

## Monstrous Schoolgirls: Casual Sex in the Twenty-First-Century Horror Film

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In a teaser trailer for *Scream 4* (2011), the latest installment in a franchise famous for parodying the conventions of horror films, a character lists some of the new rules of twenty-first-century incarnations of the genre, one of which is “virgins can die now.”<sup>1</sup> Though the line did not appear in the final cut, fans have seized it as an unofficial tagline for the film. With such a statement, *Scream 4* obviously means to mock the tendency in the previous generation of slasher films to kill off any teenager who had sex and reserve survival for a virginal Final Girl, a convention first examined in detail by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992). The irony is, of course, that almost immediately after the publication of Clover’s seminal text, the first *Scream* film came along in 1996 and broke the rule by allowing its Final Girl, Sidney, to have sex and survive not only that movie but all of its installments so far. Since the very first of its films, then, the *Scream* franchise declared the fetishization of virginity within the horror movie a passé construct. However, I argue that another equally problematic ideology has replaced this older one. Specifically, the new “rule” the teenage girl needs to follow to survive a horror film is to only have “meaningful” sex, which usually means sex within the context of a relationship with a partner who is loving and loyal, equally (in)experienced, and conscientious about his partner’s pleasure. By contrast, girls who engage in casual or “meaningless” sex are often killed off quickly in horror films, a plot device that communicates very straightforwardly that their behavior is forbidden.

But there exists a sub-genre of horror that I refer to as the “monstrous schoolgirl” narrative that does something much more complicated. Rather than simply opting to off the offending girl, she is first transformed, often by forces beyond her control, into a monster who kills others before she herself is killed. It would seem that in complicating a traditional horror film equation that links a victim’s tragic outcome to certain undesirable acts (once sex of any kind, now “meaningless” sex), the monstrous schoolgirl narrative risks obscuring its ideological message. However, I argue that this “monsterfication” is necessary so the narrative can speak to other ideologies, not least of which is a contemporary suspicion that the teenage girl has become increasingly violent, a development directly linked by some scholars to her recently gained sexual freedom.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, converting the improperly sexual girl into a monster allows her to be excluded from the domain of proper girlhood. Finally, the monstrous schoolgirl elicits feelings of both sympathy and revulsion—she has become a monster, yes, but the circumstances were not her fault; these contrary feelings mirror attitudes expressed in many contemporary discussions of teenage girls who engage in casual sex. In order to illustrate the ideologies embedded in the

monstrous schoolgirl narrative, I will examine two very different films, both released in 2009, that employ the monstrous schoolgirl plot as a device for expressing criticism of casual sex: *The New Daughter* and *Jennifer's Body*.

I have selected these two films from an array of others that deal with similar themes because they have such markedly different perspectives and artistic intentions. Directed by Luis Berdejo (best known for his involvement in the [REC] series and its American counterpart, Quarantine) and starring Kevin Costner, *The New Daughter* is a serious horror film—and by that I simply mean a film that treats its horror seriously rather than satirically—that adopts the viewpoint of a father whose daughter, Louisa, succumbs to supernatural creatures in a way that resembles her engagement in casual sex. In contrast, *Jennifer's Body*—featuring Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried, popular actresses in teen culture—is told from the perspective of a teenage girl, Needy, who watches with horror as her promiscuous best friend, Jennifer, becomes a demonic creature who feeds on the flesh of the men she beds.<sup>3</sup> Penned by Diablo Cody of *Juno* fame and directed by Karyn Kusama, who received acclaim for her directorial debut *Girlfight* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* is, according to its creators, a self-consciously feminist film merging horror and dark humor. Because these films have such dissimilar perspectives and intentions, we might expect them to communicate very different attitudes. However, I will show that they come to strikingly similar conclusions. First, both employ a standard cinematic iconography of rape to suggest that the teenage girl who engages in casual sex is a victim rather than a willing participant. At the same time, both communicate a deep-seated revulsion for these teenage girls and a desire for their punishment. Finally, in transforming Louisa and Jennifer into grotesque creatures, both films preserve the image of “true” girlhood, for, after all, they are not really girls at all but monstrous simulations of girlhood.

If a film that entertains a parental perspective of teen girl sexuality resembles a self-declared feminist work that tackles the same subject from the viewpoint and for the consumption of teens, the shared ideologies behind these similarities must be shared quite broadly in society. Certainly, the sexual behavior of teenage girls has been the subject of much discussion recently. On the one hand, this is no surprise, for the American girl has long been treated as a gauge of national virtue: when she forsakes her integrity, society is seen to be in a state of serious decline.<sup>4</sup> However, in the past decade, a profusion of stories about young girls engaging in casual sex have been seized upon by the media and mainstream authors alike as evidence that the country has embraced a set of values that is having destructive influences on the daughters of America.

In 2003, for instance, panicked attention arose in response to the “jelly bracelets” that had re-emerged as a fashion trend. The claim was that they were actually sex bracelets, tacit advertisements from the girl who sported them about the sexual acts she would be willing to perform should a boy manage to snap off a particular color: a blue bracelet, so the story went, designated oral sex while black meant intercourse. Although many sources claimed that the sudden ubiquity of

these bracelets was merely a fashion fad, not proof that youngsters everywhere were engaged in clandestine sex games, the idea still generated widespread public alarm.<sup>5</sup> Around the same time, another urban legend sprang up about “rainbow parties,” adolescent social gatherings at which girls, wearing different shades of lipstick, took turns fellating the boys in attendance, leaving multicolored rings—hence, the rainbow—around their penises.<sup>6</sup> Other concurrent news stories focused on actual events in which young girls performed sexual favors for boys with whom they had no romantic commitments.<sup>7</sup>

Most of these articles cited these stories as evidence that a “hookup culture” now defined American adolescent life. Many also make clear that they consider these “meaningless” sexual encounters as destructive. Scot Lehigh, for example, ends his 2004 *Boston Globe* article, “The Casual Emptiness of Teenage Sex,” by expressing “hope that today’s teenagers will come to understand that to rob sex of romance, to divorce it from emotion, is to deny themselves exactly what makes it special.” Although Lehigh directs his concerns toward genderless “teenagers,” far more frequently authors focus on the detrimental effects that a hookup culture had on girls. In *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti notes just how pervasive these anxieties are, noting that 2007 alone saw the publication of “nearly one thousand articles refer[ing] to the ‘girls gone wild’ and ‘raunch culture’ phenomenon” and “five popular books, all arguing that sexual activity hurts young women” (46, 47).

These authors typically claim that casual sex is so damaging to girls because they do not really choose it of their own accord; one section of Benoit Denizet-Lewis’s *New York Times* article “Girls Just Want to Have Fun?” (2004) quotes multiple experts who aver that girls do not really enjoy casual sex. The general consensus of most articles examining this issue is that girls who engage in casual sex are not acting on authentic desire but rather are responding to negative influences—a sex-obsessed media, bad celebrity role models, salacious advertising that objectifies women, or pressures from male partners.

Even self-declared “pro-sex” feminists find it hard to believe that “normal” girls would want to engage in casual sex. For example, in the introduction to *The Lolita Effect*, M. Gigi Durham declares, “I am a pro-sex feminist. . . . I think sex is a normal and healthy part of life, even of children’s lives. I want my two young daughters—indeed, all girls—to grow up unafraid of and knowledgeable about their bodies, confident about finding and expressing sexual pleasure, able to be both responsible and adventurous in the realm of sex” (22). But, as the subtitle of Durham’s book suggests (*The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It*), Durham does not believe that most girls embody these traits. Likewise, In *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein asserts, “Let me be clear here: I object—strenuously—to the sexualization of girls but not necessarily to girls having sex. I expect and want my daughter to have a healthy, joyous erotic life before marriage. Long, long, long before marriage. I do, however, want her to understand why she’s doing it: not for someone else’s enjoyment, not to keep a boyfriend from leaving, not because everyone else is. I want her to do it for

herself” (130). Orenstein here voices the central concern that experts commonly state regarding girls who engage in casual sex: namely, that it is not a “true” choice.

If the sexualized behavior of teenage girls is the result of their continued objectification by men and the media, it would seem that they would be treated as objects of pity. However, that is not always the case. In many cases, authors actually seem more annoyed or angry than sympathetic. If the title of Patrice Oppliger’s *Girls Gone Skank* (2008) doesn’t make her annoyance with such girls obvious enough, her denunciatory word choice does. At one point, for example, she writes that “[t]here is a major difference . . . between exploring one’s sexuality and being sexually exploited. . . . When females act crazier and crazier, it is apparent they are desperate to find more attention rather than evolving into sexually expressive, satisfied beings” (emphasis mine, 22). Elsewhere Oppliger supports her claims by quoting from Ana Marie Cox’s article “The Myth about Girls Going Wild,” who also expresses considerable disparagement for such girls: “Freeing girls from stereotypes hasn’t made them more masculine, it’s made them more more. Unbound from cultural constraints, they don’t flip to the male side of the spectrum. They just flip out” (96). There is a sense at times that some social critics would like to see these “foolish” girls get their comeuppance.

My intent in this article is not to take a side on whether “raunch culture” or “porno-chic” or “female chauvinism” is a sign of female empowerment or as naïve participants in their own objectification; critics have already done an admirable job examining that debate.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I am interested in examining how these anxieties are expressed in more oblique terms within monstrous schoolgirl narratives of the twenty-first century. These narratives, I claim, reinstate an ideology that the only acceptable sexual encounters for girls are “meaningful” acts experienced in the context of a relationship with no power imbalances and in which each partner’s satisfaction is treated with equal consideration. At first glance, the horror genre might seem a strange mouthpiece of national values since it is itself often considered an immoral discourse, indulging as it does in graphic acts of violence and celebrations of the monstrous and deviant. I argue, however, that it is these very aspects of horror that make it such a formidable force in the shaping of moral attitudes. Because horror films are not typically explicit about their ethical stance but instead manipulate our emotions, we may extract moral lessons without consciously realizing it. This dangerous potential makes horror films like *The New Daughter* and *Jennifer’s Body* all the more deserving of scholarly attention.

*The New Daughter* focuses on a single-parent family consisting of writer John James (Costner) and his two children: Louisa, a girl on the brink of puberty, and Sam, her younger brother. John’s wife, the children’s mother, has abandoned the family for a lover, and the three have just moved into a new home in a small rural community in South Carolina, hoping that a change of scenery will help them heal. Unfortunately, the new home proves to be the family’s undoing: on the extensive grounds of the property is a large mound, later discovered to be

home to an all-male species referred to as “mound walkers.” Although humanoid in appearance, the creatures operate according to a hive mentality and thus are more like insects than men, a comparison that the film helps draw for us by juxtaposing various plot events with changes that Sam observes in the ant farm he has been given as a school lesson. Louisa is chosen by the creatures to be their new queen and grows increasingly loyal to them at the expense of all others, ultimately causing the deaths of several people, including her father and brother.<sup>9</sup>

At first glance, it might seem that a film about man-bug monsters selecting a human queen would have little to do with contemporary anxieties about casual sex and the teenage girl. However, if we replaced the film’s supernatural components (the male mound walkers) with a realistic counterpart (a series of boys who only value Louisa for the pleasure she can provide them), the stories would ultimately not be so different. While the mound walkers are interested in Louisa purely for reproductive reasons, the boys in a “realistic” version of the story would have only sexual intentions: in both cases, the girl is only prized for her body’s capacity to produce and please, respectively; her pleasure or desires are of no concern. Similarly, substituting teenage boys for the mound walkers might eliminate all the dramatic deaths, but an analogous sort of devastation would still occur if the psychological and physical harm suffered by Louisa also caused great distress to those around her. The supernatural aspects of the film simply give the features of the stereotypical story of what happens to girls who engage in casual sex more dramatic emphasis.

The film itself encourages us to draw parallels between Louisa’s experiences with the mound walkers and the negative consequences of teenage girl sexuality. Initially, in fact, John himself cannot even tell one from the other: the truth of what is really happening to Louisa goes undetected by him for a long time because much of her behavior resembles that of a girl developing into sexual maturity. Both John and Cassandra (Sam’s teacher and John’s only friend) attribute Louisa’s bizarre behavior to the onset of puberty, at least initially. Cassandra says, “It’s a tough age for girls. Hormones. Puberty. Boys.” John initially accepts this explanation and scours the internet for information that will help him relate to his daughter using terms like “raising teenage daughters,” “odd behavior, daughter,” and “daughter, changes.” Later, when John forbids Louisa to visit the mound after dark and then to go there at all, he sounds very much like a father prohibiting his daughter from seeing a boy he believes threatens the safety and sanctity of his child.

As we have seen, many contemporary discussions of teen girl sexuality claim that whether they merely advertise their sexual behavior via provocative clothing and suggestive behavior or actually engage in casual sex, they do so because they mistake sexual objectification as a sincere expression of esteem and their desirability as a sign of self-worth. This assumption is clearly communicated through Louisa’s story as well, which provides further evidence that the narrative functions as a parable for the negative consequences of casual sex. Louisa becomes enamored with the mound walkers, eventually treating them like

estranged lovers, but the film makes it clear to the viewer from the beginning that her feelings are unjustified and that the relationship between Louisa and the creatures is an abusive one that only serves male interest. The most apparent way that the film communicates this idea is by depicting Louisa's first encounter with the creatures via the traditional cinematic iconography of rape.<sup>10</sup>

After a particularly trying first day of school, Louisa returns home and escapes to the mound for solace. Lying on her back, she is suddenly startled by a disturbing screech, but the scene cuts before we see what happens to her. However, subsequent images—all capitalizing on the conventional symbolism of blood representing a loss of virginity—imply that Louisa has been sexually violated. The first image we see after the scene cuts is John breaking a glass while washing dishes. The camera focuses carefully on a single drop of his blood that falls from his cut finger into the water. As if awoken from a reverie, John realizes that it is dark and that he literally doesn't know where his children are. Although he locates Sam safely tucked away in the living room, he finds the front door wide open and muddy footprints leading to the bathroom. Hearing water running inside, he calls out Louisa's name and, not receiving a response, tries to open the door, only to find it is locked, which prompts his further frantic jiggling of the knob. Louisa finally answers and puts her father's worries somewhat to ease, though he insists that next time she return home before dark.

The scene then cuts to Louisa, who is seated in an empty bathtub, covered in mud, knees clutched to her chest, while the shower runs over her. A final shot shows muddy water swirling down the drain and, at the last moment, a trail of blood. This second iteration of blood, this time coming from her body, affirms that Louisa has just lost her virginity. Furthermore, it is clear that the experience has been harrowing: not only is Louisa visibly traumatized, but the disturbing image of her in a bathtub, knees to her chest, allowing all traces of the incident to be rinsed from her body, recalls the stereotypical cinematic representation of the rape victim that has been described by such critics as Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sarah Projansky. And since the mound walkers are many in number with no discernible leader, the implication is that Louisa might have been violated multiple times.

After this scene, Louisa's behavior changes dramatically. Although the mound walkers are hideous in appearance and clearly have brutalized her, Louisa seems pleased by their attention. The suggestion is that her experience with the creatures has incited some sort of sexual awakening, one that is pleasurable to her but aberrant and revolting to the viewer. Having been objectified, she now participates in her own objectification, confusing it as a source of empowerment and an avenue toward romantic fulfillment. For example, on her first day of school, Louisa had worn a conservative and relatively gender-neutral outfit that included dark pants, heavy boots, and a hooded, zip-up cardigan. After her encounter with the creatures, however, she dresses much more provocatively. She comes down to breakfast the next day wearing a short, black dress with calf-high boots, hardly school-appropriate attire. Later, Louisa hears the creatures' shrill screech and leans dreamily against the column on her porch as if wistfully

recalling a past romantic encounter. At another point, we watch as Louisa stands topless in front of her bedroom window, gazing toward the mound and stroking her hair. Our view from behind allows us to see that her back is covered with loathsome sores, a shot which thus makes clear the stark contrast between Louisa's perception of her experiences and their gruesome reality. As a parable for a young girl's initiation into casual sex, the film suggests that her experiences will be distasteful and detrimental: though she may think otherwise, she is only being used, her wellbeing and happiness of no consequence to her partners.

Subsequent scenes suggest that Louisa has been impregnated. This plot development serves to further emphasize the destructive nature of her relationship with the mound walkers. For one, she suffers great physical discomfort: she vomits uncontrollably on several different occasions and complains about stomach pain. Moreover, her pregnancy causes her to devolve, becoming more animal than human. At dinner, she devours a plate of meat, discarding utensils in favor of eating with her hands and later, when Louisa is at school, John searches her room, only to discover that she is building some sort of nest in her closet. A professor who arrives to investigate the mound confirms our suspicions by describing artifacts he has discovered at other similar sites. In those artifacts, the mound walkers are depicted as looking for a "savior, a chosen one" who could save the race from extinction: "She would be human—a young girl—and then the mating ritual would begin." The professor's words are cross-cut with scenes of Louisa sitting on the grass at school, digging in the dirt with her bare hands. Sam, the younger brother, intuitively connects developments in his ant farm and the changes in his sister. "There's a new queen," Sam tells Cassandra. "Look at how all the other ants are surrounding her, guarding her until it's done." Then, immediately after this, he says, "There's something wrong with Louisa." It might seem that being chosen to be a savior or a queen would be an act of high regard, and certainly Louisa thinks this is the case. But she serves no other purpose than to reproduce, and the comparisons drawn to primitive species of humans and insects eliminate any glamour from her role. Her status as "queen" is far from regal but rather reduces her to animalistic behavior, eating with her hands, building nests, and digging uncontrollably in dirt. The film implies that as much as a girl might feel that her supposedly sophisticated, nonchalant attitudes about casual sex earn her status and power, she actually has fallen far below her original position.

Thus far, the ideological messages of the film rely on constructing Louisa as an ignorant girl who believes herself to be demonstrating sexual agency when she is in fact merely a sexual object serving the whims of men. But much as we may wish to chide Louisa for her inability to see the true nature of the relationship she cherishes, we do sympathize with her. After all, she is a young girl and the victim of at least one abusive encounter. Furthermore, by the end of the film, we realize that Louisa's allegiance to the mound walkers is actually due to the fact that she is physically transforming into one of them, for, through a feat of computer-generated imagery, we see her begin to metamorphose. In the end,

both John and the viewer know that Louisa cannot be held responsible for her behavior; she quite literally is no longer herself. All of her bad behavior has been caused by her corruption at the hands of the mound walkers. She is a victim who very much deserves our sympathy.

Although our understanding of Louisa's transformation may explain and therefore mitigate her detestable behavior in retrospect, we are not aware of this information until the end of the film—and even then, the visual evidence of Louisa's metamorphosis is displayed only momentarily. In the end, too, Louisa's metamorphosis might even diminish our pity. Though her transformation is not complete, she does become grotesque, and we have seen enough of the mound walkers to know that she is only going to become even more repugnant.<sup>11</sup> But long before that point, Louisa's increasingly violent deeds have already cast her out of the domain of the "normal" girl. Louisa's first act of aggression—pushing a school bully down the stairs— something a viewer can even vicariously enjoy. However, her later violence is unforgiveable. She purposely frightens Sam, causing him to fall off a ladder and sustain an injury that requires multiple stitches. She also attempts to entice him to accompany her to the mound. Such an act would likely result in his death, for several people are killed by the mound walkers, including a grandmotherly babysitter Louisa locks outside of the house. Luckily, Sam, sensing that something is wrong with his sister, cautiously refuses. By the end of the movie, Louisa has evolved into an actively violent girl, slicing Cassandra's throat and disregarding her father and brother's safety as she aids the creatures that descend upon the house to claim her.

Thus, as tragic as her story is, Louisa must be killed because there is no hope that she can be redeemed, and we are allowed some satisfaction in knowing that little girls who so dramatically violate the expectations of innocence certainly cannot prosper.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the movie reassures us that normal girls would never do such a thing anyway. Only imposters, monsters who look like girls, could behave in such a way. But deep beneath, they are another species indeed. The less Louisa resembles a "normal" girl, the easier it is for us to approve of her downfall without guilt or conflict. More importantly, showing us that what we thought was a girl was only a monstrous simulation of a girl preserves the ideal image of innocent girlhood. Girls don't really act this way, the film declares, only monsters who look like girls (but aren't).

In addition, the suggestion that Louisa's transformation into a mound walker fully explains her behavior is undercut by hints that her willingness to betray her family in order to satisfy her own pleasures may perhaps be an innate tendency. While Gattlin Griffith, the young actor who plays Sam, has been carefully cast to resemble Costner's all-American appeal, the Spain-born Ivana Baquero, who plays Louisa, has dark, thick, curly hair and a decidedly foreign look. In order to explain why her looks are so different from his and Sam's, John tellingly explains that Louisa "takes after her mom." These words have particular resonance considering that Louisa's mother abandoned her family for a lover and thus put a sexual relationship above her maternal duties. In favoring sexual

mates over her family, Louisa seems to be merely replicating in more dramatic fashion the sins of her mother. Perhaps, then, Louisa's betrayal of her family is not purely due to her altered state; perhaps she had monstrous tendencies to begin with. If this is the case, then she is even less of a girl and less deserving of our sympathies.

Because *The New Daughter* adopts a father's point of view, there is some reason to wonder if the film has a more complicated agenda than I have suggested. Perhaps rather than critiquing Louisa, the film is merely emblemizing the way that fathers view their daughters once they become sexual creatures. Certainly, there is considerable evidence for this in the film.<sup>13</sup> In hinting at John's questionable motivations for wanting to control his daughter's sexuality and displaying the problematic lengths to which he will go to do so, the film could imply that behind a father's concern for his daughter lurks a dangerous desire of his own. Because of the supernatural components of the film, what might be an inappropriate sexual possessiveness on the father's part, an illicit desire to control his daughter's sexuality, is recast as a heroic battle against repellent, dangerous man-insects. In fact, the supernatural components of the film provide justification for paternal control of the daughter's sexuality, an ideology that critics argue has resurged as concerns about the premature sexual development of young girls have increased.<sup>14</sup>

An entirely different agenda is at work in *Jennifer's Body*, at least according to the film's creators. In an interview with Jennifer Kwan, the film's writer Diablo Cody claims both she and director Karyn Kusama to be "outspoken feminists" and declares that the film was meant to support a feminist agenda. During the interview, Cody is unclear as to how the film accomplishes its feminist aims or exactly what these aims are but implies that she believes the film achieves three general goals. First, Cody insinuates that female-authored, female-centered films such as hers may help to create more opportunities for women in the still male-dominated spheres of acting, screenwriting, and directing. She expresses a desire to "tell stories from a female perspective," "create good parts for actresses where they're not just accessories to men," and "inspire[] girls to take life into their own hands and do with it, what they want." Second, in declaring that "Jennifer is a product of a culture that pressures girls to be skinny, beautiful and just like movie stars," Cody hints that her film offers a feminist social critique. Finally, Cody implies that her film is feminist in that it "subvert[s] the classic horror model of women being terrorized" and therefore challenges the typical gender roles of traditional films within the genre. After hearing what amounts to a quite hearty feminist manifesto, we might expect that Cody and Kusama's film would differ sharply from *The New Daughter* in terms of its ideological ends. However, *Jennifer's Body* also suggests that girls who engage in casual sex are not acting out of desire but rather have been manipulated into believing that their sole worth comes from their value as sexual objects. Moreover, rather than treating the objectified girl sympathetically, the film converts her into a monstrous creature who must be destroyed.

*Jennifer's Body* tells the story of a teen vamp who becomes a literal vampire when members of a rock band called Low Shoulder, believing her to be a virgin, attempt to sacrifice her to the devil in a Faustian exchange for fame and fortune. However, because Jennifer is not actually a virgin, she does not die but becomes a demon herself, a creature who must feed on men in order to maintain her good looks and vitality. When her mousy best friend, Anita ("Needy"), becomes aware of what Jennifer has become, she attempts to stop Jennifer, peaceably at first. However, when Jennifer's attention turns to Needy's boyfriend, Chip, Needy fights back with violence.

As with *The New Daughter*, *Jennifer's Body* uses a horror plot that involves a girl who transforms into a literal monster to communicate its critique of casual sex. However, the ways in which this plot device is deployed as an ideological vehicle is more complicated. In *The New Daughter*, Louisa's encounter with the mound walkers served as a sort of sexual initiation. In *Jennifer's Body*, Jennifer is already engaging in casual sex before she becomes a demon, but initially there is no sense that her experiences are negative. In fact, her escapades are presented as relatively harmless sources of humor at the beginning of the film. Jennifer is not only no longer a virgin but hasn't been one since junior high: as she herself brashly announces, without a hint of shame, she's "not even a backdoor virgin anymore." In fact, Jennifer seems initially like a girl for whom casual sex might actually be a source of empowerment. For example, Jennifer assures Needy that there's no reason to be shy around the members of the band Low Shoulder: "They're just boys, morsels. We have all the power." She then grabs Needy's breasts, telling her they're like "smart bombs. Point them in the right direction, and shit gets real." In the same scene, Jennifer says she will manage to procure drinks even though she is underage by playing "Hello Titty" with the bartender. Jennifer seems emblematic of the most optimistic interpretation of female self-objectification: she is aware of her sexualized role in society but sees it as a source of potential power rather than a detriment.<sup>15</sup>

In the beginning of the film, Jennifer is likeable and funny, perhaps a bit shallow but forgivably so. And Needy, our sympathetic point-of-view character, seems to value her as a true friend. Since she only becomes a monster because of a supernatural event beyond her control, it might seem that the film is not critiquing her sexual behavior per se. After all, Jennifer is a positive character while she is just having casual sex with men; what makes her monstrous is her need to literally kill and consume men, and this is a side-effect of her transformation into a demon, a transformation that comes not of her own volition but rather at the hands of men. However, I argue that regardless of the fact that the film seems to treat Jennifer's penchant for casual sexual encounters without judgment at the beginning, criticism does come in retrospect. While we first assume that Jennifer's monstrous tendencies are due to her metamorphosis, by the end of the film it is clear that the seeds of this behavior existed all along and that her actions as a demon are not really all that different from her behavior

as a teenage girl. The demon plot of the film merely offers a way to dramatize the causes and consequences of Jennifer's problematic sexual behavior and masks what could be seen as a somewhat anti-feminist indictment of casual sex and its female proponents.

Here again we therefore see divided impulses. Jennifer's Body wants to treat Jennifer as a sympathetic victim, but only according to the logic that "normal" girls don't want casual sex; since Jennifer does, something terrible must have happened to her to make her no longer a "real" girl—thus, Cody's desire to present Jennifer as "a product of a culture that pressures girls to be skinny, beautiful and just like movie stars." But this aim is at odds with Cody's other goal to "subvert[] the classic horror model of women being terrorized."<sup>16</sup> In making Jennifer—a teen who engages in casual sex—a monster, the film in fact promotes a rather anti-feminist idea: that girls who desire where they do not love are horrific. Once she becomes a demon, Jennifer's desire for casual sex becomes literally monstrous, associated as it always is with the slaughter of innocent men. And when we learn that Jennifer-as-demon is not really so different from Jennifer-as-girl, our formerly positive of Jennifer is erased. The film ultimately expresses both sympathy (it's not Jennifer's fault she's a monster) and revulsion (but she's still a monster, so we'll have to kill her).

As with Louisa, the inciting event that turns Jennifer into a monster is depicted via the cinematic iconography of rape, though in this case a pre-rape rather than post-rape image. Although she went to the concert with intentions of "hooking up" with a member of Low Shoulder, instead she becomes a pawn in the band's diabolic schemes. Jennifer believes herself to be in control of her casual sexual encounters, but the film implies that her behavior will eventually place her in harm's way. During the Low Shoulder concert, it becomes clear that the band members can access supernatural powers. Once they have chosen Jennifer to be their virgin sacrifice, they are able to lull her into a trance while they play and also cause a fire to spontaneously break out in the club. When the lead singer comes to Needy and Jennifer's aid, he encourages Jennifer to drink from his beverage, practically pouring the liquid down Jennifer's throat. The drink seems to deepen Jennifer's trance, and she willingly allows herself to be led off to the band's van, despite Needy's hearty protests and warnings. The final image of Jennifer seated on the floor of the van before the singer slams the door shut is of a confused and frightened girl, one about to be gang-raped by an entire band, not one happily exercising her sexual freedom.<sup>17</sup>

Though the scene constructs Jennifer as a victim, our sympathy for her quickly diminishes as we realize that her demonic behavior is only a dramatic extension of her previous character. Certainly, Jennifer's propensity to objectify and metaphorically consume men was a pre-existing condition. She refers to men she desires as "salty" and as "morsels," both of which emphasize their consumability. When Jennifer's current lover approaches her at the Low Shoulder concert, she grabs his crotch in public, causing him noticeable embarrassment. Moments after, when Needy and Jennifer see an Indian

exchange student they know, Jennifer muses, “I wonder if he’s circumcised. I always wanted to try a sea cucumber.” Though these moments are sources of humor, they still confirm that Jennifer’s propensity to view men as consumable objects existed before she was turned into a demon. When she was “just” a teenage girl, Jennifer consumed men sexually. When she transforms, her sexual consumption becomes literally cannibalistic and thus is more clearly marked as horrifying.<sup>18</sup> The film launches its critique against casual sex by showing that Jennifer-the-monster is only a more extreme version of Jennifer-the-girl.

The film helps us draw parallels between Jennifer’s casual sex encounters while a girl and her demonic behavior, for Jennifer doesn’t simply eat men; she seduces them first, even though there is no need for her to do so. These seductions resemble initiations of casual sex and are depicted in the film as repugnant. The men she seduces legitimately crave intimacy, and she treats them like sexual objects, so much so that, were she a man, we would find her behavior highly offensive. As a result, Jennifer’s desire for sex despite her partners’ discomfort renders her monstrous even before she eviscerates and devours them. And because the men openly express their discomfort, we cannot excuse her behavior by supposing that they might not mind being objectified by attractive women. Contrary to the popular stereotype of the teenage male, the boys in this film are far from comfortable with Jennifer’s advances. The first victim we see her kill, Jonas, is grieving the loss of his best friend (killed by the fire that broke out at Low Shoulder’s concert) and is bewildered by Jennifer’s inappropriate advances during his time of mourning. Jennifer’s next victim, Colin, is also bothered by her desire for sex with so little intimacy. “Do you even know my last name?” he asks when she makes her sexual intentions clear.

To further emphasize the horrific nature of Jennifer’s behavior, her seduction and brutal murder of Colin is spliced with scenes showing Needy and Chip making love. Sex is obviously a new experience for them, but although they are somewhat nervous and clumsy, they are clearly comfortable with each other. In addition, both are equally concerned that the experience be pleasurable for their partner. When Chip pulls out a condom, Needy reads the package. “Slippery Swirl?” she asks. “Yeah,” he answers, “it’s supposed to make it feel good for the girl.” They are very intimate during intercourse, constantly kissing, making eye contact, and smiling happily at each other. The contrast between the two sexual encounters makes Jennifer’s behavior seem all the more grotesque. Cody and Kusama overtly embrace sexual freedom and certainly the film doesn’t fetishize virginity. However, it does idealize sex as an intimate experience to be shared by two people in a committed relationship.

Cody’s statement that Jennifer is “a product of a culture that pressures girls to be skinny, beautiful, and just like movie stars,” a hearty feminist soundbite if there ever were one, suggests that her film examines the ways in which the media has trained the girl to seek self-value through sex appeal. Certainly, the title of the film seems to invoke this feminist angle as well: it may be Jennifer’s body that we see, but in the end all we do see is her body; she may

have participated in her own objectification, but in the end, she is still objectified. However, if this theme is present in the film, it is not investigated in much depth, for we see nothing of the causes of Jennifer's superficiality, only its off-putting effects. For example, while making Jennifer a demon might seem to make her need to feed on men necessary to her survival, what happens to Jennifer when she doesn't feed is somewhat unclear. At one point, she goes a month without and the worst that seems to happen to her is that her complexion becomes dull and blemished and her hair loses its healthy sheen; in other words, as Jennifer herself says, she begins to look like one of the "normal girls." While the film could be suggesting that Jennifer needs to consume men to feel attractive because the larger culture has told her this is the sole source of her value, all we see is a girl committing brutal murder just to be pretty.

Likewise, we could see Jennifer's need to compete with Needy as another unfortunate result of cultural pressure, but the film does not examine the causes of this behavior so much as its distasteful effects. The first evidence that Jennifer is killing off men who show interest in Needy occurs when Needy says that Colin is "really cool"; Jennifer then immediately makes plans to meet up with him. Eventually, Jennifer even sets her sights on Chip, whom she attempts to seduce by inventing an elaborate lie about Needy being unfaithful. Her scheme works momentarily until Jennifer tells Chip, "Say I'm better than Needy." Chip then rejects Jennifer, which causes her to attack and eventually kill him. In the end, Jennifer is exposed as not only a poor friend but also as a girl whose seeming self-possession belies a lack of confidence. The implication is that Jennifer may be self-assured about her attractiveness but also suspects that the characteristics for which she is valued are superficial and fleeting and that the qualities Needy has will earn her true regard from the opposite sex.

The conclusion to the film reveals that Jennifer began competing with Needy long before she was a demon. Early in the film, Needy tells us, "People found it hard to believe that a babe like Jennifer would associate with a dork like me. Sandbox love never dies." The suggestion seems to be that Jennifer and Needy's friendship supersedes the high school code that prevents students of different popularity from socializing. But as the film progresses, we find evidence that Needy's perception of the friendship is flawed and that Jennifer maintains their friendship because she sees Needy as inferior and therefore unthreatening. For instance, when Needy agrees to go to the Low Shoulder concert with Jennifer, Jennifer tells her to "wear something cute." In voice-over narration, Needy explains, "'Wear something cute' meant something very specific in Jennifer-speak. It meant I couldn't look like a total zero, but I couldn't upstage her either." another point, we are given a flashback to Needy and Jennifer playing in the sandbox, which Needy alluded to earlier. "I'll be Perfect Prom Betty, and you be her," young Jennifer says, showing Needy an ugly doll. "Why do I have to be Ugly Ashley?" young Needy asks. Cody would have us believe that the film presents Jennifer as a victim of forces that make girls feel that their only asset is their beauty. Though it's not at all impossible that Jennifer would have learned this

behavior at so young of an age—perhaps even through dolls—the film never spends any time developing this line of thinking.

But the most poignant and yet subtle indictment of Jennifer's attitudes toward sex occurs toward the end of the film when Needy attacks her, seeking to avenge Chip's death. Jennifer hasn't fed for some time and thus is in a weakened state. They struggle and for a moment Jennifer's supernatural ability to levitate momentarily gives her an advantage. But Needy rips from Jennifer's neck the heart-shaped Best Friends Forever necklace that she gave her, and Jennifer suddenly drops down to the bed, giving Needy a chance to bury a box-cutter in Jennifer's heart. "My tit," Jennifer says as she dies. "No, your heart," Needy responds. A comic exchange, it underlines how valuable Jennifer has come to believe her sexual body is: she will die because her breasts have been damaged. Needy's response also cleverly encapsulates Jennifer's central flaw: she has denied the emotional component, the heart, believing that body is enough, but it is ultimately the heart without which she cannot survive.

The suggestion is that Jennifer becomes monstrous because she has been treated as an object that is only useful in sexual terms: a body and nothing more—as is symbolized by Low Shoulder's treatment of her. Though Jennifer participates in her objectification, even enjoys it, we are supposed to believe that ultimately that behavior is due to low self-esteem rather than desire. But without investigating the supposed causes of her esteem issues and only focusing on its manifestations, the movie only succeeds in making Jennifer all the more horrible and deserving of execution at the hands of the good girl, Needy. Were the ingredients of supernatural horror removed from Jennifer's Body, we would be left with a fairly straightforward narrative about a superficial girl who becomes monstrous when she seeks self-value in casual sexual relationships and allows her competitiveness over men to ruin her friendships with women. These traits alone would make her unlikeable, but the film doubly ensures our loyalties by literally turning Jennifer into a monster.

As examples of the monstrous schoolgirl narrative, *The New Daughter* and *Jennifer's Body* thus serve as parables for the teenage girl who engages in sexual encounters, casting her as a victim of male abuse but one whose monstrosity ultimately warrants her destruction. In turning their sexual teen girls into literal monsters, the films justify an ultimately unsympathetic treatment of them and simultaneously preserve the image of the "true" teenage girl from contamination: if a girl acts like Louisa or Jennifer, it must be because she has been corrupted beyond the point of girlhood. And yet while such girls are treated as victims (of the media, of men), co-existing with this overt sympathy lies a disgust and resentment that seeks expression as well.

I chose to discuss *The New Daughter* and *Jennifer's Body* because they provide a manageable sample set but also, because they are so divergent, I hoped that together they would also suggest that the conclusions I come to in this essay would hold true for a far broader range of films than could be covered in this essay, all of which could be considered versions of the monstrous schoolgirl

narrative. Certainly *Orphan*, also released in 2009, explores the unsanctioned sexual desires of a young girl who develops improper feelings for her adopted father and who can be guiltlessly dispatched when revealed to be a 33-year-old serial murderess with hypopituitarism. Other films have employed the supernatural machinery of witchcraft to transform a girl craving the attention of boys into a monstrous creature. Still another set of films that cannot be labeled straightforward horror simply associate teen girls who engage in casual sex with violence, such as in *The Hole* (2001) and *Pretty Persuasion* (2005).

I do not mean to imply that critiques of casual sex for teenage girls are necessarily wrong. What I would resist, however, are general claims that the teenage girl always lacks agency during these encounters and that they are necessarily destructive. Such claims are problematic for they imply that girls are incapable of enjoying a sexual encounter void of romantic commitment, that girls are unable to recognize and resist the ways in which they are objectified by the media or by men, and that girls will be irrevocably harmed by sexual experiences not entirely sanitized of ambivalence or confusion. Because the ideological work performed by horror movies is so insidious, operating on our emotions rather than our reason, it is important that we make sure we are cognizant of the subconscious messages they are sending.

## Notes

1. You can view the trailer at the film's original website: <http://www.scream4.com/official-scream4-video-trailer.html>. The line is spoken at approximately 1:25.
2. See, for example, James Garbardino's *See Jane Hit*.
3. Jennifer is a mix of vampire (in that she is seductive and feeds on flesh), zombie (in that she does not go for the jugular, but appears to disembowel and cannibalize her victims rather than simply drinking their blood), and demon. For the sake of ease, I will refer to her as a vampire.
4. In *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Catherine Driscoll argues that girls have served this role in Western culture as a whole, functioning as "an index of broad cultural changes and continuities" (3). In a 2007 *Newsweek* article, Kathleen Deveny similarly notes that the moral health of teenage girls is often linked to that of the nation. She asks, "[D]oes the rise of the bad girl signal something more profound, a coarsening of the culture and a devaluation of sex, love and lasting commitment?" She goes on to say that "We're certainly not the first generation of parents to worry about such things" and follows with a history of the ways in which the sexuality of girls has often been presented as an indicator of broad social decline.
5. Barbara Mikkelson has found little evidence that sex bracelets were anything more than a media-generated rumor, yet authors who wish to generate the impression that adolescents everywhere are engaging in casual sex discuss sex

bracelets as if a substantiated fact. Mother and daughter Silvana and Sondra Clark include the sex bracelets in *12 Going on 29: Surviving Your Daughter's Tween Years* (2007) among evidence of the nefarious ways that “the media are encouraging tweens to spend their money (or their parent’s money!)” (52). In *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture*, Patrice A. Oppliger acknowledges that most girls who wear the bracelets likely do not perform the sexual acts they denote, yet she still claims that girls wear them because of the sexual connotations they are rumored to have: “Although adults take the color scheme more seriously than the kids, it shows how sexually aware the kids are” (27). Without overtly refuting the verity of sex bracelets, Dorian Mitchell in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* describes the anxiety they’ve caused as a “sort of moral panic” (531).

6. Cathy Young argues that the “rainbow parties” scare was heightened by an episode of Oprah Winfrey, during which expert Michelle Burford substantiated the rumor primarily through hearsay and gave no hard proof. It is Burford that Patrice Oppliger solely relies on in *Girls Gone Skank* to support her claims that “[g]irls reported having ‘rainbow parties’” (27). The release of a fictional book aimed at young adults entitled *Rainbow Party* (2005) only served to increase the hype, even though as Tamar Lewin points out, there was little evidence that such parties actually occurred. Ariel Levy agrees that they are more likely an urban legend, “more like unicorns than like typical Friday nights” (139).

7. For a list of other stories, see Chapter Five, “Pigs in Training,” of Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, especially pp. 139-41.

8. Rosalind Gill’s *Gender and the Media* (2007) does an excellent job of outlining the various facets of this debate as well as the major voices in that debate.

9. We don’t actually witness either’s death, but John’s proximity to a huge explosion and the final image of mound walkers descending upon a solitary Sam leaves little hope for either’s survival.

10. In *Watching Rape*, Susan Projansky discusses the “standard crying-in-the-shower shot” that cues viewers “that rape did, in fact, take place” (109).

Elsewhere, she refers to the “post-rape shower/bath trope” (181).

11. Several key images from the film, including an image of a mound walker, can be found at <http://movietalkmovie.blogspot.com/2011/06/new-daughter.html>.

12. The film’s conclusion is dramatically different from the short story on which it is based, “The New Daughter” by John Connolly, published in the 2005 collection *Nocturnes*. In that story, Louisa is alive and kicking at the end and waiting for an opportunity to get to Sam and thus give her father “a new son” as well (118).

13. The film does imply that John’s initial concern for his daughter is motivated in part by his reluctance to lose his “little girl,” who once loved him above all others. One scene shows John wistfully watching old videos of a much younger Louisa in which, clad in a pink shirt with barrettes in her hair, she is the picture of innocence, sweetly smiling, waving, and innocently flirting for the camera, which we can assume is being held by her father. As he confesses to Cassandra, “One minute she’s my little girl, and the next minute she’s telling me to”—here he

drops his voice to a whisper, as if announcing something really scandalous—“screw myself.” John’s sense of loss has much to do with the fact that his daughter is no longer his unwavering devotee.

14. See Valenti’s *The Purity Myth* for descriptions of “purity balls” in which a daughter literally signs over her chastity to her father for safe-keeping, a trend that is not only on the rise but which also receives public funding.

15. Susan Hopkins, for one, has pointed out this possibility: “Certainly girls and young women who are profiting from their own sexualised images cannot always be understood as oppressed or unenlightened victims” (36). She adds later that “the (post)feminist Power Girl gives as good as she gets—she uses others and is used. She offers a disturbing but honest interpretation of the wider Western culture, which depends on human objectification. . . . Instead of fighting commodification, she uses it to suit her irrepressible self-interest” (81).

16. This feature of the film is not necessarily feminist. In fact, it’s not even original: countless movies have made the sexually-obsessed teen girl a source of horror when she becomes violently obsessed with the object of her affection, among them *Poison Ivy* (1992), *The Crush* (1993), *Swimfan* (2002).

17. The scenario could also symbolize that Jennifer has been given some sort of date-rape drug.

18. A gallery of images from the film, including a visual of Jennifer-as-monster, can be found at <http://cinema.theiapolis.com/movie-OBTR/jennifer-s-body/gallery/jennifer-s-body-1020688.html>.

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