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REVIEWS**

***Into the Dark: "Pure."* Written and directed by Hannah Macpherson. Blumhouse Television, 2019.**

Currently in its second season, *Into the Dark* is a horror anthology series produced through a collaboration between Hulu and Blumhouse Television. From October 2018-September 2019, Hulu released a new film from the series each month, each one self-contained and centering on a different holiday. While all episodes of the *Into the Dark* series offer critical potential, the series finale, "Pure" (2019), is of particular interest to media and religion scholars. The film, directed by Hannah MacPherson, centers around a father-daughter purity retreat where the demon Lilith intervenes. "Pure" utilizes elements of myth and horror to critique American "purity culture," arguing for the dangers of patriarchal control and the liberating potential for feminist reclamations of mythological figures.

We follow the story of Shay (Jakhara Smith), a young woman attending her first purity retreat with her father, Kyle (Jim Klock), and half-sister, Jo (McKaley Miller), two people she had met only recently. While there, Shay becomes close with other retreat attendees Kellyann (Annalisa Cochrane) and the pastor's daughter, Lacey (Ciara Bravo). Both girls, along with Jo, have attended the retreat multiple times. On Shay's first night, the girls go out into the woods and perform a ritual to summon the demon Lilith. Unlike in past years, where Jo and Kellyann had performed the ritual by themselves, this time it is successful.

For the remainder of the film, Shay is plagued with images of Lilith and of the fathers at the retreat as demonic entities. Shay is fearful of these visions at first, but later comes to understand that Lilith is trying to protect her. The fathers begin to become more openly hostile and controlling towards their daughters. For example, Kellyann is shamed by her father for her weight and appearance, while Jo is kidnapped and mysteriously punished by the fathers for having sex. At the film's climax, Shay and the other girls stand up for themselves against their fathers. Lacey (the pastor's daughter) reveals that she's not as pure as her father thinks, having kissed a boy during the weekend. She suddenly steals a gun from her father and kills herself on stage, triggering Shay to beg Lilith to take over her body. While possessing Shay, Lilith takes control of the men and kills them all, burning down the retreat in the process. The film ends on a hopeful note as Shay, still possessed by Lilith, leads the remaining daughters through an open field.

The decision to center a purity retreat in the film works to strengthen the connection between purity culture and desire for patriarchal control. At the weekend long retreat, the girls are separated from their cell phones and isolated from the outside world. The father's ultimately have final control, and in this liminal space of the purity retreat the audience can more clearly witness the harmful effects of these father-daughter relationships. The experiences of Jo, Kellyann, and Lacey operate as examples of how patriarchal control is specifically damaging to young women's relationships, self-esteem, health, and potentially their very lives. Kellyann exercises excessively and suffers disordered eating due to her father's disparagement. Jo feels completely disconnected from her father, constantly in a struggle to seek love and approval while being angry and disappointed in him. Lacey operates as the greatest tragedy of the film, as living with her pastor father and participating in these retreats led her to tie her worth as a person to her sexual purity. When she kisses a boy, making her "impure," she sees herself as worthless, opting

to kill herself rather than live a life where she's "not good anymore" ("Pure," *Into the Dark* 2019).

In order to escape this control, the girls rewrite the myth of Lilith and call upon her to save them. Early on the girls witness a sermon where the leader of the retreat, Pastor Seth (Scott Porter) tells the story of Lilith, the Biblical Adam's first wife. Adam demands that Lilith submits to him, but she refuses and is caught having sex with an angel. For these misdeeds, God banishes Lilith to Hell, and makes Eve for Adam in her place. Jo, however, tells the girls that this is not true. Based on a book she read about Lilith, Adam lied about her promiscuity because he wanted control over her. Pastor's Seth version of the Lilith myth seems to refer to various Jewish texts from the Middle Ages (Gaines 2001), where Jo's version points to feminist reclamations of the archetype, particularly in practices of modern witchcraft (Valinete 2008). Through this feminist reclamation, Lilith become a symbol of independence, defiance, and female sexuality-- the ideal savior for the girls, standing for everything they are taught to deny and hate about themselves.

The fact that the girls summon Lilith through a ritual connects them to practices of witchcraft as well, calling to the archetypal symbol of the witch and the historic witch trials. Lilith's myth and calls to witchcraft could also operate as an attempt to connect the girls to similar stories of female struggle and oppression. The girls are able to see themselves as the descendants of Lilith, only the most recent in a long, connected history of women. Again the film points to the potential of feminist re-writing of myth and reclamation of characters to create a sense of community and connection to the past.

While I would largely consider the film a feminist critique, there are a few important places where it falls short. For example, Shay's selection as the "chosen one" has some problematic implications, especially in how it is presented. Once Shay announces to the group of men at the purity ball that she is not a virgin, Jo tells her that this must be the reason why the ritual worked. In the film's location within the horror genre, this explanation is a clear subversion of the virginal "Final Girl" archetype as most famously discussed by Carol Clover (1992). The "Final Girl's" innocence and purity is often positioned as the reason why she is able to survive and fight back against the monster (in addition to her otherwise masculine characteristics). While I do find it important that Shay's characterization rejects this trope, painting her power as stemming only from her sexual experience has similar implications. If what makes Shay different from the other girls is that she's had sex, this still supports the idea of sex as inherently transformative for women and as having an effect on their value as people. Making Shay the "non-virginal final girl" merely reverses where the value is placed.

With that being said, the film displays some ambiguity surrounding Shay's selection as the chosen one. While Jo's explanation of Shay as not being a virgin is the only explicit answer given, other parts of the film suggest different potential explanations. Shay receives visions of Lilith before she even becomes aware of her as an entity. It is also implied that Shay may have a connection to witchcraft, as she seems most excited to perform the ritual and finds the final piece for the offering. Throughout the story, shots of her dreaming coincide with images of nature, like the forest and woodland animals. It is also critical to acknowledge that Shay is the only person of color among the ritual attendees and the main cast of the film. Shay's characterization as a Black woman connected to magic and nature, especially in a primarily white cast, calls to mind tropes of the "magical negro" and the long history of Black women in horror cinema being portrayed as powerful magical beings, sinister or otherwise (Means Coleman 2011).

Whether watching the film for entertainment or analysis, "Pure" is a mixed bag. Like the other episodes of *Into the Dark*, "Pure" has a "B-movie" quality to it. The acting is acceptable

but nothing exceptionally interesting. The camera work is beautiful at times, especially in scenes of nature, but the use of pop music is often overbearing. As I've described here, the feminist critique of purity culture succeeds in some ways but fails in others. However, it is this exact complexity that makes "Pure" a fascinating site for potential academic inquiry. Scholars may be interested in comparing this contemporary film to earlier works that cover similar themes, such as *Saved!* (2004) or *Easy A* (2010) to investigate how critiques of purity culture have evolved over time and genre. Scholars may also be interested in further considering the film's portrayal of Lilith, and perhaps feminist reclamations of mythology in a broader sense. The film can also be viewed in comparison to other witchcraft narratives in cinema, like *The Craft* (1996) or the more recent *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-), which show witchcraft as both powerful and potentially dangerous, particularly when placed in conflict with the dominant social order. While perhaps not as financially profitable or well-known as other contemporary horror films, "Pure" is a complex project worth investigating further.

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