

# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Girl Meets Shark:  
From *The Shallows* (2016) and *47 Meters Down* (2017) to *The Meg* (2018)**

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Steven Spielberg's 1975 film, *Jaws*, established many tropes of the shark movie but none as long-standing as the idea that fighting sharks is men's work. As Stacy Alaimo (2001) argues, shark movies are part of a larger set of films that 'us[e] nature as a site of man making' (p. 282). Jane Caputi (1978) goes even further, claiming that the primary purpose of *Jaws* and films like it is 'to instill dread and loathing for the female and usually culminate in her annihilation' (p. 305).



Figure 1

Recent films have broken with this tradition, though, by casting female protagonists in battle against selachian adversaries. To be sure, women had entered the genre before, as part of shark-fighting teams—as in *Deep Blue Sea* (1999)—or paired up with male romantic partners, as in *Open Water* (2003) and *The Reef* (2010). However, *The Shallows* (2016) and *47 Meters Down* (2017) are two recent shark films that are distinct in being almost entirely female centered. But rather than simply subbing women in for men, these films imagine a deeper relationship between shark and she-hero. The sharks in these films force their female counterparts to face their deepest, unresolved psychological conflicts. In *The Shallows*, this encounter steers protagonist Nancy back onto her true life path. In *47 Meters*, however, the shark is an instrument of punishment.

*The Shallows* opens with Nancy receiving a lift from a generous local to a little-known Mexican beach. She tells him that her mother surfed at this very-same beach when she found out she was pregnant with Nancy. During a phone call with her sister and father, we learn further that Nancy's mother has recently lost a battle with cancer and that her death so rattled Nancy that she dropped out of medical school, having lost faith in its potential. 'Not everyone can be helped', she flippantly tells her dad (*The Shallows*, 2016).



Figure 2

Nancy's shark encounter is an unfortunate accident: she surfs upon a dead whale that is serving as the shark's dinner. Before she can escape, the shark has bitten her leg and left her stranded on a reef that rises just above the surface during high tide; thankfully for Nancy, it is low tide – at least for the next few hours.

Nancy is incredibly competent. She uses a necklace and earring to stitch up her wound and is resourceful enough to recognise that her surfing gear can serve as both tourniquet and compression bandage. At one point, she records an SOS and what she thinks might be a final goodbye on the GoPro of a surfer who did not fare as well against the shark. During the message, she makes it clear that even though her experience has been a harrowing one, it has also inspired an epiphany. She says, 'Dad, I gotta get off this rock soon, but I'm going to fight. Just like she taught us. You were right' (*The Shallows*, 2016). The end of the movie shows us that Nancy not only survived but is thriving. After calling Nancy 'Dr.', her younger sister says, 'Ma would be proud of you'. Together, they enter the water to surf while their father looks on happily.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Lisa of *47 Meters Down* is neither as strong nor as fortunate as Nancy. She is on vacation with her sister, Kate, only because her boyfriend dumped her. ‘It’s my fault’, she declares. ‘He got bored’ (*47 Meters Down*, 2017). To cheer her up, Kate, who is far more daring than her sister, takes her out dancing, and they hook up with two men who invite them on a shark-cage dive the next morning. Lisa continually questions the safety of the venture but is swayed against her better judgment by the desire to prove to her ex-boyfriend that she is more adventurous than he believes. ‘Just think of the photos’, Kate says. ‘They won’t be the kind of photos that a boring person would take’ (*47 Meters Down*, 2017). Later on, when Lisa balks again, Kate teases, ‘You’re not going to make Stuart jealous with photos taken inside a boat’s bathroom’ (*47 Meters Down*, 2017).

Even after Lisa and her sister become stranded at the eponymous depth of 47 meters after the cage’s cable snaps, Lisa still can’t help thinking about impressing her boyfriend. When Kate asks her, ‘What do you think Stuart would say if he could see you now?’ Lisa confidently replies, ‘He would lose his mind’ (*47 Meters Down*, 2017).

Lisa does have a momentary transformation. Realising their oxygen tanks are quickly depleting and the sharks showing no sign of departing any time soon, Lisa works up the courage to swim over a dangerous ocean abyss to alert a rescue diver to their location. But ultimately the outcome is tragic: though Lisa is rescued, her sister is attacked by a shark and presumably killed. The final image of the film emphasises the tragedy of Lisa's trauma rather than the triumph of her survival: as she ascends to the surface, she whimpers her sister's name continuously.



Figure 5

Unlike Nancy, Lisa is punished for choosing adventure, seemingly because her reasons for doing so are far less meaningful (to impress an ex rather than celebrate a dead mother). However, it is Kate who receives the film's most serious retribution, and for what? Refusing domestication? As much as the two films may differ in tone, they are therefore quite similar ideologically: whereas *The Shallows* rewards Nancy for returning to her family and her career of caretaking, *47 Meters Down* kills off Kate, the woman who embraces everything that Nancy must reject, and warns Lisa that she is far safer staying in domestic waters. If shark films traditionally use nature as a site of man-making, as Alaimo claimed, these films could be said to use nature as a site of woman-making, as long as the definition of 'woman' is as traditional as Alaimo meant the word 'man' to be.

*The Meg* (2018) pits megalodon against mega-action star Jason Statham, and the film signals that the genre isn't veering any further from traditional gender roles. Sure, Statham's character, Jonas, is a kinder, gentler version of the typical tough guy. He's good with kids, respectful of women, and works with a large team of men and women to take down the shark. But essentially this is Jonas's party. The shark is just a means of showcasing his pluck and grit. It is the sharks that suffer – and quite violently. Jonas surfaces with nary a scratch. And if Jonas has any unresolved issues, it's only because no one believed him the first time he said there

was a giant, unknown creature lurking in the ocean depths. Jonas ends the movie just as he begins it, only with a vindicated reputation and a new chance at love.



Figure 6

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