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# The Exorcist

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### The Exorcist

*The Exorcist* is known as one of the scariest movies of all time. It is a Warner Brothers film that was released in 1973 and directed by William Friedkin. It was produced and written by William Peter Blatty. *The Exorcist* stars Ellen Burstyn as Chris MacNeil (an actress and single mother), Jason Miller as Father Karras and Linda Blair as Regan MacNeil (the possessed little girl). The voice of possessed Regan was played by Mercedes McCambridge, who acted frequently on the radio (*The Exorcist* 1973).

*The Exorcist* was nominated for Best Cinematography, but won Best Picture, and Best Director. The movie also won Best Sound, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Supporting Actress, and much more. This classic horror film is rated R because not only is it extremely scary, but it is filled with swearing, sexual talk, sexual images and actions, violence and much more (*Movies: The Exorcist* 1973).

Four years after *The Exorcist* was released, a sequel came out known as *The Exorcist II: The Heretic*. In 1990, a third *Exorcism* movie came out, and then fourteen years after that, *Exorcist: The beginning* was released. Finally, a prequel to the 1973 film came out in 2005, called *Dominion*. Movies similar to *The Exorcist* are *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The*

*Possession* (2012), *The Last Exorcism* (2010) and *The Last Exorcism Part II* (2013). (The Exorcist Collection).

William Peter Blatty wrote the book, *The Exorcist*, which later became a successful and terrifying motion picture. While watching the movie, a viewer suffered from a miscarriage. She, like many others, believed that the film is actually cursed. When it first came out, its gross income was \$128 million. *The Exorcist* takes place in Georgetown, where a young, possessed girl, Regan lives. She and her mother struggle with the demon's power and eventually a necessary exorcism is carried out. In the genre of scary movies, *The Exorcist* remains a transition. Former President Richard Nixon was responsible for the Watergate Scandal, the unsuccessful Vietnam War and many other problems that caused United States citizens in the late 1960s and the 1970s to feel paranoid about the world around them. These feelings were successfully portrayed in Friedkin's movie through the demon possession taking over Regan, Chris and others. There was also a decrease in birthrates, an accumulation in divorces, appeal of abortions, and a negative outlook on kids. Therefore, possessed Regan who gave her mother a nervous breakdown is a great and extreme example of this. *Rosemary's Baby* is another good example (Phillips 101-109).

The United States in the early 1970s did not fulfill the dream of the ideal family, or display it like they did in films from the 1950s. There were rebellious kids and single parents, and *The Exorcist* portrayed this with Burstyn's character, who was not married and had to deal with a possessed daughter. She had to play the loving mother and the courageous worker who traditionally would be played by a father. Therefore, she had a double role. Unfortunately, the power of the female can only go on for so long, and when Chris could no longer control her daughter, it was up to Father Karras and Father Merrin to do so. Most twelve-year-old girls going

through puberty develop mood swings and a sex drive as their hormones change. The demon represents change and a break from innocence not only with puberty, but with the fact that the image of the ideal family of the 1950s ended. The demon's symbol of change is exaggerated of course; Regan becomes violent physically and sexually with the priests and even with Chris. In fact, the name Regan was inspired by Shakespeare. In "King Lear", a snake symbolized Regan, an evil female role in the play (Marcus).

In the beginning of the movie, Father Merrin (another priest who tries to help Regan and is played by Max von Sydow) finds a medal at a mining in Iraq. Saint Joseph is on the medal, and as the priest holds it and stands in front of a sculpture of a demon with wings, righteous versus wickedness is represented, which is a very important theme in the movie and shown best by an innocent young girl being possessed by a demon. The emotions brought about from this film to the audience are paranoia and negativity of the world. It also represents the fact that the vision of the American Dream in the previous decade has shattered. One of the biggest themes in *The Exorcist* is the human race coming to a destruction; the sunrise is shown in the very first shot. The symbolism of the end of the world is shown as the light from the sun goes away. *The Exorcist* also has the theme of religion. As Father Karras exorcises Regan, he forces the demon to leave her body and enter his instead. As a result, he is killed and Regan is free from her possession. The act of the priest dying for the young girl's freedom is symbolic to Jesus. (Phillips 102-104).

The scene of the mine in Iraq foreshadows many parts of the film, like pounding hammers heard during Regan's exorcism that were first seen and heard at this mine. Also, a repulsive shot of an elderly woman with a deformed face, and then a man with one eerie-looking blind eye are shown to foreshadow Regan's future appearances. (Kermode 24-25).

The novel of *The Exorcist* derived from an actual event that took place in 1949. The possessed teenager yelled in Latin, screamed offensive words and had to endure 30 exorcisms; the name of the boy is unknown. The main goal that Friedkin wanted to achieve in his movie was to make the audience feel as if they were really there, or as if they were watching a documentary. This is because the movie is based on a true story, so it was important for the audience to remember that, and as a result, they would be scared more. Friedkin's goal definitely succeeded; during the time the film was playing in theaters, people were asked by news reporters whether they believed in the Devil or not, and the majority said that they do. Most moviegoers saw *The Exorcist* as such a subjective film, and that is what a successful horror movie does. A good horror movie also requires the right characters. In almost every horror film, the people surrounding the victim are in denial of what is really happening. Chris was in denial, and so was Father Karras. He did the opposite of what most priests would do; for a good amount of time, he believed that the Devil was not controlling Regan. However, he was a doctor as well, so he looked into medical explanations. Originally, Jane Fonda was very likely to receive the part of Regan's mother, but she was not right for it, so it was given to Ellen Burstyn. Chris's role is a determined woman willing to fight for her safety and that of her daughter's. Linda Blair stood out from all the 500 other children auditioning for the part of Regan. She lived in Westport, Connecticut and played the perfect role as a possessed child who truly was a pristine girl. Therefore, the audience felt shocked by her curse words and sexual language. This is similar to *The Last Exorcism* (2010), which involved an innocent, homeschooled teenage girl who was possessed by a demon. During the audition for Regan, many parents who were watching were disgusted by the language that the character was required to use. One of the hardest parts that Regan's character had to perform was experiencing when the possession began. Her eyes roll

back, a big lump appears on her neck, and she endures extreme spasms. This was hard for the actress because it was supposed to be very shocking to the audience and to Regan that this is actually happening. When applying makeup to her, it took the artists more than two hours to do so. It was made of latex mold, and she wore uncomfortable contacts in her eyes. In one of the most terrifying scenes, Regan sits on her bed and chants as her head spins around. In order to make this happen, a mannequin was made that was identical to her and its head was used for spinning. Oatmeal and pea soup were mixed together and put into Regan's mouth as she spat it all over Father Karras in order for it to appear as throw up. The first day of filming *The Exorcist* was on August 14, 1972 and it was shot in Georgetown, New York and Iraq. Friedkin struggled to keep up with deadlines, and per day he completed only three shots. For the set of Regan's room, refrigeration was used throughout the whole area at -10 degrees Fahrenheit in order to make the room appear cold and haunted. Due to the freezing temperature, it was necessary for thick, insulated coats to be worn by the workers. The room was elevated on a big object that made it possible for the crew to move the floor to give the effect that the demon is taking over the room. (Travers ch. 1-15).

For the scene of Regan having her spasm on the bed, she wore a harness around her waist that was tied to a board and invisible to the audience. The board controlled all the motions while Regan just lied down and screamed. The actress yelled as loudly as possible to let the crew know that she was in pain, but they thought she was just acting, so they did not stop. She actually hurt her back because she was hitting the bed too hard. (Kermode 56-57).

Linda Blair was not the only actress to get hurt during the making of this movie. When Regan shoved Chris away from the bed (in one of the most terrifying and sexually disturbing scenes) she landed on the floor hard on her back and has an affliction on her spine that will never

go away. This accident happened because the harness used to pull her back was done incorrectly. Sound was crucial in this movie; a great amount of sounds were made by Gonzalo Gavira. The sound of pigs that were about to be killed was used when possessed Regan screamed. A wallet made out of leather material was coiled right next to the microphone to get good sound for when Regan's head spun. The scenery was also very important. The place where Regan's room was filmed was so cold that a little bit of snow appeared. Also, the workers who were sweating before they entered the room noticed that the sweat became frozen on their bodies. It was difficult for Friedkin to keep up with all of these necessary effects, but they made *The Exorcist* a very successful film. Before it was released in the United States, the movie was shown in the United Kingdom, and in 1999 it was put on tape, but until then it was banned from doing so in the country. People who saw *The Exorcist* were so shocked and horrified that hysterics and fainting happened often, and doctors had to rush into the movie theaters to help. In fact, one man sued Warner Brothers because he passed out and suffered from a broken jaw when he fell. It was not just the audience who was afraid of this movie- it was the actors and other workers on the film as well. A priest actually ended up comforting them because they started to worry if the set would become haunted. (Frater).

If *The Exorcist* was released today, it would still be scary, but not that big of a deal because many other horror films contain those vulgar and terrifying graphics. However, this came out in the early 1970s when this type of content was rarely shown. Also, considering the fact that the special effects were not as strong back then as they are today, Friedkin's movie was outstanding. There are many horror movies that became big hits, but *The Exorcist* will always be one of the greatest.

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