

## **“Purgatory” Reaction Paper**

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July 6, 2022

### **Author Note**

Acknowledgment of and loving appreciation to Stephanie and Chris Soares for providing the necessary funds to write develop this resource.

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### **Abstract**

This is a reaction paper to the award-winning domestic violence short film: "Purgatory."

*Keywords:* Domestic violence, gaslighting, coercive control, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse

### **“Purgatory” Reaction Paper**

#### **How would you describe the main male character in terms of his disposition and attitude?**

The main male character “Adam” had a scary disposition as he vacillated from what appeared to be other-centered care for his fiancée “Lilith” (bringing tea and helping into a robe), to a self-centered domination. His attitude was one of entitlement—volatile in some moments as he suddenly showed a strong emotional reaction to the idea of Lilith’s mother interfering with his regularly scheduled plans to see his own mother, and callous as he assured her not to see the doctor despite the vaginal tearing/bleeding that he knowingly inflicted upon Lilith.

#### **How would you describe the main female character in terms of her disposition/attitude?**

Lilith had a sunny disposition from what one can gather—dancing to the upbeat music and trying on different outfits when she was left alone in the house. She was open to different things as indicated by putting her hair down and putting on jewelry. She even appeared to have a positive, hopeful attitude when waking up every morning to a bleak situation by saying the words: “today’s going to be a good day.” Unfortunately, she also appeared to have an overly submissive attitude by crumbling under Adam’s demands to not talk to her mom—not picking up calls and letting go to voicemail, even while resisting completely blocking incoming calls.

#### **What signs of abuse did you see?**

*Sexual abuse* (forced entry while drugged) was clear. *Emotional abuse* was demonstrated by Adam’s control over Lilith’s interactions with others—not only manipulating her to think that her mother was poison (though her mother apparently did not approve of Adam, it was clearly for good other-centered cause, not for nefarious self-centered reasons) but also imposing some seriously questionable logic in regards to the food delivery man (both making her scared of the possibility of inadvertently seducing him and then also making her think that no one else would even want her). *Physical abuse* was less clear, but subtly foreshadowed by his heavy/abrupt

table pounding. *Economic abuse* is also possible since Lilith did not appear to have a job and was playing a domesticated role—at home to pick up food delivery, doing the dishes, etc.

**How might the tactic of isolation play a part in abuse within the couple?**

As the Blue Muse Production (2021) film’s closing words indicated: “during Covid-19 lockdowns, the number of abuse cases has risen sharply. In the first 3 weeks of lockdown, 14 women and 2 children were killed in the United Kingdom alone.” Adam was clearly isolating Lilith to prevent her from receiving sanity checks that would bring into sharp relief how bizarre her situation was becoming (before even getting married). She was unable to stay in contact with her mother and sister, and a seeming lack of community in a foreign city fostered abuse.

**How do you see the dynamic of “Power and Control” play out within this film?**

There appears to be an element of unhealthy power dynamics with Lilith being at home all day waiting for Adam to return from work. Of course, this wouldn’t be a problem if Lilith had power in a “stay at home” role, but even her cooking was scrutinized as if Adam was the boss evaluating her work. So without a job and means of caring for herself, there is less ability for Lilith to assert her own thoughts and rights as a human being. This was evidenced by the fact that she had little control over what she was able to comfortably wear (not just her dress, but even her hair style!) and who she could talk with (not just in person, but even on the phone!).

According to the Duluth model (Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2017), Lilith experienced the full spectrum of sexual and physical violence (e.g., intimidation [from table banging and dinner dropping], emotional abuse [called an alcoholic], isolation [prevented from talking with or meeting her mom even on her own], minimizing/denying/blaming [shifted responsibility for Adam’s outburst to Lilith’s mom], male privilege [treated like an indentured servant]) with only misuse of children, economic abuse, and coercion/threats left unclear or remaining.

**Why doesn't character simply leave the relationship and abusive partner?**

As the Blue Muse Production (2021) film's closing words indicated: " 'Just leave' is not always an option .... Abuse is a choice, the abuser's choice. The victim is NEVER to blame."

While the learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1975, as cited in Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2017) considers how repeated unsuccessful attempts to eliminate a stimulus result in passive submission, it is unclear that Lilith tried to leave before. Similarly, while ecological theory considers how victims stay because of harmful sociocultural systems—there is little indication that Lilith's environment made it not possible (aside from perhaps his mother).

The cycle of violence theory (Walker, 1979, as cited in Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2017) conceptualizes three phases that help to explain why Lilith doesn't leave Adam: (1) in the *tension-building phase*, she coped by walking on eggshells as he sampled her food, denied her anger about compliance to de-escalate by ingesting alcohol and sleeping pills, and rationalized his anger by also seeing her mom as against them even when she wanted to see her engagement ring; (2) in the *acute-battering phase*, she disassociated with feelings of shock and disbelief as she removed her jewelry in the bathroom and kitchen; and (3) in the *honeymoon phase*, she was guilted by the tea with morning greetings, and the wine with apologies at night.

**If you were the female character's therapist, how and/or would you intervene?**

As Lilith's therapist, I would absolutely/immediately intervene by having her see a physician to confirm that she is being raped while drugged, arrange to have her stay with her mother while she safely figures out long-term solutions, and report the intimate partner violence to the authorities. Over time, I would address her inability to think independently of others and make the choice to leave. Instead of being an expert she blindly listens to or submissively pleases, I would be a corrective experience as one she looks up to without putting herself down.

## References

Blue Muse Productions. (2021, May 28). *PURGATORY - Award-Winning Domestic Violence Short Film (Gaslighting, Coercive Control, Abuse)* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVTyu1CfVpw&t=1284s>

## Appendix A

### *Quotes*

- On average, 2 women are killed every week by their current or ex-partner.
- ‘Just leave’ is not always an option
- 2.34 million people in the UK were recorded victims of domestic abuse in 2018/19.
- 1 in 3 victims were male.
- Abuse is a choice, the abuser’s choice. The victim is NEVER to blame.”