

I SPIT ON YOUR VICTIMIZATION: ANALYZING TRAUMA DEPICTED IN
HORROR FILMS FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

by

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ABSTRACT

Horror films have often used their female protagonists as a tool to reinforce misogynistic themes and conservative values through the depiction of traumatic events, resulting in the “Final Girl” trend in which one lone woman is permitted to survive. To understand this phenomenon and its relationship to trauma, I have attributed this trend to three main subgenres: psychological horror, body horror, and revenge. In the context of these subgenres, I critically examine various themes of horror films, including menstruation and puberty, class tensions, feminine rage, religious trauma, and PTSD. What arises from this analysis is a complicated polarity of victimhood that can often place the female main character somewhere in between the protagonist and the antagonist. As the horror genre is often interstitial, this allows for discursive discussions on these dichotomies, frequently attributing them to real life social anxieties. This contributes to an evolution of the “Final Girl” trend, one that rejects the implications of sexist conservatism and embraces a more empowering and socially critical narrative.

Introduction

I picked up Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* rather apprehensively, certain her analysis of gender in horror films would leave a permanent bad taste in my mouth about my favorite genre of movies. Instead, I was surprised to find a thoughtful and engaging analysis from a fellow woman horror fan, provoking encouragement to analyze some of my favorite horror films from this feminist perspective. I was able to recognize that I can still be a fan of the genre while recognizing its flaws.

Clover focuses on how women are depicted in horror films, especially regarding the violence, exploitation, and victimization that characterizes many horror films of the 1980's. More modernly, I wanted to explore these aspects in relation to trauma, and more specifically, how this trauma is presented and its relation to a female main character. You might be thinking that this analysis is not particularly nuanced. After all, isn't all horror based on an inherently traumatic narrative? However, I wanted to determine whether these depictions of trauma merely perpetuate the exploitation of women that horror films have historically practiced, or if it can be shown through an empowering feminist perspective. By using Clover's analysis of *Final Girls* as the basis for this trend, I reference both modern and classic horror films with a female protagonist to show an evolution in how these characters are written or more modernly perceived regarding

contemporary feminism and social issues. In this way, I reference what is worth celebrating as a woman and a fan of horror without sacrificing the value of some of my favorite cult-classic horror cinema.

Why Horror?

Although there are many predominantly scientific explanations to answer the question “Why do we like horror?”, there is a lot to be said about the nature of horror as a genre and the known psychological, sociological, and cultural undertones that horror makes tangible. That is to say, how horror so often transforms the conditions of the psyche or problems of society into a physical adversary that demands to be known and confronted.

To achieve this, horror is interstitial in nature, often teetering between boundaries and rejecting categorization such as real/unreal, dead/undead, or human/nonhuman. By purposely blurring these seemingly infallible boundaries, horror rejects what is “known”, creating a world in which everything can be questioned, especially what we know to be the unquestionable truth. Noel Carroll writes in his essay “The Nature of Horror” that “an object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless.” (55). These “impure beings” are the antagonists of horror films. Horror movie monsters such as the zombies of *Night of the Living Dead* or vampires of *Interview with a Vampire* (dead/undead), Chucky from *Child’s Play*

(animate/inanimate), and the blob monster from *The Blob* (formless) are the physical embodiments of the threat to what is known and accepted as unquestionable truth.

By blurring these boundaries, the undertone of horror rejects the hegemonic and embraces nonconformity to explore the problems that may exist in the psyche or society. According to Isabel Pinedo in *The Horror Film*, horror creates an unstable world in which

traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (*read* male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates (86).

This is not to say that horror as a genre single-handedly dismantles these structures, art is subjective and therefore film does not truly have the capacity to do this. However, horror creates a world in which these structures are put into question. When comparing this world with our own, we start to question what is true and known. Have you ever watched a horror film “based on a true story”? Horror purposely blurs the lines between fact and fiction to merge these worlds together to question the stability of our known hegemonies.

Additionally, these horror movie adversaries and unstable worlds work together to blur the line between the physical and the intangible. Are these monsters real or are they just a projection of the psyche or social anxieties? Is this monstrous or supernatural being internal or external? Often, we can’t clearly make sense of internal conflicts or societal problems because they don’t present themselves as a singular problem to overcome. They

are also sometimes taboo or the subterranean, either not talked about or too abstract, that is, until they are manifested in horror movies as physical and tangible. The antagonist's mere presence also acts as a confirmation to this problem in a way that also suggests its universality.

Of course, this is not a particularly nuanced concept. Horror films throughout history have used their narratives and monsters as social commentary. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) zombies can be read as a metaphor for fears of governmental ineptitude and exploitation amid the Vietnam war, "the family" in Texas *Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) symbolize Nixon-era societal fears of a disemboweled "American Dream" and counterculture, and the zombie-creating virus in *28 Days Later* (2002) is seen by some as a metaphor for the HIV epidemic. Similarly, the particular subgenre of psychological horror films such as *The Shining* (1980) with alcoholism, *The VVitch* (2016) with puritan era paranoia, and *The Babadook* (2014) with the struggles of single motherhood have reflected emotional vulnerabilities, fears, or mental struggles. What these films all have in common is their use of a physical being or beings to portray either social anxieties or a troubled psyche.

The protagonist will have to overcome their horror movie monsters and symbolically the internal or unquestionable. Sometimes they do not prevail, representing the struggle to overcome the pain of the psyche or problem with society. Whether or not the protagonist prevails, however, does not discount the problem represented by the adversary. In fact, it's overwhelming oppression onto the protagonist that results in their

demise can be seen as a call to action to avoid succumbing to the pain and suffering of a troubled psyche or sociological problem.

Overall, there's an appeal to horror as a genre that not only recognizes these issues but makes them tangible enough to physically and symbolically overcome, as a result empowering or at least universalizing social anxieties or repressed emotional vulnerability and fears. In this way, issues such as feminism and trauma can be explored in horror without hegemonic boundaries and mere abstraction. Whether or not this is actually portrayed as a form of feminist media remains to be debated in later chapters.

Feminism in Horror

As chainsaw-wielding “Leatherface” hacked his way through iconic horror cinema in the 1974 cult classic *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the film's quintessential surviving character, Sally, became an early archetype for the violent exploitation of women in horror films. In the infamous “dinner scene” of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Sally is the only one left alive out of her friends and is subjected to a ten-minute-long torture scene in which she begs for her life and is ridiculed for it, featuring gruesome acts of violence accompanied with howls and jeers from the antagonists. The cinematography of the scene features close-ups of Sally's screaming face, especially her eyes, as well as point-of-view and over the shoulder shots of the family antagonizing her. With this scene especially, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* may be the film many horror critics first think of

when they criticize the victimization and violence towards women in the horror genre despite Sally's eventual escape and Final Girl status.

This is in part due to the psychology of scopophilia (pleasure derived from looking) that characterizes the way this dinner scene is filmed, specifically the sadistic voyeurism that occupies most of early horror cinema. This scene of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* acts as an example of "the male gaze", a term coined by film critic Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". The male gaze, in Mulvey's words, is "a projection of fantasy onto the female figure" (62). More specifically, depicting women in film from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that reduces women characters to mere sexual objects. In horror films, this sexualization is often intermixed with victimization and violence. According to Mulvey, the cinematic apparatus has two ways of depicting women through this male gaze: a sadistic-voyeuristic look that derives pleasure from seeing the woman punished and a fetishistic-scopophilia look that fetishizes the female body (65). To once again use the dinner scene from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as an example, the close ups of Sally's wide, terrified eyes as she struggles to escape the murderous family is an example of the sadistic-voyeuristic look as the camera focuses in on her vulnerability.

Additionally, Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* maintains that there are two forms of identification within a cinematic gaze: primary identification with the camera following the story and secondary identification with the character of empathetic choice (Clover 8). Horror tends to be more dependent on identification with the character

of empathetic choice. Given that horror is heavily victim-identified, this will often be the victim (Clover 8). On horror, Clover writes:

Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. A figure does not cower and cry because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psychokiller because he is a man, he is a man because he is a psychokiller. (Clover 13)

The victim being characterized as feminine and the killer masculine narrows down many horror films to a story about a man versus a woman (whatever the actuality of the gender of the characters may be). The “hero” or surviving character (if there is one) also tends to have more masculine qualities that allow them to defeat the antagonist. With this particular characterization, the feminine victim is not able to defeat the overwhelming masculinity of the killer. Horror, in this way, will sometimes reinforce the idea that men are superior to women.

However, with the trend of final girls that characterized slasher films of the 1970’s and 1980’s, audiences began to identify with a female protagonist that had both the feminine qualities of a victim and the masculine qualities of a hero. Carol Clover dubbed them the “Final Girls”, exploring this trend of the lone surviving female protagonist commonly depicted in early slasher films (Clover 35). These characters will cower and cry when faced with their killers, but also fight to survive, exploring the duality of these previously established gender roles. Although slashers will typically have a significant cast of teenage characters, the final girl will be “the undisputed main

character, both because of the increased character development afforded to her throughout the film and because of her early discovery of the killer” (Trencansky 64). Take for example Nancy Thompson, the Final Girl character from Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). As her friends are picked off one by one by Freddy Kruger, the nightmarish monster man that kills them in their dreams, Nancy becomes aware of the killer early on and avoids sleeping by drinking caffeine. Nancy also obtains knowledge of Freddy Kruger’s past that helps her to understand what she needs to do to defeat him. She even sets up booby-traps to directly challenge Freddy Kruger to attack her in her sleep. She does cower and scream in terror when faced with her killer like her friend Tina, but unlike Tina, Nancy fights back and survives.

The problem with Final Girl characters though comes back to Laura Mulvey’s male gaze as this identification process of sadistic voyeurism is shifted to the Final Girl. This shift assumes a submissive position due to the Final Girl’s victimization as a woman alongside the forced identification with a woman as the hero and protagonist. The Final Girl is also often portrayed as a “figurative male” due to the male gaze and the boyish way she is portrayed in order to be the hero character who is traditionally masculine (Clover 55). These “boyish” qualities of these characters centralize mainly on the Final Girl’s repressed feminine sexuality, often contrasted with the presence of another female character’s strong feminine sexuality. The more promiscuous, outgoing, and sexualized female character will often face a particularly gruesome death, almost as a punishment, reinforcing Mulvey’s sadistic-voyeuristic and fetishistic-scopophilia look. Masculinizing

the Final Girl then rejects this aspect of femininity that is necessary to modern standards of feminist female characters.

Although this trend of Final Girls in slashers seems to positively present a strong female character and a step in the right direction for feminism in horror, the portrayal of Final Girls proves it is not enough to simply have a female protagonist in order for a film to be feminist, what matters most is the perspective and characterization of said female protagonist. More modern horror films from the 1990s and onward recognized the problems of the Final Girl and the expectations horror films garnered. Today, especially with the increased integration of women behind the camera in the horror film industry, there seems to be a trend of women-led horror films that explore female identity and trauma experienced by women. The sub-genres of body horror, revenge, and psychological horror with a female lead will often portray women as more than the one-dimensional Final Girl characters as they react to the horrors happening to them. They sometimes will not prevail and overcome their antagonists in whatever form they may take, but unlike Final Girls, this is not needed to establish them as feminist characters.

The Subgenres of Trauma Horror

As we've already established, horror as a genre explores internal fears and emotional vulnerability through a tangible antagonist. However, like establishing a horror

film in accordance with the expectations of feminist media, trauma depicted in horror films has its own complications and controversies. In particular, what specific examples of trauma are depicted and in what ways. There are three main subgenres of horror that are worth noting for their portrayal of trauma, especially from a feminine perspective: body horror, revenge, and psychological horror.

Body Horror

Body horror is a subgenre of horror characterized by graphic violations of the human body, often one of the most gory and visceral subgenres of horror. These violations can take the form of mutation, mutilation, zombification, disease, demonic possession, pregnancy, and parasites. Body horror is also often associated with the subgenres of slashers, splatter films, monster, sci-fi horror, and torture-porn, overlapping while still remaining its own distinct sub-genre. It often teeters on the interstitial boundaries of dead/undead or interior/exterior, playing with the ideas of physical vulnerability and the loss of control over one's body. Unlike other horror genres where the antagonist is a separate (and often opposite) being from the protagonist, the monster in body horror is “the monstrous body not the monstrous character” (Cruz and Lopez 18). In this way, body horror is less about the fear of death and more about one's own body. In this way, the “monstrous body” can be seen as a physical manifestation of trauma.

An example of this sub-genre is Roman Polanski's 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby*. Rosemary's body becomes a vessel for the spawn of Satan after she is drugged and raped, set up by her own husband and her conspiring satanic neighbors. Rosemary endures a

painful pregnancy while her husband and doctor (who is a part of the Satanist group of course) make sure she carries the baby to term. Rosemary's monster is the one growing in her womb, rendering her weak by leaching her nutrients while it grows stronger inside of her.

From *Rosemary's Baby* we can see how trauma stems from this invasion of one's body. Although body horror seems to stem from physical trauma, the nature of horror that renders the psyche into a tangible being suggests that body horror could present an exterior adversary to mental trauma as well. To better understand internal trauma, body horror can portray the physical on one's own body as a result of a traumatic event.

Revenge

Revenge is often a subgenre of exploitation horror. These films will usually follow the same structure in which a usually female character is attacked and left for dead but survives and is rehabilitated, hunting down those who have wronged them and killing them violently. Sometimes the character is killed in the first act and the revenge is carried out by a family member or the protagonist seeks vengeance on behalf of a loved one. This subgenre is known for being controversial and highly debated.

One of the most controversial examples is Meir Zarchi's 1978 film *I Spit on your Grave*, a rape-revenge film. Despite its brutal depictions of sexual violence, it's become highly debated in psychoanalytical feminism. The film is extremely violent and graphic, dominated also by the male-gaze that characterizes early exploitative horror films. However, the "revenge" reverses the roles, switching the male gaze to a female one. As

Laura Mee writes, “The brutal acts of torture can in contrast be understood as explicitly symbolic rapes that mirror Jennifer’s own violations.” (Mee 81). *I Spit on Your Grave* inspired a surge in the subgenre that is continuing to redefine its tropes. Modern films like Coralie Fargeat’s 2018 film *Revenge* challenges the controversy surrounding *I Spit on Your Grave*. While not a direct remake the film, like most revenge films, it follows the same structure of *I Spit on Your Grave*. *Revenge* also acts as a modern reclamation of the genre for women while previously it was considered controversial by mostly male film critics.

The subgenre, although debated, shows the traumatic events and the complexities of processing this trauma through extreme violence. According to Dr. Mardi J. Horowitz, some forms of this revenge narrative may be therapeutic to some degree. If we consider a film like *I Spit on Your Grave*, research suggests it is normal for victims of sexual assault to experience revenge fantasies. She also writes:

Revenge fantasies are persistent because they also provide additional positive emotional effects. The victim can feel good about gaining a sense of power and control by planning vengeance and may experience pleasure at imagining the suffering of the target and pride at being on the side of some spiritual primal justice. (25)

In this way, revenge films can provide an outlet for this trauma with its position in a controlled and fictional environment.

Psychological Horror

As we have already established, psychological horror is a subgenre of horror that involves emotional vulnerability and darker fears repressed in the human psyche.

Psychological horror also will usually involve a mystery and mentally unstable characters, often resembling more of a character study than a normally narrative-focused horror film. According to Bruce Ballon in his article, "Horror Films: Tales to Master Terror or Shapers of Trauma?", psychological horror films can be seen as "a cultural tale that provides a mechanism for attempting mastery over anxieties involving issues of separation, loss, autonomy, and identity." (1). These films will often render these themes into tangible, physical beings to overcome, but their reality will be scrutinized as the protagonist's sanity and reliability is questioned.

An example of psychological horror is Jennifer Kent's 2014 film *The Babadook*. The film's protagonist Amelia is a troubled, exhausted and grief-stricken widow left alone to raise her son Samuel. After reading Samuel a bedtime story about the Babadook, a monster that terrorizes those who are aware of its existence, Amelia and Samuel begin to see (or hallucinate) the monster.

The Babadook can be seen as a manifestation of the trauma Amelia is not able to process as she raises her son on her own. In the end, she confronts and accepts the Babadook's presence and learns from her experience. Not all of these psychological horror protagonists are this fortunate, but their struggle with trauma is at least symbolically made tangible, creating a narrative that exposes the unmentionable

problems of the inner psyche, unacknowledged trauma, or PTSD symptoms from a traumatic event.

Chapter 1: Meet the Parents: Class, Traumatic Childhoods, and In-laws

As we have already established, horror lends itself to a particular fluidity throughout genres, creating either a fusion of two complimentary types of films or creating specific, concrete subgenres. In this way, horror is far from limited in its versatility and this allows for more complex and diverse themes to be explored through a horror narrative. In a particularly feminist approach, horror can be combined melodramatic elements to integrate marital, romantic, or familial themes or narratives. This allows for commentary on the patriarchal conventions of the domestic sphere, gender norms, and class structures.

Although melodramatic horror in particular is a subgenre that is not entirely contemporary, it's important to place melodrama and horror in the context of feminist discourse surrounding horror. According to Vivian Sobchack in her essay "Bringing it All Back Home: Family, Economy, and Genetic Exchange", melodrama contains an "implication of domestic space, generation time, and family structure" (144). Because of this emphasis on family and relationships, the melodrama was categorized as a subgenre under "women's films", that is, films with a prominent female lead and a plot related to a presumptuous female audience (Margolis 50). With certain subgenres such as teen horror and the slasher, horror may seem like the opposite of the women's film, dominated by the

male gaze and relatable to an overwhelmingly male audience. However, melodramatic elements such as a female protagonist, romance, and family issues can be seen in horror films as early as *Psycho* (1960) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and have appealed to women in this depiction of women's issues and fears. Additionally, this often female-centric subgenre of horror subverts and dismantles the patriarchal backbone of early melodrama that capitalizes on female emotion and reinforcement of societal norms surrounding the hegemonic and limited feminine role as either the wife, mother, daughter, or in some cases, the victim of a debilitating illness.

Similarly, melodrama often depicts a wealthy or middle class nuclear family structure that includes issues surrounding consumerism and wealth (Sobchack 144). In horror then, these melodramatic elements can often serve as a counter to the "American Dream" so often portrayed in contemporary American films. By showing the crisis of a disruption to these established ideas of class and wealth, horror films can also expose the fragility of capitalism and the idealized American wealthy class. Additionally, the monsters of these films are often the corrupted elite, such as the upper class Satanists of *Rosemary's Baby* for example. This particular narrative highlights the fears of those in power and their potential corruption due to exploitation and greed.

Combining the melodramatic element of marriage, family, and romantic relationships to this narrative of the upper middle class can be best exemplified in a "meet the parents" narrative. Horror often will emphasize everyday anxieties and uncomfortable situations like this to the extreme. While on one hand this may seem

heavy-handed and entirely implausible to real life situations, there is a certain comfort in watching a sort of worst case scenario that may ease the viewers expectations.

Additionally of course, these types of melodramatic horror films usually establish that anyone outside the family, that is, whoever is meeting the parents of their partner, as a sort of outsider. Usually this character will come from a different background and class that poses a threat to inheritance or the family's reputation. It is important to note then that in this narrative and in the two films I'm about to discuss, these protagonists act as a disruption to elitist corruption usually brought on by greed. In this way, the protagonist is portrayed in this dichotomy of a hero and victim, showing the complexities of romantic and familial notions in melodramas, final girls, and the fragility of class structures dismantled by an outsider or underdog character.

1.1 Home Invasion Hitmen

Home invasion horror is also a subgenre that transcends interstitial boundaries. However, unlike monsters as boundary transgressors, the home invasion subgenre instead uses an act of violation to blur the lines between two states of being. In this case, the safety of one's own home and the potential danger of being outside one's home. The infringement of the home invasion in question exposes the porousness of one's private sector. What was once a safe space from the outside world is now dangerous, reversing the expectations of the security of the indoors and in turn exposing the fragility of the

social construction of public and private space. Similarly, home invasion horror breaks down the patriarchal idea of the home. This patriarchal established dominance over a home or family that supposedly guarantees its protection and authority is breached by an outside force that penetrates itself into the known and established hegemonies of the home. In this way, home invasion horror also acts as an example of transgressional horror that

By integrating melodramatic elements to home invasion horror, a family or couple can be put into this crisis with an added melodramatic backstory. For example, Bryan Bertino's 2008 film *The Strangers* starts out following the typical conventions of a melodrama with a couple facing tension while in a vacation home after a rejected marriage proposal. Instead of eventually reconciling as they would in a normal melodrama, the couple are victims to masked criminals who infiltrate the home. This film subverts the expectations of romantic resolution by forcing these characters to a random attack, perhaps implying the fragility of their relationship due to the ease in which their home was infiltrated. In films like this, there is usually some underlying conflict that often does not become resolved, emphasizing the vulnerability of class systems, domestic spheres, or expectations of gender.

Another film that especially exercises this nature of home invasion horror and melodrama is Adam Wingard's 2011 slasher *You're Next*. The film follows a woman Erin as she meets her boyfriend Crispian's wealthy but estranged family for the first time. In an attempt to reconcile family tensions, Crispian's parents Paul and Aubrey invite all of

their four children and partners to join them for their thirty-fifth anniversary in their retirement home. Despite their parents' attempt to have a civil family dinner, the siblings begin to hash out old arguments and rivalries, with Erin caught in the middle of the awkwardness. The fighting is disrupted when the boyfriend of Crispian's sister is suddenly shot in the head by a crossbow in the middle of the dining room from an unseen force outside the window. From there, the family starts to be picked off one by one by intruders with animal masks.

Although the obvious outsider is the masked assailants targeting the family, Erin herself could also be considered an outcast to the family. In addition to not officially being part of the family, she is immediately categorized as "other" due to her Australian accent which Crispian's sister-in-law describes as "jarring". Additionally, the family judges her and Crispian's relationship that formed when Erin was working as a T.A. for Crispian. This is especially reinforced in the beginning of the film when Paul and Aubrey express their disapproval for a scandal involving their neighbor who left his wife for one of his college students. Consequently, this neighbor couple is killed at the beginning of this film by the masked antagonists. Furthermore, both Crispian and his younger brother Felix are also portrayed as these outcast characters. Crispian is a middle child, overweight compared to the rest of his family, and never seems to be acknowledged for his achievements by his father. Felix on the other hand is the more rebellious sibling, bringing home his goth, cigarette smoking girlfriend Zee who stands out against the overtly suburban and sophisticated family. Both are consistently in the shadow of their brother Dean and their sister Aimee who the parents seem to dote on more.

As the film progresses, the situation becomes especially dire as more and more family members are killed by the intruders. However, all throughout the attack is Erin leading the way for protecting, fighting, and setting up traps for the killers. Immediately, Erin takes on the role of a leader for the scared family, much to their surprise and confusion. Erin's feminine appearance and soft-spoken voice is disarming to her authority which puts her at an advantage to fight back and kill the majority of assailants who seem to underestimate the damage she can do. Additionally, she eventually reveals to Zee that she grew up in a survivalist camp in the Australian outback with her paranoid father, moving to the states with her mother as a teenager to escape that life. This rather traumatic background information about Erin's childhood is important in solidifying her definite otherness from the suburban, wealthy, upper middle-class upbringing of Crispian and his siblings. It is this vital knowledge that gives her an advantage over the killers and aids in her survival.

At some point in the film, it is revealed that Felix and his girlfriend Zee have hired these intruders as hitmen to insure Paul's inheritance as sole benefactors and have been playing along with the attack the whole time. Paul, who is a retired defense contractor, obtained a hefty severance package and would leave his family a couple of million dollars after his death. Because of both familial tensions and the sheer amount of people in the family, Felix and Zee decided the best possible solution to ensure them the entirety of the wealth was to kill off every other family member.

Killing one's family for insurance or inheritance money is not a particularly nuanced plot point and has been seen in many horror and crime films and T.V. shows. However, it is interesting to contemplate the extremities that people may resort to due to financial greed. Often, this greed-driven person or group of people already come from money and don't want to be cut off or limited from this source of wealth and be forced to get a job or pay their own bills. This also stems from a certain sense of entitlement that can drive someone to these unspeakable acts. In Felix's case, it is obvious that his own entitlement, ostracization from his family, and negative influence from Zee have made him believe there was no other choice to ensure his financial comfortability.

These kinds of narratives and plot twists play into elements of melodrama by pitting family against issues arising from greed. Ultimately however, greed wins, and this idea of a normal, loving, and well-to-do family is demolished by the horror of a planned home invasion. What's more, the implications of a more morally upright or sensible family stemming from the wealthy and well-educated is severed through Felix's actions. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the outcast and exotic character of Erin with her traumatic childhood built on scarcity and a fear of a lack of resources, this film exposes the fragility and problems of an idealized, capitalist, American family in which Erin ultimately triumphs.

At the end of the film, Erin has become aware of Felix and Zee's involvement in the inheritance scheme and the film shifts to more of a revenge driven plot with Erin as a final girl. After killing all of the masked criminals and eventually Zee and Felix, Erin also

discovers that Crispian, who had left the house and was presumed dead, was actually in on the inheritance scheme with Felix and Zee but left the house because the violence made him uncomfortable. Crispian tries to explain himself to an enraged and hurt Erin, insisting that she wasn't supposed to be killed and was instead supposed to be a witness but due to her surprising abilities to fight back, had to be targeted. When Erin doesn't accept this, Crispian tries to convince her to go along with the scheme and use the inheritance money with him, using it to pay off her student loans, go to Paris, and eventually become engaged. He also implores Erin to avoid turning him in so that all the deaths that night "wouldn't be for nothing". At this, Erin appears to be considering his offer but then unexpectedly stabs Crispian in the neck. When a dying Crispian asks "why", Erin responds with "why the fuck not?". Erin is then shot in the shoulder by a police officer who sees her stab Crispian through the window, believing her to be the killer. The film ends with the police officer falling victim to one of Erin's booby traps as she tries to call out for him to stop.

Erin killing Crispian ultimately symbolizes a rejection to wealth and conformity as it comes at such a gruesome price. Although Erin could have accepted Crispian's offer, almost as a price to pay for the trauma she has endured, she enacts revenge due to a bond severed by betrayal over money, juxtaposing Felix, Zee, and Crispian's destruction of familial bonds *for* money. The melodramatic inclinations of this film based on family and romantic connections is therefore heightened and emphasized with Erin's character and values.

Furthermore, Erin's role in the film changes from a protector and victim to justifiably vengeful final girl. However, she is unexpectedly perceived as the villain at the end of the film when shot by the policeman. Although Crispian, Zee, and Felix are still in the wrong, the amount of actual violence and killing was performed almost exclusively by either Erin or the hitmen. Felix and Zee refuse to get their hands dirty unless forced to and Crispian removes himself from the conflict entirely, resulting in all three of these characters remaining free of blood or wounds for most of the film. Erin however gets progressively bloodier as the night goes on, both in wounds and the blood of those she has killed, seeming to almost relish her kills when setting traps, using whatever weapon she can find, and beating two masked criminals with a hammer until their faces are a bloody pulp. In this way, the film posits Erin is this sort of interstitial moral boundary. Although she seems to be the more morally upright by protecting Crispian's family at all costs and knowing that what happened was wrong, she is also vengeful, violent, and a force to be reckoned with. Ultimately, *You're Next* offers a complex discussion on mortality in a context of class differences.

1.2 Wedding Night Turned Class-War

Like the melodrama, comedic elements can also be complementary integrated into horror. Often, horror comedies will satirize typical conventions of horror films with over exaggeration and meta humor like the *Scream* franchise or use purposefully gory and

cheesy effects with comical reactions from the characters like in *Evil Dead II* and *Army of Darkness*. According to *Comedy-Horror Films: A Chronological History, 1914-2008* by Bruce Hellenbeck, “comedy-horror films give you what straight dramatic horror films don’t: the permission to laugh at your fears, to whistle past the cinematic graveyard and feel secure in the knowledge that monsters can’t get you” (3). Additionally, comedy can also be a lighthearted way to provide commentary on the issues that horror may not overtly depict. Similar to how satirical literature uses this sort of self aware and exaggerated account as both a form of mockery and commentary on societal issues, the horror comedy can subvert its narrative to reveal an underlying, alternative meaning beneath the jokes and gore.

One of the films that best exemplifies both comedic and melodramatic horror is Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett’s 2019 film *Ready or Not*. The film follows a young woman named Grace meeting her husband Alex de Loma’s extremely wealthy but estranged family for the first time on the day of their wedding. Grace is judged and disliked by the majority of the family as they believe her to be an unworthy partner for Alex, most likely only marrying him to obtain some of the family’s fortune. Despite the family’s judgement, Alex and Grace get married and in order to officially be initiated into the De Lomas family, Grace must participate in the family tradition of playing a game at midnight when someone new joins the family. Grace must choose the game they play from a puzzle box that belonged to a man named Le Bail, who provided the family’s successful board game company and resulting wealth in exchange for this tradition. Grace draws the game “hide and seek” and playfully begins to look for a hiding place.

Meanwhile, the family gathers various weapons, and it's only when Alex's sister Emilie accidentally kills a maid in front of a hiding Grace that reveals the family's true intention to kill Grace as a sacrifice to Satan in order to keep their wealth, and the hunt begins.

The judgment of Grace by the family stems from Grace's status as an outsider, not only in having never met the family, but also in her upbringing which was primarily in various foster homes. Never having a stable family dynamic herself, Grace is intent on integrating into the family in some way despite both Alex and his brother Daniel's attempts to discourage this. Although Grace is perceived in such a way that she is marrying Alex for the family fortune, compared with Daniel's wife Charity who Daniel himself describes as a "gold digging whore", it is clear that she values the idea of having a family more than the fortune that comes with it. Charity on the other hand, is intent on killing Grace to preserve the family's wealth despite relating to Grace in a harsh and poor upbringing. In this way, *Ready or Not* becomes this sort of anti-capitalist narrative in which the rich hunt the poor. Like *You're Next*, the film shows people that would rather kill than surrender their wealth, despite innocent people being involved.

As the game continues, both Alex and Daniel, who disagree with the family's murderous tradition, help Grace to evade the family and Grace herself takes arms and fights back. Interestingly enough, the family's servant, three maids, and Emilie's young son Georgie all participate in the hunt. The maids and servant perhaps most surprisingly as they would be more likely to possess some sort of class solidarity with Grace. Nevertheless, Grace is consistently at odds with everyone around her, including a

potential rescuer in a passing car who blatantly ignores a blood-covered Grace screaming for help who only stops to tell Grace to “Get the fuck out of the road” resulting in Grace yelling perplexed obscenities at the driver including “fucking rich people”. Meanwhile, the family begins to question the validity of the ritual that must be performed, wondering if they would truly be punished if Grace was somehow able to live until dawn. As Daniel and Emilie dispose of the various dead bodies of the maids in a pit full of corpses (acting as literal “skeletons in the closet”), Daniel insists that the family are actually the ones who deserve to die, solidifying his stance of morality over money.

To bring forth a real-life perspective in the societal context of the film, *Ready or Not* was released in 2019 during a tense political climate surrounding class divisions and wealth inequality. In a country so divided with issues of late capitalism, the film explores an idea of corrupt traditions. Similarly, the younger generations of the De Lomas clan’s questioning and hesitance signifies a problem with inherited moral values that may inhibit positive change and progression from the accepted norm. Additionally, the film can be seen as a metaphor for the elite’s exploitation of the working class. Alex’s father reduces Grace to “nothing but a sacrifice”, a tool for the family’s financial gain. The family’s lack of morality, corruption, and general untrustworthiness also reflects how the elite are perceived at this time. Using the extremity of a satanic ritual, *Ready or Not* satirizes these societal and political anxieties surrounding class issues.

In the climax of the film, Grace is finally captured and placed on an altar while the family dons very traditionally occult hoods. However, in a surprising turn of events,

the family starts vomiting blood and it is revealed that Daniel poisoned them to help Grace escape. Charity catches up with them and shoots Daniel in the neck, angry that her own husband doesn't care about her potential death if the ritual is not completed. Daniel dies and Grace escapes once again only to be found by the mother who she angrily overpowers and violently kills. Alex, who manages to escape the handcuffs that have prevented him from interfering, finds Grace beating his mother to death. Grace, who has turned almost feral in fear and anger at this point, cringes away from Alex who realizes she will never love him again. Upon realizing this, Alex turns over to his family's side, betraying Grace. As dawn rapidly approaches, Alex prepares the ritualistic fatal blow, but soon realizes it is too late and the sun has risen. At first, nothing happens and the family begins to think that the entire tradition was fake. However, this relief is cut short as the family begins to explode into a bloody, pulpy mess as Grace, deranged from the trauma she has endured, laughs. Alex is the last alive in his family and begins to plead with Grace to forgive him. Grace, unforgiving to his pleas as a result of his betrayal, throws her wedding ring at his chest, saying "I want a divorce". At the rejection of Grace's forgiveness, Alex too explodes. The film ends with Grace, her white dress now completely red with blood and in a stoic state of shock smoking a cigarette while the De Lomas mansion burns behind her.

Alex's betrayal also emphasizes the problem with corrupt generational tradition and acts as a reversal of the female gold digger stereotype of a marriage tainted with greed. Instead of the wife from a lower-class background marrying into the family for money, the rich man marries a lower-class wife to sacrifice in order to keep his money. In

this sense, the rich man is perceived as the more untrustworthy when it comes to class differences in a marriage, offering a critical subversion of a sexist stereotype.

Similar to Erin in *You're Next* is Grace's role as a betrayed woman who is allowed the last word about morality. Both women choose to enact revenge on their untrustworthy spouses, rejecting a potential life of comfortability and wealth with them and establishing a moral hierarchy of trust and love over money. The decision of both Erin and Grace represent the competing values surrounding class and relationships, making both films a contemporary criticism of class structures, greed, and morality.

Chapter 2: Growing Pains: Puberty, Body Horror, and the “Monstrous Feminine”

A particular outlier that doesn't always necessarily comply with Carol Clover's ideologies of a gendered horror universe that establishes victims as feminine and monsters as masculine is the complexity of a female monster (Clover 13). If sex proceeds from gender when it comes to a victim/killer relationship, where does that leave a monstrous woman? In order to fit Clover's theory, this female monster would have to have masculine qualities such as challenging male authorities while somehow emasculating male victims enough to render them the feminine qualities of victimhood. While subgenres like revenge horror do explore this reversal as a counterpoint to male aggression and assault, this idea of monstrosity or role reversal almost always seems to be for an arguably justifiable reason, rendering this idea of feminine monstrosity as a reaction rather than a complex psychological condition and reinforcing the idea that women are always, in one way or another, the victim.

The complexities of a feminine horror adversary are in part due to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. In her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva defines that something is abject if it “disturbs identity, system, and order. What does not respect borders, position, rules, The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (13). This idea is similar to Noel Carroll's previously discussed theories on the interstitial nature of

horror, in that horror film antagonists can act as a representation of these abject qualities, especially in a physical portrayal of the perverse.

Additionally, however, according to Kristeva, these abject, perverse representations can take form in corpses, excrements and other bodily horror, something that body horror films in particular are often abundant in. She writes, “There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver” (12).

Therefore, the corpse and other bodily excrements are considered abject because of their role between the consciousness of one's own body and its eventual separation to a mere object outside consciousness or the living body. In relation to women as horror antagonists, women are therefore considered abject when it comes to the portrayal of both the abject nature of bodily fluids such as menstrual blood in body horror films and in the role of monstrous women who question or destabilize societal order.

Barbra Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* capitalizes on both Kristeva's ideology of abjection and this idea of horror transgressing borders to conceptualize women as the antagonist of horror films, coining the term “monstrous-feminine” to describe the gendered differences of a female monster to a male one. In relation to abjection, Creed writes, “Abjection... occurs where the individual fails to respect the law... Thus, abject things are those which highlight the 'fragility of the law' and which exist on the other side

of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction (71).”

Monstrous women then represent this collapse of gender roles or societal expectations, exposing the fragility behind them. In connection to puberty, the monstrous-feminine in horror showcases these ideologies through the complexities of the socially taboo transition into womanhood and symbolically the transformation into a monster which deconstructs a hegemonic society.

2.1 Menstruating Monsters

What better plot point in horror films to signal a significant and symbolic change in a young woman than puberty and the start of a menstrual period. Suddenly, girls are considered women, their bodies adapting to an inescapable body function that is both celebrated and shamed. At this point, they are able to have children, thus granting them value in the expected childbearing role of women. In its relation to horror films, menstruation signals a significant change in a female character, and it's usually not just the start of puberty. For some of the women protagonists, menstruation represents a betrayal of the body, having to endure a transformation teetering on the edge of childhood and womanhood and all its conflicting adolescent expectations to conform to. In this way, menstruation is the quintessential bodily change brought on by puberty that

signals an upheaval of childhood and the expectations of womanhood. These societal and physical anxieties brought on by changing bodies are shown through the boundary-transgression monster.

In body horror films like *Ginger Snaps*, this ideology is challenged in not only its portrayal of abject and taboo blood, but of the negative connotations that society and traditional feminine norms associate it with. The film follows sisters Bridgette and Ginger Fitzgerald as older sister Ginger is attacked by a werewolf on the night of her first period. While Ginger's lycanthropy gradually worsens as the full moon looms, Bridgette also must come to terms with her sisters' increased aggression, sexual desire, and violence while desperately looking for a solution to return Ginger to "normal", which to the sisters, rejects the expectations of maturing women in society. At the start of the *Ginger Snaps*, neither sister has started their period despite being well past the average age of twelve to begin menstruation. However, being "late bloomers" isn't the only unusual aspect of the Fitzgerald sisters. Both sisters are incredibly morbid and obsessed with death, vowing to either move out of the suburb or die together when they turn sixteen. As a result, the sisters are unsurprisingly social outcasts, disgusted with what they consider "average", that is, normative and hegemonic ideals of femininity and society conveniently represented through Ginger's foil, a stuck-up, preppy, and sexually active classmate named Tina. For this reason, *Ginger Snaps* lends itself to both a discursive discussion on menstruation in relation to the monstrous-feminine and the boundaries of what can be considered normative femininity.

In its relation to the abjection of the monstrous-feminine, menstruation is seen as the ultimate cultural taboo, not comfortably talked about in normative society. As Shauna Macdonald examines in her essay “Leakey Performances: The Transformative Potential of the Menstrual Leak,” “in our patriarchal culture menstrual blood points directly to the vagina and is the ultimate sign of women's uncontrollable sexuality. Since such sexuality is construed negatively, menstruation, if it is indeed such a signifier, is not something most women are likely to embrace” (344-345). This is apparent to Ginger and Bridgette who think the mere notion of beginning menstruation is a sign that they are starting to succumb to normative femininity, referring to it as “the curse” (Fawcett 2000). Ginger angrily states upon starting her period, “God! I mean, kill yourself to be different and your own body screws you. But if I start simpering around tampon dispensers and moaning about...PMS, just shoot me, okay?” (Fawcett 2000). Part of Ginger’s attitude of disgust toward starting her period is this idea of appearing feminine and therefore weak when both the sisters have kept up an edgy, outcast appearance. Bridgette, the younger sister, hasn’t started menstruation and fears not only the onslaught of inevitable maturation, but that Ginger will change and become “average,” leaving Bridgette to be an outcast by herself. Because of this, *Ginger Snaps* conveys the start of menstruation in an interstitial boundary of conformity and nonconformity.

However, Ginger’s sexual repression and actively outcast status all changes when Ginger begins her period and in turn, is attacked by a werewolf. Ginger can be considered to change both regarding her lycanthropy and symbolically during the start of her first menses. In Ginger’s physical werewolf transformation, her teeth sharpen and become

canine-like, she starts to grow thick body hair all over her body, and, in her later stages of transformation, she grows a small tail and four anterior teats on her chest, like a dog. Additionally, mirroring her increased sexual urges, she starts to dress and act more provocatively towards the boys at their school whom the sisters previously detested. However, when the sisters go to the school nurse after Ginger is bitten, continuing to bleed heavily and beginning to sprout body hair, they are told by the overly cheery female nurse that a “thick, syrupy discharge” is normal, as is hair that wasn’t there before and general pain, finishing her spiel by giving them both condoms and saying “play safe” (Fawcett 2000).

Additionally, the connection of lycanthropy and the feminine stages of puberty such as mood changes and menstruation have colored folkloric texts throughout history. According to Emily Toth in her book *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, the word “menstruation” means “moon change” and many cultures have their own mythologies surrounding menstruation with the moon which is recurrently signified as feminine (164-165). Barbra Creed also argues that the werewolf’s lunar cycle can be paralleled with the 28-day menstrual cycle and that horror movie monsters like the vampire, witch, and werewolf all exist in certain boundaries of transgression (65).

Eventually, Ginger's transformation into a full-fledged werewolf is complete. Bridgette, who has been working with a local boy to find a cure for Ginger’s lycanthropy, finds herself ending the film with a knife in one hand and a cure for Ginger in the other. When werewolf Ginger attacks to kill, severing the sisterly bond that has been strained

throughout Ginger's changes, Bridgette plunges the knife instead of the cure into the creature. Although Bridgette could've chosen to cure Ginger, it is perhaps the fear of overstepping these transgressional boundaries and fear for Ginger's expected ostracization that would arise if Ginger attempted to turn back to normal. Additionally, Bridgette was left in an adolescent slump with Ginger beginning menstruation and growing up without her, hinting at a bond already being severed by jealousy and abandonment. Overall, *Ginger Snaps* lends itself to a discussion as to just how far is too far when it comes to embracing this "monstrous-feminine".

2.2 Mind Powers

Similar to the body horror aspects of menstruation and the subgenre of revenge-based horror is Brian De Palma's 1974 film *Carrie*. Like *Ginger Snaps*, *Carrie* uses puberty and the start of menstruation to parallel a transformation to the "monstrous-feminine". The film traces the outcast and abused Carrie's development into normative femininity and sexuality, right from the very start of her first period to an almost successful full transition to the ultimate femininity of prom queen. From the very first scene we are welcomed into a very female-centric world: a high school girls locker room. The camera tracks through nude, teenage, female bodies in slow motion, eventually stopping on Carrie, lingering in the shower after the other girls have left. Blood appears in between the soap suds and running water of Carrie's shower and, due to her lack of

knowledge of menstrual functions, she panics, assuming she's dying as she calls for help from her cruel classmates.

Carrie's ignorance of menstruation is due to her fanatic religious mother who believes that once Carrie begins menstruation, she will succumb to the sin of sexuality. She relates menstruation to Eve in the bible, saying "the Lord visited Eve with the curse, and the curse was the curse of blood!" (De Palma 1976). The consequence of course for Eve's sin of sexual temptation. When Carrie insists that her gym teacher told her menstruation is natural, lamenting her embarrassment for the whole ordeal, Carrie's mother ignores her and starts to pray for the sin that Carrie must have committed to be cursed with her period.

According to Emily Toth in *The Curse*, the position of women due to Eve's sin in both the Old and New Testament and resulting menstruation contributed to their disenfranchisement, keeping women "out of the temples and out of the political and economic life of their times." (35). In fact, Toth argues that in the formation of fundamental and intellectual systems, Christianity "clung to the Old Testament belief in the uncleanness of women and the basically imperfect nature that was a consequence of menstrual flow" (37). Because this notion is so deeply embedded in the foundations of Christianity, the views of Carrie's mother may not be so archaic as Carrie's gym teacher and principal think. However, although the mother's willful ignorance is considered unusual, shame, secrecy, and embarrassment are still considered normal when teaching young girls about menstruation. Doris Keiser argues in her book, *Catholic Sexual*

Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing, “Previous concerns about educating girls about their developing reproductive capacities have become a preoccupation with concealing the reality of menstruation, and therefore menarche, with the use of the appropriate products.” (99). Ultimately then, learning about menstruation concerns repression, contributing to a negative perception of menstruating women, female development, and feminine sexuality.

However, Carrie’s mother not only wanted to suppress what she believed would be the start of Carrie’s budding sexuality, but the start of her telekinetic powers, something her mother deems demonic. Like *Ginger Snaps*, the start of Carrie’s menses parallels a monstrous transformation. Unlike the total body horror of lycanthropy however, Carrie’s mental powers suggest the edge of an internal brink, the shower scene climaxing in a light bursting over Carrie’s head as she cowers in her gym teacher’s arms after being pelted with pads and tampons. From there, her powers only grow more powerful, and she starts to use them to fight back from her mother and her crippling oppression on Carrie’s life, embracing her sexuality and femininity.

However, this ascension into normative femininity, such as dating, wearing makeup, and even becoming prom queen is still at the expense of other women who determine her rank in feminine society, limiting her agency in this sense. On one hand, her sympathetic classmate Sue, riddled with guilt for the way she participated in Carrie’s ostracization in the locker room, grants her an opportunity to express her femininity and sexuality by encouraging her boyfriend Tommy to take Carrie to prom. On the other side

of the spectrum are the women who wish to keep Carrie in her outcast and repressed role. Carrie's own mother and her vindictive classmate Chris contribute to the conflicts that arise in Carrie's growth. Carrie's mother's abuse has limited her wish to be normal and accepted her whole life and Chris wants to make sure Carrie stays that way despite her successful integration into Chris and Sue's normative feminine world.

At the end of the film, Carrie is voted Prom Queen alongside the most popular boy in school, representing the ultimate embodiment of stereotypical adolescent femininity. Carrie graciously steps on stage to accept the award, overwhelmed with the sudden support of her previously cruel peers. However, this dream-like quality of the scene is immediately interrupted by a bucketful of blood splashing down onto Carrie from above, a cruel prank organized by a jealous Chris and her bad boy boyfriend. Carrie begins to hallucinate her classmates laughing at the horrific scene, recalling her mother's forewarning before she left the house that night ("They're all gonna laugh at you!"). In an accumulation of the trauma and frustration she has faced, Carrie finally unleashes the full force of her telekinetic powers by sealing the doors of the gym and burning it down, killing almost everyone inside. Although it seems that she has been accepted into this world, the pig's blood prank exposes the facade of Carrie's wishes. Knowing that she will never truly integrate into this idealized feminine world, she releases her powers onto her classmates, showcasing that she's really been a social outcast "freak" all along. The burning of the prom also represents this dismantlement of culture and gender norms, that in the end, Carrie starts to reject. Additionally, the pig's blood brings back the menstruation imagery, once again paralleling her menstruation and her psychic powers at

her peak. Ultimately, Carrie's rage and the climax of the film grants her the agency she's desired this whole film, she is finally in the position of power over her classmates and her mother- something that's been denied to her throughout the film. In relation to the monstrous-feminine, *Carrie* exemplifies the fragility and artificiality of feminine norms a young woman is expected to conform to around the start of puberty and menstruation.

Chapter 3: Good for Her: Feminine Rage, Revenge, and Vigilante Justice

In recent decades, there has been a rise of strong female heroines that have taken over both adventure and horror films, demonstrating a break from the conventions of previously male-dominated genres. Like Carol Clover's description of final girls from horror of the 70s and 80s, these heroines will often demonstrate both masculine and feminine characteristics, empowering them with a combination of courage, intelligence, morality, and strength. This portrayal of violence through a teenage girl may seem jarring and extreme, but it undermines the lack of agency that adolescent women have been afforded in the usually conservative or problematic setting of film. Additionally, portraying young women in this way increases tolerance for on screen violence enacted by women, granting them the role of enforcers of moral order in an otherwise immoral society.

The immoral aspects of this society that require the adolescent girl character to rebel are usually as a result of either a rejection or an exaggerated and problematic depiction of hegemonies, gender roles, or the nuclear family setting. In this way, these films will either expose the fragility of these dynamics or uphold their inherent value through the actions of the female character. If we look at a film like *The Hunger Games* for example, in which an adolescent girl is thrown into a governmental and societal

conflict, we would see a rejection of what is established in society and the need for a rebellion.

Moreover, as Eva Luphold expresses in her article “Adolescence in Action Screening: Narratives of Girl Killers,” these types of films move away from the sexualization of young girls, instead opting for violence and a depiction of feminine rage (20). As this is a particularly nuanced trend in cinema, this precedes films that would be more likely to infantilize and sexualize adult women. The heroines of today, however, are young, but typically not sexualized or infantilized, instead portrayed as mature but violent. While some may argue that a violent heroine is not that much better than a sexualized one, violence is at least expressed consciously by the will of the character instead of acting as a projection of male fantasies.

In horror, this concept of a violent, unsexualized young woman that acts as a moral paradigm is best exemplified in the revenge-horror subgenre. For some of these films, the actual moral implications that result from their acts of vengeance blur the lines between their role as a victim and a killer as we saw previously with *You're Next* and *Ready or Not*. This dichotomy often fringes on a sort of vigilante, rebellious justice that postulates violence when necessary. As always with vigilante-style justice, this becomes necessary when law enforcement or the judiciary system does not take necessary action, leaving the enforcement of morals to a wronged young woman.

3.1 Punishing Perverts

For a lot of women, failure of law enforcement and the judiciary system is a common occurrence, especially in relation to sex crimes. According to the CDC, research shows that a vast majority of sexual violence perpetrators will not go to jail and are less likely to go to be convicted in comparison with other criminals. What's more, 13% of sexual violence victims will not report their cases because of the belief that the police will not do anything (Smith et. al.). In a form of retaliation, protests from vigilante groups have gained traction over the years. In particular, pedophilia has become a concerning point of contention, both with the rise of internet predators and the increase of human trafficking. Shows like *To Catch a Predator* exposed the ease with which child predators are able to groom and ensnare minors through the deception of a computer screen. Similarly, high profile cases of child sex trafficking have exposed its unexpected prevalence in various institutions.

At the heels of the Paulsgrove Riots of 2000, a series of riots that followed the high-profile abduction and murder of eight-year-old Sarah Payne and a particularly influential campaign in the anti-pedophilic movement was David Slade's 2006 *Hard Candy*. According to Slade, the film was inspired by a news story in which Japanese schoolgirls lured older men to meet them with the promise of meaningful conversation, only to assault and mug them. Like this particular instance, the expected predator is reversed in *Hard Candy*, establishing the film as an example of this murky morality.

Of course, in line with the times, the film opens in a flirtatious chatroom. users "Lensman319" and "Thonggrrrl14" exchange steamy messages that establish their romantic relationship and their known age differences. They agree to meet at a coffee

shop, a neutral setting in which the implications of their messages are still up in the air. In this coffee shop is where fourteen-year-old Hayley meets thirty-two-year-old photographer Jeff. During this scene, it's difficult to watch Jeff successfully draw Hayley in, telling her all the things she wants to hear. Hayley wants to appear grown up, telling Jeff all about how she sneaks into college lectures, how she's different from other girls her age. The danger of this situation is emphasized and foreshadowed when the shot of Hayley and Jeff drinking coffee slightly pans to the bulletin board above their heads where a poster of a missing girl hangs. Eventually, Hayley suggests that they continue their date back at his place. Jeff, surprised but suddenly eager, complies.

From the start of this film, we see a typical predator/prey dynamic established. The setup of this scene mirrors something you'd see played out in *What Would You Do?* or a story on NBC's *Dateline*. Their online romance also plays into our expectations: we've seen the internet as a tool for online predators before, resulting in the advocacy for internet safety. What's also interesting is that no one in the coffee shop stops Hayley from leaving with Jeff despite their very clear age differences and flirtatious nature. Hayley, played by a seventeen-year-old Ellen Page, is the perfect picture of innocent youth. Her short-cropped hair, big brown eyes, and oversized red jacket (an allusion to *Little Red Riding Hood*) paint a picture of naivety and submissiveness despite Jeff telling her that she "looks older" than she actually is. Still, no one intervenes, perhaps commenting on the pluralistic ignorance that is seen with crimes committed in a place crowded with bystanders. People assume someone will eventually intervene and no one does, forming a sort of crowd mentality that what they're witnessing must be okay.

Also present through this series of scenes is the seemingly controversial debate of consent that Jeff seems to grapple with. Hayley is the one who suggests taking their relationship further to meet up and later hang out at his house. What's more, Hayley seems perfectly comfortable and compliant with Jeff's flirtations, even engaging in a lot of them herself such as flashing him when changing into a T-shirt he buys her. Here the film establishes itself in a sort of murky moral territory that borders on exploitation. While Hayley doesn't present herself as a victim, we know that what is happening is still morally wrong and we anticipate the worst. In addition to Hayley's inability to consent because of her age is the argument that Hayley is even consenting at all. Although she appears to be coy and flirtatious towards Jeff, this doesn't entirely establish the consent for sex that Jeff is hoping for.

After leaving the cafe, Jeff drives Hayley back to his house that doubles as his photography studio. It's a low slope of a drive to Jeff's home, suggesting Hayley's descent into a trap. Jeff fixes Hayley a drink but surprisingly, she declines, saying that she's aware of potential dangers of accepting a drink someone else has made. This is the first reference on Hayley's part that she's aware of the situation she's in. Despite this, Hayley fixes both herself and Jeff a screwdriver and urges him to drink. Jeff shows Hayley around his studio which is adorned with pictures of models. Hayley questions whether or not Jeff has slept with the models in the photos, showing a hint of what appears to be jealousy. Ironically, Jeff assures her that he has not slept with any of them because most of them were underage and he's aware of the law. Additionally, Jeff tells Hayley about his recent breakup with one of the models, Janelle, who went on to become

hugely successful. However, he is insistent that Janelle was not underage, instead vaguely asserting that they were both young when they fell in love.

With Jeff's insistence of not mixing business with pleasure, it seems as though inviting Hayley over was an attempt to express his desires of sleeping with young, underage women without the confines of a work environment. Additionally, through his nervousness when Hayley begins to snoop around his apartment asking pressing questions about his sexual exploits and ex-girlfriend, it becomes evident that there is something a little more sinister going on here. Jeff's solemnness when describing his past relationship with Janelle becomes especially suspicious, particularly right after Jeff mentions his attraction to his underage clientele. Although this could be interpreted as bitterness towards Janelle's success, Jeff's huge house and expensive-looking furniture do not insinuate an unsuccessful career. Overall, although Janelle's age is unknown, there is some sort of indication that they're break up had something to do with Jeff's attraction to minors.

After flirting and drinking in Jeff's home, Hayley starts playing loud music and begins to strip, urging Jeff to take photos of her like she is one of his models. Jeff complies, taking a few snapshots of Hayley, but starts to feel dizzy and eventually passes out. When Jeff regains consciousness, he finds himself tied to a chair. Here it is revealed that Hayley drugged him and has been tracking him on the suspicion that he has something to do with the local missing girl shown previously on the poster in the coffee shop. Despite Jeff's obvious pedophilic tendencies, he denies having anything to do with the missing girl. Hayley doesn't let him off so easily, condemning him for wanting to

sleep with underage girls, saying “Just because a girl can imitate a woman does not mean she is ready to do what a woman does” (Slade).

Once Jeff is drugged, this surprising turn of events changes the dynamic between Hayley and Jeff. Here Hayley’s characteristics of a vigilante heroine come into play. While prior to this twist she appears as naive, innocent, and coy, she is now revealed to be cunning, intelligent, and vindictive. Jeff on the other hand is forced to forfeit his dominant role, remaining ultimately helpless as Hayley searches through his house to find something that would ruin his life. Hayley also directly uses her appearance and youth to her advantage, giving her an investigative upper hand to administer vigilante justice for the missing girl and any future victims.

With her belief that Jeff has at least lured underage girls before her, Hayley begins to look through his house in search of evidence. Searching through his emails, she finds a missing file that she determines must have been copied onto a hard drive. Hayley begins tearing his home apart looking for it, eventually finding a safe. Using her knowledge of Jeff that she has complied throughout her interactions with him, she is able to successfully open the safe and find the child porn Jeff has hidden inside.

With the damning evidence in hand, Hayley begins to enact what she perceives is the appropriate punishment. Using a bag of ice, Hayley numbs Jeff’s genitals in preparation to castrate him. Jeff begins to plead and beg with Hayley, attempting to garner some form of sympathy from her by telling her a story of abuse he faced when he was a child. Unsympathetic, Hayley continues. After the supposed operation, Hayley leaves to take a shower and Jeff manages to free himself from his restraints, only to find

that Hayley has not actually castrated him, but instead psychologically tortured him to believe that she did.

The act of castration references a somewhat controversial treatment used on sex offenders from research indicating the suppression of pedophilic behavior from treatment regimens and medication that reduce levels of testosterone (Winslade et al 380). Some states even offer physical castration in lieu of medicinal treatment, provided the defendant is knowing and consensual about the procedure (Winslade et al 383). This became controversial under the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that prohibits cruel and unusual punishment (Winslade et al 386). However, in the particular case of surgical castration against pedophilic behavior, the procedure is regarded as therapeutic rather than a form of punishment despite its extremity (Winslade et al 387).

In Hayley's case however, castration is seen as both a punishment for Jeff's pedophilia and a form of restriction towards Jeff's sex crimes. It becomes an act of extreme vigilante justice against Jeff's known involvement in child pornography and possible abduction, rape, and murder of a local missing girl. It would also seem as though Hayley has been through this procedure before as she takes the time to clean up any fingerprints or other evidence that could convict her, solidifying her role as a vigilante heroine that actively searches for and punishes pedophiles.

Angry that Hayley has tricked him, Jeff goes to confront her in the shower armed with a scalpel but finds it empty and is attacked from behind by Hayley, once again rendered unconscious. During the climax of the film, Jeff once again regains consciousness only to find himself bound by a noose and sitting on a chair. Hayley makes

Jeff a deal: if he commits suicide, she will erase all evidence of his crimes, if he doesn't, she will expose him. Jeff refuses, insisting that she must also be punished for what she's done to him. Hayley posits that even if she is caught, she will be let off easily as no one will care about her crimes against a pedophile and she is also technically a victim. Their conversation is interrupted by a neighbor dropping off girl scout cookies, and while Hayley is at the door, Jeff manages to escape. Hayley returns only to find Jeff loose and he pursues her to the roof of the house. Hayley manages to ward off Jeff with a gun and once again restates her deal, bringing the noose from the kitchen to the roof and tying it to the chimney. Jeff finally admits that he watched while another man raped and murdered the local missing girl, saying that if Hayley lets him go, he will tell her where to find this man so she can enact revenge onto him. Hayley reveals that she already took care of that man, who insisted that Jeff was the one who murdered the girl and once again urges Jeff to commit suicide. Defeated, Jeff steps off the roof of his house with the noose around his neck. Hayley, not intent on keeping her promise to destroy evidence, gathers up her belongings and escapes.

With this critical reveal, any sympathy to Jeff's character that may have been perceived through Hayley's extreme punishments are cut short. Jeff is still a horrific criminal, and Hayley has known this the whole time. Additionally, although she enacts this utmost form of vigilante justice, she is technically not a killer. While she could be charged with some form of coercion, it is Jeff's own guilty consciousness for his crimes that results in his own demise. Furthermore, it is clear that Jeff values his charismatic and successful image more than he does his own life. In the end, this too is destroyed by

Hayley who really doesn't owe him anything in this regard. She is able to expose him for what he is and eradicate the problem altogether. In this way, Hayley is an example of a vigilante heroine that can administer moral order without sacrificing all of her own.

3.2 Bloody Becky

An especially prevalent form of vigilante groups in the form of nationalist populism can be seen throughout the aftermath of the 2016 election and the election of Donald Trump (Crockford 224). As a result of Trump's insistence to build a wall along the Mexican border and his affiliation with White Supremacist groups, Trump-supporting vigilante groups formed, intent on preserving white supremacy in American society by forcefully keeping people out (Crockford 233). These vigilante groups bring up the debate of whether or not nationalism and patriotism inherently excludes non-white people. These vigilante, watch-dog organizations perceive themselves as necessary to preserve their own version of American backed by their societal values that become threatened with the supposed conflict of inclusivity and all the stereotypes that accompany certain groups of people. This way of thinking has led to a rise of white supremacy, neo-Nazism, and overall organized racism. For neo-Nazism in particular, violence is celebrated at the expense of "purifying" America. Neo-Nazis also usually aren't afraid to express their views loud and proud, often adorning their bodies with swastika tattoos and shaving their heads.

In horror, neo-Nazism made its film debut in Jermeý Sulnier's 2015 film *Green Room*. The film follows a punk band that becomes targeted by neo-Nazi skinheads after witnessing a murder in one of their clubs. Through the juxtaposition of a punk band and neo-Nazism, Sulnier is able to expose the true menaces of society. In this way, *Green Room* predates the rise of neo-nazim and white supremacy following the election in 2016. Since then, neo-Nazism has outgrown small organizations like the film's small and exclusive club and expanded to incorporate outright rallies and huge vigilante groups.

The next horror film to explore the threat of neo-Nazism is Jonathan Milott and Cary Murnion's 2020 film *Becky*. The film begins with a thirteen-year-old girl named Becky being questioned by a policeman and therapist about traumatic events that have taken place at her family's vacation home. Becky, fresh faced preteen with large, doe-like eyes and choppy blonde hair gives vague answers to their questions, seemingly unable to remember. The film then flashes back to two weeks prior, showing a bullied Becky being picked up from school by her father Jeff, with whom she shares a strained relationship. It is revealed that her mother, who was a white supremacist, died a year earlier. In an attempt to reconcile their relationship and ease some of her grief, Becky's father brings her to the family's vacation home. Unbeknownst to Becky, however, Jeff has also brought his girlfriend, a black woman named Kayla, and her son Ty. During an awkward dinner, Jeff announces his engagement to Kayla. Enraged, Becky storms off, but not before telling Kayla that her mom would have hated her. Meanwhile, a swastika-covered, skinhead prisoner named Dominick and his henchmen Apex, Hammond, and Cole break

out of a police transport van nearby. Then, posing as policemen, they are able to flag down a man with his two children, kill them, and steal their car.

Becky's reaction to her father's engagement sets up the stage for the rest of the movie. Becky isn't just mad; she's mean and vindictive, full of rage. Through this rage it's difficult to discern whether or not Becky shares the same views as her late mother. In fact, through the bulk of the film, Becky's stance on white supremacy is never explicitly stated. Certainly, Becky's young age would suggest some sort of impressionism brought on by her mother's views, and her extreme hostility towards Kayla could also suggest this, but Jeff doesn't seem to share these same notions of white supremacy, especially because of his interracial relationship with Kayla. What might be happening instead is Becky's extreme reaction of grief, her love of her dead mother clouding any judgement of who she was as a person. This strange binary that Becky is in is also emphasized by the parallel editing between the perspectives of Becky and Dominick which suggests some sort of connection one way or the other.

The film continues as Becky storms off to the woods behind the vacation home to a small treehouse. In the treehouse, she procures a small key. We are never made aware of the particular significance the key holds, but it is apparently important to Dominick and his henchmen who arrive at the house to retrieve it. Holding Kayla, Ty, and Jeff hostage and expressing their evident disgust in Jeff and Kayla's interracial relationship, they begin to search for the key but cannot find it. Unaware that Becky is somewhere in the woods, Kayla attempts to lie to keep the men from looking for her. However, Dominick, who has suspected another person is around somewhere, shoots Kayla in the

leg to get her to tell the truth. Becky, who is still in the woods, becomes aware of the intruder's presence and begins to taunt them through a walkie-talkie, insisting she has called the police. When Dominick and the others call her bluff, Dominick begins to torture Jeff with a hot fire poker to persuade her to bring him the key which he figures she must have. Dominick allows Jeff to talk to her through the walkie talkie to persuade her further, but he tells her to run instead, briefly breaking free and being shot dead right in front of Becky. Enraged, Becky stabs Dominick in the eye with a sharpened colored pencil and runs away.

Although we already see the problem with Becky's anger and vindictiveness as well as a potentially questionable sense of morality, this becomes especially heightened in her feelings of grief and vengeance. Becky, now essentially orphaned, adopts the sort of mind frame that she has nothing to lose, becoming almost feral and devilish in her rage. However, the film makes the point that these characteristics of Becky were always there beneath the surface, slowly bubbling up with her ostracization, grief, and hatred of her future stepmother. The death of her last living parent brings this anger to a boiling point, unleashing her underlying savagery and possible preternatural violence to the degree that she's almost a different person entirely.

Wounded, Dominick returns to the house and sends Cole and Hammond to retrieve Becky. Cole finds Becky's fort and attempts to negotiate with her, willing to tell Dominick she escaped if she hands over the key, not wanting to hurt her in the process. Becky doesn't even listen while Cole talks to her, looking for a weapon in the multiple arts and crafts bins in the fort. Before Cole can successfully negotiate with Becky, she

stabs him repeatedly in the neck with a sharpened ruler. Meanwhile, Apex shows some kindness to Kayla and Ty while Dominick watches. Fearing he is not totally on board with his plan, Dominick pulls Apex aside to remind him of his loyalty. In the woods, Hammon finds Cole's body and chases Becky to a lake where he falls in the water, unable to swim. Becky then jumps into a boat and viciously uses the motor to kill him. She is then found by Apex, who urges her to run. He also doesn't want to hurt Becky, especially after his guilt in killing the two children from before.

Despite Apex's urges to flee, Becky returns to the house. Using a car alarm, she lures Dominick outside while Kayla attempts to free herself and Ty. Dominick approaches the car and is attacked by Becky's dog Diego. While Dominick struggles with the dog, Becky runs to the garage to find a weapon. Apex makes a surprise appearance back at the house and wards off Dominick long enough for Becky to run Dominick's head over with a lawn mower. Seeking redemption, Apex appeals to Becky about his changed ways, but she unexpectedly shoots him coldly in the head. The film ends during the police questioning of the present day from the first scene where Becky once again insists that she doesn't remember anything that happened.

The film takes an interesting approach in showing some degree of sympathy through neo-Nazi characters with Apex's guilt. This is contrasted with Becky's unhesitant coldness when it comes to killing, heightening her own personal agenda of vengeance against Apex's neo-Nazism. While Dominick and his henchmen may be vigilantes in their own regard with some sort of plan that's implied to be fueled by white supremacist values and morals, Becky becomes a vigilante against neo-Nazism by the act of

vengeance through rage. Although this conflict with neo-Nazism is most likely unconscious from Becky's part, her obvious rejection to those who upheld the same values as her mother becomes evident. In this way, Becky's elimination of Dominick and his henchman may symbolize her abandonment towards the problematic views of her mother. What's more, the denial of "the key" needed by the neo-Nazi group, something as ambiguous to Becky as it is to the audience, also represents her dismissal of what could be a generational view of white supremacy.

While *Becky* is not without certain flaws, it's an important addition to this discussion of vigilante heroines. Becky may not be as cunning and calculated as Hayley in *Hard Candy*, but there is still a sense of morality through Becky's rage-fueled murders as she chooses to kill the people who have unjustly murdered her father and left her orphaned. Overall, the jarring appearance of a violent but innocent looking young woman heightens the apparent need for vigilante justice in some cases, especially if the perpetrator happens to be an angry teenage girl.

Chapter 4: Pray it Away: Religious Trauma, Witches, and Demon

The most predominant horror films based on biblical concepts are a part of what bibliophile and author of *Holy Horror: The Bible and Fear in Horror Movies* Steve A. Wiggins calls the “Unholy Trinity” (112). This “Unholy Trinity” consists of the films *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, and *Rosemary’s Baby* which boast their own significance in the horror genre as well as the cultural perceptions of Christianity and the bible. What’s interesting and potentially controversial about these films is that they showcase the problem of evil in modern American Christianity. If God isn’t the perpetrator of evil and suffering in the world, then is it solely Satan? Additionally, if God is omnipotent, then what is Satan’s role of authority? By using Satan or demons who do his bidding as antagonists, horror films with biblical themes directly reference this theodicy and can shape popular perceptions of this problem as seen throughout historical interpretations of the bible, both in biblical canon and apocrypha. Primarily, this problem of evil arises from a complicated history of demons and Satan in biblical understanding, one that largely takes form during the 200-year gap between the Old and New Testament.

Although never explicitly mentioned as “Satan” in the Hebrew bible, his previous role as a simple prosecutor or accuser developed into an evil entity in dualistic opposition to the supposed omnipotent God. Most notably, Satan appears in the form of a serpent to Adam and Eve, bringing about the downfall of mankind and the first sin (Genesis 1-4).

From here it becomes clear that Satan has become a mortal enemy to both God and all who wish to do good. In early literature, this perception of Satan becomes more complex. For example, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* paints Satan as a sympathetic character, a tragic underdog caricature that rejects unquestionable authority, something that became attractive in the height of supreme monarchies, dictatorship, and colonialism. In the 1920s, films like F.W. Murnau's *Satan* and Benjamin Christensen's *HAXAN: Witchcraft Throughout the Ages* reinforced the idea of a horned, evil, and lustful Satan on the big screen. However, in more modern horror films, Satan has become less of a central antagonist, with narratives opting for the idea of an anti-Christ instead. These films like the "Unholy Trinity" films *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby* reinforce the prophetic, doomsday conspiracy theory side of religious faith. Satan may not be overtly present in these films but his plot to topple religious institutions through his offspring and his overall influence on others reflects onto popular perceptions of a modern Satan as well as the interpretation of religious texts and information.

Similarly, demons and the idea of possession are equally as complicated. One possible early reference to these demonic entities is the mention of "evil spirits" in the Hebrew Bible. However, instead of demons as servants of Satan, the Bible mentions specifically that these beings come from God, leading some theologians to consider the origin of demons to be beings called the Nephilim, giant offspring of descending angels and humans. The Nephilim continually wreaked havoc onto humans, eating all of their crops and eventually resorting to eating humans when the food ran out. Additionally, this early idea of demonic entities was also attributed to satyrs and fauns, who took the form

of these humanoid goats and lived in the desert. In the New Testament, these demonic entities become more concrete, especially in their relationship to Jesus who seems to have some sort of control over them. Most significantly, Jesus casts out an array of demons referred to as “Legion” from a possessed man, transferring these evil spirits into pigs grazing nearby who proceed to drown in a river (Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-39, Matthew 8:28-34). Today, the popular perception of demons tends to derive from exorcism films and ghost-hunting TV shows. Although these present a more sensationalized version of demonic possession and hauntings, demons in film can reinforce a distrust of the paganism, the occult, and whatever other secular activity the Catholic church deems harmful. The fear behind exorcism films then comes from a fear of vulnerability and sin, an almost primordial fear at this point.

These popular perceptions of demons and Satan from film also contribute to what Wiggins refers to as “biblical illiteracy.” Just as in these films, the bible seems to be reduced to mere symbolism, proof of the divine that doesn’t necessarily need to be read to be understood. What has developed from this epidemic of biblical illiteracy is instead more of a biblical doctrine, additionally brought on by a lack of personal interpretation and taking sermons or preaching at face value. These films then offer an easily interpreted version of the biblical elements of evil. By using the Bible, priests, nuns, crosses, and scripture, religious horror films give the appearance of religious authority. Additionally, the previously discussed conservative moral codes associated with early horror films becomes integrated into this popular perception, evolving into a modern battle of sins and religious virtues.

4.1 Extreme Exorcisms

Since 1614 with the development of the *rituale romanum*, exorcisms became an official aspect of Catholicism, later integrating and evolving in American Protestantism. Although a *rituale* this old may seem archaic, reports of exorcism cases actually began to spike in the late 1960s all throughout the Satanic Panic in the 1980s and 90s. Because of this, the *rituale romanum* was updated in 1998 by the Catholic church, much to the dismay of traditionalist exorcists who primarily perform what is referred to as a “solemn exorcism.” This solemn exorcism is typically what we would see in a film like *The Exorcist*. Chanting in Latin, violence when necessary, and body horror are all elements of a traditional solemn exorcism. Today when exorcisms are conducted, they are more likely to be performed by a “charismatic exorcist”. Charismatic exorcisms derive from Protestant Churches and are characterized by speaking in tongues, healing, and deliverance. Although this more modern exorcism ritual is not traditional and contributes to the Protestantization of Catholicism, it presents a much safer alternative to the extremities of a *rituale romanum* solemn exorcism.

This surge of exorcisms that contributed to the ritual's evolution is in part due to the influence of William Friedkin's 1973 film *The Exorcist*. This film remains one of the most culturally significant horror films to this day and established the standard for possession movies thereafter. Additionally, *The Exorcist* was one of the first and few

horror movies to be nominated for an academy award for best picture, transgressing through the elitist perceptions of “good” cinema at the time and establishing horror as a genre to be taken seriously. Stories of people fainting in the theater at the never before seen extreme body horror emphasized its marketing at the time and its glorification today. What was so disturbing about *The Exorcist* was the fact that it remains grounded in biblical reality. Its film-noir elements and seemingly religious authority then differentiate it from fantastical horror films in a medium typically associated with escapism. In this way, the realism based on biblical content of the possession movie may have predated the realism of the found footage genre, one that left the viewers wondering about its possibility and authenticity.

Through these fears and by being a part of Wiggin’s “Unholy Trinity,” *The Exorcist* clearly contributes to Wiggin’s ideas about biblical illiteracy in modern society. The film sets the stage for perceptions about exorcisms and the *rituale romanum*, therefore contributing in part to the increase of cases and the popularization of exorcisms preceding the film’s release. Additionally, the film’s heavy criticism of science and technology with their misdiagnoses, malpractice, or tendency to chalk everything up to delusion or hysteria, promotes the role of an exorcist as a sort of problem solving and demon slaying hero. This ideology paints exorcisms as a more affordable, sometimes more accessible, and viable option for various problems. As we have already established, horror often reflects real life social anxieties, but this one may be more broad. *The Exorcist* truly grasps with the presence of evil surrounding us and what we choose to do to cope with that.

The film begins with two main storylines that eventually intertwine with each other. In the Iraqi desert, Catholic priest and former exorcist Lankester Merrin finds an idol that resembles the demon lord and Babylonian God Pazuzu during an archeological dig. Meanwhile, in Georgetown, an actress named Chris MacNeil temporarily lives on a set with her twelve year old daughter Regan. To entertain herself while her mother shoots a movie about student protests, Regan plays with a Ouija board she found in the basement, beginning to talk with an “imaginary friend” who she refers to as “Captain Howdy.” Not too long later, Regan starts to act unlike the sweet girl she was before, beginning to steal and swear while paranormal occurrences happen around her. This all comes to a head when Regan informs one of Chris’ friends, an astronaut, “you’re gonna die up there,” urinating on the floor afterwards. Because of this incident, Chris decides to seek medical health. While the doctors admit that Regan is acting strange, they conclude that she is physically healthy. They ultimately sedate her believing the rest will do her some good. While Chris works, her friend Burke agrees to watch a still sedated Regan. However, when Chris returns, she is horrified to find Bruce dead, presumed to be an accident because of Burke’s known alcoholism.

Something that is often overlooked in the many analytical works about this film is the role Chris plays as a single mother in the workforce. This film was released during a formative time for the integration of women into the workforce, especially with the 1973 passing of Roe V. Wade. Although acting is not an exclusively masculine or feminine job, Chris’ long hours and inability to monitor everything Regan is up to seems to be critiqued in this film. It is not in line for traditional values of Catholicism for women to

work outside of the home, and Regan certainly is not a part of a typical nuclear family. In this way, what happens to Regan can be seen as a sort of punishment for transgressing the norms of family expectations and a rejection of religious values, to which Regan's dabbling into the occult with her Ouija board can also contribute to. In the end, this must be corrected and reestablished by Holy men, in place of an absent paternal figure who didn't even bother to call Regan on her birthday.

Burke's death is investigated by Lieutenant William Kinderman who is accompanied by a psychiatrist priest named Damien Karras, a man struggling with his fate following the death of his sickly mother. Still unable to find an answer, the doctors recommend an exorcism, believing Regan's issues to be purely psychological. Chris agrees and schedules an appointment with Karras and Merrin, the veteran exorcist from the archaeological site, during which he witnesses Regan speak backwards and mutilate herself by carving the words "help me" onto her abdomen. Merrin and Karras decide to perform an exorcism as Regan's condition begins to worsen. Among other bizarre and blasphemous acts, Regan masturbates with a crucifix, crawls backwards down the stairs and projectile vomits while the exorcism continues on.

According to Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, possession movies at heart concern putting "the female body to some sort of formal trial" (83). Regan is forced to submit to several different brutal and grueling medical tests, with an entire team of doctors attempting to test every part of her body and mind. In response, Regan acts out aggressively, only intensifying her violence when she must undergo the ultimate test of

religious faith through an exorcism. Karras too has to be tested, as Regan's fate relies on the strength of his diminishing faith. Regan's possessed body also represents a sort of revolt with an emphasis on the cusp of puberty and womanhood. Regan's feminine, childlike nightgown that she wears throughout the exorcism becomes incredibly tainted with all sorts of bodily fluids, relating to Barbra Creed's previously aforementioned ideas of fluids concerning the monstrous feminine body. Her transformation becomes increasingly outside the bounds of normativity for a prepubescent girl, becoming more vulgar and sexualized, something that has to be remedied by Karras and Merrin. Like those accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials, the teenaged, female body on the cusp of burgeoning sexuality becomes a symbol for contention, fear, and vulnerability.

Although gender doesn't always factor into possession cases, the two most notable cases of alleged real-life possession involve teenage girls: Anneliese Michael and Anna Eckland. Both of these exorcisms led to the deterioration of the girls' bodies, with Michael's eventual death. Both of these cases contributed to the debate of how violent and dangerous an exorcism may be and if they should even be a viable option in treating someone who is potentially mentally or physically ill. The extremities and harsh conditions in which the girls were subjected became the basis for integrating elements of Protestant "charismatic" exorcisms into the traditional Catholic *rituale romanum*. Of course, as we see in the fictionalized case of *The Exorcism*, Regan seems to do more harm to her exorcists and those around her than they do to her. However, the real-life

cases are not completely proven to be actual demonic exorcism, which means that the girls may not have equipped the demonic, supernatural strength to be an actual threat.

At the height of the exorcism, Regan's possessing demon Pazuzu claims to be the Devil himself and cruelly taunts both Karras and Merrin. When the demon impersonates Karras' recently deceased mother, Merrin insists that Karras leave the room while he finishes the exorcism himself. When Karras later enters the room, he finds Merrin dead on the ground from a heart attack. While Karras is unsuccessful in reviving him, the demon taunts and laughs at Karras. Enraged, Karras knocks Regan to the ground and invites the demon into himself. Before the now possessed Karras can do any harm, he jumps out of the window to his death. A few days later, -Regan, now back to normal and unable to remember anything that happened, prepares to leave for Los Angeles with her mother.

Luckily for Regan, she is unable to remember the atrocities that her body committed while possessed and she is able to return to her presexual innocence. Although both Merrin and Karras succumb to evil demonic forces in the end, they become martyrs for Catholicism and all of its healing powers. By successfully purging Regan of every nonconformativity through the act of an exorcism, Regan is given a second chance, an opportunity to live free of all the consequences of her actions. Here there is an explicit boundary between the body and the soul, one that will not allow itself to transgress due to the actuality of Regan's innocence. In this way, although *The Exorcism* may have been

ahead of its time with its special effect and its depiction of the taboo, the film still upheld the classic conservative values that horror tends to perpetuate.

4.2 Puritan Persecution

Conversely, based on the idea to “purify” the Church of England from Catholic influences, the Puritans started their own religious group with an emphasis on piety, worship, and doctrine, relocating to form colonies in New England. Additionally, many Puritans were also Calvinists, which emphasize the idea that people are saved by God’s grace alone, not through their own doing, with predestination being a key element to justify the persecution of alleged witches. Puritans believed that while men and women were equal in the eyes of God, they were not equal in the eyes of Satan. In fact, they believed women had more vulnerable, weaker bodies for Satan to carry out his evil work. This led to a constant fear in the battle of good versus evil, the possibility that one could inevitably be led astray fueled the nature of the Salem witch trial accusations. Anything outside their “pure” beliefs was considered “other” and therefore most likely in line with the Devil. Other religions, including indigenous people and their belief system, were considered evil and “other” as was the vast wilderness that surrounded their colonies.

At this point in history, it is clear that this perception of the devil is one that reflects a more powerful, prevalent, and persuasive Satan. This perception was a driving

force for the paranoia that started Puritan witch hunts. As a result of this, various bizarre tests would be performed to determine if one was in any way in cahoots with the Devil. In Salem alone, around 25 people were accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death. Today, we associate this as an extremity of religious fervor. However, like exorcisms, religious fervor and all of its associated problems are not as outdated as they may seem. The rise of occultism in the 1960's and 70's, for example, emphasized by the Manson cult's highly publicized mass murders and fore fronted the fear of ritualistic, organized killings. What's more, the original Church of Satan was formed in 1966 with leader Anton Lavey publishing *The Satanic Bible*. Although this was proven to be a highly misinformed and plagiarized guide, it guided the conspiracy that many Americans tended to practice secret Satanic rituals. In the 1980s, right-wing Christian televangelists heightened this ever prevalent good versus evil narrative that can be comparable to Puritan Calvinism. Finally, the Satanic Panic culminated with several trials of Satanic abuse in which many alleged victims of sexual ritual abuse came forward with their accounts of Satanism.

Although Puritan beliefs and the tragedy that was the Salem Witch trials may seem archaic compared to our current society, there are still elements of fear mongering and paranoia that contribute to these same attitudes towards different instances. As far as Wiggins' ideology of biblical illiteracy is concerned, these blindly followed perceptions of evil can actually have serious consequences. What's more, this modern perception of Satan or of demons, as fueled today by modern pop culture, suggests a cultural rewind that rejects critical interpretation and embraces harmful panic and misinformation.

While Robert Egger's 2016 film *The VVitch* is not based on a true story that can be associated with the Salem Witch Trials of during the late 1600s, there are many elements of this historical phenomena that the film attempts to reference and critique. In fact, at the end of the opening credits, the screen reads, "This film was inspired by many folktales, fairytales and written accounts of historical witchcraft, including journals, diaries and court records. Much of the dialogue comes directly from these period sources." Egger's instance on historical accuracy then not only provides a peek into what life would have looked like for an accused Puritan girl and a troubled family, but also a startling and concerning comparison to historical repetition.

The film opens during a trial in a New England settlement. Englishman William, his wife Katherine, and children Thomasin, Caleb, Mercy and Jonas are banished from the Puritan colony. The family sets out to form their own homestead amidst a large and secluded forest. While living there, Katherine bears another child named Samuel and the family works tirelessly to transform their homestead into a survivable and sustainable home for the upcoming winter. One day while Thomasin plays peekaboo with Samuel near the forest, the baby suddenly disappears and is nowhere to be found. Later it is revealed that a witch living in the forest kidnapped Samuel, killing him and using his remains to make some sort of spell that she coats onto her naked body. The family worries that they are being punished for their separation from the Church and lack of prayer.

It is important to note here that Samuel was unbaptized due to the family's seclusion and separation from the Church. If we entertain Puritan beliefs from this era, this would make Samuel more susceptible to witches and Satanic influence as would his physical infant body. Additionally, the family's close proximity to the forest, something already established in Puritan belief as "other" and therefore dangerous and evil, also contribute to the family's vulnerability and misfortunes. In fact, after Samuel's disappearance, the rest of the children are banned from entering the forest because of this fear. Thomasin's role is also a point of contention for her character throughout the film. Taken away from the village at a formative age on the cusp of womanhood with no prospective husbands, Thomasin is treated as a domestic servant. She is expected to take care of the troublemaker twins Mercy and Jonas as well as perform most of the domestic work about the homestead. Because of the patriarchal dynamic of her family, she is subjugated to a lack of freedom beyond the bounds of normal Puritan gender roles. Furthermore, Thomasin's family, while not explicitly at first, seem to blame her for Samuel's disappearance, with all but Caleb ostracizing her from the family.

While Katherine mourns the loss of Samuel, the family faces scarcity and the fear of starvation with the coming winter. It seems as though the land in which they have created their homestead is cursed with their struggle of growing crops and the eggs of their chickens inedible due to fertilization. As these tensions rise, Katherine's anger at Thomasin leads her to consider sending her away to serve another family. Caleb, intent on keeping the family together, prepares to enter the forest to check a trap that they had set. Thomasin goes with him, but falls off the horse and is knocked unconscious when

their dog Fowler spooks the horse after running off in the brush. Caleb, who has run after the dog, becomes lost in the forest as the sky grows dark. He eventually comes across the dog's dismembered body and then a small hovel in the woods. A beautiful and youthful witch beckons him inside. She kisses Caleb and an old, withered hand grasps him. Thomasin meanwhile is found by William and Katherine chastises Thomasin for letting Caleb become lost in the woods.

The witch's appearance in this scene demonstrates the inherent sexuality of witchcraft in Puritan belief. The sin of vanity and sexual desire in women becomes embodied in the witch with her tight, revealing bodice and beautiful appearance. This is of course contrasted with the Puritan women's modest and deliberately unsexualized clothing. Both Thomasin and Caleb however are on the cusp of changing bodies and a burgeoning sexuality, not only restricted in their religion but in the family's seclusion. This witch then represents freedom to these children which becomes especially tantalizing to an ostracized Thomasin. Although the witch is a parallel to the family and the cause of misfortunes, she remains free of repression and breaks from the tiresome battle of resisting evil influences.

Caleb eventually returns to the home and is found by Thomasin naked, delirious, and strangely ill. The twins Mercy and Jonas play with the family's black goat who they've named Black Phillip, seemingly having conversations with it. They tell Thomasin that they believe she is a witch and responsible for Samuel's death and Caleb's condition. When Caleb wakes, he chokes up an apple with a bite mark and begins to act strangely.

The family begins to surround him and pray, but Mercy and Jonas begin to convulse on the floor, evidently unable to remember their prayers. Before dying, Caleb expressed his love for Christ and his passion for salvation. Believing Thomasin is a witch that made some sort of bargain with the devil, William insists that Thomasin will have to go on trial for witchcraft when they return to town. Thomasin calls William out for his hypocrisy, pointing out William's sin of lying and pride and the twin's conversations with Black Phillip. Enraged, William throws Thomasin and the still unconscious twins in the goathouse and seals them inside. Although Thomasin denies being a witch, she is ignored by William who breaks down and admits his sins of pridefulness that caused them to leave their village.

Although William and the twins admit to their sins and causes of suspicion, it is exclusively Thomasin that takes the brunt of suspicion and persecution. The Bible is explicit in that convicted witches should be put to death, which is really the only reference to witches in the Bible at all. William's helplessness and breakdown is a result of his troublesome seclusion and the notion that he alone will have to interpret the Bible against his family. Thomasin then is at the expense of her father's interpretation of the bible, with little to say in her own defense. This of course is in reference to the Salem witch trials where many women's fates were determined by strange and bizarre tests made up by the men of the Church or the psychological torture that forced their confession. Thomasin's role as a young and unmarried woman is ultimately demonized with the association of a witch's female sexuality and freedom. Although men like William may be hypocrites in their accusations, the patriarchal authority in which their

society and religion is based on determines which sins or who commits them equate to witchcraft and persecution.

During the night, the family experiences strange visions including a naked woman drinking milk from a goat and a ghostly Caleb and Samuel who speak to Katherine. In the morning, William wakes to find the goat house broken into with the twins missing and Thomasin asleep with blood on her hands. Before he can say anything, he is impaled by Black Phillip's horns repeatedly while Thomasin screams. Katherine awakes to find William dead and attacks Thomasin who is forced to kill her mother to defend herself. Overwhelmed with grief, Thomasin falls asleep in the family shed only to be awoken by chiming from the stable. There she finds Black Phillip who is revealed to be Satan as he materializes into a tall, black-clad man. He asks Thomasin if she would like to sign her name in a book that materializes in front of her. Thomasin removes her clothes and follows Black Phillip into the forest where a group of naked witches chants and dances around a fire. The coven begins to rise into the air and a laughing and delighted Thomasin joins them.

In a surprising turn of events, *The Witches* conforms to Puritan beliefs and religious ferocity, entertaining the ideals of witchcraft and a battle of good versus evil that contributed to tragic persecution. Although the film critiques the suspicion and hypocrisy that tears the family apart, it also presents it as true. However, Thomasin is still innocent throughout the film, having nothing to do with the death of her siblings as suspected by her mother and father. When she submits to the dark forces that reside in the

forest, it instead symbolizes a freedom from suspicion, judgement, and repression that she has felt with her family. Unlike Regan, Thomasin gives into and becomes a part of these Satanic forces as it allows her liberation. Instead of a patriarchal religious authority controlling her freedom, Thomasin willingly signs her name into the book and allows herself the independence she craves.

Conclusion

After analyzing these films with all the scrutiny of a film scholar feminist, I hope to shed light not only on the societal, cultural and in some cases historical concerns that these films continue to perpetuate, but also in their intrinsic value to the study of cinema. While contemporary horror directors such as Ari Aster, Robert Eggers, and Jordan Peele have ushered in a new age of high-brow horror cinema, it's worthwhile to reexamine what ostentatiously close-minded film scholars may have regarded as mere schlock. While the genre may never stop producing forgettable and cheap popcorn flicks, horror films are starting to become increasingly recognized and respected in the world of sophisticated cinema. Additionally, although many of the aforementioned older horror films such as *Ginger Snaps* and *Carrie* may have not been afforded the same production value as their modern horror predecessors, this does not diminish their culturally feminist significance. As I've already established, we can determine which social concerns and cultural attitudes influenced the depiction of these women protagonists and the trauma they endure.

The New Final Girls

Looking back at my analysis of how Sally was depicted in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in comparison to the final girls from chapters 1-4, it would be difficult to deny any indication of an evolution in how these female protagonists are portrayed. Throughout horror cinema however, these characters still essentially function the same. They provide an empathetic character for audiences to root for. Yet *why* these characters are permitted to survive by the empathy of the audience shifts and changes with which societal values that these characters perpetuate.

In some of the more contemporary films that I discussed, characters like Grace from *Ready or Not* and Becky from *Becky* act more as moral enforcers rather than the personification of the morality associated with conservative values. This morality tends to be enforced by any means necessary, even blurring the lines of the essential aspect of the final girl as the unquestionably good protagonist. This can be seen as a sort of reaction to the final girls of 1980's slashers, a push into extremity. While violence and profanity was certainly not uncommon with the original final girls, modern horror final girls use violence as a key aspect to their empowerment.

Additionally, some of the final girls from older films can be reclaimed for feminist horror fans using a combination of analyzing their flaws and recognizing what has changed for the genre. Ultimately, although these early examples of the final girl trope are not without flaws, this did help to establish the genre as one that is not entirely male dominated. It's important for contemporary horror feminists to realize that these original final girls are still strong female characters, especially for their time. Although

simply having a female protagonist is not enough for feminist standards today, these characters helped in the development for the modern final girl. Film plays more of an important role in our cultural perceptions that we may realize, and there's a reason why these classic horror films remain so influential on modern horror cinema today despite their evident flaws.

Trauma

Of course, another aspect of early final girl horror that acts as a point of contention for feminist horror fans is how trauma endured by these women protagonists is depicted. One of the many critiques of the horror genre as a whole is extreme violence that borders on exploitation. While this criticism is not without some merit, these condemnations have led to a shift in how these films use trauma to push a narrative of empowerment and validation. Although these characters endure extremely traumatic and violent events, there is some sort of solace in watching a strong character overcome her trials and tribulations, affording them a sense of heroism despite their victimhood. In this way, horror can showcase the complexities of experiencing and eventually overcoming trauma.

Additionally, there is something to be said about a genre that will portray what others won't. While someone who has gone through a traumatic event similar to the protagonist of a horror film might find the film triggering, others may find this validating. With final girls especially, this trauma can be confronted without the invalidation of the

journey to heal oneself. Furthermore, there may be some gratification in watching the villain of a horror film be taken down by the protagonist, especially in the revenge subgenre. This recognizes that trauma isn't pretty and requires a lot of healing and strength, but that it's also possible to overcome.

Women Behind the Screen

While it may be obvious at this point of my argument, it still may be surprising to some that a lot of women like horror just as much as men do. Additionally, horror is the only genre that women are seen and heard on-screen more than men. Despite all of this, horror cinema is still a very male-dominated industry with roots in misogyny. In fact the very idea of a final girl, although derived from feminist film theory, is male-created and commercialized. Although modern horror films directed by men may recognize these inherently misogynistic flaws of the genre, this could be heightened and made more powerful with the integration of women behind the camera for the development of these films.

There are very few horror films directed by women that get the recognition they deserve in the horror community. Conversely, there are a few horror films that are highly celebrated by horror audiences, such *The Babadook* or *American Psycho*, that are directed by women but aren't subjected to the same auteur glorification like other male horror directors are. While the horror genre is constantly evolving, especially today into art-

house or high-brow cinema, a feminine perspective behind the scenes in a historically male-dominated genre would generate especially complex and interesting films, especially when the characters of these films are predominantly women. If horror films continue to utilize the final girl within a traumatic narrative, women should have a say into how the genre evolves from this point. Although we seem to be headed in the right direction, there is more that the genre is capable of doing. As a feminist horror fan, I think I can both recognize the flaws of the genre and remain optimistic about the future of horror films.

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