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Conjuring Women:

Female Representation and

the Monstrous-Feminine of

The Conjuring Universe

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Introduction

The Conjuring hit American cinemas in 2013 and began a new phenomenon among horror movies. Director James Wan, high off his success with the ultra-gory *Saw* (2004), returned to the Gothic suspense of early horror, basing this movie on the exploits and adventures of real-life paranormal investigator power couple, Ed and Lorraine Warren. Moving rapidly from ghosts to creepy dolls, he spun off into *Annabelle* (2014) about a doll no one in her right mind would find adorable that comes with a demon attached. He bounced between sequels with *The Conjuring 2* in 2016 and *Annabelle: Creation* in 2017, changing his roles from director to co-writer to producer, but always keeping his hand at the helm. In 2018 *The Nun* was released after the titular villain was teased in the previous *Conjuring* films. 2019 saw the disappointing double-release of *Annabelle Comes Home* and the tangential *The Curse of La Llorona*, both of which lacked the depth of the previous films and settled for jump scares to tantalize their audiences. 2021 was a return to form with *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*, though this third installment deviated from its predecessors in significant ways. The most recent star in this growing constellation is *The Nun II*, released in 2023.

This collection of nine films (so far) has become the most successful horror franchise of all time, grossing more than two billion dollars worldwide (Vega, 2023) and making James Wan one of the most marketable names in horror today. What sets this collection apart from other horror franchises is its branching nature. While *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and other slasher/horror films have sequels and reboots aplenty, they all follow a generally linear path with a single monster. All that really changes is the names of the victims on the body bags. More than just sequels, *The Conjuring* collection of movies are films “in dialogue with one another, films within a franchise [that] expand that narrative world, each offering a branch to its wider

universe and a connection to other installments, opening avenues for audience experience" (Mee, 218). This is further highlighted by Williams' observation on the structure of fantasy which appeals to women. "For fantasies are not…wish-fulfilling linear narratives of mastery and control leading to closure and the attainment of desire. They are marked, rather, by the prolongation of desire, and by the lack of fixed position with respect to the objects and events fantasized" (Williams, 612). The growing and branching storylines of *The Conjuring* Universe are part of its great appeal as they jump backward and forward in time, giving moments of gratification at the climax of each film while promising deeper stimulation from the next film.

James Wan said he wanted to create an interconnected horror universe akin to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Want to watch a modern sci-fi Jekyll and Hyde story? Watch *The Incredible Hulk* (2008). Want to watch a classic World War II war story? *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) is what you need. Looking for a Jason Bourne-style international espionage flick? *Black Widow* (2021) has your number. Whatever genre you seek, the MCU has it, and increasingly so does *The Conjuring* universe. Demonic nuns? Check. Possessed dolls? Check. Witches, ghosts, Mexican folkloric specters? Check, check, check. And just like the MCU, they all connect to one degree or another.

With as global and pervasive as the reach of *The Conjuring* universe is, it is worthwhile to look at what messages these films are spreading. More specifically, what are these films saying about women? It may seem odd to focus on such a gendered aspect of so many films, but on closer examination the reason becomes manifest. In nearly all cases within these nine films, the antagonist or villain is either a woman or manifests in a feminine form. In virtually every instance, the victims in each film are women or girls. In practically all circumstances in these movies, it is a woman who stands against evil and conquers it. For good or for evil, *The*

Conjuring universe is very much a feminist universe, which is a very deliberate choice on the part of Wan and his writing associates. Quoting Brian de Palma, Clover observed, "Women in peril work better in the suspense genre…If you have a haunted house and you have a woman walking around with a candelabrum, you fear more for her than you would for a husky man" (Clover, 42).

But why do men want to see women triumph in horror movies like these? Humphrey suggests it's not that they want to watch female-led films but can ignore any opposition to a female-led film when it's horror. "Outright horror distracts from the misogyny and homophobia that might otherwise destroy the emotional engagement necessary for males to fully enjoy other female-centered genres, such as romantic comedies" (Humphrey, 40). Of course, that is assuming a male audience and the catering to the infamous "male gaze," which is not necessarily the case in these films.

If men are basically being tricked into setting aside inherent misogyny, what is the appeal for women in the audience? Without delving into Freudian psychoanalytic theories about castration and primal scenes, Williams provides an answer in her previous explanation of the fantastic nature of these films. "The fantasies activated…are repetitious, but not fixed and eternal" (Williams, 614). By making women the monsters, victims, and saviors of these films, Wan is encapsulating the "repetitious, but not fixed and eternal" experience of woman. To the male viewer, woman is the object of the conflicting relationship roles of mother and sexual partner. She is capable of creating and carrying life through internal processes, distinguishing herself from the male's external defining trait. She is loathed and loved simultaneously, feared and respected, though many men will never admit to either emotion. In these nine films, the female viewer sees the sum of her relationships and roles re-enacted and revealed. Creed,

drawing on Kristeva's work, explains that horror films deal with "the representation of the monstrous-feminine, in relation to woman's reproductive and mothering functions…" and "abjection by its very nature is ambiguous; it both repels and attracts, undermining borders and unsettling identity" (Creed, 16). Each film in this collection crosses borders of the body, of prescribed gender roles, of sexual power dynamics, alternatively creating a subconscious sense of revulsion in the audience at the disturbance and a sense of admiration and awe at the incredible feats performed by the women on screen, regardless of how monstrous they appear.

The fact that *The Conjuring* universe started with the semi-factual accounts of the Warrens is no accident. People *want* to see titillating movies based on real events, forgiving a wide variety of technical or accuracy sins if need be. Pasulka noted, "In movies that deal with the religious supernatural, the emphasis on the realism of the movie – of the *truth* of its account of events – often overshadows the production's aesthetic performance in marketing materials" (Pasulka, 534-536). This overshadowing becomes more significant when the impact on the audience's perception of women is affected so drastically. Pasulka elaborated on this, saying, "…even as spectators are consciously aware that they are watching a movie, unconsciously they are not. Unconsciously, they are making memories that they will fuse with memories from their own lives, and they will have a difficult time separating history from its re-presentation and from fictionalized versions of historical events" (Pasulka, 538). With this in mind, the unraveling of the story lines and an exploration of their commentary on women both monstrous and ordinary merits study.

<u>Diegetic Chronology</u>

While the real-world release of these films tends to jump around a bit, when viewed chronologically according to their diegetic settings, the greater story and bonds between the

movies becomes quite clear. James Wan and his network of writers and directors has expertly tied each film to the others through Easter eggs, shared characters, and common imagery.

The Nun takes place in a remote Romanian convent in 1952 in which Sister Irene investigates the suicide of a nun and must face down a demonic force that appears as a nun. *Annabelle: Creation*, the second *Annabelle* film to be made, is set in a remote California home in 1955. The home becomes an ersatz orphanage led by a nun who shows a photograph of her time at a Romanian convent, linking this film to *The Nun*. In 1956, Sister Irene is called up by the Vatican to combat the demon nun once more in *The Nun II*, but now in France. In doing so, she receives a strange vision of her adversary in a household hallway covered in rose wallpaper. This later revealed to be the home of the Warrens, the main characters of *The Conjuring* films. *Annabelle* terrorizes families in Santa Monica and Pasadena, California, in 1967, introducing us to Father Perez (Tony Amendola) who ministers to the victims of the demon. *The Conjuring* then takes place in 1971 in Rhode Island and pits the Warrens against not just a ghost or a witch, but the ghost *of* a witch.

Annabelle Comes Home takes place in the Warrens' Connecticut home in 1972. This film veers into the land of cliché in that the Warrens (played by Vera Farmiga and Patrick Wilson) leave their tween daughter in the care of a trusted babysitter while they head out of town. In classic fashion the babysitter's friend invites herself over, disrespects the household rules about not unleashing demons from the protective museum of evil artifacts, and nearly gets everyone killed while they try to put the wicked genies back in their bottles. Equally anemic when compared to the strength of the rest of the films is *The Curse of La Llorona*, set in 1973 Los Angeles. This a true offshoot from the rest of the universe with a new villain – La Llorona of Mexican folklore – and only Father Perez casually mentioning that he had a run-in with an evil

doll (Annabelle) to link this film to the rest of the universe. The last two movies, *The Conjuring 2* and *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* follow Ed and Lorraine Warren to England in 1977 and back to Connecticut in 1981. Most notably, *The Conjuring 2* is the first appearance of the demonic nun which also serves as a primary antagonist in this film, though this becomes clear only towards the end of movie.

The Monstrous-Feminine in *The Nun*

In both installments of *The Nun*, the heroine is Sister Irene, played by *Conjuring* star Vera Farmiga's younger sister, Taissa. She is an unconventional novitiate who has not yet taken her vows and committed herself to the life of a nun. Her introduction to the audience is while she is teaching children a lesson about dinosaurs and their likely existence, contrary to the lessons the students have already received. Despite this non-conformist attitude, she is selected to accompany a priest to investigate the untimely death of a nun in distant Romania.

Sister Irene represents the first instance of the monstrous-feminine in *The Conjuring* universe due to her inversion of the power structure. In the patriarchal Catholic church in which men are dominant and hold all positions of authority, claiming direct appointment from God, a woman like Irene is a threat. She receives visions she believes are divine but which her father interpreted as insanity before sending her off to become a nun. She has a line of communication especially between herself and God which diminishes the exclusive nature of Catholic power. For this investigative mission, Father Burke (Demian Bichir) is the investigator, yet he is not allowed to enter an abbey without the companionship of a nun. It could be said the masculine power of the church is impotent to accomplish its mission without the assistance of this peculiar would-be-nun.

Through exposition and flashbacks, the source of the evil in the abbey is revealed to be a demon summoned by the original owner of the castle in which the nuns now operate. He opened a portal deep beneath his castle which becomes the next instance of the monstrous-feminine. On screen, the summoning of the demon visually resembles a bloody birth in which a humanoid shape encased in an embryonic sac struggles to arise from a huge bloody gash in the floor. Knights from the primitive church arrive just in time to wield their phallic swords, putting an end to the unholy and unsanctioned birth and closing the orifice with a drop of the blood of Jesus Christ. Masculine religious power overpowers the feminine symbolism and restores the church's imposed dominance over reproductive powers.

Understandably, this dominance is incomplete and unstable. From that moment to the diegetic present-day women prayed around the clock to keep the portal closed and prevent the demon from escaping. In some ways these nuns have become the regulators of their own oppression, enforcing the male mandate of abstaining from sex, not procreating, and keeping the symbolic vagina closed. This fulfills Fabe's observation that "Women are also made nonthreatening in films through plots in which women are dominated, investigated, found guilty, and disempowered. The logic here is: '*She* is lacking, humiliated, guilty, weak – not me'" (Fabe, 213).

Just as menstruation will painfully flow according to its demands, and just as a baby will be delivered on its own schedule, the demon escapes its bloody prison despite the nuns' best efforts. It takes the form of a pale, feral nun and slays the priestesses one at a time until the last one kills herself to prevent the demon from taking her as well. This is the inciting incident of the first movie. The sequel takes place when it is revealed that the demonic nun orally raped a man assisting Sister Irene, injecting her demonic essence into his mouth in the form of a snake. He

then murders his way across Europe for years until he arrives in France at the same time as Sister Irene.

The horror for male viewers continues in *The Nun II* as they comprehend that Frenchie (Jonas Bloquet), the man penetrated by the demon, is now carrying the demon like a spiritual fetus. It visibly crawls beneath his skin and overpowers his psyche, controlling his will at some times and at other times using his body as a launching point for murderous excursions. For the male body to be dominated and inhabited by a body forced upon it, to be host to an unwelcome entity, and to be powerless to rid itself of the parasite is a nightmare usually reserved for women in the real world, not for men on screen. "As Carol Clover observes…invaded bodies are signs of a larger reorganization of gender roles, as the possession narrative 'concerns itself, through the figure of the male-in-crisis, with…rezoning the masculine into territories traditionally occupied by the feminine'" (Benson-Allot, 73). Further accentuating the gendered paradigm shift is the climax of the movie when Sister Irene and her traveling companion bless broken barrels of wine to transform it into sacramental wine to drench the demon. The film emphasizes that this wine is held by the faithful to be the literal blood of Christ. In other words, the abject gushing of blood generated by two women banishes the man-raping demon.

The Monstrous-Feminine in *Annabelle* & *The Curse of La Llorona*

Rather than display a demonic figure that torments humanity through the perversion of feminine identity, the *Annabelle* movies deal more closely with the suffering of women for nonconformity to gender expectations imposed upon them by both men and women alike. Diegetically the first film of the trilogy, *Annabelle: Creation* starts in 1943 when a dollmaker is trying to change a tire on a country road. He rejects his wife's advice to hail an approaching truck for assistance, and his daughter tragically dies as she dives after a lugnut that flies into the

road. The film flashes forward to 1955 and there is no indication that the wife ever says, “If only you had listened to me, she’d still be with us,” but through dialogue and flashbacks the wife reveals that the couple’s shared grief invited a demon into their home. They later imprisoned the demon and the doll it attached itself to in a closet lined with pages from the Bible blessed by priests. By that time the demon had attacked the wife, tearing off half her face and leaving her paraplegic. If the traditional expectations of the 1950s housewife were to maintain her beauty and keep a clean home, she was now incapable of fulfilling either role. When the couple opens their home to a handful of girl orphans sponsored by the Catholic church, the oldest teens make up bedtime stories about the wife’s disfigurement, turning her into an even more horrific monster.

The next punishment comes at the hands of two little girls who ignore the admonition of the male head of the household to stay out of the bedroom belonging to their hosts’ late daughter. Through this disobedience, they inadvertently set free the demon from the closet, and it targets Janice (Talitha Eliana Bateman) who has been stricken by polio and walks with a brace on one leg. Preying upon her isolation from the other girls who can run and play freely, the demon drops Janice over the second-floor railing, forcing her into a wheelchair. Slipping into deeper depression over her injuries, Janice laments that no one will ever adopt a broken girl who is such a burden. This self-deprecating attitude further reflects the harmful attitudes and beliefs about beauty and innate worth that beset girls and women of both that era and today.

This demon continues its attack by pushing Janice into the dollmaker’s workshop, symbolically the exclusive domain of the only man of the household. Janice, apparently no longer a viable daughter and seemingly without a future as a mother and homemaker, is relegated to a man’s world where she does not naturally belong. In this state of vulnerability, the demon

symbolically rapes her much like the nun demon did to Frenchie. Instead of a snake, this demon takes the form of the dead daughter (who died long before reaching puberty and the age of menstruation) and vomits blood into Janice's mouth, overcoming and dominating her.

Inhabiting Janice's body, the demon straightens and strengthens her leg, as if to say that she is no good to anyone in that broken condition, but evil will make do with what it has available. Janice kills the dollmaker, Sam Mullins (Anthony LaPaglia), telekinetically twisting and contorting his body until he dies offscreen. Given that Sam gave no indication of perverted attraction to the girls under his care, this contactless, asexual murder is a distorted reversal of the physical contortions and "patriarchal constraints on women" Williams refers to in "sadomasochistic pornography" (Williams, 610). Also offscreen, Janice slaughters Sam's wife, Esther (Miranda Otto), cutting her in half and nailing her upper body to her bedroom wall, making real the metaphorical assertion that she was only half a woman anyway.

The nun in charge of the orphaned girls, Sister Charlotte (Stephanie Sigman), ultimately recognizes that there comes a time when a toxic, abusive, critically damaged person is too harmful to keep around. To protect herself and the other girls from Janice's otherworldly hostility, Sister Charlotte tosses Janice into the closet that contained the doll and demon before, locking her away for their good, if not hers. Naturally, Janice rejects such boundaries imposed upon her by the patriarchal power of the Catholic church and forces her way through the back wall and into the next movie where she assumes the role of the docile, obedient, pretty girl child for her new adoptive parents.

Janice grows into a young woman and in 1967's *Annabelle* joins a Satanic cult and kills herself in an attempt to recover her doll which had been bought in an antique store as a gift from a young doctor to his wife Mia, played by Annabelle Wallis. With the demon vacating Janice's

body and returning to the doll, it begins to torment Mia, urging her to sacrifice herself to protect her baby. This film plays with notions of enforced domesticity, living up to maternal and marital expectations, and the sacrifices a woman must make to maintain domestic harmony, all while repeating the mantra that a woman's highest calling is as a mother. These two films and the third installment reinforce the notion that many modern horror films focus on "unhappy women who fail to adhere to normative femininity" (Benson-Allott, 72).

The capstone on the *Annabelle* trilogy is *Annabelle Comes Home* wherein Ed and Lorraine Warren have secured the Annabelle doll in their occult museum. Their tormented daughter, Judy (Mckenna Grace), ostracizes herself from her classmates due to her nascent gift of clairvoyance and her awareness of the ghosts around her. Her babysitter's friend Daniela (Karie Sarife) wracks herself with self-inflicted guilt for her father's death in a car crash. Daniela releases the doll from its case, unleashing several demons who physically and emotionally terrorize the teens and tween, even repeating the oral/menstrual rape motif when a demonic bride vomits blood into Daniela's mouth (the worst punishment for the worst offender in the film, it seems). Of course, this allows the bride demon to possess and control Daniela to inflict further attacks on her friends.

The Curse of La Llorona aligns closely with the themes of the *Annabelle* trilogy. Linda Cardellini plays Anna, the widow of a Los Angeles policeman. Her home life suffers because she spends so much time at work as a social worker and child welfare specialist. Her work suffers because she is the sole care provider for her two children. She is plagued with feelings of inadequacy and perpetually disappoints her children, her supervisors, and her clients. That disappointment turns to vindictiveness as one client blames Anna for the murder of her children, cursing Anna's children to be the next victims of La Llorona, the Weeping Woman who walks the

Earth grieving for her children that she drowned while enraged over her philandering husband. Ultimately, Anna's salvation comes through the intervention of a righteous man who provides magical protection, spiritual guidance, and a sharpened wooden cross with which Anna stabs and banishes the ghost. All of this emphasizes that a woman without a husband and who does not attend church cannot adequately provide for or protect her family.

The Monstrous-Feminine and *The Conjuring*

The three *Conjuring* films deal with the monstrous-feminine from two perspectives. The first is the villainous forces Ed and Lorraine Warren face in each movie. In the first film, set in 1971, they must expel the ghost of a 19th century witch who murdered her baby and then killed herself to gain supernatural power. In the next, they face the ghost of Bill, a cantankerous old man who died in his favorite chair. It is later revealed that Bill is being used as a red herring by Valak, the demon from *The Nun*, in order to entrap and kill Ed Warren (because naturally the male half of the Warrens is more valuable than the female). The third movie pits the couple against a living witch who casts spells on unsuspecting victims, binding a demon to them until they can kill someone else and then themselves.

This first example, the ghost of a infanticidal witch, seems horrific enough on the surface. It is the acknowledgement of the witch's feminine identity that amplifies that abject revulsion. For starters, witches subvert the patriarchal social structure by gaining and wielding power outside of androcentric religious structures and without male participation or approval. This witch, Bathsheba, subverted the unique biological features of the feminine by killing not just any baby, but *her* baby. The expected maternal norm is that every mother has an inherent desire to protect and nurture her own young, so to reject that nature in favor of gaining further supernatural power strikes many nerves in the viewing audience, regardless of its gender.

In the second film, the ghost of an old man attacks, batters, bites, and possesses an 11-year-old girl, Janet (Madison Wolfe). While not feminine on the part of the ghost, this crosses into abject horror by way of the pedophilic invasion of Janet's body. The skin is the ultimate border between the self and the other, between the self and the world around the self. As Creed stated, "the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (Creed, 13). Janet cannot stop this old man from invading her body, dominating her will, and spiritually and psychologically torturing her. Adding another layer to this analysis is the revelation that Bill is also a victim at the hands of Valak, the demon that projects the appearance of a (female) nun. Just as Bill is traumatizing and invading Janet's young body, Valak is tormenting Bill, manipulating and controlling him to attack the girl and her family. The monstrous-feminine is manifest in the rape-by-proxy of Janet by Valak. The understanding that the overwhelming majority of female sexual predators target children, and among those primarily their own daughters, coupled with the title of "mother" given to nuns of a certain status, makes the betrayal of matriarchal roles and expectations of child safety even more grievous to witness.

The third film scales this deep-rooted horror back a few degrees and returns to a human witch as the antagonist. This woman learned of occult practices and power through her father, a former priest who studied it in-depth. While he did not actively teach her about it, children tend to learn things from their parents without the parents' intent. In this case, what she learned was the joy of chaos and the thrill of ritualistic murder. This installment seems to go in a direction different from all the other movies in *The Conjuring* universe in that both the victims of the witch's spell are male. However, it is later shown that they are the latest in a series of victims and just happened to be male. She had previously cast the same spell on a young woman months

earlier, causing her to commit murder and suicide. The quality of the monstrous-feminine this unique villain brings to the franchise is the murder of her own father and the chaos she unleashes. Once the Warrens close in on her she slits her father's throat, turning on her sole parent and returning his loving (albeit unconventional) upbringing with bloodshed. While the feminine nature is expected to be that of nurturer and caregiver, the provider of comfort and safety, The Occultist (Eugenie Bondurant) – so dehumanized that her character is denied a real name – instead is a terrorist, striking out at random targets, causing fear and torment and destroying families and lives.

The other perspective of the monstrous-feminine in these three films regards Lorraine Warren herself. She is the power behind the power couple of Ed and Lorraine. She is the one gifted with psychic visions and premonitions. As Wessels observed, Ed and his team must attempt to emulate Lorraine's perceptive abilities with an array of cameras, microphones, lenses, and sensors, hoping for a synthetic glimpse of what Lorraine naturally sees. Their prosthetic devices rarely compensate for their masculine lacking, and as such Ed relies on the authority of the Catholic church to give him the credibility needed to carry out their work.

Ultimately, this patriarchy fears and suppresses Lorraine. "Whereas Ed's house of oddities neutralizes the supernatural powers of various charms, the most powerful talisman, Lorraine, is safely kept under wraps through the heteronormative Catholic marriage and gender division of labor" (Wessels, 523). She is not inherently monstrous or horrifying in the same way demonic nuns and ghost witches are, but to the church and the male audience she is a threat to their dominance. To the female audience she is both a heroine to be admired and a tragic figure of affective labor in bondage.

Conclusion

From victimized little girls to abjectly horrific witches and demons, *The Conjuring* universe has a great deal to say about women. In many ways, they are the answer to patriarchal hegemony and dominance, finding ways of obtaining and wielding power for good or for evil. Their innate qualities as women are as often a source of strength to themselves and those they support as they are targets for exploitation and corruption. These nine films run longer than 16 hours altogether, which is a long time to absorb, internalize, and reflect on so important a topic as the women in our lives and their experiences.

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