



February 2020

Higher Love

Laurie Barry

University of Nebraska Omaha, lauriebarry@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Barry, Laurie (2020) "Higher Love," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 28.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/28>

This Slamdance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Higher Love

Abstract

This is a film review of *Higher Love* (2019), directed by Hasan Oswald.

Keywords

Drug Abuse, Heroin



Higher Love (2019), dir. Hasan Oswald

Set in Camden, New Jersey, often touted as the murder capital of America, this film struggles with a quest for a love that is of a higher power, but not the higher power one might think. The film follows the journey of Nani, a pregnant addict and Daryl, the father of her child, who is in a constant struggle to save Nani from the world of violence and drugs that his child is about to be born into. As the film begins, we see Daryl frantically searching the dark and dangerous streets of Camden looking for Nani, who is 7 months pregnant and has been missing for four days. As Daryl scours the streets, Nani is holed up with fellow addicts, Iman, Nikki and others, getting high, explaining their situations through dazed eyes and half grins. Thankfully, Daryl locates Nani and we quickly learn that the complexity of their relationship is directly tied to Nani's use of fentanyl laced heroine, Daryl's higher love for Nani, and his desperate concern for his unborn child. As Nani walks away, back into the ominous streets that have such a strong hold on her, Daryl pleads

for her to go to her prenatal doctor's appointment as she has only been to two prior appointments; she promises she will and that she will call him tomorrow. A single promise, among many, that Daryl will continually hear, and Nani will continually break throughout this tale of struggle, addiction and love.

Thankfully, we see that six months later Nani gives birth to a healthy baby boy and after a long legal and social services battle, Daryl gains custody of his son, Darnez. As Nani slips back to the streets and back into the arms of the fentanyl laced heroine that has become her Higher Love, we see Daryl grapple with his desire to save the mother of his child and the simultaneous, consummate distain he feels for the drug that has ravaged the woman he loves as well as the means by which she obtains the drug. Nani surrounds herself with individuals with whom she can relate; Iman, a former dealer and fellow addict, who desperately wants to get clean with the help of his family and tough love from his father, makes a good faith attempt and rehab, but like Nani and countless, faceless others the road from 'High to Help' is littered with roadblocks that seem insurmountable. The film uses images and narrative of the dilapidated Campbell's Soup factory building in Camden with contrasting images and narrative of early television ads and the positive impact that Campbell's Soup had when it was at the height of its production in Camden, to illustrate the highs and lows that users and families and loved ones of users experience. It helps give the audience some common ground in which to experience what Daryl, Nani and Darnez are going through as they attempt to slay the demons that torment their lives.

In a final attempt to help Nani get clean, Daryl brings Nani into his home; hoping to make his family whole, Daryl puts all of his eggs in the Nani basket. Using their son and the prospect of starting their family on a new path as a motivator for Nani to make it work this time, Daryl secures Nani a spot at a rehab clinic. The morning that Nani is to enter rehab, we see Daryl on the phone

in an all too familiar scene, searching for Nani and the last glimmer of hope that the mother of his child is still capable of saving. At this point, it is clear that Daryl too is an addict, not to the fentanyl laced heroine that Nani and Iman choose to cozy up with, but to the act and idea of helping Nani regardless of the cost, despite the countless broken promises and without consideration of self. In the end, Daryl chooses as his higher love his son and the future he needs to create for him by accepting a job in, and moving to, Omaha, Nebraska where he hopes to start on a new path free of the addictions of Camden. Daryl effectively trades the high of helping Nani for the *Higher Love* he has for his son, Darnez, and the longing to give him a chance at a better life.

Nani's high is fentanyl laced heroine. Daryl's initial high is Nani, which is replaced by an even *Higher Love*...the love of a father for his son. Each of them represents a *Higher Love*, a higher power, a personal god of sorts and each of their gods has a different and distinctive face. A face that comforts, loves, punishes and praises for individual reasons. A face that will always be there, just down the street, behind that next promise, guiding one to a life changing move, but always ready to deliver the next high, the next *Higher Love*.

Higher Love won the “Documentary Feature Grand Jury Prize” and “The Grand Jury Prize.”