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FEAR, POWER, & TEETH (2007)

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## Fear, Power, and Teeth (2007)

**Literature Review**

*Vagina dentata* is the myth of the toothed vagina; in most iterations, it serves as a warning to men that women's vaginas must be conquered to be safe for a man's sexual pleasure (Koehler, 2017). The *vagina dentata* myth has been carried forth from ancient ancestors in numerous cultures all over the world (Koehler). It is one of many destructive cultural myths that guides discourses about sex and women's bodies. In this paper, I explore a recent articulation of the myth, the 2007 film *Teeth*, and I argue that in this film, the *vagina dentata* is made more complicated. While some audience members might read the film as a warning to men about women's potential destructiveness, to others, the film represents the *vagina dentata* as a means for a young woman to fight back against rape culture while also offering a scathing critique of the purity movement prevalent throughout the early 2000s.

In the early 2000s, the purity movement swept across the nation; one of its goals was to address the oversaturation of sex in the media (Strange, 2007). The purity movement was based on the rejection of the sex-obsessed culture in the US and its influence became so vast that public schools across the country began to teach abstinence-only sexual education (Strange). As of March 1, 2016, only twenty-four states and the District of Columbia are required at the state level to teach sexual education (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016).

While the purity movement dominated much discourse around sexuality in the 2000s, in 2018, a new movement developed and thrust sex back into the social spotlight. The #MeToo movement spread across the US in a matter of hours; it provided victims of sexual assault and rape a public platform to clearly illustrate the damages rape culture bring about (Garcia, 2017).

Rape culture is not the fault of any one person, but it is the product of repeated engagement in rhetoric which propagates myths about sex, consent, and women's bodies. Destructive myths about rape and the ownership of women's bodies, such as the *vagina dentata* myth, underpin the ways in which we understand and think about sex and sex-related topics (Beard, 2017). *Teeth* (2007) is a film which addresses the purity movement and abstinence-only education in a blunt, tongue-in-cheek fashion which alludes to their influence on cultural perceptions of sex, consent, and the ownership of women's bodies. *Teeth* (2007) uses the myth, *vagina dentata*, to illustrate these concepts. While *Teeth* (2007) is now over one decade old, US culture's current discourses toward sex remain critique-able and relevant to the film.

### **The Purity Movement & Abstinence-only Education**

The purity movement is rooted in Evangelical Christianity; the purity movement rejects the overtly-sexual nature of US culture, which exploits far more women than men (Strange, 2007). According to Bulgar (2008), the purity revolution is one of the largest social movements in recent history to be led by teenagers. In a cultural establishment that is infused with sexualized images, the purity movement emerged in the form of a sexual counter-culture (Strange, 2007). *Teeth*'s heroine, Dawn, is an evangelist for the purity movement. The film's writer, director, and producer, Mitchell Lichtenstein's decision to write Dawn as an abstinence-preaching teen was made in response to the prevailing use of abstinence-only sex education.

Yet, for a movement that seems like an obvious outcast of society, members of the purity movement have found benefits to their counter-culture associations (Strange, 2008; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Gross, 2018). First, the purity pledgers enjoy the uniqueness that pledging abstinence contributes to their identity. Bearman and Brückner found that teenagers only found their pledges to be meaningful in contexts where abstinence is at least somewhat abnormal.

Second, pledgers are told that once a chaste couple is bonded in matrimony, their sexual union will be glorious, active, and permanently exclusive (Gross). Third, the purity movement has ties to the federal government and reaps benefits from its association (Gross). Rather than being outcast from society and society's decision-making processes, the purity revolutionaries benefit from an enormous wealth of political agency, spanning government policy, education, and media access (Rose, 2005). In the decade preceding the release date of *Teeth* (2007), the federal government had spent one-billion dollars on abstinence-only sex education programs and community-based abstinence programs, such as *Choosing the Best*, *FACTS*, and *WhykNOw*. The purity movement has their friends in Washington, D.C., i.e. former president George W. Bush, to thank for support in spreading their agenda (Rose). In 2008, it was estimated that approximately one-third of all public school systems used abstinence-only sexual education programs (Kay & Jackson, 2008). And all the aforementioned programs require teens to make virginity pledges (Rose).

For young women, the pledges are often made to their father, who is considered the protector in families with parents who have traditional, heterosexual marriages (Gross, 2018; Baumgardner, 2007). The father is considered responsible for helping his daughter navigate relationships and culture, whereas without him, "pimp culture" will turn the young woman into a sexually-active sex object (Strange, 2007). For young men, pledging is an acknowledgment and an act of combat against male sexual weakness, and pledge groups provide external social support to help keep their masculinity balanced between beastly and sacred (Gross, 2018; SIECUS, 2005).

Masculinity and femininity are also major themes within the purity movement, which demands that traditional gender roles be reinforced alongside chastity. In her interview with

National Public Radio, author of *Pure* and former purity group member, Linda Kay Klein (2018) explains the importance of gender roles to the purity movement, “[W]omen and girls are expected to be hyper-feminine, supportive followers of men and boys who are expected to be hyper-masculine leaders, supportive and loving leaders, but leaders nonetheless.” And if either the man or the woman or the girl or the boy strays from their gender expectation, for example, if the woman leads too much or the man becomes her follower, the idea is that the whole picture topples (Gross). For the purity movement, there is no grey area—there are only two genders recognized, female and male. No other genders, i.e. agender, would work within the confines of the system in which females are followers and moral beacons, and men are leaders with weak sexuality (Gross).

Members of this particular movement within American Christianity believe that our culture of liberal sexuality causes the US to have high rates of STIs, abortion, and teen pregnancy (Rose, 2005). The response of pledging abstinence is a powerful rhetorical move which Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen (1993) refer to as an agitation tactic, involving “persistent, long-term advocacy of social change, where resistance to the change it also persistent and long-term” (p. 3). These sexual revolutionaries see themselves as the last remnants of morality in a world of “dangerous, boundless sex” and they are proud of their pledging (Strange, 2007; Murray & Aguayo, 2008). These pledges, which are either written or made verbally, are called “virginity pledges” and are symbolized by a ring or a card (Baumgardner, 2007). And the purity movement members are proud of their virginity—they blog on virginity.net and wear T-shirts and underwear reading “Chastity Couture” and “I’m Waiting.” In 2007, the purity movement had grown so popular that ten percent of teenage boys and sixteen percent of teenage girls had pledged to abstain from sex before marriage (Strange, 2007).

Significantly, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health has found that over half of the same teens who pledge their virginity will have intercourse within a few years and ninety percent of those teens will have intercourse before marriage (Blumner, 2004; Baumgardner, 2007). Since sex is never discussed in abstinence-only sex education programs, teens are left to their own devices to learn about sex and their body (Gross, 2018). Perhaps one of the biggest issues with abstinence-only education are that it fosters ignorance about the human body and the reproductive system, ignores safer sex practices, demonizes natural human feelings and functions, and leaves space for a breeding ground of myths about sex and consent. One thing is sure, the purity movement and abstinence-only sex education are intertwined.

**Abstinence-only education.** Abstinence-only education is a strict curriculum, which is part of the cultural shift to avoid excess sexualization in US culture. Abstinence-only education has been used since 1982 as part of the purity movement and in that time, over two billion dollars in federal funds have been used to teach adolescents “the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity” (Gross, 2018; Planned Parenthood, 2019). Abstinence-only education must adhere to strict guidelines with the “exclusive purpose (of) teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity” (Planned Parenthood). Abstinence-only education programs are required to teach that “sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” and that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity” (Planned Parenthood). As if this definition was not already problematic due to the expectation of adolescents silencing natural human bodily feelings and desires, it also promotes a sex-shaming “values” agenda which was put forward by members of Congress who are opposed to comprehensive sex education which

prepares adolescents for lifelong sexual health. Abstinence-only education not only affects adolescents at a personal level, but it has also permeated popular culture and made a significant contribution to the continual development of rape culture in the US.

While the assumption is that teaching young adults not to have sex outside of marriage will stop young adults from having sex outside of marriage, scientific-based research suggests otherwise. According to Santelli (2017), the theory behind abstinence-only education makes sense, but when it comes to practice, abstinence-only education often fails. Abstinence-only education is so widely accepted as a failure that it was renamed Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) (Santelli). SRAE is more of a teen-coaching program that is focused on what not to do than what can or should be done.

The Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) found that Comprehensive Risk Reduction (CRR) programs, which “promote behaviors that prevent or reduce the risk of pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs),” have had favorable effects on teens (CPSTF). As a result of CRR programs, several adolescent behaviors were altered, including sexual initiation, the number of sexual partners, the frequency of sexual activity, use of protection (condoms, oral contraceptives, or both), the frequency of unprotected sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy (Community Preventive Services Task Force). So, while abstinence-only education does not help adolescents remain abstinent, CRR programs—programs that provide adolescents with all necessary information to prepare them for life—do help adolescents remain abstinent.

***Misrepresentation of health information.*** One specific reason for the failure of abstinence-only education is the inadequate curriculum used. Two reports released in 2004 demonstrated the dangers of abstinence-only education. California State Representative Henry A.



Waxman requested a report on the curriculum of abstinence-only education and found that eighty percent of the most popular curricula used by federally-funded abstinence-only programs were using propaganda about sex to further the agenda of religious groups. Abstinence-only programs were found to be distorting information about the effectiveness of condoms and contraceptives, misrepresenting the risks of abortion, blurring religion and science, treating stereotypes about girls and boys as verifiable facts, and knowingly misleading students with basic scientific errors (Committee on Government Reform, 2005).

Another report, compiled by Advocates for Youth in 2004, further demonstrated the vast damage caused by abstinence-only programs (Hauser, 2004). Advocates reviewed all available information about state-based abstinence-only programs and found that very few of the ten states with evaluations actually demonstrated any effects on their students; a few programs showed some short-term benefits of the abstinence-only curriculum, meanwhile, none of the programs showed any *positive* long-term effects on young people's attitudes, intention, or behaviors (Hauser). No programs demonstrated positive impacts on sexual behaviors over time (Hauser). Worse, evaluations from Arizona and Ohio found that adolescents' attitudes and intentions to use contraception declined between the pre- and post- tests. Hence, abstinence-only education not only fails to help teens remain abstinent, but it also has a negative impact on teens' willingness to use any form of contraception once they become sexually active (Arizona Department of Health Services, 2003; Frank, 2005).

***Oscillating patterns of sex education.*** After viewing the numerous negative effects of abstinence-only education, nearly half of US states denied abstinence-only education funding by 2009 (Santelli, 2017). Then in 2010, Congress shifted the focus of federal funding to scientific evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs, but it continued to fund abstinence-only

education as well (Santelli, 2017). Several mainstream health professional groups have come out in strong opposition to abstinence-only programs, recommending comprehensive programs that promote healthy human sexuality for all (Santelli, 2017). In recent years, abstinence-only programs have been reinstated; in 2017, Congress added more funding to abstinence-only education programs, bringing the annual total to \$90 million. To secure a future of federal funding, programs have rebranded themselves as “sexual risk avoidance” (SRA) programs. Following the increased funding for abstinence-only education/SRA programs, the announcement was made that funding would end for the Office of Adolescent Health’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, which uses evidence to test and evaluate old prevention programs.

**The purity movement’s influence on rape culture.** Rape culture has permeated public discourse since the 1970s and scholars argue that the normalization of violence toward women is rape culture’s driving force (Smith, 2004; Meier & Medjesky, 2018). Rape culture is normalized through rhetorical acts of violence, such as slut-shaming, denying the personal and social impacts of rape, and diminishing the seriousness of sexual crimes (Meier & Medjesky). Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (2005) maintain that rape culture comes from “a complex of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women,” (p. xi). Said violence exists on a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to rape (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth).

The purpose of the purity pledge is to protect teenagers from their bodies and their sexuality, but in fact, the purity movement and the culture surrounding it cause more harm than good. Not only do the majority of purity revolutionaries denounce their pledge and have

intercourse before marriage, but they retain knowledge and practices of traditional gender roles, which places a double standard on women and men.

The traditional gender roles, which women and men must conform to in accordance with the purity movement, tell society that women must always keep men “in check” (Grubb & Turner, 2012). When it is only the women’s task to act morally, men are not held accountable for their actions, therefore, women are blamed for being raped. The most common excuses for women being raped, i.e. “she was dressed too provocatively,” are related to the victim’s femininity. Grubb and Turner explain that dressing provocatively and drinking too much alcohol are examples of behaviors that go against traditional womanhood. Further, Glick and Fiske’s (1996) study, using Burt’s (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, suggested that men who hold sexist values tend to view women as either “good girls” or “bad girls.” “Therefore, women who do not behave in a manner consistent with the cultural stereotypes of a “good girl” will be more likely to be blamed for leading their partners on and will be regarded as deserving to be raped” (Grubb & Turner, p. 447). Bartle (2000) and Baghdadi (2013) both define corrective rape as the behavior of using rape as a punishment in an attempt to reinforce gender conformity. Corrective rape is used frequently, whether the rapist recognizes the intensity or the names of their behaviors.

Murphy (2017) published selected results of Smithyman’s 1976 psychology experiment in which he printed an ad in the newspaper requesting anonymous interviews with rapists by phone. Through his study, Smithyman found that men may describe behaviors which constitute rape and identify with convicted rapists, but they repeatedly deny that they have committed rape (Murphy). As discussed above, within the purity movement and the teachings of abstinence-only education, men are expected to be dominant leaders who need women to correct their weak

sexual morality. Within the discursive reality of the purity movement, the inability for men to identify their actions as sexual crimes and take responsibility for them seems consistent.

Considering the regularly-increased flow of funds into abstinence-only education, there appears to be a connection between the rise of abstinence-only education and the growing rape epidemic.

According to the Congressional Research Service, rates of violent crime have steadily decreased since the 1990s. However, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) annual Uniform Crime Report (UCR) claims that rape report rates have increased overall since 1990. Much of the 1990s and 2000s fluctuated, although rape rates jumped 7.54% from 2014 – 2015, 6.23% from 2015 – 2016, and 3.00% from 2016 – 2017. In 2017 in particular, reported rape crimes were the sixth highest yearly report of rape in a span of fifty-seven years (from 1960 – 2017) as reported by the FBI. The FBI does not specify the types of rape or any demographic information of the persons involved. What we do know, however, is that a large number of rapes go unreported. According to Rennison (2002), as many as 63% of rapes are not reported to police. Some survivor-victims are too scared to report the crime, some women are left confused as to whether they were raped or not, and still some others may feel shame or be embarrassed. There exist a multitude of reasons for people, the majority of whom are women, to conceal the crime that may have changed their life indefinitely.

### ***Vagina dentata***

As simultaneously one of the single most vital actions of living things and one of the most uncomfortable topics of discussion amongst Americans, sex is all around us. Even though we fear to talk about it and our culture is supersaturated with it, we have myths that we use to express our anxieties about it. From “masturbating will make your breast flat” to “orgasms expose women to danger,” American women are no strangers to myths about their own sexuality.

*Vagina dentata* is the ancient myth which says that vaginas may have teeth in them. Other than in myth, women do not have teeth in their vaginas, nor is there evidence of women with toothed vaginas throughout human history. However, there are myths in cultures all over the world with similar *vagina dentata* myths. While there may be some variance, all *vagina dentata* myths involve a man wanting to penetrate a woman and either suffering penile injury or being warned that he will suffer injury if he penetrates the woman's vagina without conquering the monster inside beforehand. The motivation behind *vagina dentata* myths also remains the same: men's fears of women's bodies.

The *vagina dentata* myth is often told as a cautionary tale, which was intended to warn men about unknown women and to discourage rape. In India, however, the myth has been used as a rationale for raping women; the idea remains that the monster inside a woman's vagina must be tamed, otherwise sexual intercourse could result in emasculation or castration (Reese, 2014). In patriarchal societies, public discourses still show favoritism toward the thoughts of men.

The *vagina dentata* myth is an example of how ancient societies depicted their fears about women, their bodies, and their power. The concept of the vagina being both a source of pleasure and the pathway through which new life enters the world is baffling, especially thousands of years before the age of modern medicine. Since the information known about the female reproductive system appeared to be of superhuman quality and there was little else known, these ancient stories were perpetuated as justification for controlling women (Koehler, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Beard, 2017, Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976).

Indian, Austrian, Greek, South African native tribes (Chaco and Guiana), Japanese native tribe (Ainu), New Zealand native tribe (Maori), Chilean native tribe (Mapuche), Russian, Native American native tribe (Ponca), and English cultures all have their own versions of the "toothed

vagina” myth rooted in fear of castration (Koehler, 2017). In India, where a rape is reported every twenty minutes, the myth is focused on the need to subdue women (Reese, 2014; Beard, 2017). The myth tells of the need for male partners or husbands to sadistically knock out vaginal teeth so that a woman was fit for marriage (Koehler). Some myths discuss the importance of defeating the toothed vagina for the sake of men or all of humanity, such as that of the South African tribes, Chaco and Guiana (Koehler). The South African tribes share a similar *vagina dentata* myth, which states the necessity for a heroic man to defeat the terrible mother (Koehler). In this theme, the mother’s vagina is inhabited by a toothed fish. As the story goes, the hero rips the fish out of the woman’s vagina and she becomes a woman once more, making sex safe for all men once more (Koehler). Even in this unique tale, the woman’s sexuality is dangerous and the man’s sexuality is a battle for control (Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976; Beard). In Maori mythology, the Goddess of Death, Hine nui te Po, is known to have a vagina which “has sharp teeth of obsidian and greenstone,” (Alpers, 1964, p. 67). Both Obsidian and Pounamu are igneous rocks, created through the intense heat and pressure of a volcano, suggesting that a woman’s vagina is also a source of intense heat and pressure (Alpers). While every culture has its own contextual details, the plot and the overall message remains the same: a woman with razor-sharp vaginal teeth is “conquered” by a male “hero” who uses violent force to tame the woman and/or her teeth, making sex safe for men (Koehler; Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen; Beard).

Some scholars puzzle over the fact that the human species goes to extraordinary lengths to punish and degrade half of its population. The men of many ancient and indigenous cultures held high respect for women, yet, it is easier to hate and reject what one cannot control. Kelly (2017) described the *vagina dentata* myth as a symbol of men’s burdensome fear of castration, which justifies the reinforcement of the male gaze. Patriarchal culture and pervasive myths about

manliness reinforce misconceptions about women, suggesting that they are sneaky, dangerous, plotting, seductive traps, and thieves of male livelihood when they refuse lives of subservience (Beard, 2017).

There exists little social science literature about the vagina, despite the mass amounts of literature on other pieces of the female body (Bell & Apfel, 1995). Further, the entirety of the woman's body is a continued source of discursive struggle for definition and control. Ussher (1989) explains that Western cultures, such as the US, associate horror, fear, and danger with women's bodies, which Beit-Hallahmi (1985) and Otero (1996) attribute to myths warning about the danger of vaginas. The cross-cultural myths about vaginas bring about some fascinating truths to humanity, and particularly Americans. Braun and Wilkinson (2001) identified and analyzed seven persistent representations of the vagina. Braun and Wilkinson believe that socio-cultural representations of the vagina provide a range of cultural resources for making sense of the vagina and its functions, and have implications for women's health and safety. Many cultures have representations of the vagina as weak, a passive receptacle for a man's genitals, disgusting, abused, as well as dangerous (Braun & Wilkinson). While all these descriptors are negative, only one idea about the vagina suggests action: the myth that the vagina is dangerous. Braun and Wilkinson's social constructionist perspective is aimed at understanding what socio-cultural representations of the vagina play a part in shaping and maintaining the vagina as a taboo topic. Of course, social construction also posits the idea that the contexts through which the vagina is understood are constantly in flux, requiring frequent negotiation. While changing perceptions can seem like a positive, the representations of vaginas in US culture are not merely "ideas," because they are tied to our material reality and they have real implications for women's overall

health (including sexual, reproductive, mental, emotional, and other forms) (Braun & Wilkinson; Beard, 2017).

In popular culture, the *vagina dentata* myth pops up periodically in various rhetorical forms. For instance, Adams (1984) discusses fiction, pornography, popular music, comics, and films containing the *vagina dentata* myth or references to it. Meanwhile, other studies by Crawford (2000) and Braun and Kitzinger (1999) highlight colloquial references in jokes and slang, respectively. Then in the film franchise, *Aliens* (1979/1986/1992/1997/2012/2017), the monsters' most notable feature is their large, dripping, trap-like mouth, containing rows of long, sharp teeth. The aliens in the *Aliens* films are the most obvious, but similar references are made in association with mythical creatures as well as existing animals which we know very little about. In *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006), the mythical Kraken is called by the Davy Jones, the deliverer of death, to destroy ships, primarily operated by men, on command. The famed series, *Jaws* (1975/1978) is about a large, powerful animal that lurks in the ocean and whose behaviors are not understood. *Jaws* uses its cavernous mouth, lined with rows of razor-sharp teeth to attack its prey; with little effort, *Jaws* destroys everything in its path. Such examples of the Kraken and *Jaws* represent the fears held toward anatomical mystery. The Kraken and *Jaws* are less understood for obvious reasons, i.e. one does not exist and the other is a dangerous aquatic animal, however, the vagina can be easily studied. For the vagina, knowledge is lacking because of the fearful representation that precedes the vagina.

Fear of women's bodies is undoubtedly reinforced by the misguided approach to sexual health which is used by abstinence-only education. For instance, the National Abstinence Clearinghouse states that "diagrams of internal organs are acceptable, but images or pictures of external genitalia in any form, whether diseased or healthy, can be detrimental to the health of



young men and women's minds." According to Kay and Jackson (2008), there is no evidence in support of the said claim and by concealing female anatomy in sex education programs is damaging to the health of women and girls. The lack of diagrams of the female reproductive system is harmful for numerous reasons, including the lack of evidence to denounce myths such as *vagina dentata*. Unfortunately, yes, even the laughable myth about vaginal teeth is not commonly understood as a myth.

### **The film, *Teeth***

*Teeth* (2007) is a social thriller film (M. Lichtenstein, personal communication, May 29, 2018) which was written, directed, and produced by Mitchell Lichtenstein. With aspects of horror and black comedy, *Teeth* incorporates a dated myth and highlights parallels in twenty-first century socio-politics. While *Teeth* was filmed and released during third wave feminism (1990's—2000's) in the US, its messages have proven relevant one decade later. The film's symbolism of women's oppression through religion, medical science, and education have resonated with audiences in light of political discourse. Some themes of the film appear to be even more relevant in today's public sphere than in 2007. Lichtenstein, as a man, explains that he cannot label his film "feminist," however, numerous sources revered *Teeth* as a "feminist cult film," (M. Lichtenstein, personal communication, October 1, 2017; Kale, 2017; Reese, 2017). Lichtenstein wrote the film with the intention of subverting the *vagina dentata* myth, because "the myth says very little about women, but a lot about men; that it's an expression of men's fear of women's power," (M. Lichtenstein, personal communication). Much like the *vagina dentata* myth, most audiences perceive "bad women" through the lens of the male gaze.

**Plot & characters.** Before outlining the plot, it is necessary to overview the film's main characters and their individual contributions to the plot of *Teeth*, as well as the development of

the protagonist into a “bad woman.” Through consistently negative interactions with men, Dawn learns and adapts, slowly growing out of her Eve-like persona that is pious, pure, domestic, and submissive to “a Lilith,” who rejects her past naivety as exhibited through traditional notions of womanhood. Out of respect for the symbolic survivor and refusal to humanize wrong-doers, in film or reality, the sexual predators in this film will be referred to in descriptive terms, rather than by name.

*Review.* *Teeth* (2007) opens with a pale blue sky before panning down to show the local power plant, followed by a home, and eventually focusing on the heroine and her family. The neighborhood in which Dawn lives is painted as the perfect community. This neighborhood feels safe and unassuming, which stands in juxtaposition to the nuclear power plant just a few miles from Dawn’s home.

The screen pans down to find Dawn (Ava Ryen Plumb) and Dawn’s stepbrother (played by Hunter Ulvog) as children playing in a kiddie pool while their soon-to-be-wed parents (Gwen, played by Laila Liliana Garro; Bill, played by Lenny von Dohlen) flirt behind them. Bill asks Dawn’s stepbrother to stop splashing his sister, to which Dawn’s stepbrother responds, “She ain’t my sister!” Bill is angry with Dawn’s stepbrother, yet, Gwen insists that Bill needs to cut Dawn’s stepbrother some slack. The parents’ discrepancy over Dawn’s stepbrother will continue throughout the film. Meanwhile, the couple is so involved in their conversation that they do not realize what their kids are doing. “Okay, let’s see yours now,” says Dawn’s stepbrother. A few seconds pass before Dawn’s stepbrother screams out in pain.

*Dawn, the protagonist.* Dawn (played by Jess Weixler) is an evangelist for the purity movement and an active member of a local church’s purity group. Dawn is clearly intelligent, personable, independent, and places a high value on integrity. At her local church group

meetings, she regularly speaks about her commitment to purity and converts new pledges at every meeting because of the connections that she makes with her audience. In her free time, Dawn daydreams about her future wedding, bedazzles t-shirts, rides her bike, and spends time with her best friends, Kim (played by Vivienne Benesch) and Phil (played by Adam Wagner), who also attend her church. Dawn lives with her mother, Gwen, her stepfather, Bill, and her stepbrother. A decade after the opening kiddie pool scene, Dawn speaks at a local church function in support of purity rings. “Keep your gift wrapped!” she says.

Dawn’s obsession with purity and her involvement in the church group stem from her repressed memory of being assaulted as a small child. Regardless of her sacred vow of abstinence, Dawn is duped and sexually assaulted by several men that she should have been able to trust. The following male characters are listed and described in the order that they hurt Dawn.

Dawn’s best friends, Kim and Phil, are also regular attendees of The Promise, the Christian abstinence group. At this purity meeting, Dawn meets her first love interest (Hale Appleman). The four begin to go out as a group, but Dawn promptly ceases dating when she begins having sexual dreams about The First. Dawn and The First mutually agree not to see each other again because their attraction to one another is challenging their promise of abstinence.

*The first.* He represents Dawn’s firsts as well as the exploitation of women’s bodies by the justification of God and popular Christian beliefs. “The First” was Dawn’s first crush and the first boy she ever dated. The First wanted to be the first for other things too; he was the first boy Dawn got intimate with, and the first boy who had non-consensual sex with Dawn. They meet for the first time at a purity ring talk. Dawn gets lost mid-sentence when she gazes upon the First. After seeing the First’s red purity ring on his finger, she feels that she can trust the First to be abstinent, making him an ideal partner for her. Several days following their conversation, Dawn

calls the First to meet her at a nearby lake to go swimming. The two make out in the water and eventually retreat to a nearby cave. The First kisses Dawn again, and she gets up to leave. The First refuses to take no for an answer and forces himself on Dawn.

Dawn panics and screams, but a frustrated the First aggressively shakes Dawn, smacking her head on the cave floor. With Dawn incapacitated, the First takes this chance to enter her. Dawn tries to push him off of her but accidentally bites off his penis with her vagina. The two scream in terror. The First manages to get away and Dawn leaves as fast as she can.

The following day, Dawn tries to speak at the promise ring meeting, but is kicked off the stage after mumbling to herself. The corrupt hero (Ashley Springer), a classmate, meets Dawn at the Promise Ring meeting, gives her a ride home, and asks her out on a date. In Dawn's post-trauma confusion, she is only able to mutter, "That's funny..." Dawn takes off for a bike ride to the site of her rape. She continues to the top of the cliff overhanging the lake and drops her purity ring. Before she leaves, Dawn notices that the First's Jeep is still there, so she does some investigating. Dawn goes to the swimming hole and revisits the cave. To her horror, Dawn finds Tobey's severed penis with a freshwater crab crawling on top of it.

Dawn goes home and begins researching the myth of the toothed vagina, *vagina dentata*, and she realizes that she may have this condition. Realizing that she needs to see a professional for help, Dawn rides her bike to a local clinic. When the doctor walks in, Dawn is visibly uncomfortable and admits that she has never been to a gynecologist before.

*The grotesque gynecologist.* The grotesque gynecologist is the first gynecologist Dawn ever sees and he represents the oppression that women experience from doctors and other medical professionals. The grotesque gynecologist pretends to be sensitive to Dawn's anxiety,

referring to both stirrups as “Mr. Sockie” and insisting that Dawn is going through puberty like any average teenage girl. While Dawn asserts that she has some sort of “adaptation” in her vagina, the grotesque gynecologist ignores her. He asks Dawn if she is sexually active and she shamefully responds with “yes.” Again, the grotesque gynecologist insists that nothing is wrong and asserts, “There is no judgment in this room.” The grotesque gynecologist then asks Dawn to move to the edge of the table to perform an exam.

The gynecologist (Josh Pais) takes this opportunity to remove his glove, slather his bare hand in lubricant, and “tests [Dawn’s] flexibility” by shoving his entire fist in her vagina. She yelps in pain, yet the gynecologist insists that Dawn needs to relax. The gynecologist notices something odd and asks, “What did you put in here?” In unbearable pain, Dawn panics and engages her teeth on the gynecologist’s hand, which is then stuck inside of Dawn. The two try to separate themselves; Dawn holds onto the exam table while the gynecologist fearfully yanks his arm. Once the gynecologist finally removes his hand, he’s missing four fingers. Dawn stands up and the gynecologist’s four fingers fall to the floor. Both the gynecologist and Dawn are horrified. Dawn, now having bitten off a gynecologist’s fingers, grabs her clothes and runs out. The gynecologist continues screaming and confirms Dawn’s suspicion that she has *vagina dentata*.

On her bike ride home, Dawn passes a police officer driving The First’s distinctively blue Jeep Wrangler. Dawn revisits the lake one last time to investigate and she arrives in time to see the police officers recovering The First’s body from the bottom of the lake. Distraught, Dawn returns home to find her sick mother collapsed on the floor. Dawn’s stepbrother and his girlfriend, Melanie (Nicole Swahn), are having anal sex in the next room over. Dawn’s mom is taken to the hospital and Dawn goes to the corrupt hero’s house in search of support.

*The corrupt hero.* The corrupt hero is a high school classmate who pursues Dawn for the majority of the film and he represents the attacker of large percentage of women who are raped by someone close to them. When the corrupt hero's friend takes notice of his crush on Dawn, he makes a bet with his friend, the corrupt hero, to sleep with Dawn. In health class, the corrupt hero questions the teacher about the sticker covering the female reproductive system in their sexual education textbooks. And when he does, another classmate makes jokes about the corrupt hero's sex life. The corrupt hero also attends a Purity Ring meeting to impress Dawn, which is unsuccessful due to her mental/emotional state and her current feelings toward the Purity Ring group. But after the gynecologist assaults her and she finds her terminally ill mother unconscious on the floor, she seeks comfort in the corrupt hero. Dawn goes to the corrupt hero's house, crying hysterically, and explains her situation, "I have no one else to go to..." (*Teeth*, 2007).

While in the bathtub, the corrupt hero brings her a pill saying, "My mom takes these for her nerves." When Dawn leaves the bath, her clothes are missing and the corrupt hero hands her a glass of champagne. Candles surrounding the room, Dawn nearly unconscious, the corrupt hero uses a vibrator to stimulate her. The two successfully have sex, and Dawn learns that her teeth do not engage when she is relaxed. The corrupt hero is convinced that he has conquered Dawn's teeth. The following morning, Dawn and the corrupt hero have sex once more. Mid-coitus, the corrupt hero has the audacity to answer his cell phone and boasts to his friend that he was in the middle of having sex with Dawn. In anger that she was part of a bet, Dawn bites off the corrupt hero's penis and leaves the corrupt hero to fend for himself, sighing, "Some hero..."

Dawn returns to the hospital and learns that her mother has passed away. Following receipt of the news, her stepfather, Bill, and Dawn's stepbrother's girlfriend, Melanie, meet her by coincidence. Bill bared a gushing neck wound from attempting to evict his son, Dawn's

stepbrother. Dawn's stepbrother had complained to his father that he still resents him for making Dawn his sister. Dawn's stepbrother's dog, Mother, attacks Bill at Dawn's stepbrother's command. Melanie confesses to Dawn that Dawn's stepbrother would not let Melanie help Gwen when they heard Gwen screaming, lying on the floor. Dawn decides she must take revenge.

*Dawn, the "bad woman."* After all these painful interactions, Dawn is hardly the same girl who preached abstinence. By this point in the film, she has been molested, assaulted, and raped twice, yet, she never harmed anyone intentionally. The term, "victim" is large and inclusive, and self-defined. Even though viewers may see Dawn as a victim, she has not defined herself as such. In its usual sense, "victim" is perhaps the most inappropriate label for these men; however, this is how they see themselves. Dawn may have carried out the actions which hurt them, yet their suffering is directly resulting from their treatment toward Dawn.

Dawn's final step in the transformation to the "bad woman" appears when someone close to her suffers and dies at the hand of pure patriarchal evil. Dawn then learns that her step-brother, Dawn's stepbrother, listened to Dawn's mother die, screaming for help. With this information, Dawn decides to take action and use her power. As a result of her recent experiences, she can see through the varied lenses of the patriarchy which kept her silent.

*Dawn's step-brother.* Dawn's stepbrother claims that he has been in love with Dawn since they were little kids. He is violent, crude, abusive, and creepy, and his bedroom is plastered with pornographic images of women and a sign that reads, "Who are you calling PSYCHO?" Dawn's stepbrother is portrayed as the epitome of bad men. Dawn's stepbrother had been refusing to engage in vaginal intercourse with his girlfriend, Melanie (played by Nicole Swahn) because he has an obsession with Dawn and her vagina. Dawn's step-brother also had a mean

Rottweiler dog, Mother, that he fed condoms to and trained to attack his father. Dawn's stepbrother symbolizes damaging qualities of the patriarchy.

At home, Dawn puts on makeup and a pretty white dress before going to her stepbrother's room. They begin to have sex and Dawn's stepbrother remembers what happened to him the last time he touched Dawn's vagina—his finger was bitten. Dawn's stepbrother realizes what Dawn is capable of at the same moment when Dawn bites off his penis. Dawn gets up and drops Dawn's stepbrother's penis on the ground. Mother eats Dawn's stepbrother's penis.

By the end of the film, Dawn has lost everything she once knew: the church exiled her, her friends abandoned her, her mother died, and nearly every man she trusted did her wrong. Dawn no longer knows what to believe. If schools refuse to educate students about women's bodies, gynecologists abuse their power to harm women, and "friends" use women as a means to an end, then what is the potential of a woman's happiness? Now that Dawn sees the truth about the treatment of women, she is incapable of returning to the life she once lived. Religion was her escape from the evils of men, and religion was elemental in her demise by destroying her ideas about love, friendship, and community.

Dawn gets on her bicycle with a backpack of necessities and begins her journey. Dawn does not make it far before having bike trouble, forcing her to hitchhike.

*The old man in the car.* When Dawn's escape is hindered by a flat bike tire that she is not able to patch, Dawn catches a ride from a stranger. The stranger drives until it's dark and Dawn has fallen asleep. Dawn wakes up at a gas station and looks at the stranger, an elderly man, who smiles suggestively and sticks out his tongue as far as it goes. Dawn responds to the old man's sexual advances by reaching for the door handle. The old man locks the doors of the car, giggles,



and suggestively licks his lips. Flustered and disappointed, Dawn sits in her seat silently. But then Dawn realizes that the old man wants the same thing as the first, the grotesque gynecologist, the corrupt hero, and her stepbrother. While most of the men she had harmed unintentionally, her teeth were merely fighting back against unwanted sexual advances.

Yet again, Dawn has found herself in an unfortunate situation in which she is forced to engage in some form of sexual contact with the “old man in the car.” This time, Dawn has an epiphany; she has a superpower to help her out of unwanted sexual encounters. With her new knowledge and feeling of empowerment, a mischievous smile glides across Dawn’s face and she turns toward the old man. The screen goes black.

### **#MeToo Movement**

In 2007, an American social rights activist and community organizer, Tarana Burke, began the “me too” movement to draw attention and support to the survivor-victims of sexual abuse that she worked with (Garcia, 2017). Burke’s movement may have started slowly because sexual violence was not a prominent theme in mainstream culture at the time; rather, the influence of the Purity Movement framed sexual violence as the fault of the victim and asserted that the victim must have broken their assigned gender roles. Rape culture thrived on themes of victim-blaming, rather than pointing to the education system which removed the discussion of safe, consensual sex from sexual education programs. As a result, rape culture forced victims, the majority of which were women, to hide their experiences out of shame. Even when victims reported their cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence, most cases went unsolved (Gramlich, 2017).

One decade following the birth of Burke’s #MeToo movement, actress Alyssa Milano brought the movement to attention with a tweet (see Figure 1). Milano used #MeToo to give a

voice to survivor-victims of sexual abuse, in response to the numerous accusations of sexual harassment and abuse made against Harvey Weinstein, a Hollywood producer. Milano's tweet rapidly became "a way for users to tell their experience with sexual violence and stand in solidarity with other survivors," (Garcia, 2017). Days earlier, Rose Gowan, an actress who accused Weinstein of sexual harassment, was locked out of her Twitter account for using the



public platform to speak out against sexual harassment in Hollywood (Garcia). Gowan's silencing was soon ended with the #MeToo explosion across social media with thousands of responses from others who had also faced sexual violence, making clear to Twitter and many Americans that sexual violence is a cultural problem (Garcia).

Milano's rhetorical move created a movement and built solidarity amongst several million women in a matter of hours. In twenty-four hours, Milano's #MeToo tweet had received approximately 53,000 comments which included personal experiences and "me too" (CBS News). In the same amount of time, #MeToo took over Facebook with 4.7 million users posting, commenting, and/or reacting to the new movement (CBS News). CBS News reported that 45% of Facebook users in the US had friends who posted "me too." Such visibility and support seems to have achieved its mission; as explained on JustBEInc, "One of the main goals of the 'me too' Movement™ is to give young women, particularly young women of color from low wealth communities, a sense of empowerment from the understanding that they are not alone in their circumstances." However, Burke and Milano's combined efforts became more than a support network; the #MeToo movement made space for women to share their stories with an empathic audience, who would not cover up or twist their story like rape culture and other sexist discourses have a history of doing. This counter-white-supremacist-patriarchal movement "demands centering marginalized communities in public discourse to heal individuals and highlight systems of oppression that sexual violence serves," (Rodino-Colocino, 2018). As proposed by Pellegrini (2018), the success of #MeToo may be the result of President Trump's election and history of misogynistic statements and assaultive behavior.

As the President of the US, Trump's behaviors and rhetoric have a continual effect on the socialization of US citizens. The way in which Americans view the world is painted by discourses, such as those which are molded by President Trump. When Trump brags about grabbing women by their genitals without consent, it reinforces that discourses and subsequent myths about sex which maintain rape culture. Considering the increased frequency of rape and other forms of sexual violence in the media since the 2016 election, the US is arguably in a state

of some sexual dystopia (Gilbert, 2018; Alter, 2018). Fortunately, the #MeToo movement has initiated a counter discourse. #MeToo has brought women together to share their experiences and find the necessary support to recover. For many, the mere idea that there are others who have also experienced traumatic sexual events provides a feeling of being seen and heard, which is sometimes the most devastating psychological aftermath of sexual violence. *Teeth* (2007) is an example of a film which speaks to the societal problem of sexual violence in US culture. As more discussion of sex, consent, and women's bodies penetrate public discourse, the more empathic Americans and viewers of *Teeth* may become.

Since *Teeth*, which was released in 2007, US culture has seen a significant increase in feminist dystopian literature as well, which seems to suggest that this movement is growing stronger. Scholars like Cook (2019) may be skeptical because the #MeToo uprising was only one year ago, but the growth of counter-rape culture artifacts helps to solidify the presence of the #MeToo movement as a continuous piece of US culture. So, it seems that #MeToo could be the beginning of the end of rape culture, and artifacts like *Teeth* (2007) can be used as teaching tools to move US culture forward.

### **Analysis**

*Teeth* (2007) is filled with thematic references to abstinence-only education and the purity movement, and it uses the *vagina dentata* myth to create a discussion on the ways in which a limited sex education program is damaging to society. While *Teeth* (2007) provides enough socially-relevant material to write a book, only the major themes which echo throughout the entire film will be discussed in detail. In aiming to show the social relevance of *Teeth* (2007) as a critique of US culture's discourses about sex, specific scenes will be used as examples to

discuss and debunk myths and misinformation. Below, major themes which *Teeth* directly addresses have been selected and are discussed in terms of the literature reviewed.

### **“Nonconsensual Penetration Is Not Rape”**

Dawn and the First are at the lake going for a swim. After Dawn thwarts the First's first attempt to get physical with her, Dawn swims off. The First sees that Dawn's headed toward the cave, the place “where people ‘you know,’” he bites his lip and swims after her. Dawn, in awe by the cave, climbs up onto the dry landing. Dawn sits down and wraps herself in blankets that were left there, which contain visible stains that are presumably from sexual bodily fluids. The First joins Dawn and begins to kiss her. The First begins to breathe heavily while kissing Dawn and lays down with her before pulling Dawn on top of him. In resistance, Dawn sits up and says, “Let's go back.” The First gets up and pulls Dawn back down to the floor of the cave to kiss her again. “We made a sacred promise,” Dawn reminds the First, but he ignores Dawn and continues. Dawn says, “Get off!” trying to push the First off of her. The First pulled his underwear down and says, “You don't have to do anything.” Now frightened for her safety, Dawn begins to scream “No. No! No, stop, damn it! Damn it! [the First], no!!” “I haven't jacked off since *Easter!*” the First retorts. “I am saying no! [the First] don't!” Dawn continues screaming. The First pushes Dawn's head down to keep her from defending herself and in the struggle, the First pushes her head into the floor of the cave. “Sorry...” the First apologizes for causing Dawn to hit her head. Dawn is only somewhat conscious when the First makes his move. The First pulls Dawn's bathing suit to the side and penetrates her.

This horribly violent scene is her first sexual experience as an adult. As a purity-pledger, she knows that it is her responsibility to stop sexual advances from men, but after doing everything that she could, she was unsuccessful. The shame of losing her virginity seems to be a

bigger disappointment to her than the fact that she was raped. Dawn and the First shared some kissing and touching, but it was very clear that Dawn did not want any further intimacy at the lake. Multiple times, Dawn swam away, tried to get up, pushed, screamed, and begged, but nothing stopped the First from taking advantage of Dawn.

As Blumner (2004) and Baumgardner (2007) found in their studies, approximately half of the adolescents who make purity pledges give in and have sex within a few years of making their pledge, and ninety percent have sex before marriage. It is considered rare for someone to remain abstinent until marriage, yet, abstinence-only education still maintains that abstinence is the best way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. It seems counterintuitive to consistently try to set unrealistic expectations because even those who dedicate their life to purity can fail. On the very next day, Dawn is shamed by her church.

A situation similar to this one served as the precipitating event, or the fuel, for the #MeToo movement. In October 2017, actress Rose Gowan was locked out of her Twitter account for using the public platform to speak out against sexual harassment in Hollywood after accusing Weinstein of sexual harassment (Garcia, 2017). Gowan was being silenced by Twitter for posting her accusations on the public platform which has enormous potential to reach across the globe. Gowan, like Dawn, was trying to speak out about a traumatizing event, and instead of receiving the necessary support, they were both alienated from their usual means of connecting with others in a public space.

### **Victim Blaming & Shaming**

The next morning, Dawn speaks at the purity ring group again. When she walks out on stage, she sees a much larger crowd than last time and they're chanting. Dawn tries to speak but

has trouble stringing ideas together. For every few words that Dawn manages to squeeze out, the crowd chants lines from the Bible.

“I’m here to talk about purity...” says Dawn.

“Purity--yes! She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man,” the crowd shouts in unison.

“I can’t make sense of it... is it? ... is it the Adam inside?” Dawn asks in confusion.

“Bone by bone, flesh by flesh,” the crowd chants.

“I don’t know... but there is something... there is something inside of me... that’s lethal!” exclaims Dawn.

“The serpent!” the crowd chants.

“I don’t know, I don’t know *what*. It. Is,” Dawn, trying to explain herself.

“The serpent beguiled me and I ate!” the crowd chants again.

The pastor takes over and gestures that Dawn should leave. He says, “I think what Dawn is getting at people, is exile from the garden.” Dawn’s friends, Phil and Kim look disappointed. The crowd chants, “the serpent!” repeatedly. “Though it was not part of God’s original plan, because of Eve and the Devil...” The pastor points to Dawn as she walks off stage.

The shame that the church places on those who admitted to having sex, or even masturbating, is a large piece of the problem. In an attempt to view the situation from the church’s perspective, it seems like Dawn’s pastor is upset that Dawn was not strong enough to resist the devil’s temptation. The pastor pointed to Dawn when he was talking about Eve and the devil, suggesting that she was beguiled by the devil too. Dawn did everything in her power to stop sexual contact from happening, but everyone was disappointed in her because abstinence-only education has different standards for men and women. Abstinence-only education tells

students that it is the woman's duty to stop sex from happening because men's morality and sexuality are weak. In other words, men are told that they will have urges but that it is not their responsibility to remain abstinent; women are then held accountable for their actions in addition to the sexual actions of their male partner.

When Dawn is exiled by her church, she is in crisis. The audience is led to assume that Dawn has been part of the church and the purity ring group for several years. As one of their speakers, she deeply believed in the purity movement, but once she hinted to the loss of her purity, she was asked to leave and no one tried to help her. Since the girl is considered the moral beacon in these heterosexual relationships, she is responsible for stopping unwanted sexual advances. So, for Dawn, it would not matter to her church that she was violently raped because it would be seen as her fault.

**Virginity is “a gift, a very precious gift...”** When the audience sees Dawn shamed by the church for being raped, they are reminded of the first time that Dawn was shown as a young adult. She is speaking at the purity ring group about what it means to be abstinent.

“We have a gift, a very precious gift... do you go around giving them to everyone on the street?” asks Dawn.

“No!” the crowd responds.

“No, then they'd be a hand-out! Girls, are you gonna give that to the first guy who buys you a big bunch of roses?”

“No!” the crowd responds.

“No way!” [Dawn giggles]



“And I’m not just talking to the girls. Guys, you have the same gift to give. Are you gonna give that to a girl who looks like she just stepped out of a music video?” asks Dawn.

“No!” the crowd shouts.

“No, you’re gonna save it for the mother of your children,” says Dawn.

In this scene, Dawn is instilling the idea that virginity is something special to be only given to someone you love. Specifically, that gift is not one to give to strangers or the first person of the opposite sex to show romantic interest. Dawn, of course, is talking about virginity and how special it is to wait until marriage. The idea is that waiting means someone can give their entire body and soul to the mother or father of their children. The concept of abstinence is acceptable, but the church’s relationship to abstinence is unhealthy. Dawn is raped and assaulted multiple times throughout the film, most of which she actively tries to stop, but it is still her fault that she lost her virginity.

### **Teaching Fear of Women’s Bodies in the Classroom**

In health class, the scene begins with the class looking at the male reproductive system and the teacher is moving on. “That is it then for the penis. Now, it’s time for the... for the... uh, the next page. [pause] The female... *privates*,” the teacher says. Meanwhile, Dawn is preoccupied drawing pictures of her dream wedding dress. “What’s it hiding?” asks the Corrupt Hero. The teacher responds, “The school district rightly order that it be concealed. A detailed diagram of the... of the...” The Corrupt Hero chimes in, “*vulva?*” The class giggles and the debate between the teacher and the Corrupt Hero continues.

“Why would they cover that up?” the Corrupt Hero continues to press the teacher.

“[sigh] That should be obvious,” the teacher responds.

“They showed the penis picture!” the Corrupt Hero argues.

“That’s different!” the teacher responds defensively.

“How so?” asks the Corrupt Hero.

[The teacher is speechless, unable to continue the debate.]

The Corrupt Hero’s friend says, “The sad thing is, [Corrupt Hero], you’ll probably never know.” The class giggles. Dawn speaks up, “I think I can tell you how it's different. Girls have a natural modesty. It’s built into our nature. So depicting the...” [While Dawn is talking, there is a diagram of the internal pieces of the female reproductive system behind her.] This time the class roars with laughter in mockery of Dawn. The First defends Dawn with, “They do!” Dawn and the First share a friendly gaze.

In this scene, it is clear that at least some of the students disagree with the teacher and the school district’s decision to conceal the female reproductive system. However, the Corrupt Hero is the only student to argue with the teacher about the issue. The Corrupt Hero points out that the school district permits the male reproductive system to be shown, including the internal and external sex organs. The National Abstinence Clearinghouse would argue that only internal diagrams are acceptable to be shown of either the male or female reproductive systems, meaning that the health class in *Teeth* is showing too much. On the other hand, Kay and Jackson (2008) found that while some programs exclusively remove the external diagrams of the female reproductive system, there is no evidence suggesting that display of the external diagrams is harmful.

### **Independent sex education research**

At home, Dawn submerges the page from her health textbook that contains the diagram of internal and external organs of the female reproductive system. While underwater, Dawn

slides off the gold sticker which was placed there by the school district. Dawn's eyes widen and her jaw drops in amazement. She looks down toward her genitals and back at the picture, still in awe. So, Dawn turns to her computer, searching for "adaptations" and "female genital mutation." Horrified by her discovery of the mythical condition called *vagina dentata*, she leaves to see a gynecologist.

Here, Dawn is taking her education into her own hands. As Santelli (2017) discusses, adolescents know that they need more information about their changing bodies than the abstinence-only education program will permit, and they know how to find more information. Unfortunately, adolescents may not know the best place to find information that is medically accurate, so it is best to teach all the necessary information in a safe classroom with all the necessary information to live happy, healthy lives (Santelli). Dawn took to the internet and her public library following her health textbook, which is an appropriate means of obtaining accurate information.

However, outside the confines of the film, *Teeth* (2007), in which the main character does have teeth in her vagina, there is a possibility that adolescents could arrive at the myth as a diagnosis for themselves or someone that they know. *Vagina dentata* is not real; it is not humanly possible to grow several rows of razor-sharp teeth inside of the vagina. So, in this scene, another danger of inadequate sex education is referenced: belief in myths and misinformation. For example, today, women in India are still raped on the justification that the monster that lives inside vaginas must be tamed before intercourse is safe for the man (Reese, 2014). Further, the #MeToo movement's success is indicative of the rape epidemic, which is fueled by the harmful discourses about sex, consent, and women's bodies in the US.

**Consent: Sex & Drugs**

When Dawn shows up at the Corrupt Hero's house, banging on the garage door, the Corrupt Hero abruptly wakes up from a nap with the book, "Pleasuring a Woman" laying open on his abdomen. The Corrupt Hero lets Dawn inside and Dawn hysterically tries to explain the situation that she has found herself in. Her mother has just died, she has nearly killed two people, and she has no one left that she can trust. The scene cuts to Dawn in a bathtub, filled with bubbles, and she appears to be calming down. The Corrupt Hero gives Dawn two pills and he says, "My mom takes these for her nerves." When Dawn emerges from the bathroom, she is only wearing a towel. "I can't find my clothes," she says, slurring her words. The Corrupt Hero deflects, asks her to sit down and gives her champagne. "This is how I always dreamt it would be," Dawn says before spilling her champagne on herself. Again, the scene cuts forward to Dawn regaining consciousness while laying in the Corrupt Hero's bed. As the camera pans outward, the audience sees that Dawn's towel is missing, and the Corrupt Hero is rubbing her breasts and masturbating her with a vibrator. Dawn smiles in pleasure and the Corrupt Hero gets a condom. Dawn and the Corrupt Hero begin to have sex and Dawn expresses her concern about the teeth. The Corrupt Hero laughs at first, but then reassures Dawn, "I'm conquering them... I'm... I'm the hero!" Dawn, still visibly intoxicated by the pills that the Corrupt Hero gave her, smiles and the two proceed to have sex.

The first time that Dawn has enjoyable sex is life-changing for her, but due to the circumstances created by the Corrupt Hero, it was still rape. Inadequate sex education has played out once again, but this time, independent research allowed Dawn to be raped with the use of drugs. The film does not indicate whether the Corrupt Hero intended to help Dawn or if he intended to rape her, but it does appear as though the Corrupt Hero is trying to be kind and

helpful when she first arrives. It is clear that the Corrupt Hero intends to have sex with Dawn when Dawn emerges from the bathroom and is unable to find her clothes, but we do not know for sure if the Corrupt Hero knew that what he was doing would classify as rape. And since sex is not discussed in abstinence-only education, neither is rape or proper consent. Sex, while one or more partners are intoxicated, is rape, but even in 2019, the concept of consent is still frequently misunderstood. Many people still struggle with what consent looks like.

Fortunately for Dawn, she seems to have a positive outlook on her most recent rape--at least from what is shown. For the first time following a sexual experience, she is looking in the mirror, admiring her body. Once, again, Dawn is utterly fascinated. She examines her newly-found curves and her breasts. This is a pivotal moment for Dawn in that she had never appreciated her body before. All she knew was that the female form was supposed to remain hidden. She believed as the church told her, that the sight of sexual organs would negatively impact her mental health. On the contrary, Dawn seems to be the most confident about who she is now that she has begun to explore her body and her sexuality.

### **Double-standard of Morality: “Boys Will Be Boys”**

The film starts with a pale blue sky, before the camera pans downward to a small house in a cozy neighborhood, with a family sitting on their lawn. The audience meets Dawn and Dawn’s step-brother, playing in a kiddie pool. Their parents are sitting nearby flirting, not paying attention to what happens in the kiddie pool. When Dawn’s step-brother splashes Dawn, Bill, Dawn’s step-father, tells him to stop. Kim, Dawn’s mother, tells Bill to “cut him some slack.” Dawn’s step-brother stops splashing and says, “Let’s see yours now.”

This scene sets the tone of the film. Dawn’s step-brother is told not to splash his sister, and immediately afterward, he assaults Dawn. All of the sexual violence in this film was caused

by someone who was aware that their actions were immoral or questionable, Dawn's stepbrother included. This is a societal problem. Like Murphy (2017) explains, men may claim that they committed certain immoral behaviors, such as non-consensual sex, but they mentally disconnect their actions from the words associated with crimes, such as "rape," "assault," and "harass." It seems as though a large contributor to the rape epidemic is that boys will be boys and repercussions are seldom served when men are sexually violent.

Dawn and her superpower are the solutions within the film reality of *Teeth* (2007). Dawn's body has an adaptation to correct the wrongs made against women; by castrating men, Dawn is creating a similarly traumatic experience as felt by the survivors of sexual violence. While violence is not the true solution to the problem, castration is used as a metaphoric loss of power. As Dawn eventually realizes, her teeth are an adaptation to protect her from the unwanted sexual advances of men; despite Dawn's rejection of men's advances, they proceed anyway. Hence, rape is a power struggle and being raped is a loss of power, which is shown multiple times in *Teeth* (2007); rape is not about sex. Given that men cannot stop when they know what they are doing is wrong, using a metaphor of castration may be a way to instill the severity of damage caused by sexually violent behaviors.

### **Fear of Castration**

Throughout the film, Dawn's stepbrother shows that he has a fear of vaginas. While fear of vaginas is the theme of the film, there are not many scenes that explicitly address the fear of vaginas. Rather, Lichtenstein shows behaviors indicative of fear and struggle for power throughout the film, slowly building his argument. Together, the fear-induced behaviors, dialogue, and references are used alongside the other themes of the film to argue that men fear women's bodies because of castration anxiety. At the close of the film, Lichtenstein uses Dawn's

step-brother to finally articulate his message: men assert power over women because they are afraid of *losing* power. As the personification of men's fear of castration, Dawn's step-brother shows his fear in a number of ways, including the abuse of his girlfriend.

After Melanie and Dawn's step-brother finish having sex, Dawn's step-brother abuses Melanie.

"You like that?" Dawn's step-brother asks.

"You know, I have a perfectly good pussy," she responds standing up for herself.

"I'm sure you do" Dawn's step-brother responds.

"I do! Other boys like it just fine--" Melanie defends herself.

"Well, fuck them then!" Dawn's step-brother replies defensively.

Melanie looks upset because she really likes Dawn's step-brother and she wishes that Dawn's step-brother respected her. Dawn's step-brother feeds the condom to his dog, Mother, and he is almost bitten. Melanie says, "You get what you deserve!" "Really?" Dawn's step-brother asks and he snuggles up to Melanie. He then touches Melanie's face with a dog treat, poking her forehead and her nose before putting it up against her teeth. When Melanie opens her mouth to say something, Dawn's step-brother sticks the dog treat into her mouth.

This is an act of retaliation from Dawn's step-brother to put Melanie back into her place. While Melanie puts up with a lot from Dawn's step-brother, she was trying to stand up for herself. Dawn's step-brother is so insecure, that he shut Melanie down for merely suggesting they have vaginal intercourse. Dawn's step-brother is insecure because he is terrified of vaginas and when Melanie proposed they have vaginal sex, he felt threatened. In this scene, Melanie's vagina is a source of stress for him and makes him fear castration. When a man is castrated, they feel powerless, similarly to when a woman is raped, which is likely why it was proposed as a

punishment for rape by one judge in 1983 (Schmit, 1983). The act of putting a dog treat in Melanie's mouth was Dawn's step-brother's way of saying that she's a female dog, i.e. a bitch. Metaphorically, Dawn's step-brother is telling Melanie that her only purpose in his life is having someone to have sex with.

Lichtenstein explains that his intention was to use Dawn's step-brother as an illustration of men's fear of castration, which the *vagina dentata* myth is a demonstration of. Dawn's step-brother also represents the dangerous consequences of inadequate sex education. Had Dawn's stepbrother gone through a comprehensive sex education program, he would likely have different perceptions toward sex. Specifically, Dawn's step-brother may have overcome his fear of vaginas or at least learned that a woman's body is not harmful. There is no certainty that Dawn's step-brother would behave differently if he had learned more about the female reproductive system, consent, and the like, but he does exhibit behaviors consistent with abstinence-only sex education, i.e. sexual aggression.

### **Sexual Aggression: A Mix of Dominance with Weak Morality**

Throughout the film, Dawn's stepbrother shows that he has skewed perceptions toward women's bodies and that he has a fear of castration. Dawn's step-brother makes his overt sexuality uncomfortably present to Dawn. Dawn's step-brother scares Dawn in the shower when she's taking off her clothes, he has a loud fight with Melanie about sex, and when Dawn approached Dawn's step-brother about his fight with Melanie, Dawn's step-brother asks Dawn if that turned her on. Dawn's stepbrother has repeated fights with his girlfriend, Melanie, because Dawn's stepbrother will only have anal sex with her.

After Dawn rejects the Corrupt Hero for a date, he returns to Dawn's house to talk to her again. When the Corrupt Hero knocks, Dawn step-brother answers.



“Hi, [Dawn’s step-brother], I’m here for Dawn.”

“You’re out of your league, pussy boy” Dawn’s step-brother responds.

“Excuse me?” asks the Corrupt Hero.

“Get the fuck off my property,” Dawn’s step-brother says as he walks toward Ryan.

“I’m not a pussy...” Ryan says, backing up.

[Dawn’s step-brother knocks him out with one punch.]

“You want any more of that, you can come by and see us again, yeah?”

In this scene, the Corrupt Hero is trying to understand why Dawn rejected him and Dawn’s step-brother is acting out of jealousy. Dawn’s step-brother feels that he has ownership over Dawn and has been waiting for Dawn to give up her purity ring so that they can have sex. Dawn’s step-brother has repressed the memory of assaulting Dawn when they were children and he wants more than anything to be with her. Dawn’s step-brother is an extreme representation of what a man should be according to the purity movement. Dawn’s step-brother acts very controlling toward Dawn and wants to have sex with her, yet he is very fearful of vaginal intercourse. Throughout the film, Dawn’s step-brother and his girlfriend, Melanie, fight over how he will only have anal sex with her. Dawn’s step-brother is afraid because his finger was bitten by Dawn’s vaginal teeth when they were little. Dawn’s step-brother may have repressed the memory, but he finds vaginas to be scary. The #MeToo movement blew up because sexual violence continues to be an issue and men cannot hear what women want over the sound of their desires.

### **Conclusion**

*Teeth* (2007) is a creative critique of the way in which the mainstream discourses of US culture describe, understand, and interact with sex. Among other things, *Teeth* pokes fun at the

purity movement in a well-researched tongue-in-cheek fashion. The purity movement and abstinence-only education, *Teeth* suggests, are highly problematic. Abstinence-only education is the institutional teaching of the purity movement, which rejects the US culture's over-sexualized nature. Instead, the purity movement and abstinence-only education aim to change US culture by reinforcing traditional gender roles and portray sex as something special to be only shared between a life-long, heterosexual couple, bound by the confines of marriage. In *Teeth*, Lichtenstein uses the *vagina dentata* myth to illustrate the dangers created by the purity movement and abstinence-only education, such as the double standard of morals between men and women. Not only are the purity movement and abstinence-only education dangerous because they do not teach safe sex, but also because they are feeding rape culture. Public discourse is filled with confusion about sex, specifically in the topic of consent. Since abstinence-only education does not prepare adolescents for life by teaching them everything that they need to know about their bodies and the bodies of potential partners, adolescents must be left to their own devices to teach themselves. Adolescents may not necessarily find the correct information, which can lead to the belief in myths and misinformation, fostering fear toward sex, the bodies of others, and their own bodies.

The #MeToo movement, which went viral in October 2018, may have initially taken off because of celebrities, but there are signs in US culture which suggest that it has not ended. Worse, abstinence-only education and pledges to the purity movement do not keep adolescents from having sex. What the purity movement and abstinence-only education have done is foster confusion and construct fear. Rape is a struggle for power and the quest for power is driven by the desire to eliminate fear. The #MeToo movement is successful because it addresses the fear held by women as a result of the rape epidemic. As public discourse slowly fills with women

discussing sex, consent, and women's bodies, US culture may slowly move toward a safer and sexually healthy nation. The *vagina dentata* myth has so far stood the test of time so far, but it does not have to continue. Men should not have to fear castration, nor should women have to fear sexual violence. Maybe one day sex can just be sex.

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