

# Sleeping with the enemy essay



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In the movie *Sleeping With the Enemy*, Laura Burns, is living a life that many would describe as perfect. Laura lives in a beautiful mansion on the coast with her handsome, wealthy husband Martin. This wealth allows Laura the opportunity to stay at home rather than working outside of the home.

However, behind closed doors this perfect life is very different from what the outside world sees. Laura is constantly being beaten, ridiculed, and criticized by her husband.

Martin is obsessed about keeping the house in perfect order. He is easily set off by simple things such as a towel being out of line, or a can out of place in the cupboard. Upon him discovering that things are “out of order,” he resorts to severely beating Laura. The only way for Laura to escape from this torture is to stage her own death. One stormy evening Laura agrees to go out with Martin and a neighbour on his sailboat. She does this so that she can put her plan of escaping into action.

Laura “falls” over board and desperately swims to shore. Meanwhile, her husband assumes that she has drowned due to the fact that she is unable to swim. However, Laura has been secretly taking swimming lessons to help her carry out her plan of staging her own death. Once ashore, Laura packs a small bag with some personal belongings and money.

At this point she abandons her abusive husband, leaving her dangerous life behind. She starts a new life as Sara Winters. This new life allows Sara the opportunity to experience what it is like to live without violence, and fear. Sara gets involved with a Professor that teaches drama at a local college, despite the fact that it is very difficult for her to let her guard down after all

those years of living in fear. However, with a little patience she is able to feel safe again, but just as she is able to let her guard down, Martin finds the wedding ring Laura attempted to flush down the toilet, that stormy night she fled.

Angry and determined Martin begins to frantically search for Laura, a search that eventually lands him in the middle of her new house in Idaho. Laura fearing for her life has to make an awful decision, but one her life depends on. Will she shoot Martin, and move on with her life, or let him live, and live in fear for the rest of her life? This movie presents a variety of forms of domestic abuse: physical, emotional, psychological. Although this is not a true story, I believe it portrays a very realistic view of spousal abuse. The physical abuse that is shown in this movie effectively displays just how quickly things can change, one minute everything is fine, and the next Martin is hitting and kicking Laura.

I believe that this is an accurate display of how spousal abuse can occur. The textbook *Family Violence*, discusses Lenore E. Walker's cycle theory of violence. This "theory has three distinct phases: the tension building phase; the explosion, or acute battering, phase; and the calm loving respite phase". I believe that each of these phases is effectively displayed in this movie.

An example of how this is displayed is when Martin is outside talking to the neighbour and he finds out that this neighbour had been in his house, he immediately confronts Laura and when he does, he quickly resorts to hitting and kicking her, and then just as quickly he apologizes and offers her gifts. One of the most valuable parts of this movie for me was that despite the fact

that Laura had been able to escape from her husband, and as far as she knew he believed that she was dead, she was still very fearful and on edge. One common consequence that people who have been abused suffer is difficulty trusting others. This is depicted in the fact that despite many attempts by Ben to get Laura to discuss her past, she was not willing to let her guard down and trust him with such intimate details.

Instead she just shuts down and pushes him away. This could also be due to the fact that “ many woman who have suffered spousal abuse are naturally hesitant to enter into another relationship. “ In showing this side of Laura they are allowing the audience to better understand the long term effect that abuse has on individuals that have been abused. Regardless of the reasons behind why Laura does things the way that she does, I believe that this movie accurately portrays this issue that is faced by survivors of spousal abuse. However, one area that I don't believe the movie touched on enough was the psychological problems associated with survivors of spousal abuse. Wallace discusses that often woman suffer from such things as posttraumatic stress syndrome, depression and other symptoms that inhibit their ability to function within society.

In addition the Department of Justice Canada states that “ abuse may affect virtually every aspect of an abused person's life. It can harm their physical and mental health, their ability to work, and their relationship with their children and loved ones” In this movie Laura does not appear to be suffering from such things, in fact she seems to be coping very well, with the exception of the not trusting others, and not wanting to enter into another relationship. These mental issues are an important part of spousal abuse

that I feel should have been portrayed more in this movie, in order for the audience to fully understand the wide variety of possible consequences of abuse. When looking at how this movie portrays Martin, I believe that it covers some very common areas that can lead to spousal abuse. First of all, his need to be in control over every aspect of their lives. This desire to be in control is because of the fear of losing control or power.

This is demonstrated in the fact that everything in the home must be perfect, even down to the towels, and the time that dinner is on the table. When Laura does not adhere to these obsessive compulsive rules, the abuse occurs. This movie effectively demonstrates how this power and control can be at the root of spousal abuse. It is also interesting to note that Martin is able to function normally within other aspects of his life, eg.

work and socially. He does not appear to have any serious mental illness or disfunction. In fact one website supports this fact by stating that: men who assault their partners are not violent outside the home. They do not hit their bosses or colleagues.

When abusive men hit their partners, they often aim the blows at parts of the body where bruises don't show. If abused men were truly mentally ill, they could not selectively limit and control their violence. In portraying this the movie is effectively letting the audience know that domestic abuse can occur in even the most "normal" looking families. The movie also effectively demonstrates how Martin is very insecure, and ultimately very jealous of Laura's interaction with the neighbour.

This happens often in abusive relationships, when one of the spouses is overly possessive of their spouse, and questions every encounter they have. This is very valuable for the movie to display, due to the fact that quite often this is the case in an abusive relationship. Martin is excessively attached to Laura, he repeatedly tells her that they will always be together no matter what. The obsession that Martin displays when trying to locate Laura also demonstrates this attachment effectively, he is willing to lie to whoever necessary in order to find her, even kill her mother.

This is a very important demonstration because often women stay in an abusive relationship because they are afraid to leave because their spouse will come after them and hurt them further. The last part of the movie that I found very informative was at the end when Laura repeatedly shoots Martin. I believe this is a true example of just what any human being is capable of when pushed to the maximum, mentally, physically, and emotionally. The writer also portrays the utter shock that Martin feels when Laura does not conform to what he is demanding of her. In closing I believe this movie does portray an accurate account of spousal abuse, and just how damaging it can be to both the abuser as well as the victim.

To think that any human being could be capable of harming another in that manner is truly horrifying. However, I do believe that the writer does not put enough emphasis on the psychological aspects associated with spousal abuse, such as depression, anxiety, et cetera. Having said this, there is always value in material that help people better understand more information about spousal abuse. References Department of Justice Canada. (2006). Spousal abuse: a fact sheet from the Department of Justice Canada.

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