



DL837 BA in NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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From Victims to Agents: The Evolving Role of Women in Mainstream, Western Horror Cinema

Horror, as a film genre, has always had a complicated relationship with how its female characters are presented. As a genre that largely revolves around placing its characters into horrific, dangerous situations, it became common for men to be represented as the heroic protagonist and the psychotic villain. Women, on the other hand, were often reduced to uneducated background characters to be physically attractive to the audience before being brutally murdered. As the genre has evolved, however, the role of women in horror films has evolved too. More and more films introduced strong, realistic female protagonists who challenged these stereotypes that had gained popularity and allowed for the horror genre to expand and explore more developed and complex representations. As Randy Meeks said, “Everybody’s a suspect!”¹ This essay will examine the evolution of female protagonists from passive “Final Girls” to more autonomous and complex characters that can be seen across horror films from different decades, in *Halloween* from the 1970s, *Scream* from the 1990s and *The Invisible Man* from the 2020s.

The “Final Girl”, popularised by Carol J. Clover, “*is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again*”² and each of these films, as I will present, is a different example or interpretation of this trend. Using academic sources, like that of Clover, as well as Cynthia Freeland and Sandra Lee Bartky, I will analyse each of these films and follow the evolution that has taken place of how their female characters are presented.

¹ *Scream*, (1996), 56:47

² Clover, Carol J., ‘*Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film*’, *Representations*, No. 20, Special Issue: *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, (1987), p.201

Looking back to see how female protagonists made first impressions through horror films, one of the most popular examples, seen through its influence throughout media, its hauntingly recognizable killers mask, and its countless number of sequels, is John Carpenter's *Halloween*, and its protagonist, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis). Laurie Strode is a classic example of the "Final Girl" and is one of the characters from which the term originated. Her survival throughout the film, while the people around her are killed by Michael Myers, leaves her as the "Final Girl", but presents that as all the agency she has been given. Laurie rarely seems to be acting in ways that would benefit her, but more so entertain the audience, not fighting back, but acting "hysterical in the face of danger".³ A great example of this is when Laurie is fleeing from Myers and is attempting to escape through the back door. Laurie is unable to open the door but tries repeatedly to open it as Myers makes his way into the room. It is only after Myers begins approaching Laurie that she thinks to break the glass of the door to open it. This placing of Laurie in a frozen position evokes mainstream Hollywood's tendency to present women as something to be viewed. Laurie being chased made it difficult for the audience to see her, so this scene was inserted to maintain the tension of desire.⁴ The film never allows Laurie to do anything more than survive.

Laurie's role in the film appears to be a lot more passive than those of the protagonists in *Scream* and *The Invisible Man*. While she is being pursued by Myers, it is Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasance) who is given the agency to defeat Myers, shooting him and causing him to fall through the window at the end of the film. Films tend to be particularly biased towards male protagonists, portraying them with a higher level of agency and more authority.⁵ Myers and Loomis, the film's two main male characters, hold the most agency, being the two characters to drive the plot forward. Myers is the cause of the film's events, the whole film revolves around what he does, and Loomis acts to stop Myers, to conclude the plot of the film. Although Laurie is the film's primary protagonist, it is Loomis who acts as a narrative figure of authority.

³ Lehmann, Tabatha, 'Horror, Halloween, and Hegemony: A Psychoanalytical Profile and Empirical Gender Study of the "Final Girls" in the Halloween Franchise' Diss. Florida Southern College, (2021), p.7

⁴ Freeland, Cynthia A., 'Feminist frameworks for horror films', (1996), p.743

⁵ Sap, Maarten, et al., 'Connotation frames of power and agency in modern films' Proceedings of the 2017 conference on empirical methods in natural language processing, (2017), p.2331

He is an active pursuer of Myers, driving the investigation, and he is ultimately the one to put an end to Myers' rampage. On the other hand, Laurie is given very little agency and other female characters, like Laurie's two friends, are killed by Myers. The film even opens with the murder of Myers' sister, Judith, as she sits bare-chested. While women being murdered in vulnerable scenarios was nothing new at the time, seen most popularly in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, this scene exemplifies a key transitional moment in horror cinema, presenting a murder in the film's opening minutes, a shock to audiences who would've expected to have to wait for the film's horror to begin. As well, it presents the murder as much more real, and therefore more terrifying, taking place in a suburban home, when the victim is at her most vulnerable. Finally, the killer is revealed to be a child, someone who would be thought to be innocent and harmless. In just the opening scene, the film redefines how it aims to present its horror and to terrify its audience.

Nudity also does a lot to show how the film's characters are seen and desired by the audience. Along with Judith, both of Laurie's friends, Lynda and Annie, can be seen wearing little clothing at points during the film, appealing to the male gaze. This had become the norm in Hollywood, evolving from the 1920's, and the femininity that grew alongside the film industry. "In the words of the pioneer advertiser, Earnest Elmo Calkins, "beauty as a business tool""⁶ When we look at how the male characters are shown in similar stages of undress, we see a big difference. After escaping from the sanatorium, Myers kills a mechanic to steal his clothes. Although the man's body is shown to the audience, only his head and shoulders are visible, even then obstructed by grass. Similarly, when Bob, Lynda's boyfriend, fetches beer after the two have had sex, he puts his clothes back on. Lynda, on the other hand, remains naked, to make herself an object of both Bob and the audience's desire. Women are presented as one of two archetypes, the "bosomy figure" who is more sexually adventurous, and the "final girl", "responsible, boyish, flat-chested".⁷ Women are seen as either completely obsessed with sex or entirely uninterested but either

⁶ Mulvey, Laura, 'Unmasking the gaze: some thoughts on new feminist film theory and history', *University of London-Birbeck College*, (2001), p.9

⁷ Loiselle, André, 'Buxom Monstrosity: Theatricality and the Ostentatious Body of the Horror Film', *Monsters and the Monstrous 3*, (2013), p.51

way, it is the one thing on their minds. Although the film followed the collapse of the Hays Code, this binary didn't disappear completely. The implementation of less sexually restricted stories more so added avenues for women to be simplified to.

Much can be inferred from the ways in which the protagonists are positioned following the conclusion of their stories. For Laurie, although she survived, Myers left his mark. His disappearance posed a future threat, and Laurie was left huddled, crying and covered in blood.⁸ This presents the events of the movie as a negative experience for Laurie, having been attacked and traumatised, while the male characters almost benefit. Loomis is seen as the hero, and Myers faces no repercussions for his actions. Overall, *Halloween* has a very warped representation of gender, murdering, sexualising or traumatising its female characters, while praising and respecting its male characters. Many aspects of this film became staples of the genre, leading to its critiquing and meta-examination in *Scream*.

After almost twenty years of evolution for the horror genre, *Scream* was released, turning the genre, and the tropes that audiences had grown used to, on their head. The film follows Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), a protagonist who is given much more agency than we had seen with Laurie before. This is immediately shown in her first interaction with Ghostface, the film's killer. When she is in a bad position, about to be stabbed by Ghostface, she kicks him, allowing herself to get up. Unable to quickly escape through the locked door, Sidney runs to her room, blocking the door from the inside, and calls the police. As the film aims to critique the tropes of the genre, Sidney's actions breath a fresh breath of quick thinking into a genre stale with characters getting themselves killed through poor decision-making. Following years of female protagonists that are poorly written and represented, the film shows Sidney as a smart, capable protagonist, although, she is unable to catch a break. This film, as well as the following films, has Sidney constantly chased and attacked, but she is consistently able to outsmart and overcome

⁸ Podraza, Morgan, 'Forty years later: Laurie Strode and the survival of the Final Girl.' *Horror Studies* 12.1 (2021), p.134

her attacker.⁹ This is a pivotal point in horrors evolution, as it is one of the first mainstream representations of a female protagonist who acts not for the entertainment of the audience, but for her own survival.

Turning the table on traditional gender roles, *Scream* works to allow its female characters, like Sidney and Gale (Courteney Cox), to have much more impactful roles in the story, while male characters like Dewey (David Arquette) and Randy (Jamie Kennedy), occupy more passive roles. Gale also breaks down the idea of the “Final Girl”. Her designer suits and representation of femininity oppose the expected “boyish final girl”.¹⁰ The role of the police officer, Dewey, being made less important is especially noticeable, given the importance of characters like Loomis in *Halloween*. This disrupts the expectation that slasher films had become known to present, male characters that are more active, and less vulnerable. The decrease in male agency can also be seen in the film’s killer, revealed to be both Billy (Skeet Ulrich) and Stu (Matthew Lillard). Contrasting Myers’ intimidating, unmovable stature, Billy and Stu as Ghostface, although successful in killing a number of people, are sloppy and inefficient, constantly making mistakes and being outsmarted. Each of the male characters have no control in the narratives events, as they often arrive too late, fail to stop the threat, and misunderstand or don’t believe what has happened. The female agency is increased as Sidney and Gale possess more active resistance towards Billy and Stu, physically confronting and fighting back against them. With Dewey and Randy having been injured, further presenting them as vulnerable male characters, Gale uses Dewey’s gun to help Sidney, allowing her to kill both Stu and Billy. This entire final sequence encapsulates the intelligence of the films female characters, Sidney in particular. She is constantly put into difficult, dangerous situations, but she is always smart, allowing her to survive film after film.¹¹ Overall, the film does a great job at not only reversing the gendered roles but drawing attention to how meaningless they are altogether.

⁹ Zmajić, Magdalena, ‘*Feminism, Sexuality and Gender Roles in the Scream Movies*’, (2023), p.6

¹⁰ Espiago, Carlota F., ‘*Screaming for Progress: New Feminine Models, Traditional Masculinity in Crisis and Homosexual Undertones in Wes Craven’s Scream*’ (1996), p. 14

¹¹ Mehls, Robert, ‘*In history no one can hear you scream: Feminism and the horror film 1974-1996*’, *University of Colorado at Boulder*, (2015), p.125

Like in *Halloween*, sexual intercourse is present as an underlying theme throughout the film.

“*Scream zeroes in on virginity and sexuality as a source of anxiety for young women.*”¹² It furthers the idea that women are defined by their relationship with sex but evolving from simply being obsessed with or uninterested in it, the film presents Sidney, traumatised by it. “*Women are passive; men are active. Men carry the narrative action forward; women are the stuff of ocular spectacle, there to serve as the locus of the male's desire to savor them visually.*”¹³ An important dynamic between Sidney and Billy, her boyfriend, is her reluctance to have sex with him, due to her mother, Maureen's, rape and murder, having taken place one year earlier. This complicated relationship with sex allows for a much more complex and human character than those seen in *Halloween*. *Halloween* presents the idea that having sex is bad, those that are active are “punished” and killed, while those that are restrained survive. *Scream* allows Sidney to battle with her emotional conflict and be overwhelmed by her trauma and distrust, before beginning to overcome. Towards the end of the film, Sidney does in fact move past her trauma and decides to have sex with her boyfriend. Not only does this allow her arc to reach a satisfying conclusion, but the tropes also mentioned by Randy are able to be ignored. Although Randy states that anyone who has sex will be killed, this rule does not apply to Sidney. While providing the character of her daughter more depth, the treatment of Maureen in the story removes any and all possible depth from her character, her rape and death simply being a plot point. Never fully developed as a character, she is almost entirely defined by her sexual history and violent death. It does, however, “address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities. The deployment of sex, violence, and emotion is thus in no way gratuitous and in no way strictly limited”.¹⁴ While taking away from possible development of her own

¹² Karlyn, Kathleen R., ‘*Scream, Popular Culture and Feminism's Third Wave.*’ *Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in US Films*, (2009)

¹³ Carroll, Noël, ‘*The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm*’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Autumn, 1990, Vol. 48, No. 4, *Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics*, (1990), p.351

¹⁴ Williams, Linda, ‘*Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess*’, *Film Quarterly*, Summer, 1991, Vol. 44, No. 4, (1991), p.9

character, Maureen's rape and death is integral to Sidney's character, and makes her entirely realistic and relatable.

Entering the 2020's, *The Invisible Man* offers a contemporary angle for both our female protagonist, as well as the film's plot as a whole. Cecilia Kass (Elisabeth Moss) completes the evolution of women through these films, suffering the threat through the intimate abuse of her partner. The film's horror manifests as a continuation of her relationship with Adrian Griffin (Oliver Jackson-Cohen). She possesses the most agency we have seen, compared to Laurie and Sidney. We see this immediately in the film's opening, showing Cecilia's planned escape from Adrian's home, and their relationship altogether. Through this scene, the differences between how our three protagonists reclaim their agency when escaping from danger can be seen. Laurie was stuck repeatedly attempting to open the door, only thinking of breaking the window at the last moment. Sidney found herself locked inside with Ghostface. Thinking quickly, she ran upstairs, locking him out of her room. Cecilia executes an elaborate plan in order to escape, drugging her partner, staying quiet, having her sister meet her to take her home. We can clearly see the evolution in intelligence the protagonists have or haven't been given.

Adrian's treatment of Cecilia perfectly encapsulates the extremes of a patriarchal relationship, having manipulated her to look and behave exactly how he wants. "He controlled how I looked and what I wore and what I ate"¹⁵ While we aren't shown this control, or their relationship prior to Cecilia's escape, we can see her state following their relationship, barely able to leave the house, doing whatever she can to ensure Adrian isn't watching her. The way Adrian treated Cecilia perfectly showcases Sandra Lee Bartky's view on patriarchal power, "the ideal body of femininity – and hence the feminine body-subject – is constructed; in doing this, they produce a "practiced and subjected" body, that is, a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed".¹⁶ With the state we see Cecilia in, the film's monster is reframed, not as

¹⁵ *The Invisible Man*, (2020), 16:23

¹⁶ Bartky, Sandra L., 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power', (1988), p.33

a physical being, but as an embodiment of power, lingering over her following her escape. In contrast to Dr. Loomis' agency in place of Laurie's in *Halloween*, Cecilia is at the forefront of the investigation regarding Adrian's apparent death. She is an active protagonist, investigating how Adrian operates and how his suit works. She mimics Loomis in the ways in which she understands the threat, attempts to convince and work with others, and actively tracks and confronts the threat. She is, however, the primary victim. "A person who is described as "experiencing" things does not seem as active and decisive as someone who is described as "determining" things".¹⁷ While *Halloween* presents the victim, someone experiencing, and the agent, someone determining, as two separate characters, *The Invisible Man* combines them into one.

The film ends with Cecilia reclaiming her agency by murdering Adrian. This can appear as both a powerful reclamation of Cecilia's agency or as a morally ambiguous act, one that has been shaped by trauma and revenge. It is clear that this act has Cecilia reversing the power dynamic. Adrian maintained control over every aspect of Cecilia's life, notably in how she was seen, how she dressed. By killing Adrian while wearing the invisibility suit, she decides how she is seen, in this case not at all, and removes him from her life. The manner of Adrian's death, however, complicates this empowerment. Cecilia frames her murder to look like a suicide, concealing the truth of her actions. The murder does however bring Cecilia's story to a satisfying conclusion, her murder of Adrian mimicking the way that Adrian murdered her sister, Emily. While she repeats Adrian's actions, it is also the repetition of his words that thrusts her into action. "He repeats the word "surprise" to imply he is responsible for everything".¹⁸ Whether her actions are morally correct, Cecilia has regained her agency entirely.

¹⁷ Sap, Maarten, et al., 'Connotation frames of power and agency in modern films' *Proceedings of the 2017 conference on empirical methods in natural language processing*, (2017), p.2330

¹⁸ Filimon, Eliza C., 'IN THE INVISIBLE MAN (2020). Towards a Theory of Whodunits: Murder Rewritten' (2021), p.222

“When horror movies try to reveal female characters as the hero of the story, this gave a message to audiences that women can be powerful and independent.”¹⁹

Overall, this thesis presented evidence that shows an evolution of female representation across the three films, *Halloween*, *Scream* and *The Invisible Man*. *Halloween* presents a classic example of the “Final Girl”, following Laurie as she is stalked by and narrowly escapes Michael Myers. *Scream*, then, follows a much more meta narrative with Sidney, who outsmarts and outplays the killer throughout the film. Finally, *The Invisible Man* pushes this evolution to its extreme, following Cecilia, a protagonist who constantly fights against her ex-boyfriend, and does not give up until she has killed him by the end of the film. It is clear that, as women have been able to gain more and more power in the media world and have been able to contribute to the stories being told, female characters have left behind the poor characterisation of the past and have grown into realistic portrayals of women who have regained their agency. Although limited by a smaller word count, this piece provides a foundation for further future exploration. Ultimately, future stories will hopefully only provide even more agency for their female protagonists.

Bartky, Sandra L., *Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, (1988), p.33

Carroll, Noël, *The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Autumn, 1990, Vol. 48, No. 4, *Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics*, (1990), p.351

¹⁹ Sa’eed, Manaar K., et al., *The representation of women in the horror movies: A study in selected horror movies.*, *Communication and Linguistics Studies* 5.1, (2019), p.16

Clover, Carol J., 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film', *Representations*, No. 20, Special Issue: Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy, (1987), p.201

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Zmajić, Magdalena, *'Feminism, Sexuality and Gender Roles in the Scream Movies'*, (2023), p.6