

This installation explores the final girl trope. Final girls are used in horror movies, most commonly within the slasher subgenre. The final girl archetype refers to a single surviving female after a murderer kills off the other significant characters. In my research, I focused on the five most iconic final girls, Sally Hardesty from *A Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Laurie Strode from *Halloween*, Ellen Ripley from *Alien*, Nancy Thompson from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and Sidney Prescott from *Scream*. These characters are the epitome of the archetype and with each girl, the trope evolved further into a multilayered social commentary. While the four girls following Sally added to the power of the trope, the significant majority of subsequent reproductions featured surface level final girls which took value away from the archetype as a whole. As a commentary on this devolution, I altered the plates five times, distorting the image more and more, with the fifth print being almost unrecognizable, in the same way that final girls have become.

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Blood, Tits, and Screams: The Final Girl And Gender In Slasher Films

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Many critics would credit Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* with creating the genre but the golden age of slasher films did not occur until the 70s and the 80s¹. As slasher movies became ubiquitous within teen movie culture, film critics began questioning why audiences, specifically young ones, would seek out the high levels of violence that characterized the genre.² The taboo nature of violence sparked a powerful debate amongst film critics³, but the most popular, and arguably the most interesting explanation was that slasher movies gave the audience something that no other genre was able to offer: the satisfaction of unconscious psychological forces that we must repress in order to "function 'properly' in society".⁴ Critics like Laura Mulvey who coined the term 'male gaze', argue that by allowing people to watch somebody else act out things they would not do themselves, individuals are able to sublimate these desires in socially acceptable way.⁵

Every film-goer knows that a well-made horror movie can successfully toy with an audience's emotions. Slashers offer the experience of fear and an adrenaline rush, as well as sadness and usually a somewhat happy ending. What they might not recognize, or maybe just avoid acknowledging, is the sexual aspect that is included in almost every horror movie. This argument leads down a rabbit hole into questioning the validity of psychoanalysis and will undoubtedly end with an almost accusatory explanation of the Oedipal complex.⁶ These critics attribute the success of slasher movies to the ability of filmmakers to manipulate their audience by using certain techniques, like strategically placing cameras so that viewers can experience a victim, bystander or killer's point of view and fulfill these aforementioned subconscious desires.⁷ I agree that what makes a well-made slasher movie so profitable is the successful use of techniques that are so often played upon within the genre, but I think there is something else that the audience craves to experience. In this paper, I will explore the reason why the slasher genre has been so successful by examining the 'final girl' trope through the lens of five of the most recognizable characters within the genre: Sally Hardesty from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), Laurie Strode from *Halloween* (1978), Nancy Thompson from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Sidney Prescott from *Scream* (1996) and Ellen Ripley from *Alien* (1979).⁸

Slasher movies are often seen as the least respectable subsection of the horror genre for understandable reasons.⁹ One of the most frequent complaints is that slasher films are too predictable. However, it is important to realize that this was not always the case: in their time,

¹ Janet Staiger, "Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film," *The Slasher, the Final Girl and the Anti-Denouement*, October 2015, 214, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137496478_15.

² Catherine Williamson, "'You'll See it Just as I Saw it': Voyeurism, Fetishism, and the Female Spectator in *Lady in the Lake*," *Film and Television History* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688109>.

³ Andrew Welsh, "On the Perils of Living Dangerously in the Slasher Horror Film: Gender Differences in the Association Between Sexual Activity and Survival," *Sex Roles* 62, no. 11 (March 2010): 763, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9762-x>.

⁴ Aviva Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film," *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2005.58.3.16?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

⁵ Laura Mulvey, Rachel Rose, and Mark Lewis, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) (London: Afterall Books, 2016), 28.

⁶ Ruth McPhee, *Female Masochism in Film: Sexuality, Ethics and Aesthetics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016)

⁷ Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, 8th ed. (Austin: U of Texas P, 2011), 48.

⁸ See endnotes for a summary of each film.

⁹ Gloria Cowan, "Gender and Survival vs. Death in Slasher Films: A Content Analysis," *Sex Roles* 23, no. 4 (August 1990): 188, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00289865>.

many of the classic slasher films were groundbreaking, exploring and even creating a new realm of the horror genre.¹⁰ These early films created tropes that remain the staple of slasher movies as other filmmakers seize on successful strategies in an attempt to share the profit. . However, this means that the genre is clogged with hundreds of lazy reproductions that solely rely on simplified versions of these old archetypes, losing the power that slasher films once had while adding nothing new or controversial to the genre. These archetypes have lived on for decades and even though many critics say they are a cheap way to continue rolling out mediocre films, waiting for one to be successful. People are still watching these movies, and this is the way into exploring why people would want to watch gory, violent and often exploitative films. Possibly the most popular, and what I'd argue to be the most powerful and, and therefore naturally controversial, slasher movie tropes is the 'final girl.'

The final girl, by definition, just the last standing female character in a horror movie, but that does not even begin to explain what lies within the trope. The term was coined by Carol J. Clover in her 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* in which she investigated the role of gender in slasher films and explored the reasoning behind why slasher films are successful in what is considered the first feminist critique of the genre. Specifically focusing on slasher films of the 70's and 80's, Clover tracked certain behaviors and representations of the character archetype that she named the 'final girl': she is separated from her friends, often by death, forced to survive and ultimately escapes or defeats the evil entity in the movie. Clover noted the frequent virgin status or sexual unavailability of these characters.¹¹ This trait is one of the main reasons the final girl is so controversial; their virginal status is now widely understood as a way to represent innocence in the face of evil. Contrasted her with her less 'pure' friends, it is also interpreted as a way to punish female sexuality and shame women. However, this is a gross misunderstanding of what virginity means in these films (it is important to note that not all final girls are virgins.) The true purpose of the virginal status actually has very little to do with sexual purity, innocence, or cultural morality, but rather to create a sense of 'otherness.'¹²

A final girl's friends usually dress less modestly than her, are seen consuming drugs and alcohol and most notably having lots of sex, the final girl is separated by not participating.¹³ This 'otherness' is so vital because it is often how she connects to the killer. It is this otherness that draws the killer to the final girl, a connection that filmmakers are able to exploit in order to smoothly force the viewer through the maze of changing their perspective, and therefore allegiance, from the killers point of view to that of the final girl.¹⁴

According to Clover, the audience will first identify with the killer, from whose point of view we witness the multiple gory murders that are a hallmark of the genre. The vital part comes next though however, when the villain's focus turns becomes targeted against the female protagonist, the audience shifts – along with a change in camera point of view – its identification to the Final Girl. Clover emphasizes that characterization in slasher movies does not rely on stereotypes of sex. Slasher characterization breaks down the patriarchal tendency of mainstream

¹⁰ Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).

¹¹ Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations* (Special Issue: Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy), no. 20 (Fall 1987): 183, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928507>.

¹² Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 78.

¹³ Robin Wood, *Robin Wood on the Horror Film : Collected Essays and Reviews* (n.p.: Wayne State UP, 2018).

¹⁴ Klaus Rieser, "Masculinity and Monstrosity Characterization and Identification in the Slasher Film," *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 4 (April 2001): 370, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X01003004002>.

media to hold characters within the constraints of gender normativity. Slasher films step outside of the idea that males are masculine and females are feminine. "The fact that we have in the killer a feminine male and in the main character a masculine female would seem, especially in the latter case, to suggest a loosening of the categories, or at least of the equation sex = gender" (p. 106). Just like Clover, I disagree with the idea that the virginity of final girls is a way to shame those who have sex. I do not think breaking down these gender norms was intended to be revolutionarily feminist. It is used because it is successful, and I think the reason it is successful, is what makes slasher films even more interesting and complex.

The audiences' identification is unstable and fluid across gender lines, particularly in the case of the slasher film. Clover notes that during the final girl's confrontation with the killer she becomes masculinized through what she calls "phallic appropriation", the moment that she picks up a weapon, such as a knife, in order to defend herself against the killer. The phenomenon of the male audiences being forced into identifying with a young, female character was in many ways groundbreaking, especially within a genre that is so often critiqued as solely appealing to males because of an obsession with sadistic voyeurism. It raises further questions about the nature of slasher films and the relationship the genre has to feminism. "What filmmakers seem to know better than film critics is that gender is less a wall than a permeable membrane." (46)¹⁵ Slasher films rely on gore and sex because sex sells, but I believe there is so much more to be seen in a well-made slasher film. The variety in how these tropes and traits can be molded, when analyzed, goes far beyond what the genre is credited for.

For the remainder of the paper, I will discuss the five aforementioned final girls whom I believe all not only fit the trope, but present the idea in different ways. I hope to expand the definition of the final girl and debunk the critiques that so often present these women as simple patriarchally cast characters invented by lazy writers. Presented in figure 1, you will see the eleven most recognizable traits of final girls. The context introduced here will be used throughout the following analysis. (See Figure 1).

¹⁵ Clover, *Men, Women*, 139

Figure One

1. Not Strongly Feminine
2. Not Sexually Active
3. Kills the Killer
4. Outlives Every other Significant Character
- 4a. Outlives Every Significant Male
5. Knows the Killer
6. Viewer's Point of Identification
7. Unisex Name
8. Seeks out Killer
8. Begins with Focalization on Killer's POV and then Shifts to Final Girl's POV
9. Victims are Almost all Teens
10. The Final Girl is Stalked/Targeted by the Killer
11. Final Girl is Clearly Contrasted to Less 'Pure' Characters

	1.	2.	3.	4.	4a.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
Texas Chainsaw Massacre Sally Hardesty	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
Halloween Laurie Strode	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Nightmare on Elm Street Nancy Thompson	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Scream Sidney Prescott	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

16 17 18 19 20
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Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974): Sally Hardesty

The criticisms of the final girl trope are most explicitly began within this film. Firstly, deaths of females within the movie are fetishized in the most overt and explicit way of any other slasher film. The last thirty minutes of the movie are consistently compared by critics to soft-core torture porn, and I would not disagree with this. Her torture is explicitly sadistic and sexual; she is tied up for 15 minutes and 33 seconds of the movie. The total action of her being tied up while she is held down, straddled and groped by male characters is shown on screen for 1 minute and 32 seconds. That is hard to justify without entering the realm of sadistic pleasure. This is just one piece of the torture from the last thirty minutes of the movie in which the male attackers 'share' her, groping her, verbally harassing her, often with clearly or slightly subtle references to sex and rape, among other sadistic and sexual acts. Sally becomes an object that torture is projected upon. His movie is far from feminist or progressive. I believe this is where much of the criticism of final girls as a trope begins. So, it is vital to consider this movie when analyzing the trope.²¹

Sally is in every way a final girl, but she is a prototype. She does not kill or defeat the killers, but rather escapes and is rescued by a male trucker whom she luckily sees during the final

¹⁶ Ellen Ripley is not included in this figure and she will be discussed later in the paper.

¹⁷ *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, directed by Tobe Hooper, 1974.

¹⁸ *Halloween*, directed by John Carpenter, 1978.

¹⁹ *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, directed by Wes Craven, 1984.

²⁰ *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven, 1996.

²¹ *A Texas*.

scene of the movie. She is not 'pure' and she is not stalked by the killers, rather she is the female who is able to evade them longer than her friends, and is only then focused on by the killer. She is more than just the simple definition of the last surviving female, because through facing horrific trauma, she evolves from a passive and hesitant female character, to one who will do anything to survive. Within thirty minutes of the movie, she goes from a somebody who stood for over ten seconds watching her brother get murdered (instead of running from the killer), to somebody who jumps through a second story window without second thought in order to escape. This evolution does not make up for the numerous problematic downfalls of the movie but it did bring the final girl trope to life.

Halloween (1978): Laurie Strode

Laurie Strode is often regarded as the quintessential final girl. She is intelligent, resourceful, and aware of her surroundings in a way that no other characters are. Laurie is consistently perceptive, and is the only one who senses the threatening presence of Michael Myers while her friends repeatedly miss obvious signs of danger, and dismiss Laurie's concern because they are too busy having, talking about or thinking about sex. This clear juxtaposition helps highlight the fact that it is the lack of distractions that helps her survive, rather than just her virginity. Another key aspect of Laurie is that she is chosen by the killer, unlike earlier representations of final girls like Sally Hardesty who becomes the focus of the killers only because she is the one who survives the longest. She is the most prominent example of the other reason why virginity is a key trait of some final girls: her sexual inactivity separates her from her peers and makes her an 'other' in her friend group, an 'otherness' that the killer can relate to.²²

Like Sally, as well as every other final girl, Laurie is truly defined by her climactic confrontation with the killer. Fifteen minutes of the film are dedicated to Laurie's confrontation with Michael. Within that time, she further cements her label as an iconic final girl.²³ She is impressively creative and resourceful in her defense against Michael, creating weapons out of household objects, creating diversions by opening patio doors to mislead Meyers while she hides in the closet and prepares to fight, refusing to die. During this scene, audience members see her for her powerful escape, not just as a sexual object whose pain is used for voyeuristic pleasure. She disrupted all expectations, and in doing so revolutionized the role of females in slasher films and added new meaning to the final girl trope.

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984): Nancy Thompson

While Sally was trapped by cannibalistic family and Laurie was forced to confront a serial killer that had been stalking her, Nancy from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* finds herself in a different situation. Unlike previous final girls who were trapped by their killer and therefore forced into confrontation with them, once Nancy catches onto the fact that the thing that had been killing her friends, Freddy Krueger, was only able to attack her in her dreams, she was put into the situation of making an active decision about confronting her tormentor. Sleeping is not something she could avoid forever, but the power she had over her killer through her ability to choose when to confront him gives her added complexity as a final girl. She is given more power over the killer than any other final girl, and she uses that to her advantage. Nancy was the only one who really believed

²² *Halloween*.

²³ Brian Newby, "Observing Changes in Gender and Sexuality in Slasher Film Franchises" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 2009), 7, http://udspace.udel.edu/bitstream/handle/19716/5423/Brian_Newby_thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

that Freddy was able to kill through dreams and she was constantly dismissed as experiencing an intense fear response due to trauma; she was isolated on another level than that experienced by other final girls. She begins to question her own sanity and creates an elaborate plan in order to defeat Freddy. She succeeds without the help of those on whom we are taught to rely (i.e. doctors, law enforcement, parents), which is another motif within the final girl trope.

Nancy pushes the final girl trope beyond its previous resting point. Sally simply fought for her survival. Laurie added to this with resourcefulness, intelligence, and quick thinking. Nancy creates and pulls off an ingenious, intricate and successful plan of defense. She takes control over her confrontation with Freddy. In doing so, Nancy builds another level of feminist power by succeeding in the face of her father. Beyond the symbolism of disregarding her father, the authoritative male figure in her life. She is simultaneously defying the authoritative figure in her community, since he is a high ranking police officer. When Nancy takes matters that would be dealt with by the police, or with the support from parents, into her own hands, she climbs above patriarchal norms. In order to save herself she must get past both literal and physical obstacles put in place by her father, from the orders he gives police officers, to the bars on her windows. By breaking past the constraints put upon her by a patriarchal society and defeating the only other primary male character, she modernized the final girl trope.²⁴

Scream (1996): Sidney Prescott

Sidney Prescott is iconic for of her epic triumph over two killers. Sidney is also a vital addition to our analysis because her character challenged the final girl trope as a whole through the satirical lens of *Scream*. *Scream* is self-referential and parodies its own genre with foreshadowing by having characters cite horror movie 'rules', as well as through direct and slightly more subtle shout outs to other horror movies (which include the three other movies discussed thus far). *Scream* is groundbreaking because it breaks the fourth wall by having characters constantly refer to their own lives as a living horror movie and critiques standard tropes and themes that exist within the genre. Sidney's character adds even more complexities to the final girl trope. Her first introduction is in her bedroom while she is turning down her boyfriend who is pressuring her into sex. Female denial of male advances is a classic and often misused element of the final girl. She continues to play into the role of the stereotypical final girl, flirting but ultimately not very sexually active. She is contrasted by her more promiscuous and rebellious blonde best friend. However, within twenty minutes of being introduced to Sidney, her actions start contrasting the final girl trope that the audience was encouraged to expect from her. Her innocent heroine exterior is first broken when she defends herself against slander by punching a reporter in the face on live TV and refusing to be apologetic, stepping outside of the reserved and in control final girl archetype.²⁵

Sidney further removes herself from the stereotypical final girl when she takes control of her fate early on in the movie, thinking her boyfriend might be the killer. This further demolishes the characteristic idea that final girls do not have control over their own lives and are rather just able to survive what is put in front of them, a concept Nancy had begun to deconstruct a decade prior.²⁶ Later in the movie, she has sex with Billy, but not because she was feeling pressured or like it was the right thing to do, but because she wanted to make that decision, taking power over her sexuality, and feeling no shame afterwards. She does not defeat the killers on her own and she

²⁴ *A Nightmare*.

²⁵ *Scream*.

²⁶ Sue Short, "Sex and the Final Girl: Surviving the Slasher," in *Misfit Sisters: Screen Horror as Female Rites of Passage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 213, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230287372_3.

survives along with three other major characters. Sydney never allows herself to become the victim of circumstances put in front of her and in that way redefines what it means to be a final girl.

Alien (1979): Ellen Ripley

Finally, I will analyze Ellen Ripley as a final girl. I did not compare her to the four other iconic final girls because she evolved on a different track than them. *Alien* is not a slasher film, none of the characters within the movie are teenagers, no characters are sexualized, the killer is not human and Ripley is not an outsider. Ripley is not strongly feminine or sexually active, but neither are any of the other characters within the movie, so this part of the trope loses its relevance. In fact, *Alien* only checks off three of the ten boxes from Figure One, two of which are just because she is the only survivor. *Alien* came out four months after *Halloween*, and I think both of the movies' evolution of the final girl trope from that of Sally Hardesty are equally valid. *Halloween* created a more iconic version of the final girl, and therefore this branch off was recreated and further evolved upon while *Alien* continued to grow in its own right, but with time got further separated from the archetype. I think it is just as important to include Ripley within the analysis of early final girls as any other character, and maybe more so, because she takes on the trope in a completely different way than each other film discussed. She is not a final girl because of her surroundings, feeding into the stereotypes that have become synonymous with the trope, but rather because she survives a killer on her own, meticulously using her surroundings and overcoming what should have been a death sentence, at least according to Ash, one of the antagonists in the film. She is far from defined by her gender, and about halfway through the film, viewers begin empathizing with her as the movie shifts to focus on her point of view, which is a classic staple of the final girl archetype. This movie avoids much of the criticism that has been previously discussed because of the lack of problematic representation of women within it, but Ripley is also not fairly acknowledged as a final girl, which I think further enforces the critique that final girls cannot exist in a way that is not harmful to women.²⁷

Every genre has clichés. It is rare to find a film that does not exploit women to some extent, and slasher films definitely suffer severely from both of things. However, this analysis unfortunately means that every other complexity within the classics is overshadowed.²⁸ The badass escape of Sally does not make up for the movie's focus on sadistic sexual torture. Laurie is ultimately rescued by a man which takes credit away from the fight she put up to survive. Nancy does not kill Freddy Krueger. Sidney is not a sole survivor and Ripley had no interest in participating beyond her job description, but they are all powerful and iconic characters who exemplify how film tropes evolve, how gender is exploited in cinema and how the mass recreation of a successful trope along with critics' tendency to base their opinions off of past critiques can lead to the gross misunderstanding of something that can be incredibly powerful when one pays attention to what is truly going on beneath the surface of a character.

²⁷ *Alien*, directed by Ridley Scott, 1979.

²⁸ Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing (Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing)* (n.p.: State U of New York P, 1997), 9.

Endnotes:

1. When Sally hears that her grandfather's grave may have been vandalized, she and her paraplegic brother, Franklin, set out with their friends to investigate. After a detour to their family's old farmhouse, they discover a group of crazed, murderous outcasts living next door. As the group is attacked one by one by the chainsaw-wielding Leatherface, who wears a mask of human skin, the survivors must do everything they can to escape.
2. Halloween night, 1963: In Haddonfield, Illinois, six-year-old Michael Myers kills his teenage sister Judith with a kitchen knife without explanation. Young Michael ends up committed to Smith's Grove Sanitarium and placed under the watchful eye of Dr. Samuel Loomis. Fifteen years later — on the night before Halloween — Michael escapes from the asylum and heads for home, with Loomis soon following in pursuit. Back in Haddonfield, high school student Laurie Strode takes a job as a babysitter for Halloween. As the night of the masks draws nearer, she keeps seeing an eerie masked figure stalking her. While Laurie and her friends believe a schoolmate has played a Halloween trick on her, Laurie has no idea what danger is waiting for her and Haddonfield.
3. Teens living in Springwood, Ohio are having nightmares about a burned man with blades on his fingers. After one of her friends dies during a nightmare like that, it's up to Nancy to find out what's going on, and ultimately to confront it before she dies too.
4. In the town of Woodsboro, two teenagers are gruesomely killed by a mysterious stranger wearing a white mask. A panic breaks out in the town, as the killer continues to target more and more people, displaying an affinity for horror movie tropes in staging his murders. Sidney Prescott, who is still reeling from the death of her mother a year before, becomes the killer's primary target as "Ghostface" slowly wipes out her friends one by one. Meanwhile reporter Gale Weathers investigates the killings with deputy sheriff Dewey Riley, convinced that the deaths are linked to Sidney's past.
5. In the year 2122, the crew of the commercial freighter spaceship Nostromo sidelines their trip back home to Earth when they pick up a Distress Call from an uncharted moon. While searching for the source of the signal on the moon, one of the crew members gets an alien organism attached to his face and falls into a coma. The next day, an alien embryo explodes from the crewman's chest — and rapidly matures into a savage monster. As the alien stalks through the ship, the crew desperately tries to find a way to fight back.

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