

# ***THE EXORCIST* (1973) AND "SATAN SAYS" BY SHARON OLDS (1980)**

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**The following pages examine themes from the film *The Exorcist*. After an analysis of the chosen themes within the film there is an examination of the similarities and differences of the poem "Satan Says" to the themes found in the movie, as well as consideration as to how the poem can be read as a response to one of the most famous movies in the U.S..**

This project is brought to you by Bean Rodriguez  
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# SATAN AND REGAN: *THE EXORCIST*

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## Chosen Themes:

**SEXISM**

**CHRISTIANITY**

**PURE BODY**

**NO FATHER**

**SEX**

**"All the women... are passive, helpless and lost in a cruel world without male help and guidance" (McCormick).**

Regan and her mom, Chris MacNeil are without a father and husband, respectively. The only prominent male characters in the movie are there to aid the mother and daughter; it is implied that they cannot fix anything without male assistance. The mother sees many doctors, Lt. Kinderman shows in attempt to solve the investigation of Burke Denning's death, and Father Karras and Father Merrin all arrive before anything is fixed.

## SEXISM

The movie suggests that the women, and the mother specifically "needs a man to lean on" (McCormick). Nothing can be done without a man.



"Religious people have either hailed it as a reaffirmation of the power of Good over Evil or condemned it as downright blasphemy, charging that a good God would never allow an innocent child to suffer so, to behave so obscenely, at the hands of a demon." (McCormick).

## CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is certainly not absent from the end of the film, but one might say that the degradation and apparent opposing actions of the religion in the beginning is what makes it present. Satan has power over the girl, and forces her to do and say obscene things, including penetrate herself sexually with a cross. Scenes like that make it difficult to say Christianity is absent when it is clearly referred to, even if in a corrupt way.



"Christianity itself has often fostered a bad...image of women...who do not conform to the passive, servile and virgile prototype of the Blessed Mother Mary" (McCormick). This perspective makes Regan and her mother depicted as anti-christian because they never gave up or into Satan's presence, even though that seems like it should be a Christian action.

"Twelve is the age of puberty, an age when demon of sex enters the bodies and minds of most girls" (Beit-Hallahmi).

## PURE BODY

"Not just a case of possession and its cure, but also a tale of purity temporarily lost and (temporarily?) regained" (Beit-Hallahmi).

Regan's body is temporarily taken over by a male demon at the time when her body would be changing anyway, but by changing in this manner with a man overpowering her, she becomes not only un-pure, but un-pure at the hands of an evil and corrupt patriarchal figure. Beit-Hallahmi explains "the demon representing evil, death, sex, and bad religion enters the body of the Good Daughter."

Regan's body is one of the most symbolic and transformative elements of the movie, but this also forces her body to become an object. She changes from an innocent young girl who wants a pony, to a bloodied, abused, puking, sex driven monster with the voice of the devil. She transforms when most girls would transform during puberty, but becomes something evil and obscene: the opposite of pure.



**"It is possible that the demon represents her father and the possession is her way of being reunited with him, or even letting him enter her. It is also possible that Regan feels guilty for her father's going away and the whole possession affair may be an attempt to bring him back" (Beit-Hallahmi).**

The lack of a paternal figure in the movie does not just apply to Regan; Father Karass does not have a father either. In fact there are no families within the film, other than those that come to the home for dinner, that have a father figure. Heterosexual relationships are not sustained by any of the main characters.

## **NO FATHER**

Some critics find that the movie suggests homosexual relationships through the absence of heterosexual relationships; however, I find this to be a bit of a leap since there not any concrete examples of homosexual relationships either. Regan does tell her mom to lick her bloodied crotch after stabbing herself, however, she says it in a man's voice so I do not think it is a strong enough example to justify homoerotic relations.

**"Heterosexual relationships do not lead to any permanent or happy matings." (Beit-Hallahmi).**

***The Exorcist* "can be seen as an extended rape fantasy. It is a sadist's delight, and the repellant torture of an innocent young girl by an unseen, powerful male entity cannot but be a real turn-on to brigades of woman-haters unable to find happiness even sado-masochistic porno flicks in which the women seem to enjoy their degradation" (McCormick).**



## SEX

There are no explicit sex scenes but there are many times when the demon speaks through Regan and tells others to do sexual acts, and one of the most prominent scenes is when Regan stabs herself in the vagina with a cross. There is no presence of sex in a healthy light. Sexual comments are always from Regan after her body has been possessed, and are always commands, without a choice. The male demon is clearly in control and uses Regan to create sexual tension among others.

**"Sex in *The Exorcist* is described solely through jokes and perversions...does not include any description of normal sexual relations" (Beit-Hallahmi).**

# "SATAN SAYS" BY SHARON OLDS IN RESPONSE TO *THE EXORCIST*

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Themes:

SEXISM

CHRISTIANITY

PURE BODY

NO FATHER

SEX



# SEXISM

## SIMILIARITIES

- The girl speaking cannot get out of the box without the help of Satan. She needs him and is incapable of helping herself.

## DIFFERENCES

- The girl comes to realize she loves her parents and does not end up going with Satan, even though she said the things he told her to say.

## Response to *The Exorcist* - Does Not Need a Man:

The poem ends with a girl coming to her own decision about her love for her parents rather than needing a man to get her away from Satan. However, she only came to this realization after summoning Satan, so it can be argued she still needed a man to help her reach her decision. But, in the end she still ended up on her own, without a man there to support her.

# CHRISTIANITY

## SIMILARITIES

- A presence of Christianity can be argued by the absence of it, or rather through the presence of Satan - if there is a Satan there should be a God.

## DIFFERENCES

- There are no followers or practitioners of religion. Satan is the most "religious" figure of the poem. No priests arrive and the girl does not even bring up her own faith.

## Response to *The Exorcist* - Independent Survival:

By removing faith entirely from the poem, Olds makes the girl appear independent. She does not rely on faith, or her parents, she takes care of herself, but when desperate she reaches to Satan. Olds makes it appear that faith is not the only way to save oneself.

# PURE BODY

## **SIMILIARITIES**

- The girl is described as being in a musical box and compares herself to a "ballerina pin" (Olds). She is a stereotypical representation of an innocent ballet girl, much like Regan is a young girl wanting a horse.

## **DIFFERENCES**

- The girl in the poem does not have an abused, bloodied body like Regan. Her body is not controlled and taken over. She asks Satan to get her out of a box, but he is not inside her body or her space like he is inside Regan and her room.

## **Response to The Exorcist - Self Control:**

The girl in the poem does not become an object abused and used by Satan. Olds makes her in control of her own body, and her body is able to remain pure. She only has to say obscene things, but never has to do anything physically harmful or that makes her un-pure.

# NO FATHER

## SIMILIARITIES

- The girl does not have a good relationship with a father, or mother. In fact, it is implied that she is abused - Regan may not have been abused physically, but it is inferred that her father neglects her.

## DIFFERENCES

- The girl in the poem does not have a good relationship with her mother, but Regan does.  
- The absence of a father does not remove heterosexual relationships because she refers to when "they were / locked in the bed" (Olds).

## Response to *The Exorcist* - Relationships Exist:

By bringing a father, whether or not he is a good or present one, into the poem there is no more space for assumptions of homoerotic implications. Even all the things Satan makes her say have heterosexual stereotypes associated with them. In the bottom line, there is a presence of a relationship between a man and a woman that lasts, and that alone is a response to the doubt stemming from *The Exorcist*.

# SEX

## SIMILIARITIES

- There are no explicit sex scenes described.
- Sexual phrases are directed toward her parents, like Regan's are sometimes toward her mother.
- Satan finds it enjoyable to have a young girl say sexual things.

## DIFFERENCES

- The girl in the poem is not told to do any sexual acts, she is only told to say sexual things, mostly about her parents.
- The girl is not used as a physical object sexually.

## Response to *The Exorcist* - Not an Object:

Olds does not make the girl a sexual object. She makes her a girl seeking help who almost gives up her soul, but finds out that love can be enough, that it is okay to feel pain and hate and love at once. The girl is not used for a man's pleasure, or at least she is the one who gains power over him and has the strength to turn him away in the end, and she does this without a man's help.

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