick at times. This humor can be used to strengthen the film's feminist message.

The movie can be seen as an analogy of how women are forced to repress their sexuality, whereas men are encouraged to be predators, and how women can overcome that repression.

Director and writer Roy Lichtenstein was inspired by the myth of Vagina Dentata while making this film. Many of those myths have themes of repressing a woman's sexuality but have opposing themes that state that men can act on their sexual desires. We see these themes present throughout the movie. In the beginning of *Teeth*, Dawn was practicing abstinence. Throughout the plot, various men sexually assault, rape, and coerce her into sex. Dawn's teeth represent how women can take control of that power dynamic and get revenge on men that are sexually violent.

Context:

The writer and director of the film is Mitchell Lichtenstein. He is also an actor and producer; he has had small roles in shows such as *Miami Vice* and *The Equalizer* and produced a small number of short films. He is also the son of iconic pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. It is quite clear that he comes from a strong creative background. Additionally, he started acting in the 1980's so he knows what it is like to be on set and can work well with his actors because he has been in their shoes before.

We must note that Lichtenstein identifies as a male and *Teeth* has very strong feminist messages. Some of his credibility can be lost because he is not a woman—he has never been through what his main character has been through. But he did make *Teeth* because he was fascinated about the myth of the vagina dentata. He did his research on it and stated that he thinks the myth speaks to fears that men in societies all over the world have about women and the secret strength that they can possess.

Many myths about vagina dentata focus on how the woman who possesses it is too powerful or cannot attract a man. These stories talk about how the woman needs to be conquered by a man who is not scared to take her on. Others mention how the woman in possession of the teeth needs to get them pulled to become a suitable bride. When 19th and 20th century scholars

described these myths, many of which come from non-Western cultures, they applied Freud's concept of castration anxiety to it. This hints at the fear that many men have of losing their manhood, as historically, manhood has been tied to genitals. In other cultures, such as the Māori in New Zealand, vagina dentata takes on a more ironic tone. The demi-god Maui dies after entering a goddess through her vagina, which has teeth. The myths can be very sexual in nature, but do not emphasize the act of sex itself, instead focusing on the how the extra set of teeth need to be removed.

Throughout the film, Lichtenstein is careful to not oversexualize Dawn despite the sexual content that is present. There is subversion of the male gaze, and Dawn becomes humanized because she is not presented as a sexual object. She is rarely seen 'showing off' or as a seductive character, even though many characters in the film want to have sex with her.

Teeth was released in 2007, which is two years before another notable feminist horror movie was released: *Jennifer's Body*. The film focuses on Jennifer and her friend Needy. Jennifer gets killed in a virgin sacrifice by a local band that wants to become famous. Jennifer is not a virgin, so she resurrects and has a ravenous urge to eat men, and it is up to Needy to stop her. At the time, the film was panned, but is retrospectively being seen as a feminist horror film.

In the mid 2000's to the early 2010's, body horror was very popular. Franchises like *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Human Centipede* became pop culture phenoms because of the gore that was shown in these movies. They were so controversial that the term "torture porn" became a derogatory way to refer these films. Many people saw these franchises as depictions of senseless violence, and it is possible that *Teeth* was lumped in with them by audience, despite the positive reception it garnered from critics. It makes sense to see why one would think that; a film about a young woman who uses the teeth in her vagina to cut off men's penises seems quite outlandish and violent.

Literature Review:

The final girl trope was coined by Carol J. Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. She describes the ‘final girl’ as being the last living young woman in a horror film that must come face-to-face with the killer. Especially in older, classic slasher films such as *Halloween* (which is where this trope originated from), *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the final girl was a young woman who did not drink, smoke, use illicit drugs, and was a virgin.

The ‘final girl’ has been argued to be feminist because it is a woman taking down the killer, however, there are detractors that argue otherwise. It is very easy for male audiences to see themselves represented in characters that present as final girls because they are not hyper-feminine. Many early final girls in the 1970’s tended to have gender neutral names and did not show many ‘feminine’ traits. They were considered to be people who took control of the situation, could anticipate the killers next steps, and were intelligent. Later, we see a shift to having both the killers and the final girls being identifiable to male audiences.

Towards the 80’s and 90’s, final girls became a bit more feminine, even though they still maintained virginal purity. However, to make up for this, there became more of a focus on the male killers such as Freddy Kreuger and Jason Voorhees. This allowed for predominantly male audiences to still root for the final girl, as she still possessed more ‘masculine’ traits but also root for the killer because the killer is ultimately a male. This plays into the idea of the male gaze—by feminizing the final girl, it is easier to sexualize her even if her character is not sexual.

The male gaze is defined by Oxford Reference as: “the point of view of a male spectator reproduced in both the cinematography and narrative conventions of cinema, in which men are both the subject of the gaze and the ones who shape the action and women are the objects of the

gaze and the ones who are shaped by the action”. In other words, in conventional cinema, many films take on the point of view of a man and that point of view reduces women to objects and sexualizes them. Even though women in horror films are meant to be relatable to men, they ultimately still play into the male gaze by reducing the women to objects, which is what the slasher subgenre is dependent on.

The slasher subgenre conjures up much phallic imagery. These films revolve around male killers trying to penetrate women with knives. In the 90’s and in the present, we see a shift in how final girls are treated and how the slasher subgenre does not revolve around slashing. Many films, including *Teeth*, start to focus on other ways to kill off characters and terrorize final girls. We also start to see a tad bit more diversity, with newer tropes such as ‘Black or other characters of color dying first’ becoming popular.

It would be amiss for me to not mention the concept of ‘White gaze’, the intersection of race and gender, and how that relates to purity while talking about the final girl trope. The majority of final girls tend to be White. The White gaze is like the male gaze, except the theory talks about how movies tend to come from a white point of view and that point of view dehumanizes characters of color. Historically, in America, White women have been seen as purer and more innocent than women of other races and thus more worthy of needing protection. This type of rhetoric was the excuse for many racist acts to happen in the United States, such as the lynching of Black men. Even newer films, such as *Get Out*, are starting to subvert this White gaze as well as the male gaze.

Analysis:

In *Teeth*, Dawn deals with a stressful home life. Her mother is terminally ill, and she is constantly having to reject sexual advances from her stepbrother. Likewise, she must deal with bullying at school, as her peers target her because she is seen as a prude. She consequently is sexually assaulted, raped and drugged by various men and classmates who are obsessed with being the ones to 'turn her out'. If Dawn did not undergo all that pain and suffering, she would not be seen as a hero and audiences would be against her. She would be seen as bitter and vengeful; her using and learning about her vaginal teeth would not be justified.

As we can see, Dawn goes through extreme, traumatic experiences. The violence she endures helps her stay a "pure" protagonist as she becomes more of an antagonist of the film. Additionally, these acts of sexual violence help victimize Dawn and thus justify her acts of violence against men. This helps the movie start to redefine a final girl as a girl who stays virtuous due to suffering. Lastly, the film casts violence as humorous, focusing mostly on the reactions and emotions of both Dawn and the men she interacts with. This humor helps the audience digest the rough content of the film which in turn helps strengthen the film's feminist message.

To help illustrate my thesis better, I will look at these ideas of purity, revenge, and humor in *Teeth* and compare it to other horror/thriller films that focus on rape and revenge. How effective are their messages to audiences? The two movies that will be compared to *Teeth* are *I Spit on your Grave* and *Promising Young Woman*. Both films differ from *Teeth* in the tone of the films, as well as how they comment on revenge, or, if they have any commentary at all. First, I will give a quick synopsis of each film, then I will dive into my *Teeth* analysis. After this, I will compare the violence in *Teeth* and *I Spit on Your Grave*. Then, we will look at the humor in *Teeth* and *Promising Young Woman*.

Synopses

Teeth follows Dawn O'Keefe, a high school student who is active in an abstinence program, and does not do drugs, drink, or party. She meets another young man, Toby, in her abstinence program, and they take a liking to each other. One day, while swimming at a local lake, Toby takes Dawn to a secluded cave and rapes her. However, Dawn's vaginal teeth engage and cuts Toby's penis off and he dies. After this, Dawn decides to go to a gynecologist to get checked out. The gynecologist sticks his fingers in her vagina during her exam; she gets nervous and her 'teeth' bite off his fingers. She is even more distressed about her second set of teeth, and around this time she starts reaching out to a male classmate for support. He invites her over, where he gets her drunk, drugs her, and has sex with her. She soon learns that he did all that as part of a bet with his friends, as they wanted to see who could take her virginity. When she learns of this, she purposefully bites his penis off. The film culminates with Dawn seducing and cutting off the penis of her stepbrother, who has been trying to have sex with her throughout the film. She cuts his penis off and leaves him to bleed off and die. Finally, she goes hitchhiking and gets picked up by a creepy older man who expects sexual favors because he drove her. Dawn then realizes she could kill the man by using her 'teeth'.

I Spit on Your Grave focuses on a writer named Jennifer. She goes to the countryside to work on her novel, and soon upon her arrival, she meets four men who immediately take interest in her sexually. The four men rape Jennifer and leave her to die. However, she did not die, and she devises a plan to get revenge on the men by killing them. She succeeds, as by the end of the movie all four of the men die in numerous, graphic ways, such as by castration or being disemboweled by a boat propeller.

Promising Young Woman follows a woman named Cassie who is a med school dropout and still lives at her parents' house. She faces scrutiny from her parents because they feel that she

was wasted her life, however, they do not know that Cassie is still dealing with the suicide of her friend, Nina, who took her life after she was gang raped while they were in med school. Cassie comes up with a long plot of how to ruin the lives of all that wronged Nina, such as the school dean that did not expel Nina's rapist, or the lawyer that defended the rapist. Towards the climax of the film, it seems as if Cassie has a change of heart, as she starts to get closure. However, she gets the "ultimate" revenge by appearing at Nina's rapist's bachelor party. He kills her, and he, his wife, and his whole bachelor party get implicated for the murder of Cassie and for Nina's suicide.

Teeth Analysis

At the start of the film, Dawn was a virgin and never did drugs or drank. However, by the end of it, she has done all of that and more. This goes against what a final girl normally does. When looking at older slasher/horror films, the final girl does not engage in morally questionable activities. Them being pure helps audiences root for them— because those girls are not doing anything wrong, they deserve to live and outsmart the killer at the end. Because Dawn loses that label of purity, she must gain it back by suffering throughout the film.

This idea of gaining or keeping purity through suffering is something that directors and writers can utilize to help various audience maintain sympathy for characters they would not be supportive of. In an essay on the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, Tanine Allison discusses the differences between older war films and modern war films, saying: "In more contemporary films, on the other hand, virtue is linked to what the soldiers endure—physical and psychological pain, the gruesome deaths of friends, unexpected ambushes, a brutal and practically unseen enemy—not what they accomplish" (p. 58). She goes onto discuss how after the Vietnam War people's perception of the American military changed. People started to doubt the myth that we

hold about soldiers fighting for Americans' freedom. In the film, the soldiers were punished to atone for the war, but the suffering went so far that they became victims and eventually heroes for toughing it out. This can apply to *Teeth* as well; Dawn's innocence ultimately lies in her suffering. She garners sympathy from the audience in this way.

Now, the assumed audience for this movie can be thought of as men, as Mitchell Lichtenstein, the director and writer of *Teeth*, spends a lot of time trying to get rid of the male gaze. Because Dawn is not sexualized by a male audience (even though she is sexualized by male characters in the film), this concept of obtaining purity through suffering is especially important because it is crucial for men to relate to her. Men must have a reason to support her in her quest for revenge; there must be a reason for Dawn to be seen as a bit more 'masculine'.

Common values that are placed on American women (especially White women) involve them being quiet, docile, and submissive towards men, but Lichtenstein rejects these values in *Teeth* by making Dawn become a more vengeful character. When an act of violence is committed against a woman by a man, she is encouraged to "be the bigger person" and keep quiet about the incident. If Lichtenstein only showed one instance of sexual violence, audiences would think that Dawn is supposed to be quiet. But, by showing her being raped by 2 of her classmates, one of which involved a young man drugging her and encouraging her to drink alcohol, as well as showing the sexual harassment that she faces from her stepbrother and other males in her school, she is allowed to shed those values of stereotypical women and can still maintain her purity. Dawn can take on those more 'masculine' traits that are also common for final girls, such as being proactive against a killer or an aggressor. She is justified in her killings, accidental or not.

What makes this film notable, however, is its emphasis on humor and that it is used as a tool to help the audience process the suffering that is depicted onscreen. When a man's penis or

in one case, fingers, are cut off, we only get to see it for a split second, usually for humorous effect. The movie has a tongue-in-cheek tone to it and everyone— the audience and the characters in the film— is in on the joke. It is impossible for a woman to have a whole set of teeth in her vagina that can bite off penises and fingers and everyone in the film knows this too. When she bites her gynecologist's fingers off, she runs out while he yells in shock that vagina dentata is real. The idea of vagina dentata is so outrageous that none of these incidences of Dawn using her teeth are taken very seriously. Because these instances are not taken seriously in the movie, the audience does not need to take it seriously either. But, due to these events taking place back-to-back, especially in the third act of the film, it is not easy to forget all the violent events that happen to Dawn. This can make the audience question how one can experience so much trauma and somehow make out of it seemingly fine. Humor becomes a way for a male audience to sympathize with Dawn, as in real life rape and sexual assault is no laughing matter,

This movie also shows the emotional toll of the violence that is happening and conveys humor through that as well. This is effective because it forces viewers to focus on the characters instead of the shock value of violence, thus humanizing the characters. There are no overly gruesome scenes, unlike *Saving Private Ryan*. *Teeth* only has a small portion of the movie that is dedicated to showing blood. Most of the humor is conveyed through the reactions of the characters. In one scene, after Dawn cuts off a boy's penis, the boy calls out for his mom, saying "Mommy?" Or, in a different scene, we see Dawn's stepbrother, Brad, get his castrated penis eaten by his dog and his sorrowful, helpless reaction to it. This can make a male audience sympathetic to male characters because it is quite horrifying to lose your penis, however, the audience is still identifying with Dawn because those male characters 'had it coming'.

Violence in *Teeth* & *I Spit on Your Grave*

The most standout part of *I Spit on Your Grave*, and what renders this film ineffective is the graphic depiction of rape. Jennifer's rape scene lasts for almost 30 minutes—the movie is around 70 minutes long. That is a large portion of the film dedicated to watching a woman being violated. Compare this to *Teeth*, where the longest rape scene clocks in at around 10 minutes. This was the first rape scene of the movie, which is when Dawn's classmate from the abstinence club rapes her in the cave. Even then, that scene and the other scenes in *Teeth* do not contain any of the content that *I Spit on Your Grave* does. In *I Spit on Your Grave*, we see Jennifer being slapped and beaten, having her clothes torn off, and we see many instances of full-frontal nudity from both the male characters and Jennifer. We even see Jennifer bleeding from her vagina as she cries out for her rapists to stop. This scene is very difficult to watch and can turn viewers off from the rest of the film.

It can be argued, though, that that graphic depiction of rape can serve the purpose of making Jennifer pure. Instead of breaking up rape scenes throughout the film and showing examples of a tough personal life, like *Teeth* does with Dawn, the audience sees a drawn-out instance of sexual violence. This makes audiences, especially male audiences, empathetic to Jennifer's character. She is justified in killing those because they terrorized her. The audience does not expect her to be forgiving or to move on from her rape. Viewers are rooting for Jennifer and are supposed to be happy when she finally kills all four of the men. This is like Dawn; the audience is happy when she uses her teeth to kill because she is going through turmoil in her life.

I Spit on Your Grave does not have much humor or a non-serious tone, unlike *Teeth*, which can make violent scenes difficult to digest. Even though the audience is meant to be supportive of Dawn killing men, a small part of that support can be due to the unrealistic and humorous nature of how she kills them. *I Spit on Your Grave* is very much a product of its time

(the 1970's) and it at its core, an exploitation film; viewers are expecting to see violence and action. Additionally, humor can humanize characters. Audiences can feel more connected to Dawn because we have insight into her mind and her thinking process. Jennifer's character may be a bit detached from characters because we do not see any of her personality, she is simply a woman who gets revenge on her rapists. This can make *Teeth* more effective because Dawn is likeable because of her personality, Jennifer is only likeable because she kills her rapists.

Likewise, there is not much higher-level commentary on the concept of revenge, but the film does have inklings of a feminist undertone. This ultimately shows Meir Zarchi's, the writer and director of *I Spit on Your Grave*, intent of creating a feminist final girl. One of the male characters tells Jennifer that she deserved to be raped because of the revealing clothing that she was wearing, and that if she was more modest, the men would not have been sexually attracted to her and would not have raped her. Jennifer agrees with him in a bid for him to trust her, and she castrates him at her house. This does show a thread of movies that contain rape and revenge plots having feminist commentary. Jennifer killing the man who told her that shows insight into the mind of Zarchi — women who have been sexually assaulted should not be victim blamed because of their outfits. *Teeth* does not have any outright commentary on feminism like that in the film, it is more subtextual. For example, focusing on a pure, virginal girl who becomes not-so pure is feminist, especially when compared to older horror films.

Humor in *Teeth* and *Promising Young Woman*

A more modern film that focuses on rape and revenge is *Promising Young Woman*. What makes this film differ from *Teeth* is that it offers more comments on mental health, grief, and how that can cloud one's judgement, but it also employs humor and irony to make its protagonist relatable and likeable to viewers.

What is already noteworthy is that Cassie herself did not get raped. She is avenging her friend's suicide. This is important because in *Teeth* and in *I Spit on Your Grave*, both protagonists were the ones who were victimized. It is fascinating to see a movie from the perspective of someone who knew the rape victim. This raises an important question: was Cassie justified in ruining the lives of all those people?

Cassie did not go through that same process of purification and justification that Dawn went through. Audiences saw Dawn go through numerous disturbing instances of sexual violence and were able to observe troubling aspects of her personal life, such as being bullied at school. Therefore, she was within her right to kill and injure men. She was made pure by being a victim, and by being a victim, she could get retribution. The rape scene in *I Spit on Your Grave* can also be called for comparison- Jennifer was purified and justified. Cassie did not face any of that. Perhaps Nina, the friend who was raped, would be able to get revenge because she was the actual victim.

If Cassie did not have a dry, ironic, self-deprecating tone throughout the film, it would be tough for audiences to relate to her because she did not have a process of purification. That is why humor is crucial for this film. Even though Cassie was not put through numerous hardships in *Promising Young Woman*, the audience still roots for her because of the humor in the film, as well as how relatable the emotions of grief are. Cassie is likeable, and it is quite heartwarming to see someone who cared for their friend so much. At the same time, it is heartbreaking to see someone who basically tore their life apart due to the depression that can come from grief. This makes this film very similar to *Teeth*. Dawn is a character that is hard to hate, and the humor in that film makes her relatable and more personable. *Promising Young Woman* is a bit more realistic, and especially in a world that is seeing people raise more awareness about mental health struggles and is post #MeToo, the themes in this film can ring true for many.

This also connects to how *Promising Young Woman* makes an argument on how it may be better to forgive and move on, rather than get revenge or avenge someone who was wronged. In the film, Cassie visits Nina's mother and Nina's mother tells Cassie that it is time to move on from her suicide, as the strong emotions that she is feeling are holding her back from living her life. *Teeth*, as well as *I Spit on Your Grave*, do not take a strong stance on how devoting a large portion on one's life to getting revenge can be harmful to one's mental health. At the end of *Teeth*, Dawn realizes that she can use her second set of teeth to get back at men; she can entice them into having sex with her and she can castrate them. She seems to be excited that she can get revenge on men for the rest of her life.

It would be amiss to not mention how Cassie still gets revenge at the end of the film, even if it cost her life. This makes *Promising Young Women* fall in line with *Teeth* and other films centered around women being raped and them getting revenge. Although there is commentary on how being hung up on revenge can ruin one's life, the revenge may be worth it.

In *Teeth*, Dawn can retain her label of purity by enduring acts of violence. In turn, this makes audiences support her as she kills male antagonists, albeit accidentally at times. The use of humor in the film also makes the film more palatable to audiences, as it distracts audiences from brutal depictions of violence and makes the men being injured or killed the butt of the joke. When put in comparison with *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Promising Young Women*, we can see how the ideas of revenge, purity, and humor may be utilized differently to achieve a common goal: to get the audience to rally behind a female protagonist.

Conclusion:

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