

Female Representation in the Slasher Genre:
An Analysis of the Hitchcock Era and Beyond

by

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Introduction

Think back to all of your favorite scary movies growing up. You will probably remember the bloody gore, or the jump scares they induced. At first, second, or third viewing, you will only remember the plot and the characters, but at a deeper look, there is a steady line of misogyny against the female characters throughout. The most obvious way this is accomplished is through the scares that viewers enjoy so much. Horror films, particularly “slashers,” have a history of both brutalizing and sexualizing their female characters simultaneously. This creates an ongoing narrative in these types of films, that the more sexually agent a woman is, the more violent her death will be in the end. It was not until semi-recently that female characters have fully been given the opportunity to fight back and save themselves in the end. The genre is now beginning to make some minor changes to the archetypes they present, such as film theorist Carol Clover’s “Final Girl” character, who is essentially the last woman standing at the end of the film. While there have arguably been many improvements in the genre and its treatment of female characters throughout, there are still deep-rooted sexist elements in the genre as a whole. This is why I believe that even with the growth of empowered lead female characters throughout history, there are still overarching themes of misrepresentation, hyper sexualization and violence towards women in slasher films.

For this thesis, I will conduct a literature review and a content analysis of various films in the slasher genre—*Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), *Black Christmas* (Clark, 1974), and the *Black Christmas* remake (Takal, 2019). Throughout these films, I will be examining the themes of violence against female characters, stereotyping of female characters, as well as the concept of the Final Girl. There is an extensive amount of research on the slasher

genre and the way that it indirectly promotes both violence against women and further emphasizes the imbalanced sexual power dynamics between genders.

Literature Review

There have long been theories about the deep rooted misogyny within the horror or, more specifically, the “slasher” film genre. Due to the inherent violence throughout the films, many critics have discussed the complicated relationship that feminism and slashers have. This literature review will discuss that relationship through the themes of stereotypical portrayals of women and violence against women. It will also delve into the phenomenon of the Final Girl and Scream Queens. These themes, and the past research that has been done on them, will assist in answering my thesis question. Based on the evidence of film critics and a content analysis of various slasher films throughout history I hope to prove that, even with the growth of empowered lead female characters throughout history, there are still overarching themes of misrepresentation, hyper sexualization and violence towards women in slasher films.

Violence Against Women

Even though horror films involve violence towards most every character involved, the violence against the female characters is more deeply rooted in misogyny. Brandon Bosch tied the genre of horror with that of pornography because of the similarities in the treatment of female characters. When discussing the violence against female characters in slasher films, one also has to discuss the sexual nature of the violence. He writes,

One of the most common complaints about the slasher genre (beyond that it is very formulaic) is that women are sexualized a lot in these films, and often seem to be

“punished” for their bad behavior. That is, women who smoke weed, engage in sex, or act “slutty” tend to get the axe. Moreover, women are often killed while they are undressing or right before, during, or after sex. A lot of people have complained that mixing sexual imagery and violence might be an unhealthy combination, especially when consumed by younger audiences. These criticisms of the genre remain strong in a time of renewed concerns about rape and domestic violence (19).

Oftentimes, the male characters get killed off by fighting back or in a masculine way, but female characters are typically brutalized in some way in the process of being murdered. Men in horror often get killed in a very instant or anonymous way, but women are made to suffer and the killing often feels deeply personal. In the genre, violence against women is justified because of aspects of their character beforehand, or because of their inability to fight back against their killer at all. As Bosch said, this violence combines with sexual imagery to create a very complex relationship between the two.

There have been many studies that show the similarities between the horror genre and pornography. Both elicit physical sensations or reactions; both show mistreatment and degradation towards women; both genres require women to be “punished” for their actions. In the case of pornography, this punishment is sexual, where in horror it is typically more violent and tragic. Additionally, both genres require little substance in their characters beyond following their set formulas for success. Linda Williams has written about the similarities between the genres of pornography and horror. She described the tie between both as their excesses. For pornography, that would be the excess of sex and for horror that would be the excess of violence. Female bodies are used for similar purposes in both scenarios. They are objects used to please

historically male characters and the male identifying camera. Further on in Williams's study, she discusses the real world implications that come from the mistreatment of fictional female characters. She expands:

Robin Morgan's slogan "pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice" is well known (Morgan, 139). Implicit in this slogan is the notion that women are the objectified victims of pornographic representations, that the image of the sexually ecstatic woman so important to the genre is a celebration of female victimization and a prelude to female victimization in real life (5).

As can be seen in most horror films, the ties between sex and violence are clear in the killing of the side female characters, leading up to the main fight for survival with the Final Girl in the end. The side female characters are killed in a more sensational way than male characters, and are typically stripped down in some way. This could be through their actual physical clothing or stripped down intimately to be positioned in vulnerable state after the act of sexual intercourse. From there, they are typically killed in a more drawn out and personally violent way, whereas their male counterparts are killed quickly.

Adam Charles Hart follows up some of Williams' connections between horror and pornography in his book *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media*. He writes about the uniqueness and directness of genres like these and how horror "reaches out to prod and provoke its audience" (7). He further argues that these audience responses are elicited in horror specifically through close ups and the use of jump scares.

Alfred Hitchcock is one of the most famous and well known directors of all time. Part of that legacy, though, emphasizes his treatment of his female characters, as well as the treatment of his actresses. He was once quoted during the filming of his 1963 film *The Birds* saying “I always believe in following the advice of the playwright Sardou. He said, ‘Torture the women!’ The trouble today is that we don't torture women enough” (Clover 40). While he might be the “Master of Suspense,” that suspense comes at the hands of brutalizing women in one way or another. While other horror films focus on physical violence towards female killers, Hitchcock’s films intimately entwine themes of physical violence and psychological violence. His film *Psycho* might be the most well-known example of what horror films are meant to look like. The terminology of “Scream Queen” was fully embedded into our culture as Janet Leigh’s Marion Crane screams bloody murder while gets stabbed to death (all the while being half-naked and exposed in more ways than one to her killer).

Archetypes

Even though women in horror are typically the only characters to survive in the end, the depiction of them throughout the history of the genre is rather disempowering. Aside from the Final Girl, female characters in slashers are left cowering and screaming, without hope of self-defense against their eventual killers. The slasher sub genre specifically portrays an archetype of “damsels in distress” and female characters in crisis situations. According to *The Art Direction Handbook for Film*, a trope is “a universally identified image imbued with several layers of contextual meaning creating a new visual metaphor” (Rizzo). Not only do tropes embody the same traits from film to film, they also usually suffer the same fates. For example, a common trope in slasher films is that Black characters typically die first. Think of *Scream 2*,

when two Black characters are killed before the opening credits even roll. Tropes typically have some connotation to traditional stereotypes and the actual hierarchies of power dynamics created within our society. Horror, more than most other genres, is built upon the use of formulaic characters.

Some of the most active traits in slashers have to deal with sexual purity or the morality that women are typically asked to possess by societal standards. The status of whether or not a woman is sexually active seems to be one of the most obvious aspects of the female characters' personalities. This obsession with purity comes from the traditional Christian values that have been placed on American society. Chad Brewer writes,

According to Hutchings (2004), some critics of slasher films view the violence against women as nothing more than a reaction against feminism. He says: "For film critics, and especially those on the left, the slasher was too often a reactionary and regressive development, especially in comparison with earlier social-critical U.S. horror films. In particular, the slasher offered a conservative moralism regarding sexuality which was itself just one part of a broader turn to the right that took place in American film and American society towards the end of the 1970s (193) (7).

For a long time, the sexuality of women has been simultaneously a taboo and too widely discussed subject. American media, and just society in general, have an obsession with "slut shaming" female characters, actresses, singers, and so on.

For female characters, these stereotypes are typically representations of traditional gender roles. More often than not, the female characters are complex to a certain extent. As long as they

embody the traits of the “virgin” or the “whore,” they can fulfill their purposes. According to Brewer, feminist film theory has criticized the depiction of these female characters. They have claimed that: “Even though the media professionals say that portrayals of women have changed in the last few decades, stereotypes still exist, specifically portraying women as cowardly, weak, and dependent on a man” (19).

In more modern horror films, female characters have been granted the ability to fight back, not just simply survive the killer. Mary Beth McAndrews writes about how female characters have “become much more complex and nuanced, no longer just a two-dimensional foil to the villain.” This newfound strength was not always apparent in the genre, but also still does not dissolve the surface-level portrayals they face. For example, in Christopher Landon’s *Happy Death Day* (2017), the main character Tree bravely fights back against the villain and comes out victorious. Along the way though, she is portrayed as a stereotypically bratty sorority girl. Sure, she grows along the way and breaks some of the established tropes of a Final Girl, but her measure of success in the end is surviving and ending up with a boyfriend.

As enjoyable as slasher films are to simply watch, they carry deeper meanings and representations of feminism. Historically, viewership of any media has been through the viewpoint of middle class, middle aged white men. In Laura Mulvey’s essay titled *Visual and Other Pleasures* she describes the “male gaze” and spectatorship in film. She writes that “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (62). The male viewpoint of the passive female is very apparent throughout the history of slasher films. Through various filming and editing techniques, viewers are forced to

identify visually with the viewpoint of the male killer and therefore, identify the female victim in terms of the male. Typically, this would mean in the same voyeuristic sense that the male killer does as well. This can be seen within the formulaic nakedness of the female victims in most every horror film. This characteristic sets the female character up as a sexual object to be looked at. Even with more developed female characters, they are almost always showcased as a reactive force to the male's active actions. The Final Girl might survive, but even as the supposed "main character," all of her actions are reflective and responsive to the typically male killer's actions.

Through a feminist film critique, the male gaze objectification of the female victim in horror helps to perpetuate the objectification of women in real life. This male gaze is accomplished through the use of specific camera angles and shots that follow and stalk women in horror. Even if the actual audience member is not male, the viewpoint of the camera in most horror films is from the perspective of the male killer. According to Paula Rabinowitz, a main goal of feminist filmmakers is to shift this gaze and create characters for women themselves to align with in horror. Even as viewers root for the Final Girl to survive, part of themselves pass judgement on the stereotypically "weak" woman who can barely save herself. Rabinowitz states that "questions of gender are fundamentally questions of representation" (154) and with the conscious dismantling of the male gaze comes new struggles. This shift from object to subject often still incorporates some of the same stereotypes and tropes. Even with the female led and directed *Black Christmas* remake, where the women have personalities, opinions, flaws and complex relationships, they still have some reactive actions. In the end, after nearly an entire film that showcases independent characters, the women must come together to defeat toxic masculinity and the patriarchy. This film certainly has a lot to say about the feminist wave that has come

through horror films, both in themes and through actual plot points. This then creates the fear that a film with this much of an outrageously political message might now be the only way to present fully developed female characters.

Scream Queens and Final Girls

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a Scream Queen is “a female actor who plays a main character in a horror movie who gets frightened or attacked” (“Scream Queens”). These actresses who repeatedly starred in horror films began being typecast for the same roles because of the iconic sounds of their screams in film. Janet Leigh is arguably still most well-known for her scream in the shower scene of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. The concept of a “Scream Queen” became so ingrained in the mainstream culture of horror, that a show of the same title was created in 2015.

Scream Queens is a comedy television show that ironically follows many well-known tropes of the slasher genre, like the Final Girl and normalized violence against women. Within the first episode alone, there is a ridiculous amount of bloodshed against young women, and it usually makes a mockery of them. As a parody, the majority of the show is supposed to be taken lightly and is actually making fun of the mistreatment of women in the slasher genre throughout its history. The over-the-top killings paired with the piercing screams of every woman in the show get the point across—it is mocking the exaggerated and blood curdling screeches of the scream queens throughout history. While other horror films have included the same actions and plot points, this show is proving how unbelievable the portrayal of women has been.

The idea of a Scream Queen actress eventually morphed into what is now known as the Final Girl archetype. For most fans of the genre, this Final Girl character is probably the most well-known formula of horror films. She is present in nearly every slasher, even in the recent films that supposedly are more feminist. This character is the last woman standing and either escapes or defeats the killer or villain. She is defined by Carol J. Clover in *Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film*, as “the girl scout, the bookworm, the mechanic. Unlike her girlfriends (and Marion Crane) she is not sexually active” (204). Viewers can establish that she is the character to root for and to protect. It is because of her virginity that her innocence is tied in to every other aspect of her life. The most well-known and clearly defined example of this trope would be the character of Laurie Strode in the *Halloween* films.

The Final Girl presents an interesting dichotomy though. While she must be virginal and shy, the picture of an innocent and helpless girl, she must also incorporate elements of masculinity.

Brandon Borsch describes this as someone who is more “androgynous, and sometimes acts more stereotypically ‘male’ in some ways (rationale, complex thinking, relatively stoic)” (27). This masculinity is hypothetically what saves her in the end. She is the damsel in distress who needs saving, but she is also the white knight who saves herself by escaping the killer.

The relationship between the Final Girl and the killer is inherently sexual. While she is typically virginal, he is typically sexually repressed. Clover further discussed this relationship as “The killer's phallic purpose, as he thrusts his drill or knife into the trembling bodies of young women, is unmistakable... he ranges from the virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transsexual...” (209). She continues on to say that:

The "certain link" that puts killer and Final Girl on terms, at least briefly, is more than "sexual repression." It is also a shared masculinity, materialized in "all those phallic symbols" - and it is also a shared femininity, materialized in what comes next (and what Carpenter, perhaps significantly, fails to mention): the castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at her hands. His eyes may be put out, his hand severed, his body impaled or shot, his belly gashed, or his genitals sliced away or bitten off. The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with. (210).

The sexual limbo is important to the construction of the positive aspects of the Final Girl—essentially that her status as a virgin is what saves her from the killer—and the construction of the negative aspects of the killer. Clover argues that the reason for the male killer's issues is rooted in sexual deviancy in some way. There is no Final Girl trope without the discussion of sexuality and the societal standards set for both men and women.

By studying the films in the slasher genre themselves, along with these and many other readings on the subject, I can deduce that sexism and violence against women still have very firm grips on slasher films. These themes are often extremely theoretical but can be seen in examples listed by various authors throughout the history of the genre.

Content Analysis

“Cinema is a reflection of society and, in most cases, has the ability to be a mirror and not just show the problems but also give solutions and help them reach a large number of people through faces and voices that matter” (Kitri Kulhari).

Media in any form has always had the power to reflect our societies, cultures, ideas and dreams. This quote from Indian actress Kitri Kulhari showcases the ability that cinema has had to shine a light on, and sometimes bring change to larger issues plaguing our societies. Within this paper, film serves as the primary source for my thesis question regarding the misogyny against women in the horror genre. In this section, I will be analyzing some popular slasher films throughout the history of the genre. With the help of secondary literature, I will be looking for the different elements of the Final Girl character, violence against women and the sexualization of women in *Psycho* (1960), *Halloween* (1978), *Black Christmas* (1974) and *Black Christmas* (2019 remake). Although these examples might differ in many ways, they each have something very specific to say about women in horror situations and women in general.

Psycho

Alfred Hitchcock is widely known for his mystery and horror films like *The Birds*, *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*. Perhaps his most famous film is the 1960 flick *Psycho*. *Psycho* includes many well-known attributes of Hitchcock films, such as the Hitchcock Blonde, the use of heavy shadowed lighting throughout and a look into the psychological state of a character. It also incorporates many well-known attributes of the horror genre in general as well, such as a Final Girl character (even if it is altered in this film), an intense male gaze and the sexualizing of the female characters. *Psycho* is the story of Norman Bates and the Bates Motel. When Marion Crane stops by late one rainy night after stealing money from her job and running away to meet her boyfriend, she meets the motel owner Bates. From there, the story follows Marion's sister

Lila and Marion's boyfriend Sam as they search for her and eventually both end up back at the Bates Motel.

Initially, Marion Crane is presented as the main character, as the first thirty minutes of the film follow her as she embezzles money from her job and is in the process of running away to be with her boyfriend Sam. On her way to meet Sam, she pulls over and spends the night at the Bates Motel. After meeting the owner (Norman Bates) and speaking with him over dinner, she is eventually killed by Norman's "mother" while showering. Norman "finds" her dead body and disposes of her car and all of her belongings. Marion seems to be Final Girl simply because of the amount of screen time she initially has, but her sister Lila comes to further embody the trope. Lila seems to be virtuous and is simply a concerned friend and sister_versus Marion who was killed in part because of her independence and sexual appeal. Lila searches for her sister and works to find and save her. In the end, she is the person who finds the corpse of Mrs. Bates and escapes the death her sister did not. She makes relatively smart decisions throughout the film that help keep her alive and eventually avenges her sister's death. Even though she does not really fight back against the killer in the traditional Final Girl way, she does survive in the end. Similarly to other films discussed in this analysis, Lila is in the end saved by Sam. As Norman creeps up on Lila dressed as his mother, Sam comes from behind and essentially strips Norman of his alter ego by physically disrobing him. So, even though Lila keeps herself safe until the end of the film, she is ultimately saved by her male companion.

Most of the film is from the camera's perspective, rather than the perspective of the stalking killer, which is different from other horror films. One way this film furthers the use of the male

gaze is with the now-famous “shower scene” in which Marion Crane is killed (see image below). As Norman and the camera are looking through a peephole watching her undress, the scene through his (/ his “mother’s) perspective begins. As Marion is showering, a dark shadow appears and violently opens the shower curtain, then stabs her. When Marion is stabbed, it is through point of view shots that are very unsteady and up-close. Viewers are placed into the perspective of the camera and therefore Norman in this scene. The camera showcases her stabbing in sections, essentially quartering and dismembering her. Her nakedness is extremely important to the plot, as it is eventually discovered that the psychological side of Norman that houses his mother decides to kill her because of Norman’s sexual attraction to her. This element once again showcases the dangers that independent and societally “immoral” women face. While it is a more underlying theme in this film behind the psychological analysis of the character of Norman Bates, the concept of society’s standards for women is still present.



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Norman Bates represents an ideal depiction of a psychologically disturbed serial killer. From almost his first discussion, he speaks of his mother in a very interesting way. While talking with Marion over dinner, he says that “A boy’s best friend is his mother” and that “A son is a poor

substitute for a lover” (*Psycho*). These quotes provide a closer look into Norman’s mental state and his relationship with his mother. Most killers in horror films have some sort of sexual deviance or issue that makes them into the “monsters” they are. For Norman, this deviance is his very close and inappropriate relationship with his mother. While the audience never sees them interact while she is alive, it is very apparent that there was some level of possible abuse and dependency on both ends. Norman comes to mentally and physically embody his mother, thus cutting him off from the typical emotions a young man might have. Any sexual attraction he feels is deemed to be sick by his mother, therefore making those emotions seem wrong to have. While the idea of sexuality is usually deemed inappropriate for women, there is a slight reversal because Norman is almost trained to not have sexual thoughts. Similar to other horror films, the use of a knife as Norman’s weapon comes to represent a phallic symbol. Because he can never act on his sexual feelings, he uses the knife to penetrate Marion and then he tried to do the same to her sister Lila.

While *Psycho* focuses more on the male main character than it does any of the women, it still begins to showcase some of the themes of violence towards women. This film also introduces additional Freudian themes about men and their relationships with their mothers that can be seen in many horror films after. Although she ends up not being the true Final Girl, Marion Crane ushered in a new wave of Scream Queens in horror films to come.

Halloween

Perhaps one of the most well-known horror movies in the history of the genre, John Carpenter’s 1978 *Halloween*, provides us with the perfect example of the Final Girl/ Scream Queen

archetype. This is the story of Michael Myers, who has escaped from prison many years after murdering his sister. He returns to his hometown, where he stalks and eventually tries to kill Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis). After noticing Laurie on her way to school, Myers begins to follow her and her friends Annie and Lynda as they begin their Halloween nights, eventually acting upon his murderous desires.

Viewers are first introduced to Laurie as a young woman who listens to her father and is a bookworm babysitter. While her friends walk around with confidence in more masculine outfits, Laurie is demure and is first seen wearing a skirt and sweater. She is the prime image of an innocent schoolgirl. Her friends are outgoing and discuss taboo topics, such as smoking and their sex lives, but she remains true to her virtues and goes to work later that night. The difference in the appearances and personalities between Laurie and her friends is what sets her up in the viewer's mind as our Final Girl. Even though her friends give her a hard time for only working and never playing, she sticks to her moral values. This juxtaposition, as well as the camera angles that seem to voyeuristically follow her from a distance (see image below), help set her up as the main character.



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As the audience follows Laurie's character more, she begins to come out of her shell. She is still a very conservative character, but she begins to have more of a voice, both towards her friends and in her own life. With this transition, comes a clothing change. She originally begins dressed extremely modestly and ladylike, but then changes into pants and a sweater, which is further positioning her as our movie's main survivor and potential hero. By the end of the film, Laurie becomes our full-fledged scream queen. She is the only character with the opportunity to fight back against her attacker and is the only survivor amongst her friends. Although she has the opportunity to fight back to some extent, it is still done in a very weak way. She screams and wails while trying desperately to flee Myers. As she runs, she keeps tripping and looking back for him, only making his job easier and easier. She is able to protect herself from him long enough for a man to come to her rescue. After this police officer saves her, she is left helplessly crying and the film begins to fade out. There is such a small amount of time in this film where a woman is actually given the ability to save herself and then it is diminished by her being ultimately saved by an older man who then leaves her abandoned in a state of emotional trauma. This shows a common theme throughout other horror films as well: as long as the Final Girl is physically saved, she is going to be okay. However, this idea does not accurately portray how women face trauma in their lives. By showing these types of endings, it makes it seem like as long as a woman is saved by a man, nothing else in the world could possibly matter. This ending of *Halloween* does show Laurie being saved, but it also shows the legitimate psychological repercussions of what being attacked looks like.

The Final Girl archetype has been shaped around the character of Laurie Strode, who perfectly embodies Carol Clover's definition of what a survivor in horror looks like. She is the character

who viewers root for and relate to in some ways. Explained by Maya Zhou as “feminist possibility” (3), this character trope has become a mainstay in the genre, though she has undergone some minor changes. By analyzing the original and the 2018 iteration of the *Halloween* films, Zhou describes some of these evolutions from the frame of the #MeToo movement. She writes that despite Laurie’s positive aspects of feminism and accurate representation, “much of her action towards the climax of the film serves only in response to Myers’ actions” (10). She is still a passive character within the overarching active male world. Another one of Zhou’s noted changes is the growth of female characters with which female viewers can actually align themselves. Even though viewers recognize and root for the Final Girl, they are still seeing her through the eyes of the male killer watching her as well. Using another film to help define this, I think of the 2019 *Black Christmas* remake that I also analyzed. In that reading, I would still argue that there are some sexist elements to the film, but for the most part, viewers are given multiple female characters with depth and personalities to align ourselves with. Because there is no singular killer, it is much easier to firstly align with the character of Riley, and then align ourselves with traits of the more secondary characters.

From the get-go, the female victims of Myers are sexualized and violated. Within the first scene in the film, viewers see the brutal murder of Michael Myers’ sister at his adolescent hands (see image below). His sister is sitting naked in front of her mirror and is stabbed directly between her breasts, essentially mutilating her femininity while killing her. Every woman that Myers murders is naked to some extent and is killed in a very brutal way, and almost sexual way. One of Laurie’s best friends Annie is also stuck babysitting on Halloween night, but as she is ditching her responsibilities to go pick up her boyfriend, Annie becomes Myers’ next victim. Annie is the

complete contrast of Laurie is most every way. She is loud and bold, always saying exactly what is on her mind. When she is killed, she is wearing a men's dress shirt and is killed in her car as the windows fog up, a reference to the act of intercourse in a car. Her car horn honking drowns out and replaces her futile screams as she is choked from behind. Laurie's other friend Lynda is a moderate middle between her two friends. While she might be more "well-behaved" than Annie, she is still shown as a bit of a flirt and is sexually active with her boyfriend. When Lynda is killed, she has just had sex with her boyfriend and is choked out, similarly to Annie. Whenever Lynda first sees Myers come in the room in a mask, she assumes it is still her boyfriend either playing some sort of prank on her or that it will be a roleplay situation. All of these murders showcase the relationship in horror between the female victims' deaths and sexuality. The supposed "impurity" of these women makes them Myers' targets. The actions of Laurie's friends, who both smoke, drink and go out with boys, directly contrast her own actions. Within the world of slasher films, the brutal murder of the "whores" in the virgin/ whore dichotomy speaks directly to the real-world treatment of women who break societal standards for morality or purity. This concept, originally coined by Freud, has been described by feminist theorists as another way the status quo of the patriarchy is maintained (Bareket et al 1). These authors further argue that, "Assertive female sexuality represents a potential source of power over men: As gatekeepers to heterosexual activity (Kane and Schippers) men fear women's ability to use sexual allure as a manipulative tactic to unman them (Glick and Fiske 1996; Segal 2007)" (2). It is now relatively well known that this trope is used constantly in the horror genre and that its continued use upholds the power of the male gaze, yet it is still commonplace in these stories.



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Overall, *Halloween* (and all of its sequels and remakes) have had a large impact on the genre because of the portrayal of the theoretical Final Girl. The relationship between Myers and Strode has been emulated in nearly every horror film since and still leaves viewers and me with a Final Girl who just is not an accurate enough depiction of the strength of women. While Laurie is more relatable than some other Final Girls, her battle with Myers makes women look unintelligent and unable to save themselves in the end.

***Black Christmas* (1974 Original Film)**

Black Christmas is a 1974 film by Bob Clark about a sorority house under threat of a psychotic murderer living in their attic. While this group of women are plagued by his sexually explicit and disturbing phone calls, they also search for one of their missing sorority sisters. The audience never sees the manic murderer (aside from a short glimpse at his eyes). While most horror villains are shown with some sort of mask or disfigurement, this killer is actually never really shown at all. His biggest impact was his voice, whether that be on the phone or off screen. The story mainly follows Jess as she is dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, as well as the fear that

one of her sorority sisters is in danger. Aside from Jess, the rest of the film centers on the hunting down and eventual killing of the majority of the women left in the house over Christmas break. Viewers are introduced to Jess, our obvious Final Girl, almost immediately. She is effortlessly beautiful, but innocent looking; she is kind to all of her sisters and friends. She is not overly quiet and reserved but chooses her words carefully and is very forward thinking in her actions. Unlike *Halloween*, this film does not showcase her fighting back at all. At the end, she survives partially because of her own skills and actions, but is once again rescued by male police officers who end up sedating her. After her life is put in danger, she is next seen covered in her boyfriend's blood and with his dead body draped over her, as she believed him to be the killer. Like Laurie though, once she is saved she is almost immediately left alone, even though there is still a threat.

Throughout the entire film, the women were not really taken very seriously, and this is shown once again in the final scene where she is abandoned in a way, as the men around her go on with their lives immediately following these murders and attempted murder of Jess. Similarly to *Halloween*, this showcases a lack of discussion about the emotional trauma this might cause. In real life, women have also been told they cannot openly discuss their traumas and emotions because it would be a taboo topic. This concept is heavily represented in the endings of horror films, when women are made to seem happy and grateful that they are even alive. After they are saved though, they are often left to deal with their traumatic experiences alone.

Jess offers some new twists and traits to the Final Girl archetype. She might not be the most realistic representation of a woman in danger, but she is a step closer to an accurate portrayal. One of the first real conversations she has is with her boyfriend, to tell him she is pregnant and does not want to keep the baby. This is very shocking as most women who have sex in horror

films end up losing their lives because of it. Almost immediately she breaks one of the cardinal rules of being the Final Girl and still survives in the end—potentially signaling a societal change in the virgin/whore dichotomy. Although she never gets the opportunity to fully face the killer and avenge her friends and their deaths, she does spend the entirety of the film making mostly intelligent choices that guide her to her own survival. Kris Dionio (Ryerson University student) argues that even though this film presents a more feminist view of horror, the brutal violence against the mainly female victims still showcases the patriarchal nature of these films.

Most of the violence towards these women is done through the eyes of the killer, with a distorted camera lens (see images below). Especially with the fisheye type of lens used to showcase the killing of Barb, one of the sorority members who would speak back to the killer whenever he called, viewers feel as though they are actively seeing from this man's point of view. This distortion of his viewpoint, as well as the shaking of a handheld camera, are symbolic of this man's very obvious mental health issues. More than most other killers in the genre, the fear that viewers feel comes from his voice rather than his physical body. From that voice, the audience can understand that there is some sort of psychological issue in his words and his mimicry of a mother and baby's voices as well. While it is easiest to root for each of these women and hope for their survival, the camera would have us align with the eyes of the killer. Because he is never seen⁰⁸, he is just a viewpoint through which to view these women and worry for their safety. There are a lot of point of view shots, particularly through different objects, like windows or the cellophane that the first sister was suffocated with. These angles only increase the sense of voyeurism that the killer is enacting.



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Like most of the films on this list, *Black Christmas* does have many themes with real world implications for the treatment of women in society. From the first scene, the women are told (and are telling themselves) to not provoke or make the situation of the caller any worse. While calls like this are hopefully not common, harassment of women sadly is. As of a March 2021 survey by UN Women UK, 97% of women ages 18-24 in the United Kingdom have experienced sexual assault in some way (Topping, *The Guardian*). The harassment that these women experience through their telephone is an accurate indicator in some ways to what the majority of women deal with every day, in one way or another. There were also many themes of the women being told what to do. Specifically with Jess' character, she is told she is not allowed to have an abortion and then is later told she is going to marry her boyfriend. They are never asked for their own opinions but are told by everyone around them how to live their lives. There is even some internalized sexism within the sorority as well. Barb is judged throughout the film by other women for being her authentic self, just because it goes against the societal norm for what a lady should act like.

***Black Christmas* (2019)**

This 2019 remake of the 1974 thriller offers a politically charged and socially conscious look at a similar story. Offering a much clearer stance on feminism, and incorporating some supernatural elements, this film finally gives women the chance to fight back (and fight back hard). Actually directed by a woman named Sophia Takal, this remake offers up more developed and complex leading ladies. Similarly to the original, the plot of this film centers around a sorority house as its members are leaving for Christmas break and some sisters begin to go missing. This film offers a modern take on the “phone call from inside the house” plot point from the 1974 version. To showcase more recent forms of harassment that women go through, female viewers can relate to the initial sequence of a young woman being followed and trying to fashion her keys as a potential protective force. From there, the different sorority women face harassment from social media direct messages. There is still a common theme of mistrust of the police, especially for the main character, Riley, who is coping with the trauma of being raped. Like the original film, there is a theme of abandonment and the struggle to cope with a terrible experience, especially in Riley’s case. This entire film offers her the opportunity to fight back against the men who never believed her and mocked her, but it also paints the image that the only way to cope with trauma is through revenge or violence. This concept of revenge is definitely debatable as to how healthy the portrayal is for viewers who might have experienced something similar.

While Riley is ultimately presented as the main character, there are actually multiple Final Girls. This broadening of the trope is an example of the potential changes to the genre in the wake of the #MeToo movement. This film does offer viewers the chance to root for more women in general, and then actually have the opportunity to see them survive in the end. None of these women really take on a lot of the common characteristics of the trope though. Sexuality is rarely

discussed in the film outside of the topic of assault, but none of the women are presented as virginal and simultaneously androgynous in nature. These changes could be leading towards the end of the traditional survivor character and pointing towards a more realistic female character. For what feels like one of the first times in horror, viewers are able to identify with the female characters and not the would-be killers. This is partly because of the well-roundedness of the women in the film and partly because there is a plethora of different hooded killers. With this many different killers, all who act like machines, there really is not a way to show each of their perspectives or their point of view.

Because this plot seems to be so far-fetched, it is easy to ignore that there are still some stereotypes portrayed. These women are a lot smarter (and more capable) than a lot of other Final Girls, but they still face a lot of the same issues of their predecessors. These issues include stereotypes that make women look incompetent or helpless, like when these sorority women struggle to open locked doors when trying to escape the killer or when they celebrate their victories before actually securing their safety. At the 2015 Women of the Year Awards ceremony, Reese Witherspoon discussed the representation of women in film and how the stereotypes used make women seem incapable of handling crisis situations. She said,

I dread reading scripts that have no women involved in their creation because inevitably I get to that part where the girl turns to the guy, and she says, "What do we do now?!" Do you know any woman in any crisis situation who has absolutely no idea what to do? I mean, don't they tell people in crisis, even children, "If you're in trouble, talk to a woman." It's ridiculous that a woman wouldn't know what to do (Witherspoon).

While this film is a massive improvement on the “women in crisis” trope, it is still present in those small moments when the female characters make mistakes that promote more of the same stereotypes present in slasher films.

Overall, these characters are so much stronger than others in the genre and the film does not end with men coming to their rescue, which is a massive improvement to the genre. The violence perpetrated against the women does still raise some issues. If any men are killed in the film, it is done quickly and almost anonymously in a way. When the women are killed, it is a sustained violence that is very intimate. As Riley was being choked, the camera was very tight on her facial expressions while the man trying to kill her kissed her under the mistletoe (see image below). This once again creates a dangerous combination between sex and violence.



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This remake offers a more in-depth look at fraternity life and culture on a college campus, especially the ways in which they promote misogyny and toxic masculinity for other men. A fraternity on campus essentially sells their souls to their organization in order to kill “bad” women (those who, in the men’s opinion, pose a threat to their way of life) and therefore preserve the patriarchy as it already is and has been. In older slasher films, there are very deep rooted themes of misogyny and patriarchal power, but these themes are often overlooked as they

are made more theoretical. Viewers typically opt to ignore these themes and simply enjoy the film instead. While other slasher films might skirt around issues with masculinity (or sometimes even support the patriarchy through themes and representations), this film very clearly states its opinion on female worth and power. This film makes it so that to watch this film at any depth, you have to think about the message it is saying about the dangers that women have been in and are in from sexual harassment, abuse and violence. Similarly to other films, the “villains” of the film are representing their own masculinity through some sort of phallic object. In one of the final scenes, each member of the fraternity is shown with the paddle that they hold between their legs and that they continually beat against the ground (signaling masturbation at the hands of violence against women). Riley, along with the other female characters, are able to gain back control by using a multitude of weapons, including the eventual smashing of these paddles.

Despite the vast differences in the years of their creation, these films all have common themes and elements of both the sexualization of women and violence against women. Each film uses camera angles to create an uneasy feeling of voyeur-ing and stalking. By putting viewers into the often unhinged and physically unstable view of the killers, they are reinforcing that cinema is to be viewed through a male lens. This male lens is created by years of white middle aged men being in control of societal standards of how women should act, and that is represented in the treatment against secondary female characters and the inevitable Final Girl.

Conclusion

The slasher genre is one that is both incredibly entertaining and incredibly problematic. As showcased by the literature and films analyzed, there have been some improvements to the genre

and its treatment of women, but are those changes enough in a post-feminism and #MeToo society? Even with the contrast between the 1974 and 2019 versions of *Black Christmas*, which showcase vast improvements to an almost identical plot and story, the female characters represented are still shown within the light of a patriarchal society and a male lens. There are many improvements that can still be made to eventually end the misogynistic themes that are rampant in the slasher genre. By creating more dimensional and fully fledged female characters, it is much more difficult to bombard them with harmful stereotypes and hyper-sexualization. Another way to help with this is the inclusion of more diversity on creative teams, whether that be writers, directors or production teams. The more that women (and diverse women) have the opportunity to add inputs and opinions, the more well-rounded future female characters will be.

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