

"Fatal Attraction"

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"Fatal Attraction" is a psychological film directed by Adrian Lyne and starred Michael Douglas and Glenn Close. It received six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and Best Actress, Glenn Close. When the film was released in 1987, it became one of the most controversial movies of the decade. Its content becomes a theme of discussion in the media, as well as in the social and psychological field. Certainly, this feature brought the attention of the public when social changes were emerging; conservatism and the women's movement was affected for its content of morality rather than the psychological perspective. The character propagandized by Glenn Close, "Alex," wasn't seen "good" in the eyes of the audience, perhaps for the context of their values at that time. Alex was seen as a stalker and manipulative; and people don't have empathy for that. However, for other critics, what this character brought to the public in general was a visual illustration of a mental disorder that wasn't well known during that time, Borderline Personality Disorder. Although "Fatal Attraction" was released about two decades ago, it's still as relevant for our current time as it was almost 27 years ago. In fact, what the character, Alex, portrays in this film evokes more questions than answers: *What does Borderline Personality Disorder mean? How do we know when someone has it? What is the root of it? Is there a good prognosis for it? Does Fatal Attraction really portray the criteria for this mental disorder?*

The story stars Michael Douglas (Dan Gallagher) as a successful lawyer who has been happily married to Beth (Anne Archer) for nine years, and has a 6 year old daughter, Ellen (Ellen Hamilton Latzen). One weekend, while Beth and Ellen were out of town, Dan had a wild and passionate affair with an editor for a publishing company, Alex Forest (Glenn Close), which happened to be her client. She wasn't married and appeared to be a successful and independent woman. And because both of them were free for the night, they spent one night and part of the next day together in her apartment, having sex, listening to music, talking about their old memories (they coincide to love Madame Butterfly opera), and having a homemade dinner. They also spent time walking and having fun in Central Park. During this time, Alex was totally

unimpressed that he was a married man and she quickly established an intimate relationship with him.

After Dan spent this time with Alex, he attempted to break off the relationship clarifying that it was a one time deal and that he was a happily married man. In response, Alex refuses to let this affair die. Since then, Alex's mental state degenerates through the course of the story becoming extremely erratic and dangerous. She became possessive and vindictive. She began clinging on to him by demanding his time and attention. When he ignored her demands, she first slit her wrists before Dan went home; she called him at any time to his house and work; she stated that she was pregnant with his child and obligated Dan to take responsibility for it; she arranged to meet with Beth under the pretext of buying their apartment with the intention of getting their new phone number; she poured acid on his car; she kidnapped his daughter; she boiled Dan's daughter's pet rabbit, and tried to stab Dan. Dan, desperate to keep his secret and preserve his happy marriage, tries to reason with her, threatens her and even hides from her, but she becomes more reluctant to lose him. He has no other choice than to confess his infidelity to his wife and make a report to the police that Alex is threatening his family.

The dramatic irony of this story is that Alex, with her extreme behavior, pushes Dan further away from her. When all her attempts fail to capture Dan's attention, her anger increases dangerously. She maneuvers to get into Dan's home where she attempts to murder Beth and Dan with a huge kitchen knife. Surprisingly, while Alex is about to kill her husband, Beth appears in the scene shooting Alex in the head and killing her.

By analyzing the movie "Fatal Attraction," the Alex Forest role demonstrated an extreme case of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). At the beginning of the movie (party setting/work setting), Alex doesn't show any evidence that indicates that she has a mental illness. She looks charming and capable to be in control of herself when she met Dan for first time. However, as the movie continues (having a passionate affair with Dan), Alex's behavior becomes better known as emotional instability and lack of control, which according to the DSM-5, she may meet the

diagnostic criteria of Borderline Personality Disorder (301.83). I chose the movie, "Fatal Attraction," because most of the time, the individual who suffers from borderline personality disorder are misdiagnosed, misunderstood and stereotyped in our modern time. Consequently, having chosen this film allows me to give the readers a better understanding and options on how to perceive, diagnose and treat individuals with borderline personality disorder.

According to the DSM-5, Borderline Personality Disorder is classified within Cluster B, and it is defined as *"a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of context."* Actually, this disorder accounts an estimated of 14 million adults in the U.S, making up about 1% to 2% of the general population in the United States, which 75 percent of whom are women who live their life on the edge (Nehls, 1998) (Svoboda). *"More women than men become borderlines,"* says psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Bruce J. Levin, director of the consultation and evaluation division at the Philadelphia Association for Psychoanalysis. Temperamentally vulnerable men are more likely to become aggressive, taking their frustrations out on society. Women, on the other hand, conditioned to absorb emotional pain, tend to self-destruct (Hotchman).

The DSM-5 considers 9 diagnostic criteria in total, but only 5 are required to make a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder. Alex Forest meets 8 of the 9 diagnostic criteria and these are: (1) Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment. (2) A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation. (4) Impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g., sex, substance abuse, and binge eating) (5) Recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior. (6) Affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (e.g., intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety usually lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days. (7) Chronic feelings of emptiness. (8) Inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty

controlling anger (e.g., frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights). (9)  
Transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms.

**Criteria # 1** - - - People with borderline personality disorder have a strong fear of abandonment, and are very sensitive and quick to react when they perceive that they are being rejected or abandoned. This type of behavior may lead them to fail in their relationships. For example, one of the many scenes that gives us a visual detail of this criteria is when Alex lies to Dan about the death of her father (who died of heart attack in front of her when she was a child). She, in order to avoid Dan's rejection, immediately changes in affect. She doesn't want to make him feel guilty for the joke he made of having a heart attack at the park. She immediately excuses that her father is still living and having a happy life. As Harvard psychiatrist, John Gunderson, director of the Borderline Personality Disorder Center at McLean Hospital says, "*Seeding the emotional storms, is a hypersensitivity to rejection*" (Svoboda).

Although in the movie there is not sufficient evidence of Alex' previous history that remarks a serious sign related to borderline personality disorder, the scene where Alex tells Dan that her father died of a heart attack in front of her at age seven, may show feelings of emotional deprivation, abandonment, and vulnerability that were imprinted during her childhood. It appears to be that the death of her father at 42 chase her through life, dictating her thoughts, feelings and behavior. As Jeffrey Young, the psychologist with the Fatal Attraction allusion says, "*The emotions the child couldn't express get acted out in "inappropriate ways when they grow up"*" (Hochman).

**Criteria # 2** - - - Individuals with borderline personality tend to attach rapidly and profoundly to others, even early on in relationships. Their perception of intimacy is greater than the other person, and in many cases, it is inappropriate. Moreover, their perception of others often alternates between extremes of idealization and devaluation. They may view a person as good one minute, but shift to seeing him/her as all "bad" the next. For them, it is difficult to recognize that "good" people sometimes make mistakes. One excellent scene that clearly illustrates the

idealization/devaluation Alex demonstrate towards Dan is in the audiotape she made for him, labeled "Play me, Alex." He plays the cassette which contains the following monologue, *"I guess you thought you'd get away with it. Well, you can't . . . Because, you know, I feel you. I taste you. I think you. I touch you. Can you understand? Can you? . . . you thought that you could just walk into my life and turn it upside down without a thought . . . You know what you are, Dan? . You're a son of a . . . I hate you. I bet you don't even like girls, do you? . . . I know I do. So you're scared of me, aren't you? . . . You're afraid, aren't you? You gutless, heartless, spineless . . . son of a . . . I hate you. You deserve everything you get . . ."* According to Otto F. Kernberg, a national expert on borderlines and professor of psychiatry at Cornell University's medical college, as borderlines mature, they continue to idealize some things and demonize others to make sense of a world that seems frightening. He adds, *"They lack of capacity for a realistic assessment"* (Svoboda).

**Criteria # 4** - - - The other common feature of borderline personality disorder is impulsivity which is a tendency to act quickly without thinking about the consequences of one's actions. The Mayo Clinic's Palmer states that chaos serves another important function for borderlines. It distracts them from their emotional turmoil. Impulsivities such as sexual promiscuity, drug use, bingeing and purging are attempts to escape from the intense negative emotions that overwhelm them (Svoboda). Great illustrations of this criteria are represented when Alex has impulsive sex with Dan having just met him (in her kitchen and in the elevator where they could've been easily caught by the guard who was wandering around just above them). When Alex calls the operator to ask for Dan's phone number, she is surrounded by junk food, suggesting that she binged. When she become pregnant which demonstrated that she not only did she have sex with an unavailable man that she barely knew, she didn't use protection. According to Kernberg and Michels (2009) these impulsivities in borderlines patients may be caused by the decreased functioning of the prefrontal and preorbital cortex which has been related to a decreased capacity of affect control (Ogrodniczuk).

**Criteria # 5** - - - According to Klonsky and Olinio (2008), self-mutilating behaviors are seen as coping mechanisms used to regulate negative emotions such as pain, loneliness, and extreme anger (Ogrodniczuk). According to experts, individuals who suffer from borderline personality disorder develop these behaviors not with the intent to commit suicide, but to catch the attention of the other person and to relieve the anguish. Those who are involved with people who suffer borderline personality disorder tend to believe that they are "manipulative," and "attention seeking" to the point of making their lives out of control and miserable. But the truth is that those with the disorder struggle with these traits which are part of the illness. Most of the time, they end up feeling "confused," "isolated," and "ashamed" for their behavior.

There are two specific scenes that represent in detail this criteria: When Alex injures herself by slitting her wrists in desperation that Dan decides to stop their affair; and in the last scenes, when Alex is standing in front of Dan's wife, Beth, saying their desperate feelings about Dan, she is using the knife to cut up her own leg. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Borderline Personality accounts one of the largest proportion of suicide attempts in psychiatric disorders (depression, bipolar I, schizophrenia) with an estimated self-injury, nonsuicidal intent rate of 60-80% while 8-10 % of individuals with borderline personality will die from suicide (20). The key assumption of these self harming behaviors may result from a combination of biological vulnerability (brain function), psychological vulnerability (their perception to view the world), and early environmental factors (interpersonal stress, history of physical, sexual and emotional abuse) (Barlow 2002; Suarez, Bennett, Goldstein, & Barlow, 2008). Moreover, borderlines individuals suffer also from other psychiatric disorders such as major depression, bipolar disorder (Grant, 2008), eating disorder (Zanarini, 2010), and substance abuse (Grant, 2008) which may increase the risk of suicidal behaviors (Durand, & Barlow, 433-435)

**Criteria # 6** - - - According to the mental health professionals, a key feature of borderline personality disorder is that they constantly experience a lot of dramatic shifts in their emotional

states as a result of interpersonal stress. They may feel okay one moment but then feel angry, sad, lonely, afraid, jealous, or shameful moments later. These emotional shifts can last for hours and in rare cases for days. One scene that visualizes this criteria in detail like many other scenes throughout the film, is when she lunges at Dan's back with a kitchen knife after Dan almost tried to shock her with his hands in her apartment (Dan was getting frustrated and irritable because her behavior was taken to the extreme; she kidnapped his daughter). As soon as Dan backs away and prepares to leave her apartment, Alex's emotional state from anger shifts within seconds, to an emotional state of seduction and want for him (she stares at him in a seductive way). According to the New York psychiatrist, Frank Yeomans, emotional dysregulation and impulsivity are at the core of borderlines behavior. They swing from happiness to despair, to fury, often in minutes, and each feeling is vastly disproportionate to its trigger. *"Life is like a ship in a stormy sea without a keel,"* he notes (Svovoda). A finding that may explain this dramatic shift of emotional states in individuals with borderline personality, it is an unusually heightened activity in the amygdala, a brain structure that forms part of the limbic system, which governs memory and the sense of smell as well as emotional reactivity (Wingenfeld, 2010; Svoboda, 2013).

**Criteria # 7** - - - Feelings of emptiness emerge when the individuals with borderline personality have an unstable self-image and rely on others to provide them with a description of who they are (if they are good enough or bad). When no one is around providing these descriptions, they feel empty; they feel a deep uncertainty of who they are. Feelings of emptiness may bring them feelings of anxiety, self-defeating behaviors and fear of abandonment. An excellent illustration of this criteria is when Dan refuses to accept the invitation to see the opera piece, *Madame Butterfly*, with Alex, she is shown sitting alone in her apartment turning the lamp on and off while listening *Madame Butterfly* very loudly. In this scene, she appears to be desperately lonely, empty and needy. According to Lineham and Dester-Mazza (2008), borderlines individuals are described as chronically bored and have difficulties with their own identities (Durand & Barlow, 433).



**Criteria # 8** - - - Intense, inappropriate anger is one of the more troubling symptoms of borderline personality. Anger in borderlines individuals is view as inappropriate because its level is usually more intense than is expected by the situation or event that triggered it. Its manifestation can be misunderstanding, yelling, or becoming physically violent.

There are many volatile scenes that illustrates criteria # 8 in which Alex exacerbates more her emotional crisis: When Dan decides to go to his home after spending the night with her, she yells at him, kicks him, and slaps him in one day of the relationship. While playing catch, Dan plays dead. She lashes out at him saying *"You bastard! My dad died of a heart attack when I was seven years old right in front of my eyes."* When she is unable to obtain Dan's number from the operator, she yells, *"F. . . you!"* to the operator. When Alex expresses her anger at Dan by pouring battery acid all over his car while it is parked in a parking garage near Dan's office. When Alex kills the family's pet rabbit and boils it on the stove, she exhibits her anger by behaving destructively towards Dan's daughter's treasured possession in order to hurt, control or intimidate Dan. And when Dan rejects her proposals in a very agitated and angry voice, directing her to *"cut the sh . . ."* She expresses her motives shifting from being nice to being angry, *"It's not gonna stop. It's gonna go on and on until you face up to your responsibilities . . . I'm pregnant . . . I'm not going to be ignored . . . Don't you remember our week-end? I mean, wasn't that wonderful?"* Then, when Dan tells her not to lie herself and that she is sick she responds . . . *"Why? Because I won't allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage? . . ."* Many psychiatrists, including Otto F. Kernberg, are convinced that there is a temperamental predisposition (highly reactive, emotional, and so hypersensitive to perceived anger or rejection) that, coupled with early environment, leads to the borderline's broken emotional thermostat (Svoboda). Furthermore, researchers have found that the low levels of serotonin in the brain has been associated with aggression and impulsivity, in much the same way, norepinephrine has been found to be related to aggressive behaviors in borderline personality disorder (Rinne, 2000) (Ogrodniczuk).

**Criteria # 9** - - - Experts agree that paranoid thoughts and dissociative symptoms are common in borderline individuals. These symptoms typically appear at times of extreme stress, especially when they perceive abandonment. These paranoid thoughts may involve unrealistic ideas that everyone around is purposefully abandoning him/her as part of a conspiracy plan. The symptoms reflect depersonalization experiences (feeling of watching oneself act, while having no control over a situation). A well visual description of this criteria is when at the end of the movie, Alex assaults Beth in the new home. She holds a knife in her hand, cutting her thigh, asking "*Who are you? What are you doing here? Why are you here?*" Alex explains that Dan loves her, but that Beth is keeping him from her and accuses Beth of playing "happy family." Her words indicate delusions (Dan is in love with her, Alex) and paranoia (Beth is keeping Dan from being with Alex). There is an explanation that paranoid and dissociative thoughts are the result of a pervasive unjustified distrust (Edens, Marcus and Morey, 2009) and suspiciousness interpreted as personal attacks (Bernstein and Useda, 2007) (Durand & Barlow, 420)

**Criterion #3** - - - By evaluating the case of Alex Forest, it is clear that she doesn't meet the criteria # 3 which is *an identity disturbance, markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self*. In the context of the movie, Alex has a job, thinks that she loves Dan, makes plans for the future, and wants to keep her baby. In other words, she dreams to have a family with Dan.

According to the "New and Exclusive Cast and Crew Interviews" section of the, "Special Collector's Edition" of the Fatal Attraction DVD produced in 1987, the ending described in the summary section is not the original ending that was filmed. The original ending portrayed Alex killing herself by slitting her own throat with a kitchen knife while she listened to the opera, Madame Butterfly. Dan is arrested for Alex's murder. In my opinion, if the director Lyne and writer Dearden would had kept the original script, plus given more information about the motives that drive Alex to develop these extreme and erratic behaviors (family history/past relationships), this film would have been far more consistent with Alex's borderline personality character. But

after modifying the original ending, the producers gave this film a more commercial content than educational purpose.

Movie lovers know that the entertainment industry tends to exaggerate the plot of a story and in some cases, hinder its realism. This may influence people's minds, such as perpetuating stereotypes, prejudice and other negative portrayals. The problem with this film is that most of the time, producers portray a borderline character as immoral being motivated by sinful desires (infidelity, sexism), driven by "basic instincts," and lack of virtues rather a character that may suffer a mental health illness (Harper, 32). As Lisa Levers, a professor of counselor education and supervision in the School of Education at Duquesne University and author of *"Representations of Psychiatric Disability in Fifty Years of Hollywood Film,"* states in the concluding words of her study: *"Visual representation is a powerful means of communication; visual stereotypes reflect the attitudes of the culture and also shape and reshape the perceptions of the viewer . . . Throughout history, artists have depicted this 'culture of insanity' in stereotypical imagery, but today's media of mass communication—film and video—are so pervasive that the negative effects of stigma propagation through them becomes especially dangerous."* In many cases, this negative portrayal of mental illness and those who are mentally ill not only may add to sufferer self-stigmatization, but Otto Wahl, a professor of Psychology at the University of Hartford, researcher and author of the book, *"Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness,"* claims that it leads to lack of public support for mental health resources (p, 96). When actress, Glenn Close, participated in the White House Conference on Mental Health Awareness, she stated to CBS News that her portrayal of Alex Forest in, *Fatal Attraction* (1987), would be different today as a result of her own increased awareness of the illness. She added that now her character's depiction has contributed to stigma regarding mental illness, which seems to bother her enormously. She says, *"I think as public figures, as entertainers, that we have a moral responsibility to only portray characters, that if, if they have disruptive behavior or behavior that is negative that it has to be responsibly explained"* (Garret).

I believe that if movie producers use education and seriousness in the content of the psychological movie, the audience would have a better understanding on what it means to suffer from borderline personality disorder, and consequently this would help to reduce the stigmatization these individuals face. However, by stating this, I don't devalue the good work of the entertainment industry. Glenn Close's character provides one of the most impressive and convincing portrayals of a person with borderline personality disorder, including emotional instability, impulsivity, disturbed attachment, fear of abandonment, anger, and suicidal attempts. Certainly, Glenn Close got deep into Alex pathological disorder, and her level of seriousness and involvement gives this film a greater validity despite its excesses (Alex' attempt in killing Beth and Dan, and Alex' survival after Dan's drowned her to death in a tub full of water).

In conclusion, thank to Fatal Attraction, nowadays, we can have a notion of what it means to suffer from borderline personality disorder. Although it is a substantially more common disorder, yet it is the less known and the more misunderstood comparing with other mental disorders (schizophrenia). People with this disorder are not villains, they are ill. They do need treatment. If we educate ourselves, surely, we can give our family members, friends, and neighbors that may suffer from borderline personality disorder, a better prognosis, a hope to live a better life. But most importantly, we can help to reduce the stigmatization that they suffer in our community and provide them with better health resources.

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*“You survived by seizing every tiny drop of love you could find anywhere, and milking it, relishing it, for all it was worth. And as you grew up, you sought love, anywhere you could find it, whether it was a teacher or a coach or a friend or a friend's parents. You sought those tiny droplets of love, basking in them when you found them. They sustained you. For all these years, you've lived under the illusion that somehow, you made it because you were tough enough to overpower the abuse, the hatred, the hard knocks of life. But really you made it because love is so powerful that tiny little doses of it are enough to overcome the pain of the worst things life can dish out. Toughness was a faulty coping mechanism you devised to get by. But, in reality, it has been your ability to never give up, to keep seeking love, and your resourcefulness to make that love last long enough to sustain you. That is what has gotten you by.”*

*“Tempting as it may be to draw one conclusion or another from my story and universalize it to apply to another's experience, it is not my intention for my book to be seen as some sort of cookie-cutter approach and explanation of mental illness. It is not an advocacy of any particular form of therapy over another. Nor is it meant to take sides in the legitimate and necessary debate within the mental health profession if which treatments are most effective for this or any other mental illness. . . What it is, I hope, is a way for readers to get a true feel for what it's like to be in the grips of mental illness and what it's like to strive for recovery.”*

Rachel Reiland, *“Get Me Out of Here: My Recovery from Borderline Personality Disorder”*

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