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Mother Dearest

Oil painting

The horror genre has piqued my interest since middle school. However, I find myself repeatedly frustrated with the same problematic tropes: all if not most of which revolve around gender roles. In my research paper I explored toxic masculinity, misogyny, female exploitation, and motherhood in horror films. For my painting I decided to focus on horror's "evil mother" trope. Many slasher films villainize mothers, viewing them as instinctual hysteric monsters instead of maternal figures. My painting depicts from left to right Margaret White from *Carrie*, Norman Bates from *Psycho* dressed as his mother, Rosemary Woodhouse from *Rosemary's Baby*, Pamela Voorhes from *Friday the 13th*, and finally Nola Carveth from *The Brood*. Rosemary, the woman in color, represents the repercussions of the evil mother trope: a pregnant woman terrified that her baby is unwell, brushed off as hysteric when she is in her right mind. The figures surrounding her are characters that have historically enforced the trope of maternal hysteria.

Thankfully with the rise of the social horror genre, horror's fear of mothers has shifted into women's fear of motherhood. Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* both address this fear of motherhood, forcing audiences to humanize their mother characters. My hope is that the filming industry, particularly within horror, will make more room in the near future for female directors so that they can tell their own stories without men telling them for them.

Motherhood, Misogyny, and Monstrosities:

Gender in Horror Film



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Writer's Note: This paper explores how gender roles and stereotypes are enforced within horror films. It will more heavily cover feminine subjects including the final girl trope, motherhood, and the oversexualization of women in horror, specifically within the slasher genre. This essay was written with the intent to inform audiences of problematic tropes in the horror film industry so they may be more recognizable, especially for easily-influenced youth.

INTRODUCTION

A teenage girl lays in bed filing her nails, her long golden locks splayed across the pillow. The bedroom door creaks. "Well? Did ya get my beer?" the girl queries. She is greeted with a long silence. The filing stops as she flicks her eyes upwards from her work. A tall figure looms in the doorway, draped in a pale bedsheet. Squared glasses frame two rigid holes cut into the bedsheet. She giggles, raising her eyebrows. "Cute Bob, real cute." Silence. She grimaces, propping herself into a sitting position. Shifting her shoulders alternately, the bedsheet slips downwards, revealing her bare chest. "See anything you like?" she chuckles nervously. Still, nothing. "What's the matter? Can't I get your ghost Bob?" she chuckles. "Alright, alright c'mon, where's my beer?" The figure breathes heavily in response. She sighs in confusion, "Okay, don't answer me. Well, aren't you weird. Well, I'm gonna call Laurie. I wanna know where Paul and Annie are. This is going nowhere!" She picks up the receiver, hand on her hip as she stares

impatiently at the blank ceiling. As if instantaneously, the sheeted figure appears behind her, choking her with the phone's cord. She writhes and moans, bare chest facing the camera straight on.

Halloween is one of many classic horror films that exploit, victimize, and sexualize women. Like many other forms of media, film has historically been viewed through the male gaze. A study from 2020 states the average percentage of female directors in film within the past thirteen years is 4.8 percent.¹ The percentage of female horror directors is even slimmer.

Horror films have generally been directed by men, for young male audiences. To be rephrased, men have been responsible for how women are portrayed in film. Consequentially, the victimization of women in horror is often portrayed pornographically. Directors will choose for female victims to run from the killer half-nude, the camera panning up their body crudely. To quote Casey Becker from *Scream*, "They're all the same. Some stupid killer stalking some big-breasted girl who can't act, who's always running up the stairs when she could be going out the front door. It's insulting." Although male directors repeatedly use the same misogynistic tropes, many also reuse the theme of mothers and motherhood, an experience that seems far from man. The similar portrayal of different genders throughout horror movies is far from coincidental. Hopefully, like the release of Jennifer Kent's *Babadook*, there will become a time when women grace the genre with their own experiences.

¹ L. Smith, Stacy. *Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender and Race/Ethnicity Across 1,300 Top Films from 2007 to 2019*. Annenberg Foundation, 2020.

I. THE FINAL GIRL

The most notable horror movie trope has to be that of the Final Girl. The Final Girl defines the last girl still standing in a horror movie, particularly within the slasher genre. She is the one to escape or outsmart the killer in the final minutes of a movie. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a classic example of a film that uses the Final Girl cliché. In it the protagonist, Nancy Thompson, uses her quick-thinking and fast reflexes to outrun and rid of the killer, Freddy Krueger. But what is the issue with horror movies having an abundance of female protagonists? There is no issue. It is the way that these characters are portrayed that is the issue.

The stereotypical Final Girl must fit the following criteria: she must be white, sober, and a virgin. Although all film genres have been historically white, many modern Final Girls still have this physical trait in common. American society commonly stereotypes white women as fragile people who must be protected. The Final Girl is a fictional reflection of America's cultural "Missing white woman syndrome". Missing white woman syndrome is defined as the overabundance of media coverage surrounding violence toward white women and girls. As a result of the media's focus on violence towards white women, society subconsciously is more fearful when a white woman is in danger than a woman of color or a man.

Sobriety assists the Final Girl in her plan of escape, however, the protagonist's sobriety also serves as a role model, shaping young audiences' morality surrounding drug use. In 1978's *Halloween*, we are introduced to the lead, Laurie Strode along with her two friends. In one of the opening scenes, her friends walk into the scene sharing a cigarette while Laurie holds an abundance of school books (see fig. 1). These two girls would later become victims of Michael Myers' killing spree. The correlation between the girls' drug usage and their eventual deaths would be a coincidence if it were not for the numerous other horror movies that also kill off all

their secondary characters involved in drugs. “There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie,” Randy Meeks famously quotes in *Scream*. “For instance, number one: You can never have sex. Sex equals death. Okay? Number two: You can never drink or do drugs. No, the sin factor. It’s a sin. It’s an extension of number one.”²

Lastly, the Final Girl must be a virgin or non-promiscuous. This corresponds with men’s obsession with female virginity and the patriarchal need for men to control women’s bodies. To quote Randy Meeks from *Scream* again, “That’s why she always outsmarted the killer in the big chase scene at the end. Only virgins can do that.” However, this trope also became increasingly relevant in eighties horror films and this is no accident. An overarching fear of wanton values swept America as a result of the AIDs epidemic. From *Halloween* to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th* to *Hellraiser*, the female protagonist is always a virgin. Their promiscuous colleagues are not as lucky. A 1990 study directed by Gloria Cowan and



(Fig. 1) Laurie Strode (left), played by Jamie Lee Curtis, accompanied by two friends who pass between each other a cigarette.

Margaret O’Brien on gender and survival in slasher films estimates that female characters who have sex on screen are over three times more likely to die than their male counterparts.³ While sexual men have a 32 percent chance of survival, sexual women have only a nine percent survival rate.

²Quote time stamp- (1:13:12)

³ Cowan, Gloria. *Gender and Survival vs. Death in Slasher Films: A Content Analysis*. California State University, 1990.

Although the Final Girl has been proven to be an oppressive tool for young women, it has been argued that the trope has its feminist indications. Because most final survivors are women, male audiences are forced to sympathize with female characters. Unfortunately, the reason most horror survivors are female is because it is more socially acceptable for women to appear vulnerable than men. Because men have more control over the film industry, they choose for themselves not to be victimized in the same way that they victimize women, enforcing the negative stereotype that men cannot be victims.

To make it easier for men to associate themselves with these female characters, many Final Girls embrace more masculine traits. Some are given more androgynous names such as Jess from *Black Christmas*. Alice Hardy from *Friday the 13th* wears more traditionally masculine clothing: dress shirts tucked into belted pants (see fig. 2). However, this also plays into the idea that women can only stand up for themselves if they manifest masculine traits.

Many define the Final Girl trope as one that stands on a thin line between feminism and misogyny regardless of its clear patriarchal intensions. While some modern filmmakers continue to duplicate the Final Girl exactly, the twenty-first century has been a turning point in the realm of horror film. Director Jordan Peele



flips the formula on its head, masterfully producing hit films *Get Out* and *Us* one after the other. The protagonistic survivors of both films are black, unlike many other horror movies where people of color are treated as disposable characters. Played by Daniel Kaluuya, Chris Washington, the survivor in *Get Out*, is the first “Final Girl” in film to be a black man. Contrary

to how the media normally portrays black men, Chris Washington is depicted as the victim rather than the perpetrator. In *Us*, Peele writes the mother, Adelaide Wilson, as a protectively strong woman, powerful yet retaining her femininity and maternal instinct. *Us* is a rare example of a horror film that correctly portrays motherhood. This has not always been the case.

II. MOTHERHOOD IN HORROR

Mothers have always been a central theme in the horror

genre. After the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the trope of the evil mother skyrocketed in popularity. The evil mother trope can be divided into three subcategories: the abusive mother,



Carrie's mother, Margaret White, played by Piper Laurie. (*Carrie*, 1976)

the negligent, and the overprotective. 1976's *Carrie* is a textbook example of the overprotective mother cliché.

Stephen King illustrates a sixteen-year-old Carrie, oppressed by her mother's excessive Christian beliefs. The film opens in a girl's high-school locker room. Carrie is horrified to have gotten her first period, never having been told what a period is by the hands of her mother's beliefs. On the surface, this film centers on the fears of womanhood,

however, the film has an underlying theme of maternal hysteria. Stephen King mirrors this overprotective mother trope in *It* (2017) where a mother forces her son Eddie to

believe he needs to take unnecessary medications. The evil mother can be identified in many other horror films including *Friday the 13th* which portrays the negligent mother, Pamela Voorhes, and *The Brood* which depicts the abusive mother.

(Fig. 2) Alice Hardy played by Adrienne King in *Friday the 13th*.

The evil mother cliché is one that negatively enforces the societal belief that if a family is dysfunctional, it is the mother's fault. However, if a father is not fully present in his children's upbringing, it is considered normal. Still, the horror film believes if a father is not present in the upbringing of his children, the mother will become hysterical. Movies such as *Black Swan*, *Carrie*, and *Friday the 13th* all share the hysteric single-mother trope. Even horror movies based around nuclear families illustrate many mothers as instinctual monsters rather than people. *The Brood* takes this concept quite literally in its portrayal of an alien-like mother, confined to a psychiatric ward, who grows wombs on the outer layers of her skin.

Steffan Hantke argues in his novel *Japanese Horror Under Western Eyes*, "Male anxieties about female empowerment and men's declining social status have given rise to films where women are the avenging 'demonic other'." Thankfully with the rise of the social horror subgenre, the thematic fear of mothers has shifted into the less-problematic concept of fear of motherhood. *The Babadook*, the first and only critically acclaimed horror film written by a woman, follows Amelia, a single mother struggling to balance her career and motherhood. By framing Amelia as the protagonist, the audience acknowledges that she is human. Her outbursts and poor choices are explained rather than excused as maternal hysteria. Rather than being painted as "good" or "bad", Amelia is recognized as a mother with good intentions who can make bad decisions. Jennifer Kent, director, and writer of *The Babadook*, uses her own experiences as a woman and mother to influence the film, something that almost every other horror film lacks.

Horror movies in the last decade have dramatically improved viewings of motherhood, even those directed by men. *Hereditary* and *Us* both portray motherhood as a difficult feat. *Hereditary*, similarly to *The Babadook*, depicts an abusive mother from a perspective that leaves

us empathizing with both her and her family, a view that prevents audiences from villainizing mother figures generally. Unfortunately, with the filmography sphere being so male-dominated, many toxic tropes continue to stay untouched.

III. SEXPLOITATION AND THE RAPE-REVENGE FILM

The rape-revenge film, although feminist in theory, has historically been far from radical. Rowan Ellis dissects the stereotypical rape-revenge film into three acts in her video essay *Why Jennifer's Body Flopped, Explained*:

Act I: A woman is raped, tortured, and left for dead.

Act II: The woman survives and takes an angry sense of strength to what was done to her.

Act III: The woman is empowered and takes revenge by killing (and sometimes torturing) all of her rapists.

The genre presents itself as a revenge fantasy but ultimately takes the form of a rape fantasy directed at male audiences. One of the first popularly recognized rape-revenge films was the 1972 movie *The Last House on the Left*. The movie follows a young girl who is kidnapped, raped, and killed by a gang of escaped convicts. After the girl's tragic death, her father goes out seeking revenge on his daughter's rapists. The film exploits the woman's suffering before shifting to the story of a man, choosing to ignore the girl and her experiences. In the following years, *I Spit on Your Grave* was released, a rape-revenge film in which the victimized woman plans and carries out her revenge. However, the film is still far from feminist as it chooses for the rape sequence to take up 25 minutes out of the 105-minute run time. Unsurprisingly, all of these films were written and directed by men. The 2010 remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* was written and directed by a man as well as its followup of *I Spit on Your Grave 2*. These men choose to tell women's rape stories, something completely irrelevant to their own lives and then sexualize it.

After the woman's torturously long rape scene, they diminish her into the "badass chick with a gun and no alternate character traits" trope.

Jennifer's Body, released in 2009, was the first horror rape-revenge film written and directed by women. The film's advertisement toward young male audiences, against the producer's will, ultimately led to its downfall. The directors originally stated that the movie was originally supposed to be for teen girl audiences. *Jennifer's Body* tells the story of high schoolers Jennifer, played by Megan Fox, and her best friend Needy, played by Amanda Seyfried. One night, Jennifer guilts Needy into going to a nearby bar so she can flirt with a band's lead singer performing there. After an unexpected fire, Jennifer and Needy are forced to flee the building. The band singer offers an intoxicated Jennifer to "hop in his van" so he can get her somewhere safe, leaving Needy behind. The band drives into the nearby woods where they satirically sacrifice Jennifer for fame and the succession of their band. However, Jennifer, unlike the spell requires, is not a virgin, turning her into a vengeful succubus. The rest of the film follows Jennifer who views boys as nothing but food and Needy who is determined to figure out what is wrong with her friend. *Jennifer's Body*, unlike its genre predecessors, focuses more heavily on revenge rather than assault. Although the movie has its fair share of sexual scenes, they are used sparingly to focus more on the overarching story and character development. It is no surprise that its marketed audience would lead to its downfall. A high school student in the documentary *Miss Representation* states, "Empowered women, in general, threaten men because they feel that an empowered woman is just putting down a man, as opposed to trying to sort of raise herself."

Women's fear of rape and the male rape fantasy have both been contributors to the theme's relevance in the horror genre. But one thing is certain, exploitation is not horror, it is gross.

IV. CONCLUSION

Men continue to dominate the film industry, sexualizing, demonizing, and exploiting their female characters, particularly in the horror genre. However, women are not the only ones negatively impacted by these male-centric tropes, so are men. The horror film views men as overly aggressive and as stated previously in this paper, promotes the idea that men cannot be victims. Thankfully, with the recent introduction of the social horror genre, women, men, and people of color are being viewed more realistically. The film industry is slowly realizing that oppressed groups should not only be included in film but should also be perceived as three-dimensional characters. We can do more than hope for the filming industry to change for the better. By educating ourselves on harmful movie tropes, we can choose which people and companies to support, slowly creating a society where children are no longer subconsciously harmed by stereotypical preconceptions.

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