

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

Nymphomaniac Vol I (2013)

Lars von Trier (1956-)

OVERVIEW

Director Born in Kongens Lyngby, Denmark, in April 1956, Lars von Trier worked as a child actor during the late 60s before going to the University of Copenhagen to study film theory. His first films, produced at age 25, won awards. Since the 1990s, von Trier has been a force in the avant-garde film movements of Europe, including hyperrealism, German expressionism, and Dogme 95—a movement he founded himself. Often his films delve into topics that make people uncomfortable, such as mental illness, sexuality, and violence. Von Trier's detached attitude about the controversial 'necessities' for his hyperrealistic films—including animal abuse, unsimulated sex, and physical violence—has marked him as a controversial director. Film journalism outlet Looper listed him first among the likes of Ruggero Deodato and Stanley Kubrick in 2021.



Film This unique film comes in two forms: A combined 241-minute edited version, or a two-volume uncut version, Volume I running for 117 minutes and Volume II running for 124 minutes. The first volume follows Joe, a young nymphomaniac, as she tells her life story to Seligman, a solitary middle-aged man, as she recovers from a beating. It was revealed early in the film's production that it would actually be two films, and they would have a "softer cut" available. Filmed in the German cities Cologne and Hilden and Ghent, Belgium, production began in late August 2012. Upon release, Nymphomaniac was given an NC-17 rating by the MPAA, but this was eventually rescinded, and the film is now unrated. At the time of writing, Volume I of Nymphomaniac holds a 76% approval rating on the digital review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.



Background Using digital composition, Nymphomaniac combines the actors having simulated sex with pornographic actors actually engaging in sexual contact. Von Trier spoke about this at the Cannes Film Festival, saying, "We shot the actors pretending to have sex and then had the body doubles, who really did have sex, and in post we will digital [sic] impose the two. So above the waist it will be the star and the [sic] below the waist it will be the doubles." Lead actress Stacy Martin would jokingly complain about the sex scenes being "boring" to shoot because of the technical nature of digital body doubling. Among those interested in erotic film, Volume I receives frequent praise. Fandango Media—the company that owns and maintains Rotten Tomatoes—has this to say: "Darkly funny, fearlessly bold, and thoroughly indulgent, Nymphomaniac finds Lars von Trier provoking viewers with customary abandon."

MAIN CHARACTERS

Joe – A young woman with nymphomania

Seligman – a somewhat shut-in middle-aged man

Jerôme 'J' Morris – A neighbor of Joe, her eventual employer, and then her lover

Joe's Father – A doctor who Joe loved very much

Joe's Mother – A distant woman who Joe disliked

B – Joe's childhood friend who pushed her into a libidinous lifestyle

H – A married man who tries to leave his wife for Joe

Liz – The secretary at the company Jerôme's uncle owns

SYNOPSIS

On a trip to the local shop, a middle-aged man finds a young woman, bloodied and beaten in an alleyway. He tries to help her, but at first she asks him to leave her alone. After promising not to call the police or an ambulance, he takes her in. She introduces herself as Joe, and he as Seligman. As she tells him her life story, he listens, interjecting occasionally with parallels drawn from his passions, including fly fishing, mathematics, and music theory. From Joe, we learn she was sexually active from a young age, claiming to have discovered masturbation at age two. As a young teen, she lost her virginity to a neighbor she admired, finding him unfulfilling.

A few years later, Joe and her best friend B have a competition on a train to see who can sleep with the most passengers. Joe wins after felling a married man who rejected B's advances. Joe then tells Seligman of her time with "The Little Flock," a cult-like group of girls who dedicated themselves to rejecting society's fixation on love with frequent casual sex and no repeated partners. After B finds love, Joe abandons the group and her, continuing to follow the group's rules on her own for a time. She is reunited with the neighbor, Jérôme, after she drops out of medical school and seeks a job at his uncle's stationary and printing company. Joe decides to sleep with all the other men at the job save for Jérôme, though she admits to Seligman she was falling for him. She writes a letter confessing her feelings, but he is gone when she tries to deliver it, met instead by his uncle.

Unable to find Jérôme and confess her love, Joe doubles down on her nymphomaniac tendencies, working a full-time job during the day and sleeping with a half-dozen or more men every night. After a lengthy retelling of one of her lover's wives slapping her and the events surrounding that moment, Joe recalls her father's last days in the hospital after learning Seligman is reading the works of Edgar Allen Poe. The poet's delirium reminds her of her own father's painful passing and the depression that struck her when he finally died. Joe then learns that Seligman is a music lover and asks him to play the tape that's already in his deck. He explains that it is a partial recording of Bach's *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, and they listen, discussing the music theory behind polyphony. This leads Joe to discuss the polyphony of lovers she experienced, naming F, a devoted and submissive man, and G, a domineering and passionate man as supporting melodies to her 'cantus firmus' Jérôme. She then tells Seligman about her first loving sexual encounter with Jérôme, and the film ends when Joe tells Jérôme she can no longer "feel anything."

PLOT

A Woman in the Alley – An alleyway appears: aged brick lit by dingy lamps, old corrugated aluminum shielding garbage bins from the mixed rain and snow that slowly fall all around. The rain and meltwater trickle down the brick past a squeaky broken ventilator fan before tapping percussively on a bin lid. The camera then pans down and lingers for only a moment on a hand, bloodied, lying against the wet pavement. A woman is lying on the ground. In a nearby apartment, an older man goes about his day. He pops in to a nearby shop for groceries, and on his way back, he discovers the woman lying in the alley. The man hovers over the woman. He stoops down and whispers, "Hello?" When she doesn't respond, he gently taps her shoulder, and she stirs. "You've been in an accident," the man says gently, saying he'll go to call an ambulance. "No," the woman moans. "I don't need an ambulance." When the man insists, she threatens to "be up and gone" before he can come back. He insists again, and she replies that she doesn't matter. "Is there anything you want?" the man asks. "I'd like a cup of tea," the woman replies groggily, "with some milk." "You'll have to come with me," the man says, helping the woman to her feet. "They don't serve tea in the street."



Hospitality – Inside his apartment, the man—who we later learn is called Seligman—approaches the bathroom with something in his hand. He turns his back and holds the garment out to the woman through the doorway, trying to preserve her modesty as she exits the shower. "Here's some pajamas," he nearly whispers before walking away to give



her space and privacy. He's made a bed for her so she can lie down and rest. The woman looks around Seligman's apartment as she crosses to the bed. She lies down stiffly, painfully, as Seligman covers her with a blanket. Seligman then says he'll wash her clothes, and she asks him not to wash her coat. "It smells rather bad," he says. "It's my coat," she replies. "The smell won't come off anyway." "It's your coat," Seligman says, putting it back down. He returns with her tea, and she twists to sip from the large cup. "Were you robbed?" he asks, sitting down in a chair near her. "It's my own fault," she murmurs. "I'm just a bad human being." "I've never met a bad human being," Seligman says solemnly. "Well, you have now," the woman says, placing her cup back on the bedside table. Seligman then convinces her to talk about what she means. The woman sits up a bit, saying, "Maybe I know where to start. But if you're to understand well, I'll have to tell you the whole story, and it will be long." Seligman nods in agreement. "Long is good."

Fly fishing – "Why is that ridiculous fish hook hanging?" She looks up at a fly tacked to the wall. "It's a fly," Seligman explains, saying he caught a big fish with it once. In his mind's eye, we see him tying the feathers to craft the fly as he explains the art of fly-making to the woman. The point is making something that looks like something the fish would want to eat. He then briefly explains how fly fishing works: the heavy lines and the understanding of the surrounding stream. His mind wanders, and he begins talking about a book he "worshiped" as a child, *The Complete Angler* by Izaak Walton. His mind's eye remembers the illustrations.



Child Discovers Genitals – The woman begins talking: "I discovered my cunt as a two-year-old." A young girl's face takes the screen, and she looks downward. "Cunt is a very strong word," Seligman whispers. "Let's call it 'Pandora's box,' then," the woman suggests. "No," Seligman backpedals. "Cunt is better." "So," the woman continues, "I was a nymphomaniac." Seligman takes issue with this, saying children are incapable of such dysfunction: "Not even the strictest god would see anything other than a child's normal behavior." He defends this interjection by mentioning that fetuses too touch their genitals in the womb. "Can a fetus somehow be sinful?"



Rubbing the Genitals – Seligman stops talking and allows Joe to move on, explaining how she and her childhood friend B would "play frogs" in the bathroom, splashing water all around before rubbing their genitals against the bathroom floor while kicking across. Shostakovich's Suite for Jazz Orchestra No. 2 blares as the girls play, but it is soon interrupted by a knock on the door.



Mother – The girl's mother knocks on the bathroom door, asking if she's done. The girls quickly wipe up the water, flushing the toilet to make noise to cover up their activities. It's from the mother that we learn the woman's name is Joe. "I loved my father very much," Joe continues as we see him, shaking his head at the girls' mischief. "He was a doctor. My mother's name was Katherine. My father called her 'Kay.' I suppose she's what you'd call a 'cold bitch.'" Kay plays solitaire.



Rope climbing – The scene changes to a school gym where two girls mop, blurry in the background. Three ropes hang from the ceiling. One shakes as if someone were hanging from it as Joe narrates, "When we had PE, I'd climb up the rope and hang there for ages with the rope between my legs. 'The sensation,' I called it..."



Children's sin – Joe continues, "Perhaps the only difference between me and other people is that I've always demanded more from a sunset, more spectacular colors when the sun hits the horizon. That's perhaps my only sin." From the bed, she looks at Seligman, who asks, "Why are you insisting that

children are sinful?" "Not children," Joe corrects. "Me." "I don't see sin anywhere," Seligman replies. "But, then, I'm not religious." "That's because you don't know the rest of the story," says Joe. "And, by the way, I'm not religious either." Seligman gets distracted again, asking why she'd let something as cruel as sin survive beyond religion, but Joe continues her story.

Anatomy Books – Young Joe reads from a book on her father's desk. He peaks at her from around the corner, unseen. Inside, Joe turns to a page with the female anatomy, tracing over words and reading them. Her father nods as she correctly reads each piece of anatomy. Joe looks up to see her father and smiles before leaving. Moving to the desk, she closes the book and places it on a nearby shelf.



Father's Botany Lessons – Wind blows through the trees. Joe's father looks up, his eyes closed, savoring the sensation. Young Joe is nearby, mimicking him. Looking up at a large ash tree, Joe's father strokes her hair. "When the ash tree was created," he says, "It made all the other trees in the forest jealous. It was the most beautiful tree... It was the World Tree in Norse mythology. Remember Odin? He hung from the ash tree for nine days in order to gain insight. The ash tree had the strongest wood. Then, in the winter, the ash tree lost all of its leaves. All the trees noticed its black buds and started laughing: 'Oh look! The ash tree has had its fingers in the ashes.'" He passes a small ash branch to his daughter, pointing out the bud. "You can always tell the ash tree in winter by the black buds." With her father's help, she mounts an ash sample in a book for pressing. At a nearby lime tree, there is another sample, another story. Joe's voiceover talks about his love of nature and education.



The Nymph – In the bed, Joe looks up at Seligman, asking, "Am I boring you?" Seligman replies he's just wondering how she'll weave fishing into her tale: "You start with the fly on the wall there. It's called a nymph. It would tie in elegantly with your discussion about nymphomania." He goes on to explain what a nymph is, the early stage of some insects' lives.

First Intercourse – Joe begins, "As a quite young nymph, It was imperative for me to get rid of my virginity... I kind of knew this boy, J, who owned a moped. So in my eyes, he was rather sophisticated. I was fifteen, and perhaps my girlish romantic expectations were a bit high." In her mind's eye, we watch the event unfold: 15-year-old Joe knocks on J's door, and he invites her in. As he works on his bike with his "big strong hands," young Joe asks him to take her virginity. As if she'd asked him to help her with some laborious task, J agrees with a neutral tone. In a small adjacent room, Joe sits on a cot, waiting for J to finish tinkering with his moped. He can't get it started. "You should probably take off your knickers, yeah?" He says, wiping the engine grease from his hands. Joe complies, her voiceover speaking about her mindset as J stands above her, touching himself. "He shoved his cock inside of me and humped three times," says Joe. The memory repeats this in perfect clarity, the numbers '1, 2, 3' appearing on the left-hand side of the screen with each thrust. "Then he turned me over like a sack of potatoes," Joe says. A plus appears in the center of the screen, and J spits in his hand before rubbing it on himself. "Then," Joe continues, "he humped me five times in the ass." J shakes as he orgasms, pressing his head against the nearby wall. Without a word, he stands, pulls up his pants, and gets back to work on his moped. Young Joe puts herself together quickly and on the way out opens the fuel valve J forgot to open. He kick-starts the moped without issue. As her younger self limps away, Joe says, "I never forgot those two humiliating numbers." Seligman speaks up, "Three and five... Those are Fibonacci numbers." "That may be," says Joe. "In any case, it hurt like hell. I swore I'd never sleep with anyone again. But of course, that only lasted a short while."



Competition – “A couple of years later, I was at my friend B’s, and as always, she had a new idea. We put on clothes later known as the ‘fuck-me-now clothes.’” A bright, spindly fly appears on screen for a moment. “The idea was a competition; we were to go on a train trip. B said there was no need for tickets. The one who had fucked the most men when we reached the destination would win the chocolate sweets.”



Steppenwolf’s *Born to be Wild* blares as the girls board the train and size up the men in the compartments. It falls silent when Seligman interrupts again: “What you were doing when you walked down that corridor... You were reading the river!” He explains the concept of how fly fishermen learn to perceive the river’s topography from the fish’s point of view to pick the best place to fish. When Joe resumes her story, B instructs her on how best to attract men for casual sex: ask “W” questions, and “it will happen on its own.” “It turned out to be shockingly easy,” Joe says to Seligman. “It was exactly right: Look them in the eye and smile. But then, suddenly, it stopped.” Seligman smiles, “That’s a very clear parallel to fishing in a stream... Either none of the fish are feeding, or they all feed at the same time. They go into ‘feeding frenzy.’ And then just as suddenly as it started, it all stops. It’s observable, but it’s highly unpredictable... Anyway, the fish most readily bite at the beginning of a light rain... They can’t be seen from above because the water’s surface is disturbed.” “But then it started again,” says Joe, “but a bit more slowly.” In his meandering way, Seligman explains how fly fishermen sometimes deploy a second phase of their technique, the induced take: “In phase two, you not only imitate an insect, but an insect in trouble.” Back in the train carriage, B feigns tears to attract another point in her favor. Young Joe tries to imitate this behavior, but success is more difficult.

Seduction of the Married man - “Just the same,” Joe begins, “we were running out of subjects, and B was ahead on points, which led us to S’s first-class compartment.” The girls sit across from a well-dressed man who ignores them, reading a newspaper. The conductor comes around, looking for tickets, and B causes a scene when they don’t have theirs. S offers to pay for the girls tickets. After the conductor leaves, B tries and fails to seduce S as thanks for the train tickets. Outside his carriage door, B and Joe discuss strategy, Joe conceding defeat. B says she’ll give Joe five points if she seduces the married man in the first-class compartment. Back in the carriage, Joe bonds with the man, suggesting that he should have gotten his wife a better gift. He reveals to her that his wife is ovulating and, because they’re late in life for it, he’s running home to try and impregnate her. After their discussion, Joe basically forces herself onto the man, fellating him. He finishes, and Joe swallows, giggling and saying, “Wow.” A shot of a fisherman pulling a large salmon into a net takes the screen. Joe happily munches on the chocolate snacks on the train station platform.



Seligman’s view – Seligman says, “When you told the story, you were cheerful, full of humor. It wasn’t as if you embarked on some tragic tale... The only thing you’ve done—except giving a few people an experience to remember—is you relieved S from his load... I read somewhere that if you keep the load too long, the sperm will die... Maybe thanks to you, Mr. S and his wife now have a healthy and well-functioning child.” Again, Joe calls her misuse of her “power as a woman” unacceptable, pushing back against Seligman’s paternalistic behaviors. “All I wanted to say was,” Seligman begins, “if you have wings, why not fly?” He compares her behavior to the physics of helicopters: to get the steel whirlybirds airborne, one must tip them toward the ground in a seemingly contradictory movement. “They want to fly, it’s just a little unpredictable when. You flew on that train. That surprised you.” He finishes his digression and leaves the room with her now cold tea.



Getting to know each other – Sometime later, Joe naps in the bed. Seligman returns with a fresh cup of tea and a pastry. “No more stories,” he whispers as she rouses. “I need to sleep.” “Oh no,” Joe replies. “This was beginning to amuse me.” “I don’t even know your name,” Seligman says, and the two formally introduce themselves. Joe calls his name ridiculous, and Seligman snorts. “It’s Jewish,” he



comments. "You said you weren't religious," she replies. "No, but my great-grandfather was," he explains, saying his parents were sentimental about their religion. She turns a comment he made about sin earlier around on him, and he begins a little talk about Jewish anti-Zionism. "Seligman means 'the happy one,'" he explains eventually, and Joe asks if he is happy. After a moment of thought, he replies, "I suppose I am. Even if I'm the type of person to cut the nails of the right hand first." Seeing Joe's confusion, Seligman explains his personal philosophy of nail-cutting: those who trim their dominant hand first seek to get the difficult out of the way so they can enjoy the easier tasks without additional worry, whereas those who cut the nails of their non-dominant hand seek pleasure in life first. Joe looks down at the pastry beside her tea and recognizes it: "That's rugelach... served with a cake fork." She then explains that, in her opinion, it is a pastry, calling the habit of serving it with a cake fork "downright feminine." It reminds her of someone from her past and begins the next part of her story.

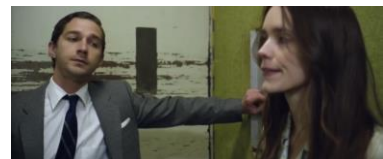
The Little Flock – Soon B and I started a club that we called the little flock." As one young woman plays a rhythmic tritone on a piano, several others—including Joe and B—chant, "Mea vulva, mea maxima vulva." Joe's voiceover explains that B was raised Catholic, and the little ceremony was based in her perversion of the faith's rituals. Seligman finds the tritone most interesting: the interval between B and F was banned from use during the Middle Ages, called the Devil's interval. The little flock gathers weekly to share their sexual exploits. Joe explains, "Now B's message wasn't exactly representational. She just had to be the tough one. It was directed at the men. It was about fucking and about having the right to be horny. We masturbated together, that kind of thing. But it was rebellious." Seligman wants to know what they were rebelling against. "Love," Joe says. "We were committed to combat the love-fixated society." The little flock goes about their business, breaking store windows displaying Valentines and wedding décor and staring angrily at couples making out in the movie theater. "I really believed in the little flock," Joe says, "but, of course, that was naïve of me. Over time, even the strongest couldn't stay true to our manifest." A short scene of a group meeting shows Joe and B having a conflict over B falling in love with a man. "The secret ingredient to sex," B whispers to Joe, "is love." Joe storms out of the meeting. In the bedroom, Joe explains, "For me, love was just lust with jealousy added... It all strengthened my wish for a serious education."



School – In Seligman's mind's eye, a short aside plays out. Joe, dressed as the stereotypical pornographic schoolgirl touches herself while giving math and geography lessons on a chalkboard. "Why are you smiling?" Joe asks, and Seligman tells her he was imagining how she would discuss the education in her mode of storytelling. "That's nothing to smile about," Joe says plainly. Seligman asks what kind of education she got, and Joe responds that she began medical school, following in her father's footsteps. We see a short scene where younger Joe observes as her instructor performs an abortion. "It was harder and harder for me to concentrate," she says, "so I studied less and less until finally I dropped out. My dad was very disappointed... but it was the only time I saw my mother really smile when she said, 'What did I tell you?'"



Work: Surprise meeting with Jérôme - Instead, I began to look for a job. It turned out it was hard to get a job that paid even halfway decently." Younger Joe stumbles through a job interview, naïvely admitting she doesn't have any secretarial skills nor thought she would need them. While it seems she's not going to get the job, she realizes her boss will be Jérôme, 'J' from her youth, the boy who took her virginity. He hires her. The next day, Jérôme sits at his desk, drinking coffee. The secretary shows Joe in and Jérôme dismisses the secretary, asking Joe to take a seat so he can explain her duties. "Hi," he begins, grinning goofily. "I bet you didn't think I'd make something of myself, right? And now, here I sit, director's chair of M&J Morris LTD." "It's quite surprising," Joe says. "Surprising?" Jérôme replies. "It's a sign from God. You know I've thought about you often since then. Have you thought of me?" Before Joe can reply, Jérôme interrupts, saying he's sitting in for his uncle while he recovers from an illness, continuing to explain the business. He then goes on to show Joe around. It's clear the staff barely



tolerates him. In the freight elevator, he feigns a failure to trap himself and Joe inside and tries to come on to her. For once, Joe pushes a man away, saying, "You're not really my type." When Jérôme tries to get the lift running again, he realizes it's actually stuck. After hoisting himself up and out, he reaches down to Joe, lifting her up. As younger Joe works in the office, Joe narrates, "As I didn't recall anyone defining my work duties, I decided to clean up in order to smooth the waters." After clearing Jérôme's desk, she brings in a tray with coffee, sugar, cream, and a piece of rugelach. When he finally gets to work, Jérôme is upset. He tells Joe off for moving his things and demands that she bring the tray in again, making her wait at the door as if he were busy. When she sets the tray in front of him, he rudely demands a cake fork. Meekly, she leaves to get one. "Unmanly," Seligman says in the bedroom. "Feminine," Joe corrects him. Seligman jumps into an aside about the novelty of cake forks and a story about the Bolsheviks.

Seducing men at work – Sometime later, younger Joe walks around the office. Liz, Jérôme's secretary, watches her with interest. "I was wondering if you could help me," Joe says to a man at a desk. She points out some smudges on a document, saying the man's hands must be dirty and that they should go wash his hands. She repeats this same discussion with a couple of other men until finally we see her exiting the water closet, a man just behind her as she tightens her belt. "If you'd asked Jérôme, he would have said that I was the one who declared war," Joe narrates. "Many times, he'd take me into town just to hold his coat." She remembers one incident in which she embarrassed him by skillfully parallel parking his car after he had failed to do it.



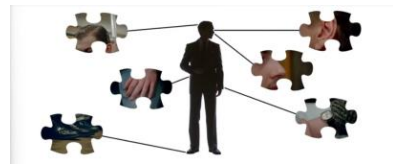
Lovestruck – "It was about this time that a dramatic change happened inside of me," Joe narrates as her younger self looks over the chaos of Jérôme's office. "I could suddenly see a kind of order in the mess." Liz sees Joe doing this one day, and she gently confronts her about it, saying the young woman is in love with Jérôme. "It was all very, very wrong," Joe says to Seligman. "I wanted to be one of Jérôme's things. I wanted to be picked up and put down again and again." "His strong hands," Seligman says, having recalled her saying it earlier. She explains it wasn't just about his hands anymore, but all of him. "Love distorts things," Joe says. "Or even worse: Love is something you'd never ask for. The erotic was something I asked for or even demanded of men. With this idiotic love, I felt humiliated by it and all the dishonesty that follows. The erotic is about saying "yes." Love appeals to the lowest instincts, wrapped up in lies. How do you say yes when you mean no and vice versa? I'm ashamed of what I became, but it was beyond my control." Seligman says she's only justifying her personality now: "I thought the point was to reveal it."



Chasing Jérôme – Younger Joe sits watching Jérôme eat his rugelach in his office. "Thank you," he says, dismissing her. "You're welcome," she says dreamily, missing the point of his comment. He has to resort to rudeness to get her to leave: "You can go now. Goodbye, Joe." A bit later, she walks a familiar path through the woods. "At this time, I took up walking again," she narrates. "I walked in the forest, the forest of my childhood." She lays out her path and the trees her father loved to show her, the woman with her dog, and the old man on the bench. "I couldn't free myself of the image of Jérôme and his careless elegance. And during this time, when I was with other men, I forbade them to touch my body with their hands, and soon I stopped having sex altogether. I tried to meet him all the time. I found out where he lived but of course never dared ring his doorbell. I even started humiliating myself on purpose in order for him to notice me." Repeating the scene from before, she parallel parks Jérôme's car, but this time she hits another car and breaks the tail light. Jérôme informs her it will come out of her pay before storming away. It's after this Joe writes a letter confessing her love, but when she goes to give it to Jérôme, his uncle is back, and Jérôme is gone, traveling the world.



Obsession about Jerome: *Masturbation on the train* – Seligman asks if she was jealous, and she denies it, saying, “I didn’t know that feeling.” He calls such an ability superhuman before asking, “So that was the end of love, then?” Joe responds, saying it’s not quite that simple, “But more about that later, as they say in the movies. Though I’d tried to keep him in my own way. Mentally. As I masturbated on the train amongst other people.” Seligman thinks it unlikely she could get away with such a thing, but she says it can be done very discretely: “The only thing that could give me away—and mostly to women—was my open mouth when I came.” On a train, we see younger Joe engaged in such an activity, her coat on her lap, her eyes jumping around the carriage. She describes the way she’d try to jigsaw puzzle together a mental image of Jérôme. Before she can finish her mental puzzle, an older woman sees her gaping mouth and begins staring. Joe stops her clandestine activity.



Father’s “Souls of the trees”: Seligman has a quick comment about the fallibility of memory, and Joe says that’s not always a bad thing. In the forest, now covered with snow, Joe’s father leads her by the hand down a trail. “As silhouettes in the winter, the trees are difficult to tell apart,” she says, describing how her father would keep up their flora examinations even in the winter as he uses a magnifying glass to get a closer look at a bud on the tip of a branch. “It’s actually the souls of the trees,” he says as snow begins to fall, “we see in the winter. In the summer everything is green and idyllic. In the winter, the branches and the trunks, they stand out. Just look at how crooked they all are. The branches have to carry all the leaves into the sunlight. It’s one long struggle for survival.” Joe narrates, “My father surprised me by calling the naked trunks the souls of the trees. The poetic thought was rare for him, as by his own account, he preferred the empirical sciences.” Joe says she intensified her ‘hunt’ for men, comparing her genitals at this period of her life to the automatic sliding doors of a supermarket with an overactive sensor. Shostakovich plays once more as a slideshow of penises crosses the screen.



Too many men – Joe enters her apartment and crosses to her answering machine, its light blinking emphatically. She has many messages from men awaiting her attention, a group she describes as her “sizable circle.” In order to deal with them, she rolls dice. Each number represents a style of response. “A one meant an overly loving answer,” Joe narrates as her younger self rolls the dice again and again. “A two, not quite as passionate but still positive, and so on up to five, which was a complete rejection, and six, no answer at all. The trick with this method was I didn’t have to worry about the individual relationships but instead became completely unpredictable, which, of course, drove the men even wilder.” Younger Joe makes a series of calls based on her list of dice rolls. “That sounds rather stressful,” Seligman comments, and Joe agrees, but she says she took comfort in her book of botanical samples. “When I needed comfort or peace,” she narrates, “I took out my herbarium and looked at my favorite leaves.”



Homewrecker – In her apartment, a man stands awkwardly as Joe sets the table. “H was a sticky bastard,” she says. “I had invited A for dinner, as he was my favorite, while H’s presence had become quite irritating.” H insists on staying, confessing his love for Joe. Joe returns the confession in an attempt to get him to leave. In a long, drawn out scene, H returns, saying he’s left his wife. To Joe’s horror, his wife and children have tailed him. The dramatic scene plays out much like you would expect: The wife appeals to their humanity, using the children as props, but, especially after A makes his appearance, the façade drops, and Mrs. H reacts violently, slapping H after screaming at them. She leaves, pushing her boys down the stairs while wailing.



Loneliness – Joe pushes herself into a seated position on the bed. “So how did this episode affect your life?” Seligman asks. “Not at all,” Joe says softly. “You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.” “Some people,” Seligman continues, “blame the addict. Other people feel sorry for the addict.” Joe refuses to categorize herself as a simple addict: she had no ‘need’ in her mind, only lust. “Addiction sometimes leads to an absence of empathy,” Seligman says. “You can’t fight a lion and blow the noses of your children at the same time.” Joe says her nymphomania was callousness. “You’re very stubborn,” Seligman comments. “But what about yourself? How did you feel during all this? Did you feel good? Did you feel bad?” She says, on the whole, she felt good, “but when I try and remember a specific episode, I’d say that just then I felt rather bad... Mrs. H was right about the loneliness. I’d be lying if I said it hadn’t been my constant companion.” She tells Seligman he’s “led her into a trap” before telling the story of a surgery when she was young. In pre-medication before sedation, she felt totally alone in the universe, and that feeling frightened her like nothing else in her life.



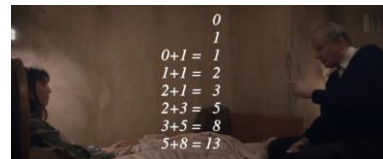
Delirium – Glancing around the room, Joe sees the fishhook on the wall, a portrait of a woman peeking out at her from behind another painting leaned against the opposing wall, and a book by the bedside. She asks about it, and Seligman says it’s the collected works of Edgar Allan Poe. Joe isn’t familiar, and Seligman gives a short history of his life and his strange, agonizing death: “He died in the most fearful way you can imagine, in something you’d call delirium tremors.” While he continues to explain, there is an odd recognition in Joe’s eyes. She intimately knows what he’s describing. “I know what delirium is,” she says. In black and white, younger Joe walks down a rain-soaked path to a hospital. As she does, Seligman recites the first section of Poe’s 1839 short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Joe’s father went out much the same way as Edgar Allen Poe, fighting with terrors that didn’t exist as his brain fell to pieces. The doctor and nurses can’t do anything to help him besides restrain him when he lashes out. Joe cries as she strokes his hair. Sometime later, Joe enters the room to find her father in the throes of a particularly bad episode. He doesn’t even recognize her. It takes a team of doctors and nurses to restrain and sedate him so they can hook him back up to his IV, forcing Joe to leave the room.



Father’s Death – Joe walks through the bowels of the hospital down a long corridor lined by piping and ductwork. She approaches the morgue, looking tentatively through the window before pushing the door open. In the morgue proper, a man works, wiping down gurneys. Slowly, Joe approaches him as if drawn by a magnetic force. The automatic door to the morgue interior opens, and the man looks at Joe. Slowly, the door closes behind her. Moments later, Joe and the man have sex on one of the gurneys he was tasked with cleaning. There is pain where typically there would be pleasure. She orgasms and begins to sob, pushing the man away. “When he died,” Joe’s voiceover says as we see Joe’s father’s corpse in the hospital bed, “I had no feelings left.” “That’s certainly understandable,” Seligman whispers. Joe then talks about her shame in having “lubricated” when her father finally was pronounced dead. Seligman sighs and says, “I know you like to present yourself in a negative way... but this story doesn’t add to that belief. It’s extremely common to react sexually in a crisis. It may be shameful to you, but in literature, there are many worse examples.”



Polyphony – Joe notes Seligman’s cassette player and asks him to play whatever is already in it. “It’s something I’ve been listening to a lot lately,” Seligman says, “but it’s not an entirely complete recording, unfortunately.” He says it’s a segment of Bach’s *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* before diving into a spiel about polyphony, calling Bach a master and diving into another discussion about Fibonacci numbers. He then defines the bass, accompaniment, and main voice, or ‘canto firmus,’ before playing the tape. The camera skates around the room while the two listen to the organ track, lingering on the hook on the wall, the faded wallpaper, and the portrait of the woman peaking out from behind another picture.



Like Handshakes – “The relationship between the various intercours create a completeness,” Joe says it’s like the handshake, a commonality in our culture that allows you to judge a person more deeply with just a touch as “the sum of all the different handshakes” one might experience in their life. A montage of handshakes, including fascist military leaders, African villagers, Japanese businessmen, and people closing on home purchases, flashes on the screen. “Normally,” Joe continues, “a nymphomaniac is seen as someone who can’t get enough and therefore has sex with many different people.”



Only One Lover – I see it precisely as the sum of all these different sexual experiences. So in that way, I have only one lover.” Joe’s voiceover tells us a story of three of her favored lovers. First is F, “the bass.” He is a submissive and doting man who worships Joe’s body above all else. She describes him as patient and almost fatherly. Next is G, and he’s the polar opposite: demanding and dominant like an ill-mannered street cat. Joe loved the way he’d take control and compares him to a jaguar. As if playing a polyphonic melody, the two scenes replay on opposing sides of the screen with artistic embellishments, accompanied by organ.



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the screen with artistic embellishments, accompanied by organ.

Caged animal – Her younger self appears on one of her daily walks, the camera looking down at her feet as they trod forward down the path. Joe narrates, “Despite my success in managing the complicated logistics involved in arranging up to ten daily sexual satisfactions while also having a full-time job, I was still prone to a certain sadness. So when my busy life allowed a few breaks, I used them to take my walks.” The walk repeats several times, each sped up, Joe saying, “These repeated walks became a kind of metaphor for my life: monotonous and pointless.... Precisely like the movements of a caged animal. Basically, we’re all waiting for permission to die.”



Meeting Jérôme again – On one of her walks, Joe notices torn pictures scattered on the ground. She picks them up, recognizing imagery from them. As she gathers more pictures, they lead her toward a viewing platform by a pond. There, she finds a scrap with a face she recognizes: Jérôme. A hand reaches out to her from above. Jérôme is excited to see Joe, and they stand together, staring. “What a strange way to meet,” Jérôme says. Joe agrees. Her voiceover explains that Jérôme had a fight with his wife who tore up their vacation snapshots before storming away. Again, B appears, whispering to Joe, “The secret ingredient to sex is love.” Bringing things back to the polyphony metaphor, Joe says, “The third voice, the secret ingredient.” “Cantus firmus,” Jérôme makes love to Joe. The organ begins to play again, the main melodic line dominating for a moment as Joe and Jérôme have sex. The other voices join, forming a triptych of music and visuals, showing us F and G’s scenes from before with Jérôme’s and Joe’s in the center, the organist’s hands and feet flashing on the screen occasionally. The tape player clicks loudly, stopping suddenly as the track ends prematurely. While having sex with Jérôme, Joe’s expression suddenly changes. “What’s wrong?” He asks. “I can’t feel anything,” she says before repeating it again with a more desperate tone in her voice. She begins to sob.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Joe

Joe is a self-described nymphomaniac. Seligman finds her lying in a dirty alleyway after she suffers a beating. Upon being taken in by the older man, she decides to tell him her life story.

Adventurous Especially in her youth, we see the adventurous side of Joe. She and B get into typical childish mischief on top of being overly sexual together, such as when they “play frogs.” Because her parents assume they’re just playing with water, the sexual element of this activity is never known. We see a similar adventurous nature emerge during the train trip where, perhaps for the first time, B and Joe compete to see who can have the most casual sex in a set amount of time. Joe credits this experience with broadening and deepening her sexual appetite. Through her sexual experience, we see adventurousness: At one point, she describes a period of her life as if she were an explorer going to see unknown lands, but it is instead a variety of penises. She desires novelty and thrill, leading her to emotionally unfulfilling relationships that prioritize sexual encounters above all else.

Numb Because of a life of exponentially increasing sexual encounters, Joe has grown emotionally numb. She has such dysfunction in her sexual life, she fails to see men as anything but toys to appease her appetites. This leads Joe to what she describes as callousness that is just apathy: she doesn’t care. Even when the wife of one of her lovers causes an extended scene in front of two of her lovers inside her apartment, Joe just goes with the flow and admits to Seligman that nothing came from that moment, no real impact on her life. Joe’s numbness is that of uneducated and misplaced nihilism. If nothing has inherent meaning, it follows that we as actors in our own experiences give meaning. Instead, Joe posits that “we are all just waiting for permission to die.” She cloaks a deep depression in feigned philosophy.

Dissatisfied Ultimately, Joe can’t find satisfaction. She wants more from everything and everyone, saying of herself that she “expects more out of a sunset” and that it’s her “only sin.” Her overindulgence in sex may be a part of her mental blocks, of why she feels like a bad person. A lack of thrilling or new sensation leads her to believe she is bad: If other women can be happy with one man for years on end, how can she be good if she is unhappy with potentially thousands of sexual encounters? Instead of trying to find a satisfying relationship, Joe uses dice to define her relationships. This keeps her unpredictable to the men, which “drives them wild,” but, she admits to Seligman, it does add stress to her life.

Jerôme ‘J’ Morris

A neighbor from her childhood, her employer, and eventually her lover, Jerôme has a major impact on Joe’s story. He is the boy who takes her virginity. They reconnect when he is put in charge of his uncle’s company and hires Joe for a secretarial position.

Prideful Jerôme is quickly shown to be prideful. Whereas many teenage boys would be excited or unsure when asked to have sex with a girl, he acts like he’s been asked to do a chore. Likewise, after very quickly reaching an orgasm with Joe, he simply stands up and goes back to fixing his moped. When Joe casually solves the mechanical issue he’s having by opening the gas valve on his moped as she leaves, he turns angry and jealous, his pride hurt. As an adult, this behavior continues and intensifies. He wears fancy suits, expensive watches, drives an expensive car, and strews about his expensive material possessions when he takes over his uncle’s office. When Joe skillfully parallel parks his car after he fails, his pride is hurt again. He also takes Joe’s refusal to have sex with him in the elevator as a personal affront, growing obviously jealous when she sleeps with other men in the office.

Seligman

We don’t learn a lot about Seligman outside of his interests. He finds Joe lying on the ground and takes her in when she refuses to seek medical care. Unlike apparently anyone else in her life, Seligman offers to listen to Joe tell her life story, although he frequently interrupts.

Helpful We see this subtle trait in Seligman from the beginning. His first act is a helpful one: upon seeing an injured woman lying in the street, he helps her into his home to recover after she refuses to go to a hospital, threatening to simply limp away and find another place to die if he does so. Not wanting to see Joe come to any further harm, he helps her to wash and find a safe place to rest, giving her the food and milk he bought for himself just moments before. Seligman also wants to help Joe understand the darkness within her and how it could manifest in a lack of self-empathy.

Curious Seligman is shown to have a natural curiosity. We see this first when he sees Joe lying in the alleyway. While many people would rush to the nearest phone to call the authorities, Seligman instead stops to help her, taking her in to recover when she refuses to go to a hospital. Something about her intrigues him, and he wants to know more about her and why she has such a negative attitude. His curiosity shows in his frequent interjections while Joe tells her story. He always wants to know more or seeks clarification when something is confusing or seemingly contradictory. Seligman also has a broad range of interests, from fly-fishing to music to helicopters to literature and beyond.

Talkative Seligman is almost comically talkative. Sometimes, he'll interrupt Joe's story with a minutes-long tirade after she's said only a sentence. He can talk endlessly, often about nothing, almost uncomfortable when he isn't allowed to interject something. While one of his more minor traits, Seligman's talkative nature frequently interrupts the story with metatextual analysis and asides that lead Joe into new chapters or episodes from her life. His frequent interruptions represent men's frequent inability to listen to women: He seems to have a compulsion to interfere with how Joe tells her story even after having literally begged to hear her tell it.

Joe's Father

Joe's father takes center stage at several points in her story. It's clear she loves him and values his opinions. During his final days, she stays by his side in the hospital as he goes through a painful delirium.

Caring Joe praises her father as the caring parent. He shows this clearly as well, often finding excuses to walk with his daughter through the woods and teaching her about the trees. He holds her close while telling his stories, stroking her hair and giving her that contact all children need. While Joe's mother is irritated by the young girl's mischief, her father smiles about it, loving to see his child grow and learn, even if it's a bit awkward. We see this again when Joe looks up the female anatomy in his medical books. While some parents would react harshly or out of embarrassment, he simply smiles when he sees her making these discoveries. He cares more about her happiness and healthy development than for morals or norms.

B

We don't see a lot of B, but her fingers are all over the story. It's the childhood friendship of Joe and B that pushes Joe into her life as a 'political' nymphomaniac. B is the one who dreams up and funds the competition on the train, showing herself to be more skillful at seducing men than Joe at that time.

Non-traditional While Joe is convinced of her own dysfunctions, it's B who pushes Joe into a life of nymphomania and dysfunctional relationships. Their sexual competitions and the ideas behind their "little flock" push Joe into frequent casual sex and then normalize it. Both of these activities are dreamed up and given form by B's desire to rebel from her family's expectations. Joe falls into them in order to fit in and refuses to give them up even as B abandons them herself.

Dominant B shows herself to be the dominant one of the pair early in the film. It's at B's behest that the girls play frogs, and it's when staying with B that Joe begins the competition on the train. B's desire to rebel against her parent's strict Catholic moralism leads Joe to embark on the expansion of her sexual appetites. In many ways, this desire ends up being taken more seriously by Joe than B, who splits with the "little flock" when B goes against their prime tenant: Don't fall in love. B has such an impact on Joe's life; when she rediscovers Jérôme, it's B who appears in her mind, whispering again, "The secret ingredient to sex is love."

THEMES

Sexuality

Desire / Lust This dual theme comes up often throughout the film. Joe is unable to untangle lust from desire in her understanding of the concept, so they intermingle. What are childhood crushes turn into a quest for perpetual satisfaction, muddying the water further. Most of the lust we see is Joe seducing men or men lusting after her. Further, we don't actually see most of the seduction, we see the act. Late in the film, Joe explains that, in her mind, she builds herself an experience in her mind that is the sum of all her sexual experiences, so in that way she has only one lover. This helps to explain her lust and nymphomania as an attempt to have a more complete experience, a desire to know and feel.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of this theme comes into play near the midpoint of the film. When showing Joe around her new workplace, Jérôme fakes a fault in the freight lift in order to try and have sex with Joe. We soon learn he is a married man, but this doesn't stop his lust and desire to have Joe again. While she remembers the time he took her virginity with shame and disgust, he is incredibly proud, and he desires to relive that experience. When Joe rejects him, he is hurt.



Seduction Seduction might be the most obvious theme in the film. Joe relies on it first and foremost throughout her life in order to keep her circle of lovers well populated. She also doesn't lack preferences or tastes: when she abandons a lover for whatever reason, she seeks to replace him. Because of the way she plays into desires, expectations, and societal norms, she is able to be exactly what her lovers desire, allowing her to keep so many all at once. Even when it's revealed she has multiple lovers, a pair of them during the latter half of the film, they both still desire to have her, to be with her. The younger man turns to comfort her after the other man's wife follows him to Joe's home, and H—the unfaithful man—continues to refuse to leave. Sometimes Joe's seduction techniques take unusual forms, such as her use of dice to decide how she will respond to her lover's messages. She claims that this keeps her unpredictable and therefore irresistible to men without having to keep track of each individual relationship. Seduction is key to her because it's the act of sex she wants, not the romance or connection.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of seduction comes in the first half during the competition on the train. B offers Joe five points and the win if she can successfully seduce the married man who had rejected her advances. Joe manages to bond with the man and get him to admit he wants to sleep with the young women but also wants to remain true to his wife. Joe kneels down and undoes the man's belt and pants, and while he vocally rejects her advances, he barely moves, refusing to do more than just say, "no, stop," even as she begins to perform oral sex on him. There is a lot of gray area in this moment: Did Joe force herself on the man, or did he simply go through the motions of rejection so he has plausible deniability in his mind while also getting exactly what he wants?



Sexual affair The idea of an affair comes up at several points, including a lengthy scene in which one of her lover's wife tracks her down and tries to use her children as a prop to shame her. We mostly see it in the way Joe juggles men. It's clear most of them have no clue she sleeps with so many men. In one scene, she claims to three separate men that they've given her an orgasm for the first time in her life. They react differently, but each shows no sign that they're one of many lovers. In this we see Joe's life as one long sexual affair. Were she to inform her lovers and sleep with more of them more frequently instead of using them once before moving on, she'd be practicing polyamory, but that would run against her desire to fight the societal norms around love and romance.



Illustrative moment In a very long moment in the latter half of the film, Joe discusses an embarrassing moment in which a married lover of hers brought his wife into her home. He didn't mean for this to happen, but by suddenly leaving her, he leads her right back to Joe's home. The wife uses her children as props, trying to shame Joe and her husband, manipulating him back into her arms. We never actually see the act of the affair, but we very clearly see the backlash to the affair being discovered.

Dysfunction There is no singular moment that adequately highlights Joe's dysfunction in Part I. We hear most of it from her stories. While she often insists that she had the compulsion from a young age, we don't see this come about until her late teens after B's goading during the train competition. In this way, the film makes us question Joe's telling of her life story, making her an unreliable narrator: Some of the sexual encounters she describes are perfectly normal, and many people who are not nymphomaniacs seek multiple partners. What seems to be most dysfunctional about Joe is her inability to accept sensations for what they are, always demanding more, always seeking more. Her compulsion seems more like an addictive personality than anything else. In a different story, Joe could easily be a gambling addict or substance abuser. This becomes the most clear at the film's end when, after finally having sex with Jérôme, she claims to feel nothing.

Love The value of this theme grows as the film goes on. At first we see the love between a father and daughter (as well as a lack of love between mother and daughter). It's clear Joe has a deep love for her father, an idea strengthened by the penultimate chapter of the film when she stays by him as he dies in the hospital. This comes up again when Jérôme makes another appearance. When they were teens, Joe had a thing for him, but his rough, unsatisfactory behavior when they first had sex quickly changed her mind. Jérôme hasn't changed much as an adult, still being prideful but having better taste. As they spend time near one another, Joe finds herself falling for Jérôme, wanting to be "one of his things." She even writes a letter admitting her love for him, although she cannot deliver it. At the film's end, she encounters Jérôme again. This time, she describes them making love as opposed to just having sex. As the film ends, she is distraught to find she can't feel anything: love wasn't the secret ingredient as B promised.

Illustrative moment Later in the film, we see Joe love-struck. She sits in Jérôme's office, watching him eat his rugelach. He dismisses her, thanking her for brining in the pastry and coffee. Dreamily, she replies, "You're welcome," the ghost of a smile crossing her lips. She misunderstands that the thanks weren't heartfelt, only a dismissal. Being sent away leaves her disappointed, but in this moment we can clearly see the perception-warping capacity love has and Joe fears.



Rebellion / Liberation This very minor theme is important to Joe. She bases much of her identity around this idea. In some ways, she sees her nymphomania like a freedom fighter would guerrilla combat. She is fighting against a system she despises, that of romance. In her mind, she is a liberator, though this idea runs against her telling of the story, especially when she leaves the "little flock" over B's falling in love with a man. In some ways, she is too radical, such as her belief that sex should only ever be casual. There is no room for the gray areas of life or human desires. Her rebellion stunts her experience, rendering her unable to feel the emotions that typically come with close sexual relationships. She feels physical sensation more than anything else, and this helps to make her an unreliable narrator: She often talks about emotions, but it's clear she lacks an understanding to make those determinations, often using emotion to justify her personality first and foremost instead of reporting how she actually felt in those moments.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of this theme in the film comes near the halfway point. The little flock goes about their typical activities as Joe narrates. In one short moment, we see B throw a rock through a shop's display window. Inside rests a collection of wedding accouterments. Joe explains that the little flock exists to rebel against a society crazed by love.



Masturbation / Rubbing the genitals This idea and action comes up again and again throughout the film. Joe speaks at length about how she was obsessed with rubbing her genitals as a child, calling this sinful. Seligman retorts that fetuses also touch their genitals in the womb, saying that even the cruelest of gods couldn't call such normal human behavior a sin. We see Joe's partners stroking or lubricating themselves, and one scene shows us how Joe would frequently masturbate on public transit.

Illustrative moment While there are many clear moments of this theme throughout the film, the most important comes early in the film. Joe claims that the idea originally came from her friend B, but it was a game they played often. In the bathroom, the girls remove their underwear before splashing water around and "playing frogs." During this action, both rub their genitals on the wet floor. This is something Joe believes is formative in her nymphomania.



Multiple partners As a nymphomaniac, Joe's story is one about multiple sexual partners. Whereas in other similar stories there is a lot of drama surrounding the complexities of trying to hide partners from the others, Joe sidesteps this completely, essentially randomizing her relationships by using dice to make decisions. To her, partners are just a way to get sexual pleasure. She isn't interested in knowing these men or building lives with them; she just wants sex. *Nymphomaniac Pt I* gives us an interesting point of view on this behavior, with Joe explaining toward the film's end that she views the many encounters as a continuity, that whether having sex or pleasuring herself, she thinks of the sum of all of her experiences, and—in an esoteric way—this means that she only has one lover: a totality.

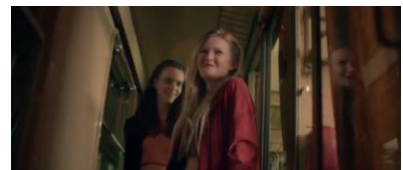
Illustrative moment During the introduction of the film's second chapter, Joe has sex with three different men, the scenes playing out like a rondo or call-and-response. After the act, she tells them that she wants to tell the man something, claiming they gave her an orgasm for the first time. Each man reacts differently, one excited to hear it, saying he loves her, another too out of breath to properly respond, and a third joking that "lots of girls say that." This moment clearly shows exactly what Joe wants to get out of her experience with multiple partners: novelty.



Society

Gender This theme is unsatisfactorily explored in the film. Most of what we're shown can't be fully trusted, as it's Joe's story-book retelling of her past, and most of the focus is on overt sexuality or perversions of norms to achieve sexual pleasure. Joe wields her femininity like a weapon, a hunter stalking prey. She knows just what men want to see and hear, allowing her to keep her circle of lovers well populated. We can see some of her misogynist tendencies clearly as she describes her mother as a "cold bitch" before not mentioning her again for nearly an hour and a half. Rarely does she have a bad word about men, and those she loves she worships, such as her father or Jérôme. Women, however, are disposable or competition. She gives up a lifelong friendship with B over a simple disagreement at a little flock meeting. Never again does Joe see B or the flock all because B decided to have sex multiple times with a man she fell in love with. While the idea of feminine sexuality comes up often, the untrustworthy nature of Joe's narrative and the fact that the script was written by a man make Joe's experiences less of an exploration and more of a sock puppet, a man telling a woman to express his views with her voice.

Illustrative moment Early in the film, when discussing the competition on the train and her relationship with B, a sequence unfolds where the two girls put on what they call the "fuck me now" clothes and parade down the train's corridor. Interrupting the action for a moment, we see a bold and spindly fly, comparing the girls' clothes and makeup to fly fishing, their clothes like the feathers hiding the hook. In this moment, we see gender as a display, a costume.



Religion A minor yet important theme, religion comes up at a few key moments. Joe first describes herself as a sinful child, and this causes an argument with Seligman. After they both state they're not religious, he wonders why she insists on perpetuating the cruel concept of sin beyond religious belief. Seligman talks about his name and his family being Jewish, though he himself is removed from both the religion and the culture. He holds on to sentiment, like considering rugelach a cake and serving it with a cake fork. In a final perversion of religion, Joe compares her many lovers to the polyphonic hymns of Bach and others, giving her favored lovers positions as the bass line, counter-melody, and 'cantus firmus.'

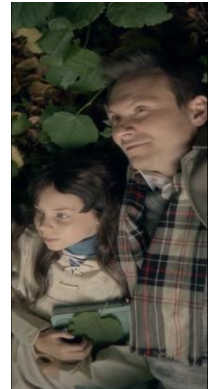
Illustrative moment The clearest moment of religion comes during a perversion of Catholic practice. After describing the competition on the train, Joe describes the formation of a group based on B and Joe's ideas about love and sex, "the little flock." They gather in a little room much like a Sunday school group, and they all stand, chanting in Latin, "Mea vulva, mea maxima vulva." Perverting the various Latin chants and prayers of the Catholic Church, these women gather to praise their "biggest/most important vagina." Most discussion of religion in the film includes such dark goofiness as this.



Relationship

Fatherhood We see next to nothing about motherhood throughout the film, but fatherhood comes up several times. Joe is incredibly fond of her father. While her mother is distant and uncaring, Joe's father spends much of his free time with her, teaching her about the trees in the woods. These frequent escapes into the forest mean a lot to Joe: She says that she found comfort in her 'herbarium,' a book of leaves she collected with her father, long after she became an adult. Even as he dies in a painful delirium, Joe's father does his best to be a good father for her, repeating one of his stories about the ash tree when she claims to forget it.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of fatherhood comes very early in the film. While sharing a long story about her father during her childhood, we're shown a loving moment between father and daughter. He tells her stories about the trees to help her remember his botanical lessons. Beneath a lime tree, they lay looking up as Joe's father tells her another story. In this moment, we understand how Joe comes to see her father as such a positive force in her life: He wants to give her the best chance to blossom into an adult, taking time to feed her interests and bond with her.



Loyalty The use of this theme in Nymphomaniac is a bit strange. We see it in its most typical in Joe's devotion to her father. In her youth, he is her favored parent: she uses some especially cruel words to describe her mother as unloving and potentially emotionally abusive, though because of her lack of loyalty to her mother, we never see this in action. Her father, however, she sticks by through thick and thin, remaining by his side even as he dies painfully in delirium. Similarly, Joe is very loyal to B, having sexual competitions with her and founding a cult-like group of young women devoted to having only casual sex. When B falls in love, however, Joe remains loyal to the beliefs of the group, leaving the "little flock" and B behind for betraying these ideals.

Illustrative moment A strange moment of loyalty comes up near the half-way point of the film as B promises to let Joe win the contest on the train if she can seduce the married man who rejected her. Although by a strict interpretation of the rules Joe has lost and even concedes defeat, B gives her the win for doing what she cannot. On the train platform, Joe enjoys the chocolates—the prize—and offers some to B. B simply shakes her head, agreeing to the bargain she set.



Change

Growth Joe's story is one of growth. We see her as a baby, a child, a teen, and a young adult as well as the older adult she becomes. At each stage of the story, we see how her past experiences shape the person she becomes. Her childhood is somewhat typical, though her teenage years are far from normal, driven by her own desires and her friendship with B pushing her to be sexually overactive. There are several changes in Joe's attitudes throughout, first when she and B start their "little flock," then again when Joe breaks off her friendship with B and association with the group: She becomes a leader instead of just another of B's followers, making her own decisions based on her own desires and beliefs. We also see her change from a habitual nymphomaniac to someone deeply in love. At this point, she admits that she stopped having casual sex with anyone, thinking only of Jérôme.

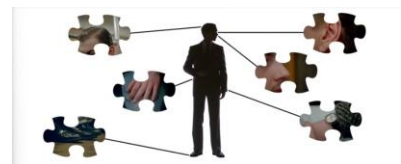


Illustrative moment One of the clearer moments of growth comes early in the film when Joe tells the story of losing her virginity. We've seen very young Joe and present-day Joe, but this scene introduces teenage Joe. While she jokingly calls herself a "very young nymph" to tie into Seligman's fishing metaphor and add to her case that she is a "bad person," fifteen is a pretty typical age for teens to seek out a sexual encounter. The experience is dissatisfying and frustrating for Joe, who remembers the pain and how quickly 'J' was done with her: "3 + 5." This is an important formative experience in a person's life, and it's clear this dissatisfaction had something to do with Joe's nymphomania later in her life.

Past

Memory The entire story of Nymphomaniac takes place in Joe's memory. She is telling her story to Seligman, their conversation acting as a sort of chorus and metatextual analysis. Memory is imperfect and messy, shown several times throughout the film. Most notably, this idea comes up when Joe's father dies in a painful and confusing delirium. At one point, he can't remember who his beloved daughter is, causing them both deep pain as he lashes out as if being attacked. In many ways, Joe's memory is her lover: she says it's the sum of all her sexual experiences that informs her perpetual desire to have sex with multiple men. While she may have many partners, it's her memory of those encounters that is her "one lover," as she puts it.

Illustrative moment Memory is discussed in depth during a scene near the middle of the film. When telling the part of her story where Jérôme 'disappears' to travel the world, Joe talks for several minutes about how she tried to keep him in her memory. In a retelling of a moment where she was masturbating in public, she tells Seligman how she would try to piece together a mental image of Jérôme from pieces of the other passengers on the train: The hands of one man, the coil of another, the watch on another's wrist, another man's shoes. After this, Joe talks about how love distorts memory and perception, saying it's one of the reasons she wants to rebel against the idea.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the film approach humor?
2. In your opinion, does the digital body-swapping add to the film's realism or detract from it? Explain.
3. Do you feel Joe's telling of the story is honest? Why or why not?
4. How does the film's reliance on vulgarity impact its storytelling and themes?