

SUNY Purchase

The Final Girls:
From One to Many

James Stephens

Senior Project

Professor Nathan Holmes

20 May 2022

Advisor: Nathan Holmes

Second Reader: Paula Halperin

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: <i>Scream & The Beginning of the Final Girl(s)</i>	4
Chapter Two: <i>Halloween and the Inheritance of Courage</i>	14
Chapter Three: <i>Texas Chainsaw and the Future of a Legacy</i>	24
Conclusion.....	35
Filmography.....	38
Bibliography.....	40

Introduction

She looks death in the face; but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued

-Carol Clover (Her Body, Himself)

Horror films have always played an important role in cinematic history—even though the genre tends to be one of the least critically acclaimed, it is no overreach to say that horror films are a vital part of the Hollywood economy. Horror films, while divisive, project our inner fears on screen—be it through monsters, magic, witches or—in the case of this paper—other human beings. Slasher films are, for all intents and purposes, defined by conflicts between humans. Yes, the antagonist may *seem* they have special powers (after all, how many people have allegedly “killed” Michael Myers?) but as far as we see, they are human. This means those *doing* the evil to other humans are fellow humans—an uncanny version of fear. It is this which makes slasher films some of the most effective at portraying horror. In these films, the reasons for the villain murdering are psychological—there is no magic curse to break; there is no evil scientist—they are simply human beings that you or I could potentially encounter on the street and never know their depths of depravity. The heart inside these monsters is the same heart and blood pumping in all of us. However—there is a single trope in horror films which I feel represent the hope and overcoming of evil: that is the trope of the final girl—the woman who conquers the other, darker side, of humanity and makes it to the end of the film. Sometimes the sole survivor.

The slasher genre has a sordid history and Carol Clover has helped come up with an interesting argument: horror films before Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* in 1960 were different than those which came after *Psycho*, as Clover notes. The phase following *Psycho* took place during

the American cultural revolution of the late 1960s. It is of note that slashers went through a transformation from being viewed as low-brow entertainment to where we see, decades later, films such as *Silence of the Lambs* are winning Best Picture.

In this paper, I will continue working on Clovers's idea of the final girl to show how this character *has* evolved over time. To prove the evolution of the trope there are three films I feel best represent the final girl *then* and *now*. We will focus on Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), from a weak victim to determined grandmother in the *Halloween* films (1978-2023), as well as looking on at the lesser-acknowledged Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns) from the *Texas Chainsaw* series (1974-2022) and last, but not least, both Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) and Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox) from *Scream* (1996-2022). I am using this paper to show that the character of the final girl has significantly grown since the era of Clover's original analysis. The final girls we have now are fully fleshed-out human beings. No longer are these women simply playing a hollow shell of a role—now these characters are taken more seriously and have more depth—these films depend not on the villain anymore—now the film depends on these final women and how they are now in the dominant position.

Slashers had reached a muddled tipping point by the mid 90's with redundant formulaic schlock filled with unsurprising and predictable shocks and chills. In essence, the audience had grown accustomed to and outgrown these tropes as they knew what to expect. The constant re-makes and reboots of the same films did nothing but help stifle horror as an exhilarating body genre: if we know what to expect and wait for, the chills will barely sprout—eradicating a physiological reaction from a human viewer whatsoever. *Scream 5* (2022 d. Radio Silence) includes a definition of these re-boot or legacy sequels through a side-character, Mindy: "you gotta build something new, but not too new...it's gotta be part of an ongoing storyline...new main

characters supported by or related to legacy character” (*Scream 5*). The legacy sequels of *Texas Chainsaw* (2022 d. David Blue Garcia) and *Halloween* (2018 d. David Gordon Green) are direct sequels to the original films—eliminating any plot development that occurred in the various previous films. *Scream 5*, however, is a continuation of all the previous films while also remaking scenes from the original *Scream* (1996 d. Wes Craven).

CHAPTER ONE

Scream and the Beginning of the Final Girl(s)

My favorite scary movie? What's the point? They're all the same. Some stupid killer stalking some big-breasted girl who can't act who is always running up the stairs when she should be running out the front door. It's insulting.

- Sidney Prescott (*Scream*)

Amidst the booming pop culture of the 1990s came a film from a director who, oddly enough, was a main part of creating predictable horror films: Wes Craven. Previously, Craven helped prop up exploitation films (1972's *The Last House on the Left*), helped birth a nightmare (1984's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) and even helped us fear the "other" in 1977's *The Hills Have Eyes*. All those films had landed themselves solidly in the horror canon. What could be done to elevate or evolve these long-held tropes? Well—this is where Wes Craven's 1996 classic *Scream* comes into play. Following the film's release for nearly five years after, there was an uptick in fresher slasher films which took *Scream*'s self-referential formula and tropes to a new height (West) including 1999's *Idle Hands* (d. Rodman Flender) and a surprise box office hit in the Wayans' Bros. parody film *Scary Movie* (2001 d. Keenen Ivory Wayans) which later spurred on a whole series that has garnered more than three-quarters of a billion dollars worldwide. *Scream* and the parody films that followed had one thing in common: they both subvert generic horror tropes to comedic effect. And, of course, the character of the final girl thrives.

Before discussing *Scream* itself, it must be noted that during the mid-90s, the final girl had a small but mighty evolution—which we will see the origins of later. Teen horror had reached a height where the villain now *comes to* the final girl instead of the final girl entering the

villain's own space—as Carol Clover calls their habitat the “terrible place.” Clover has often noted that there is a correlation between the final girl and the villain. To Clover, the villain resides in “the terrible place” or the location where the killer is originally located or lives or resides (Clover 74). For instance, the town of Haddonfield in *Halloween* or Jason Voorhees' forest hut from the *Friday the 13th* series (1980-2009). This place is often “home” for the killer, and the killer himself may view these victims/survivors as intruders—this is important in understanding the psyche of the killer: they are often portrayed as human-like, but there is something off or almost uncanny about them. To Clover, this terrible place acts as a metaphor for the place inside which houses the nastiness and darkness whether the characters acknowledge this or not. The villains view someone intruding into their home as someone intruding into their psyche, upsetting the villain's status-quo. Many of these killers have an immaturity to them and have been stunted growing up—any lack of deference to their homes, themselves or their psyche will result in a terrible reaction. That is not to say the killers were provoked but it does add depth to the killer's mental state.

Woodsboro, California is the town plagued by a mysterious ghost-mask-wearing killer in *Scream* and serves as the terrible place for its main antagonist known as Ghostface. I feel it important to note that *Scream* is a film about teenagers and many scenes center around their high school. This is an important detail when thinking of the terrible place as *Scream* coincided with the rise of school shootings in the 90s where the high school itself becomes a terrible place. Framing a safe place such as Woodsboro as a terrible place reinforces the idea that you are not safe anywhere.

The final girls of this era also seemed to have something personal attached to the villain—eating at teens' fears they cannot trust their school or their friends. One best example

would be 1997's *I Know What you did Last Summer* (d. Jim Gillespie) where the final girl and her group of friends know who the killer is (as they hit-and-ran over a body earlier) and know why they are killing (who would not want to get revenge over someone who ran us over and left us for dead?). Regardless of the cause, the final girl is now being intruded upon—just as Ghostface intrudes upon Woodsboro. It is no coincidence in this uptick in final girls as this era was birthed upon the tails of third wave feminism which “allowed the focus to shift to the female protagonist, her friends and their survival” (West) and crafted a nuanced portrayal of women as possessing both good and bad qualities (as we will see in *Scream*). What this means is that the female characters are more fleshed out than ever before.

For *Scream*, there was an important facet when it comes to casting the final girl. Before this era, many of the actresses starring in these slasher films were not big names beforehand. But *Scream* did something very interesting with their casting by using actors who were already well-known. At the time, *Scream* star Neve Campbell had been starring on the hit teen series, *Party of Five*; Courteney Cox was coming to the limelight in the series *Friends*; Drew Barrymore had already secured her spot in Hollywood and David Arquette came from an influential Hollywood family—the film mixed these new and older faces (such as Henry Winkler as Principal Himbry) together. Some may call this stunt casting, but after all, the film stands on the back of horror greats like *Psycho*. By casting those actors we are familiar with, it only serves to heighten the terror of seeing them in danger—especially the women who are traditionally seen as damsels in distress (an important idea which the final girl trope has been fighting against).

This casting is an important development in slasher history as the films I will be talking about are usually ensemble pieces with unknown actors. *Scream* played into the idea of an ensemble cast with known figures which increases the importance of (or interest in) the films’

main characters—taking the spotlight away from the killer himself. Ghostface has scarce screentime and was not as visually disturbing as past killers such as Leatherface or Freddy Krueger while also being less mysterious than past killers such as Michael Myers or Norman Bates. Along with this, Wes Craven played to audience's expectations by killing its most famous star, Drew Barrymore, a few minutes into the film (playing with our expectations that Drew Barrymore would be the final girl—as she was arguably the most popular star in the film at the time). The amount of female characters in this film also proved to be a box-office draw for the increasing amount of young women who were now going to horror films (Rubin). This is in contrast to Carol Clover's era of writing where then, the main audience for these films were primarily teen boys—but now we see this shift and how the shift in audiences will have an impact on the final girl. More women viewing the films means more representation might be needed. *Scream* is proof of this itself: no longer do we only have one final girl, but we have two: Gale Weathers and Sidney Prescott. This is a sentiment that many following slasher films, as well as *Scream* sequels, would take to heart. This is a huge development and the biggest shift in the history of the final girl trope.

Scream is known for its ensemble cast and even more known for its two final girls: Sidney Prescott and Gale Weathers. There is already a dichotomy between these two characters—not just the age difference—as both characters were presented as rivals at the beginning of the film as Weathers had previously covered a story about Sidney Prescott's mother's murder, shining Sidney in a non-favorable light. Weathers, a famous c-list television reporter enters the film wearing bright red colors, short dresses and even heels. This is a big deal in subverting the common idea of the final girl: the audience will go into the film expecting the final girl to be the buttoned-up or innocent character—*Scream*, however, toys with our

expectations of the trope itself. Gale has clearly lived well and is well off, is no virgin and is not scared of anyone or anything—a refreshing take on the final girl and a characteristic both Sidney and Gale will realize they share in common. Weathers is not focused on relationships or love (which ends up coming to her); instead she is focused on the case at hand and finding a way to get her story—for Gale, the main objective is not capturing the killer but more-so exposing the killer. Sidney, on the other hand, is presented in typical final girl attire—jean jackets, jeans, shirts covering her arms or, as Clover calls the attire, boyish (Clover 88). It could easily be said Sidney resembles a tomboy, especially as a foil for the other main female teen character, Tatum (Rose McGowan), who walks around in short skirts, brightly colored shirts which highlight her bosom and also are thin enough to show her nipples peeking through—which we may call the “slut” character (as she is actually called in *Scream*). This is not to say that Sidney is your typical final girl in the same league as Laurie Strode or Sally Hardesty, as we will later see Sidney is an evolved version of those two characters. In fact, she is very much different: Sidney comes into the film with a backstory (her mother had been murdered one year prior and Sidney played a part in convicting the wrong man for the murder) whereas the other final girls were simply dropped into the film with not much backstory given to the audience—they seemed only to be there for the thrills of the audience. This alone shows an increase in importance of the final girl’s character—she is no longer a blank slate. She no longer happens into the “terrible place” and she is no longer a stock character. This is a great and impactful change on the final girl trajectory.

There are still some key final girl elements that we see subverted in *Scream*. The film is known for its self-referential humor and mocking (or homage) of past horror films. There is an infamous scene in which one of Sidney’s friends, Randy (Jamie Kennedy), ticks off a list of certain “rules” horror films need to abide by—and one of those rules is, of course, about the final

girl. “First,” he claims, “you can never have sex.” A major aspect of the slasher is the sexually advantageous characters being killed off (seen as early as *Halloween* and popularized in the *Friday the 13th Series*). However, this is one of the biggest shifts we see in the treatment of the final girl’s sexuality and sexual nature. Earlier in the film, Sidney is in her room while her boyfriend, Billy Loomis (Loomis, a last name referencing back to *Psycho* and *Halloween*) climbs through her window in an effort to see her. Sidney appeases him as he tries to get closer to kiss. She ends up playfully pushing him off a little bit as her father realizes someone is in the house. Gleefully, Sidney tells Billy she’s not a virginal little girl—“would you settle for a PG-13 relationship?” she asks right before flashing her breasts. This is an outstanding move that shifts our understanding of the final girl. It is also important to note that the director also subverts the male gaze in this scene by shooting the Campbell from behind to show no nudity to the camera. The audience never sees her breasts but we know her character is free enough to show them. Could we imagine Laurie Strode doing the same? Absolutely not. Randy’s rules about horror films are no longer stable and help to prove the point that the role of the final girl has indeed shifted.

We can look at 2022’s *Scream* as not just a legacy remake but also a mirror to the original film. The movie starts with a young actress, Jenna Ortega (whose character, Tara Carpenter, is used in place of the Drew Barrymore character from the original film). Ortega, while not nearly as popular as Barrymore, is a Disney Channel star who has transcended into more adult films and already brings forward a Gen Z audience. But Ortega’s Tara does *not* share the exact same fate as Barrymore—a sudden, surprising death. Tara’s cell phone rings, she answers, the voice on the other line is deep, nefarious and asks her about her favorite scary movies. Seems familiar? And this familiarity is important in defining the growth of the final girl.

Our expectations are that, just like Barrymore, this character is about to be slaughtered. But our expectations have, yet again, been subverted. Ghostface enters *her* home and after a bloody battle, Ghostface, above Tara, stabs her. Then—cut to title. The audience is under the assumption Tara has suffered the same fate as Barrymore or even Marion Crane as this is how we have been conditioned. But soon enough we find out she is indeed alive, thriving in the hospital and was able to make it out alive.

This is a development and subversion of the age-old damsel in distress trope. This trope needs to be involved in discourse of the final girl for many reasons—especially when we look at slasher films. The previously mentioned scene from *Scream 5* sees Tara on the ground, the camera lingering above, looking down on her as she glares up towards the camera—almost as though she is looking at us, the audience, for help. This all happens after Ghostface breaks her leg and stabs her hand—she is helpless, as is the audience, and this might breathe some life back into the idea of the body genre as the audience clenches, waiting for her inevitable death.

“No, no, no!” Tara whimpers as Ghostface places himself above her, looking down at his potential victim. While this can send chills down viewers spine, it also plays into the archetype that women need help—“Women in peril work better in the suspense genre...you fear more for her than you would for a husky man” to quote director Brian DePalma (Clover 90). And there is no mistaking the inevitable masculine urge to “protect” and “defend” a so-called or so-viewed weak woman. But Tara has made it out alive and is now enraged with a passion to seek revenge. The damsel seems no longer in distress. In fact, both the original *Scream* and *Scream 5* lack men coming in to save the day. Instead, it is the women, the final girls, who save the day. As Clover mentions, final girls used to be “abject terror personified,” yet it seems now that they are abject persistence personified—a great development in the final girl trope (Clover 84).

These final girls are a delightful comparison to the 1970's final girls who were strong in their own right, but still prospered under the idea that "the sexes are what they seem; that screen males represent the Male and screen females the Female...this [trend]...encourages impulses toward victimization in females" (Clover 91), meaning that viewers of all genres will buy into the heteronormative roles and personalities of men and women without much fluctuation between the two. However, these slasher films object to this: while there are women who do die violently in these movies, there is still that one person who represents hope and that person is a woman. With that subversion in mind, we must look at the progression of the final girls in the *Scream* films. The original was impressive with its two final girls (Sidney & Gale), but *Scream 5* has *five* final girls. This follows the upward trend of seeing the *Halloween* remake with Laurie's daughter and grand-daughter coming out alive as well as seeing multiple survivors in *Texas Chainsaw 2022*—both of which will be examined later. The growth in the amount of women replicates the growth in the trope and by that, can have a positive effect on society.

I do believe the term "positive effect" is accurate to use for describing the development of this trope. "Torture the woman! The trouble today is that we don't torture women enough" once said Alfred Hitchcock (Clover 90). However tasteless the quote may sound, we must remember Hitchcock's opinions are a reflection of his time. But times have changed. And they have changed for the better. There is no mistake that all three legacy sequel films in this paper were made in America post-2016—a time of great struggle and resistance towards the growing Women's Movement seen after the election of twice-impeached US President Donald Trump. Seeing legendary feminists such as Gloria Steinem, bell hooks, Angela Davis or Dolores Huerta passing the torch to younger, fresher feminists as we have seen in post-2016 women's movement

is reflected in this film. This is awe-inspiring to see, and very much necessary. I bring this up to talk about a very specific scene in *Scream 5*:

Gale Weathers and Sidney Prescott find themselves in the very kitchen where Ghostface almost killed them in the original film. We also have the film's two young antagonists, Tara (as mentioned before) and her sister, Sam (Melissa Barrera). This scene is almost shot-for-shot what happened in the original film—a mirror to show us what was and what is to come. In this scene, Gale Weathers is seen being choked by one of the Ghostface killers (a female, in the case of this film, named Amber). Amber, obsessed with horror movies just like the original Ghostfaces, tells Gale “it’s time to pass the torch,” meaning Amber wanted to completely eradicate the *final girl trope* and pass on the power to female villains. Gale kicks Amber as Amber is lunging on top of her—similarly shot to the first scene in this film—but Gale musters enough strength to push Amber atop the stove, with Amber’s hand accidentally igniting the flame. Amber, as I mentioned, a horror film aficionado, knows what passing the torch means—and she wanted that torch—she wanted to appear as though she was Ghostface’s final victim, therefore making her the final girl by framing one of her friends as the killer. But the feel-good ending of seeing the final girl (now final girls) succeed floods the audience with hope.

Everything was set up for what Amber wanted to happen: as Clover states, the murders of women are generally “filmed at a closer range, in more graphic detail and at a greater length” (Clover 84) which, during the film, we have seen Amber kill men from a far greater distance and never get very close to them whereas when she is trying to kill Gale Weathers, Amber is face-to-face, chest-to-chest. Amber also knows that “during the last 15 or so minutes, the women fight back and constitute the film’s climax” (Clover 85). That was Amber’s intent—however, Amber missed that the final girl trope has shifted and become something different. Amber is pushed into

the stove and is engulfed in flames until she falls to the ground. “Enjoy that torch,” Sidney says as she watches Amber’s body burn. Moments earlier, we see Gale and Sidney with the other two final girls (Tara and Sam), realizing the two adults had already passed down that torch—they even share similar wounds to their left abdomen (another moment of the old mirroring the new). This idea will be heartily developed when examining Laurie Strode, the original final girl, and her evolution from prey to predator.

CHAPTER TWO

Halloween and the Inheritance of Courage

I watched him for fifteen years, sitting in a room, staring at a wall; not seeing the wall, looking past the wall; looking at this night, inhumanly patient, waiting for some secret, silent alarm to trigger him off.

- Dr Loomis (*Halloween*)

In the canon of final girls, there will always be one that comes to mind first: Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis). Strode's character from 1978's *Halloween* (d. John Carpenter) is so important that even Carol Clover used her as the blueprint for the final girl. But what is it that makes Curtis's character and the film so iconic? From a horror aspect, *Halloween* paved the way for a very certain type of villain: the calculated and methodical stalker; the Michael Myers template is seen throughout horror and thriller history. The groundwork was by *Halloween* and continued in films such as Curt Duncan from 1979's *When a Stranger Calls* (which, coincidentally served as the inspiration for the first 20 minutes of *Scream*) and even in science fiction horror with the redator from *The Predator* (1987) or one of the most iconic B-film villains: Pamela and Jason Voorhees of *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980-2009). Interesting enough at the turn of the decade, these slasher/psychological thrillers rose to critical acclaim with characters such as Glenn Close's Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) or Kathy Bates's Annie Wilkes of *Misery* (1990)—both of whom received Academy Awards nominations with Bates winning Best Actress in 1991. All of this is important to note because without *Halloween* as a precursor, these women may have never received their acclaim from a genre (horror/thriller) which is often overlooked by critics.

In *Halloween*, Strode is the victim to “the shape,” Michael Myers (Tony Moran). The film briefly sums up Myer’s psyche in a flashback at the beginning of the film (another horror trope which takes the first few minutes of a film as a bait-and-switch for the audience). As a child, Myers murders his sister and is sent to an asylum. Unfortunate events happen, and Myers, now an adult, is on the loose, returning to his suburban hometown of Haddonfield, Illinois. This so happens to be where Laurie Strode lives. It is important to note that later *Halloween* films dive more into Laurie’s backstory (including finding out Laurie is related to Myers) but for the sake of this paper, I will only be talking about *Halloween* within the context of the first film—and only the first film—noting this because all of the films in between *Halloween II* (1981) and *Halloween II* (2009) have been eradicated in the *Halloween* legacy sequel from 2018 which I will be examining in this paper (the film is a direct sequel to the first *Halloween*—ignoring the countless films between them).

Haddonfield and the Strode Home are the set of Myer’s terrible place. All the trauma felt by both Myers and the neighborhood is still lingering all these years later as we see Myer’s house abandoned and boarded up. What is also important about these terrible places is the dichotomy they offer—a kind of a trick played on the viewer. For example, Haddonfield looks like the ideal neighborhood for the white upper middle-class with great upkeep and nice neighbors. We would not expect a killer here. Everything in Haddonfield would be ideal save for this *one* house: Michael’s house, which has been standing and decaying since his family left. This helps us visually see that something on the street is not ideal—something in the American suburbs has an evil underbelly—a trope exemplified by David Lynch’s 1986 horror film *Blue Velvet*.

What looks safe may not always be safe: “the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim” (Clover 81). The idea of danger lurking at your very own seemingly safe home is a perfect blend for horror and will serve as a backdrop for one of *Halloween*’s most famous scenes where Strode and Myers are literally playing cat-and-mouse between Myers’ own house’s walls.

While Michael Myers is iconic on his own right, so is Laurie Strode. The character helped propel Jamie Lee Curtis to stardom (enough to be crowned the of the original “scream queens”) but also helped define the final girl—a complete reckoning and rewriting of what happened to Marion Crane in *Psycho*, played by Curtis’s real life mother, Janet Leigh . Laurie Strode, back in 1978, was a teen who was naïve and did not want to break away from her own “perfect place” (her house and neighborhood) and her seemingly perfect. The final girl, like Laurie, always seems to have everything together—they do well in school, they’re worried about their grades and their friends but most importantly, they’re *not* worried about sex. But when Myers enters Strode’s “perfect place” (which, in another dual connection between the characters, her “perfect place” happens to be Myer’s “terrible place”) we begin to see Strode shift. While babysitting two children and finding out there is a murderer on the loose, Strode calls her friends for help: but they are either already dead or answering in the middle of dying. Strode must come up with the willpower to save herself *and* protect those children. This sets up the “motherly” or protective aspect of the final girl. By showing her protective nature, the film further defines her and proves her pure heart. Her maternal side is so important to *Halloween* to the point where those two children Strode protected, have reprised their role in 2021’s *Halloween Kills* (portrayed by Anthony Michael Hall and Kyle Richards) and has even promoted Richards’ character, Lindsey Wallace, to final girl status.

The original Laurie Strode was not just a run-and-hide kind of character. We can see the cogs turning in Strode's brain as she realizes she is the only way to beat the evil. Luckily, Strode has proven to the audience that she is extremely quick on her feet as we watch her learn how to strategize and fight back. This will be echoed in the 2018 legacy sequel.

Halloween 2018 shows Michael coming back to his own terrible place—Haddonfield—and terrorizing the community once again. By this point, Strode is living somewhat off-the-grid, but still close enough to Haddonfield (her perfect place which turned to her terrible place). We also learn that she has a daughter and granddaughter, Karen and Allyson (Judy Greer & Andi Matichak), but their relationship has been fractured since Laurie has been obsessing over preparing for Michael's inevitable return. We see the final girl is still plagued by the past and her obsession has turned her into a somewhat cold and defiant mother. Laurie has been working hard to perfect her final girl status—she is still dressed in pants and button-down shirt—her hair has gone grey and unmanaged—it is clear she is still dealing with the trauma of the original film. This trauma is key to understanding the development of the final girls thanks to these legacy sequels. We see that Laurie has come to an understanding of what it means to be a hero but she also understands the nuances of living in the shadow of her heroism. Laurie, after all this time, has honed in on her strength and power—she knows what it means to halt or hurt Myers—and this knowledge is a great development in the final girl: she is now smarter than ever and more prepared.

In the final frames of the original film, we see Myers back to stalking Strode with the film's score pulsating as through our own veins (a physiological reaction we have to horror films). We see Myers' doctor, Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasence), walking around with a gun, ready to save the day—going with the viewers' assumption that it would be a man to save the day, not

a woman. The shadows around Laurie become more important as we realize those shadows belong to Myers whose presence is now engulfing Laurie. Instead of yelling and frantically trying to find a way out, we are treated to a surprising moment: Laurie decides now is the time to rip off Myer's mask—standing face-to-face to the man—giving Laurie the opportunity to slide it off Myer's face.

This single moment, I believe, is the tipping point in the final girl trope: the unmasking of the killer. This unmasking proves to take away the killer's shield—making him vulnerable to his very core. This is an aspect that makes the final girls heroes—revealing the big mystery to herself. Even if the audience does not get to see the face, there is a sense of closure and accomplishment in seeing the final girl unmask the masked threat. There are many moments of vulnerability, but the greatest way the filmmakers can show the brute talent of the final girl is when she takes power into her own hands—Strode grabs a hanger to use as a knife while Dr. Loomis comes with a loaded weapon. In one of the most iconic scenes in horror history, Laurie Strode hides in a closet as Myers searches the house. It is this scene—this moment—where Laurie proves to be one of the first examples of a final girl. Michael is looking for Laurie throughout the house—he is preying on her. There are some simple cinematic techniques which helps put us in the eyes of the final girl. Strode is sunken to a position low on the ground with the use of high camera angles looking down on her, making the teenager look even smaller, even in the confines of this small closet. This visually tells us that right now, Laurie is in the most danger—and it feels like it may be over for her. However, there are some low angle shots through Laurie's POV where we see Michael outside the closet, ready to barge in. This is the height of panic in the film, and the mood is tense. But Laurie is not in the closet just to hide: she

finds a hanger and untwists it to a phallic-looking faux-knife to strike Michael in the shoulder and get up to run away. Laurie has no choice but to fight.

Craftily enough, there are many scenes where director Carpenter uses POV shots to great effect. Some shots earlier in the film show us a POV shot through Myers eyes (we even hear his breathing), but there are other shots that *act* like a POV shot and confuse the audience if we are looking through Myers's eyes or through the camera lens. This trickery of POV shots works fabulously to create an atmosphere of confusion and claustrophobia—and this claustrophobia readies us for the powerful closet scene. To add to this, it must never be left out that the film began with an extensive POV shot where we are in adolescence Myers' eyes as he gratuitously kills his sister. By putting us in both POV shots of Strode *and* Michael, we have views from both the hero and the villain. It is uneasy to look through a killer's eyes but also equally uneasy to look through the eyes of a woman as prey. This will become important later as we see shifts in POV shots—when Strode is seen in *Halloween 2018*, there are many POV shots from her own eyes—more than in the original film—demanding the audience to see things *her* way. Linda Williams mentions that “the villain is remarkably like the woman in the eyes of the traumatized male” (Williams 63) which points to an idea of identity when it comes to looking *through* eyes. Identity will be largely explored when talking about *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

After the closet scene, Strode comes out victorious. Strode is no longer the prey—and in the legacy sequel she becomes the predator preying on Michael. She now has the power. Everything Michael had tried to hide is now seen by the (metaphorical) harsh light of day. Strode has taken something important from Myers *just as* Myers took something important away from Strode. It is in the 2018 legacy sequel where we see this examined further.

Seeing Strode in the 2018 film, we have a very clear shift in how the final girls work when they come back—a shift Clover could have only dreamed of. Here, I will add onto what Clover has said and find a new way to update her original views on the final girls. The 2018 Laurie Strode, still played by Jamie Lee Curtis, comes back to the film in a very jarring manner: she finds out Myers has returned while we find out that Laurie has been drinking heavily since the original film and has a strained relationship with her children due to her trauma (a twist on the Strode-as-a-mother-figure in the original film—by struggling with her own demons we now see this final girl as a fleshed out character). Additionally, her house is boarded up, fortified and trapped up, just in case. Metaphorically, it could be said that Strode, mentally, is still lost in Haddonfield and her home a labyrinth of violence; a home that seems eerily similar to Myers's boarded up Haddonfield home. Her house, just as Myers's is a metaphor for where these characters are at mentally. But there is no mistaking that Strode's home is purposefully formatted to *be* a living trap for when Michael comes back.

Of course, as we can see, the final girl is not perfect. I think this shift would heavily inspire Carol Clover and other final girls from the 1970s to grapple with the PTSD suffered from their original films—something that would be obvious when we see the final moments of the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the film's final girl, Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns), having somewhat of a mental break after getting saved—laughing and crying in front of Leatherface's eyes. But these original horror films, both *Halloween* and *Texas Chainsaw*, somewhat dispose of their final girls after these last moments of the film. To the audience, her character is in limbo. That is what makes these legacy sequels so important to the final girl trope—the expanding of her character.

The 2018 *Halloween* continues to explain more of Strode's situation: "Mom was always waiting for Myers to come," Strode's daughter tells us; her trauma is noticed by her daughter and could possibly become a family curse. Laurie's obsession with Michael turned into an obsession neither her daughter nor her granddaughter could understand. This is an amazing add of depth to the character of a final girl—she is now more multidimensional than ever. There has been a certain stigma attached to the final girl as a basic prototype character; this is secured by the fact that Clover herself has been able to define the idea—the trope is not an abstract idea. There are very clear signs of what the final girl is and in the past, those signs have remained a bit stagnant. This is the importance of adding the influence of the legacy sequels to further prove that the final girl has evolved.

In 2018, Myers enters Strode's new house. This is where we can see the development of Laurie as final girl. The original *Halloween* film and the 2018 *Halloween* share a specific moment in common. The original *Halloween* has the closet scene discussed above, however in the 2018 version, there is a beautiful twist on that scene. We are at the final showdown with Laurie Strode (along with her daughter which whom Laurie forced to hide in the bunker). Laurie is in complete fight mode and even shoots off some of Michael's fingers. Somehow, Michael stabs and pushes Strode off the balcony to the ground where it looks as though she may have been dead (this pushing or jumping from heights is common when it comes to final girls). Again, through Michael's POV shot, Myers turns his attention away from Strode's body—a mirror to common horror films where the audience or the characters assume the big bad is dead—only for him to get up moments later. This specific scene is a twist on that—Myers is now assuming Strode dead, not the other way around. Already, we see Strode has a leg-up on the villain. Strode's daughter begins to panic, acting (yes "acting") like a damsel in distress. But Myers

doesn't know she's holding a loaded gun—and she shoots him. Earlier I had mentioned a scene where it seemed as though the shadows from behind were about to grab hold onto Strode—this film has turned that around completely as Strode is now the one emerging from the shadows with her own knife. This can be seen as a swap of what Linda Williams would see as doubling in horror films. Williams, in her essay *When the Woman Looks* mentions: the male monster can be seen as a “double for the male viewer and characters in the film” while the monster could double for the woman because of her “feared power and potency” (Williams 63). It is interesting to view the final girl as a double for the monster that men fear and it is very clear in *Halloween 2018* that Laurie Strode has turned into the hunter (not technically the “monster” of Williams work) that men fear. It is awe-inspiring moment to see these women working so hard together to try and vanquish the evils which stalk them. This will be a continuing trope with the evolution of the final girl—the multiplying of the final girl.

In the conclusion to the 2018 film Laurie finds Myers and shoves him down to an underground cellar. Laurie's granddaughter picks up her grandmother's knife and begins stabbing Myers' hand, forcing him to drop to the cellar--which happened to be the exact set-up Strode was going for. With Michael in the cellar, we see him looking up—now that high-angle shot is for *you*, Mr. Myers—that type of shot is no longer for the scared “final girl.” Instead, these three women were able to cage a monster that has been looming over their whole lives.

There is a sense here of mental clarity that we would love to believe has helped Laurie Strode understand she does not need to be scared the rest of her life. This message itself is so bone-chillingly beautiful—seeing three generations of women, no longer just one final girl, surviving, fighting back and essentially conquering the evil. This evolution, especially seeing the final girl(s) turning from prey to predator and victim to hero is awe-inspiring and part of what

makes the final girl trope a living breathing trope that can, and has, evolved. It may be true that, as the *Halloween II* (1981) tagline says, “how do you kill what’s not alive?” but Strode’s accomplishments in halting Myers serves as closure more-so than as a complete vanquishing of evil (as Myers never truly dies because producers ended up wanting to make a franchise out of the film and would not be willing to kill their mascot). While Myers may always be alive, so will Strode.

CHAPTER THREE

Texas Chainsaw and the Future of a Legacy

Say my name!

- Sally Hardesty (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*)

In thinking about 1970's horror slashers, there will always be one film that, without doubt, will come to mind: 1974's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (d. Tobe Hooper). The film fulfills much of the now tried-and-tested horror tropes—but at the time of release, these tropes, such as the final girl, were still in its infancy. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* marked a development in the horror blueprint defined by Carol Clover which will help us grasp the very meaning behind the final girl.

Instead of the villain stalking his prey in the shadows, the main antagonist, simply known in the first film as “Leatherface,” demands attention from his victims by chasing them with a giant chainsaw--doing the bidding for his left-behind and decrepit family. The family acts as a metaphor for those left behind in post-modern America and those youth who are “lost but blindly optimistic young people wandering into strange places that waited to gobble them up” (Lanza). This sentiment is also echoed in 2022's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* where a group of young influencers enter the town where Leatherface now resides.

Before talking about the final girl, it is of note to speak about gender in the film: specifically the Leatherface character himself. Weapon choice is key to understanding the nuances behind gender in horror films. Here we have Leatherface holding a large, long chainsaw—Michael Myers carries a long knife and Ghostface is known for stabbing. All of these weapons act as a phallic symbol. Analyzing these weapons is vital in discussing femininity and

masculinity in these films. A chainsaw, a very clear phallic symbol, is wielded by the villain to reinforce the insecurity he has with his masculinity (which will come into question later). These phallic symbols tie very closely to what, in her work *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*, Linda Williams calls the “body genres:” horror, pornography and melodrama which can elicit a literal physical reaction from the viewer.

Horror films bring about physical reactions from the audience and *Texas Chainsaw* is a prime example: take, for instance, Leatherface’s chainsaw—the noise the machine makes is enough to prick the hairs on our arms; the intense chase scenes cause us to hold our breath and the disgust of gore churns our stomach. What makes Williams’ point even more pertinent when it comes to slasher films is how much they have in common with pornography. Susan Sontag has noted that “it seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked” (Stommel). Both genres can arouse something within us and both genres can manipulate our emotions. Both genres are explicit and slashers often include naked or bare-breasted women. The explicit nature of these genres could help explain why we root so much for the final girl—as she is the “pure” character who could never be pressured into anything sexual. There is a dichotomy to how we cheer on the “virgin” type but are so willing and ready to watch the other characters get brutally murdered—perhaps we are rooting for the stereotypical virginal woman as we are conditioned in such a manner at the time—there films were a “respon[ce] to values of the late sixties and early seventies” (Clover 77). However, it is important to remember that the final girl trope *becomes* a challenge to the status quo, as was the cultural movements of the 60s. In a manner, the final girl is an anti-pornographic character in a graphic world created by these films. *Texas Chainsaw* is filmed in a gritty almost documentary style—somewhat akin to homemade pornography of the time—very hand-held, very cheap and

very vulgar. The manner of filming and the sparse mis-en-scene insists on the viewer watching this movie through a lens of destruction—so much so that the film cells itself looks as though it has been a bit destroyed.

All of this is what makes Sally (originally portrayed by Marilyn Burns and now by Olwen Fouéré), as well as many of these final girls, so important: the body genres can often be used as stimulation—but by these women conquering the men, the very act of being a final girl could be an affront to the masculine ego. After all, Clover states that slashers are often the prelude to more adult films such as pornography which is a reflection of the young male audience back then (Clover 78). But our final girls, Sally Hardesty and Laurie Strode act as the antithesis of a pornographic actress and serve a different purpose.

Texas Chainsaw promotes a different kind of final girl than we have seen in *Halloween*. Sally shook the audience with her helplessness during the first two-thirds of the film and gave the viewers something to cheer about as her helplessness turns to complete determination and then domination. Carol Clover has also maintained that the final girl is mostly only seen as a main role in the final third of the film which happens in *Texas Chainsaw* (Clover 85). There are similarities here with Laurie Strode and many of the final girls of their time: Sally is your typical “good girl” in contrast to her other female friend (and only other female in the film), Pam (Teri McMinn), who is more scantily dressed while Sally remains dressed relatively conservatively. Pam does nothing overtly sexual, but through Daniel Pearl’s cinematography, we are greeted with a brief scene of Pam where the camera is at a low-angle, tilted upwards showing her leg, giving us a clear shot of her legs and a peak underneath her short shorts as the camera follows her from this revealing angle. This is important to note because Sally is never granted the same type of shots. Sally, for the most part, comes across as more demure. Like Strode, Sally wears

jeans and a tank top—nothing revealing at all. Nothing sexual at all. However, it is of note that Sally’s shirt is tight and does display her nipples: but this could be a remainder of the era as the 1970’s braless-bra was in fashion as was the “no-bra” movement—also of note is the cast is mostly intentionally dressed in hippie-style clothing which could explain why Pam wears no bra. Sally returns in 2022’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (d. David Blue Garcia), similar to Strode, and she is as tough as ever—she is dressed somewhat more masculine with a large cowboy hat and prepared for battle—almost military-like. With this alone, we are able to see the growth with Sally between the two films: she is aged, most likely near her 70s, with her white hair pulled back—there is no doubt that Sally is out for revenge. And similarly to the development of Laurie Strode, Sally is still stuck in her trauma living in a dilapidated small house ridden with newspaper clips of Leatherface’s victims.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, released four years prior to *Halloween*, introduces a villain who brings with him a severe sense of gender dysphoria, confusion, mommy issues and sexual frustration (which we see with many of these villains). In fact, the Sawyer family (Leatherface’s family) acts out the roles of a “traditional family:” we see a father raising his two male children while one of his children—Leatherface—will take the role of the “mother”. Here, tradition is twisted on its head as we see Leatherface don a wig and makeup to take the place of the only traditional female role in the family: the mother. Why is this important in defining the final girl? In fiction, gender roles often act as character traits: this is how we have some common stock characters thrown into horror films such as the dumb jock, the “slut,” the coward, or even a character placed to be a red herring. These roles specifically attach themselves to genders—the jock being male, the “slut” female (along with her sexually active male friend who somehow

always dodges the “slut” branding), the coward often thin or waif-like men and the red herring could be anyone but is always a side-side-side character.

In the original *Texas Chainsaw*, Leatherface’s character is interesting in the aspect of gender—he is seen both wearing a male face as well as a female face, complete with him putting on his mother’s makeup. He is then seen in the kitchen, cooking the meal. This sets up a dual role as Leatherface is both the hunter (or your traditional male who puts in work outside the home) as well as the traditional housewife who stays home and cooks the meals. Sally, however, comes into the film as a blank slate, neither acting as a traditional woman nor a traditional man. She bares none of the stereotypical attitudes or characteristics attributed to men or women.

Sally and Leatherface are polar opposites: Sally does not conform to gender roles and is happy in her own skin whereas Leatherface is seen being forced into conformity, forcing him not to be comfortable in his own skin—to the point where he wants to wear *other people’s* skin instead of his own. Sally does not. It is a confusing dichotomy to see Leatherface, who is supposed to be the strongest of the strong, whimper and writhe in his own skin while Sally may *look* weak but she is strong in knowing *who* she is—and we see who ended up on top: the only survivor—Sally.

Sexuality is also an aspect in the final girl’s story. As discussed, she is virginal, level-headed and tends towards gender-neutral attire and very minimal makeup. Gender roles serve as the basis of one of the film’s most tense moments: Sally’s dinner with the Sawyer family. Sally is tied up at the head of the table, sitting on a chair lined with human hands, while Leatherface’s father (known in the credits simply as “old man”) is barking orders to his children (Leatherface and his brother, here called “the hitchhiker”). Leatherface, wearing his mother’s face, is cooking and nearly cowers at every word his father says. It is an interesting moment to see the

vulnerability of Leatherface's character and makes the audience wonder: who is the villain here? Was Leatherface created by his decrepit father? Clover notes that "Sally is captured and brought to the dinner table, Leatherface demonstrates transsexual qualities wearing an excessive amount of makeup, a wig and making female noises. The fact that Leatherface is gender confused but the only one capable of killing in the family articulates the failure of gender roles in traditional Texan society" (Clover 47). The notion of the failures of Texan society relates to the aforementioned failures of the middle-class white suburbia in *Halloween* and the wealthy white teenage world of *Scream*.

Sally is crying, yelling and screaming—everything we would expect from a damsel in distress. But things turn even more strange: Leatherface brings down the nearly-dead body of his grandfather as the two boys move the Grandfather's face to catch stray blood from Sally's finger. This is a bizarre somewhat sexual moment of trading bodily fluids. It also forces upon the viewer the fact that the mother is no longer present in the family: she is quite simply a body of bones (akin to Norma Bates from *Psycho*). Leatherface, under the demanding masculinity of his father and lack of feminine energy in the home, has never been allowed the time to find his own true identity—especially considering if he were going through gender dysphoria, one might expect his mother, or a mother-like character to have been able to help him through this. If Leatherface expected Sally to fulfill a motherhood role, he and his family were exceptionally wrong.

It is during this dinner scene where we see Sally try to embrace her femininity using stereotypically feminine mannerisms: she tells the family she will do *whatever they want* if they end up letting her leave. The men mock her, seemingly blowing off any idea of sexual assault or rape—they are not interested in her sexually or what she has to offer them as a woman. Again, this hammers in the gender-neutrality of the final girl as she is not seen in this film as a sexual

object. The surreal over-the-top scene is absurd and the chaos almost forces a laugh out of the viewer. Isabel Pinedo says “we cringe at the gallows humor and laugh at the terror;” meaning that there can be, and often is, laughter in the darkest places to psychologically help us comfort ourselves (Langlois). After all, it *is* just a movie, but as Williams shows us, what we are watching can trick our bodies and our minds: we physically laugh, we physically cringe and then psychologically, we are stuck in a moment of self-reflection—how do we feel laughing at seeing our final girl in peril? The moment subverts “Cartesian theories on rationality” (Langlois). The female body, Sally, is being used and relied upon to further the emotional intent of understanding Sally’s pain—the visceral carnage acting as a metaphor for us to see what it might just be like living through Sally’s near demise. Viewing Sally as a woman in distress is on the viewer as the characters in the film make no mention of taunting Sally just because she is a woman.

Eventually, Sally unties herself and runs through a glass window (which happens twice in the film—showing a woman jump through and break a glass window to save herself is by definition strength). This is the moment where Sally takes her power back from not only Leatherface and his family but from the toxic men trying to toy with her. Sally runs to the street and finds a truck driver and later another truck drives by. Sally jumps on the truck, watching and laughing as Leatherface tantrums at losing his victim. He waves his chainsaw above his head as Sally, bloody and all, laughs—she beat the man and is actively getting away, laughing in his face—laughing in the face of patriarchy.

This final scene proves that Leatherface’s phallic chainsaw ends up failing him—almost as if Sally laughing at him is washing away whatever masculinity Leatherface has left in him. It is also of note that the 2022 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (d. David Blue Garcia) continues the use of the weapon but this time, his chainsaw is taken and wielded by the Lila. If masculinity is

channeled through a phallic object, then it could be said that the final girls, playing with the villains castration anxiety, are in control of the phallus, therefore having the power. They are able to toy with him and play with his masculinity as he is only left to watch *her* exacerbate *his* fears.

In that vein, and taking to account the legacy sequel, we notice that obsessions have shifted. While *Leatherface* was intently obsessed with Sally, in the 2022 film, we see that Sally has been tracking *Leatherface*'s every movements. She is waiting for the day to hunt him down. Similar to Laurie Strode in the *Halloween* legacy sequel where Laurie has lived her whole life dedicated to staying hyper-aware that Michael Myers could be lurking anywhere. In the same way, Michael turned into Laurie's obsession. The gender roles here have already shown a reverse. Even in *Scream*'s 2022 legacy film, *Scream*, we see *Ghostface* becoming Gale Weathers' obsession.

This shift in targets is vital to understanding the development in the role of the final girl and can help inform the viewer about the excess of the genre; as Williams says "to dismiss [slashers] as bad excess... is not to address their function as cultural problem-solving" (Williams). We take the final girl as a stand-in for women in society as she shows how gender empowerment does exist in many forms. Sally, along with the viewer (be it male or female) who can relate has become stronger, smarter and now is dead-set on ending the villain and closing the chapter on his reign of terror—be it literal terror from these films or the terror of the reality of life. All can be accomplished despite the odds. We see this come to fruition in 2022's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The 2022 version of the film, while lambasted by critics, does add an edge when it comes to the evolution of the final girl. In this film, we end up seeing two sisters: Melody & Lila (Sarah Yarkin & Elsie Fisher), who fight it out until the end and seemingly finish *Leatherface* once and

for all. While this generic ending is of course open-ended, that does not make the grand finale any less meaningful. During a few very brief scenes, the camera shows a POV shot through Sally Hardstey's eyes—as she is now an older woman, hell-bent on revenge. We notice, through the mise-en-scene of her small hut (which could be her own “terrible place”), that Sally has been tracking Leatherface and has an armory (similar to Strode) ready to fight. However, the treatment of Sally in this film shines light on a new aspect of the final girl. Sally appears to be a shut-in (unlike older Laurie Strode who, while yes, being a shut-in, Laurie was able to have children and live life—somewhat), keeping her misery in her own shack waiting for the day to get revenge. Sally is a prisoner to her past with a plan for the future.

By this point in time, assuming the legacy sequel takes place in 2022, Sally catches word that Leatherface is back and active. Hearing that he is tormenting the youth again, Sally realizes she is done hiding in her “terrible place.” This is a metaphor, as well, for the final girl's epiphany: she has been living in her own “terrible place” not just physically, but mentally as well. Hearing their past is coming back serves as a way for these women to come to terms with the past which has been haunting them and pushes them outside their comfort zone to see the daylight and to fight back—to finish what had begun.

Sally in the 2022 film is no longer smashing herself through glass windows like the original; now she grabs a shotgun and gets into her car—she is coming for him this time. While she keeps the traditional garb of the final girl (very male-centric clothing or gender-neutral), we notice that, since her clothing has not changed much, perhaps this is indicative of her character being stuck in time while she has difficulty adjusting and growing—perhaps, mentally, she is still that girl from the end of the original film—just with a bra this time. Trauma has a way of turning people

stagnant. But the news has broken her from her fugue state and she is ready to complete what she has been waiting years to do.

Melody and Lila are running through the small Texas village while Leatherface tortures the youths the sisters had brought down with them in hopes of gentrifying the decrepit old Texan town (similar to the manner in which the original teenage characters were trespassing on someone else's forgotten land). Leatherface has already begun to torment the young adults when Sally drives into the scene. Sally gets out of her truck, holding *her* phallic object (a shotgun). From head to toe, Sally is ready to fight. In an irreversibly uncomfortable scene, Leatherface does happen to slash Sally to death, but not before she is able to pass her shotgun down to Melody. In a technical sense, this is the first and only death of a final girl mentioned in this paper—but it must be said that her death was not in vain: she is now helping prop up the two *new* final girls—a handing-of-the-torch moment rife in these legacy sequels such as *Halloween* (2018) & *Halloween II* (2022) and highlighted in *Scream 5*. This inheritance of courage pops up a lot in these legacy sequels, giving weight to the fact that the final girls are not final girls by chance—they have been delt that which they can overcome.

Sally held off Leatherface long enough, and with Lila carrying Sally's gun (along with wearing Sally's hat) while her sister, Melody, takes hold of the chainsaw and uses *his own phallic weapon* against him forcing Leatherface to come face-to-face with his own anxiety and power issues. Now, the power is being held by the woman. Amidst all of this, Melody takes the last shot and shoots Leatherface down. What makes the final girl trope so powerful exists in this scene: we have an older generation fighting alongside the newer generation, passing down knowledge and hope, passing down and instilling the idea that women can come together to fight. Sally tells Lila not to run, as if she stays in fear of Leatherface, she will be running in fear

forever—Sally, along with Strode and the *Scream* women are all now at the point where they have reached a sense of closure knowing the future is in good hands. These women did not conform and they did not stand idly by. These final girls, as we are seeing, will go out fighting, possibly even dying to overcome the evils of the world. This is a great development in the history of the final girl: they are not just selfishly fighting to keep themselves alive—now they are fighting to protect others.

Conclusion

Scream is incredible evidence that the final girl trope has evolved. Since the beginning of this trope in the 1970s, we have seen a shift in *her* treatment. As Clover named the trope, the final “girl,” we now see that it is plural: the final girls. The original trope can be seen widely in popular culture be it through parody films, homages and she has even been seen in other genres. The original image of the final girl, as often pictured through Laurie Strode’s iconic denim outfit, may be one of the most familiar parts of this trope. And that may be one of the enduring traits about this trope—the clothing signifying her gender-neutrality or her, in some people’s mind, masculinization. But there is more to this than just masculinization and gender roles, as I have described it here—the final girl is about gender but is also about more than just that:

For a brief moment, I think it might be important to hear some details about me and the importance of horror on my life and why this topic is very near and dear to my heart. When I was a child, my family would gather around the tv to watch horror films—the only genre it seems we all could agree on watching. It is such irony that a horror film could end up bringing the family together. I now realize those horror movies had something we all wanted to see: and that is victory over evil. This is something I grew up hearing from the gospel and is fascinating to realize it was echoed in my family’s film choices (as ironic as it may be).

But these moments were more than just family coming together. As a child, watching the horror on screen, I was able to look around at the rest of my family and realize I had a group of people around me to protect me—especially with my mother holding her hand over my eyes during the gory scenes. Growing up, especially right before puberty, I began watching these films differently. Instead of covering my eyes for gore, now my mother would cover my eyes only if a woman took off her top or something sexual occurred. Then, after puberty, I became

more self-aware of what I was watching—that these films were echoes of the darkness and hope in society.

I began trying to look for something that represents me, a black man, in these films (controversially enough, I did notice the trope of the black character dying first—which has been semi-debunked by now as Complex Magazine stated in a 2013 article asking “Do Black Characters Always Die First in Horror Movies?” Short answer is no, but with my own insight, they may not die first but they are generally the first *brutal* death. And this did stick with me and is part of the wrongs I wish to right with my own films). Along with the short-lived or under-developed black characters, I noticed the women would be brutally killed—however there was always that one woman who made it to the end—the woman who survived. This woman does not just represent a woman—she represents the underdog that lives in all of us. Me, in my young mind, felt like the underdog and felt not seen—so I related to the final girl. I saw through her own will power and fight she could get what she wanted—if she could fight and vanquish that which society allows to prosper, so can I!

Growing from watching bad VHS copies of 60’s and 70s horror to watching rented tapes of classic giallo horror to finally being able to go to the theaters *without* parental guidance, I have noticed a shift in the role of this final girl. Yes, they are still mostly white women, but that makes no difference—the power of film is in its ability to act as a metaphor for our own lives—and just as those final girls fought, I would, too—fight for what I want, what I need, for my rights, for anything. This is most likely one of the strongest reasons I want to pursue a career in film.

I enjoyed seeing and researching what it is about the final girl trope that has lasted and endured for so many years. Overall, I am very pleased to see the shift in the treatment of the final girl. The earlier film I talked about, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, has a final girl that I would,

personally, say is the most basic foundation of what the final girl offers. Sally, in the original film, was not the most complex character—she barely had any lines and not much character development. However, she marked the beginning of seeing these women fighting back against evil (which generally happened to be men) and marked the start of a shift in the treatment of women in horror films—we can see the difference in the treatment of Sally versus the treatment of Janet Leigh's character, Marion Crane in *Psycho* who could have been the final girl but was punished due to her sexual and criminal activity. While the idea of punishing women in horror films has continued (as seen with the brutal murders of women in *Friday the 13th*), we cannot ignore that there are these female characters who make it to the end. A few years after *Texas Chainsaw*, the final girl blueprint was created through Laurie Strode. This blueprint has shifted and changed over time for the better.

Now, there are multiple final girls. Now, these final girls get to the end by working with each other, not against each other. Now, the final girls are shown in future legacy films passing the torch down to the new generation of females—empowering them as a mother figure, as a teacher, as a multi-dimensional character. The shift is brilliant and follows with the modernization of the treatment of women. No trope will be perfect but no trope will ever remain stagnant. The message resonating the most about the development of the final girl is that women are stronger together—with each other's passion and through each other's trauma, these women are able to build themselves up stronger and better than ever. They are smarter than Leatherface—they are stealthier than Michael Myers and they are more persistent than any iteration of Ghostface. As one they may be strong but together they are more powerful than ever.

Filmography

Alvarez, Fede. *Don't Breathe*. United States: Sony Pictures, 2016. Film.

Blanks, Jamie. *Valentine*. United States: Warner Bros, Pictures, 2001. Film.

Carpenter, John. *Halloween*. United States: Compass International Pictures, 1978. Film.

Clark, Bob. *Black Christmas*. Canada: Warner Bros., 1974. Film.

Craven, Wes. *Scream 4*. United States: Dimension Films, 2011. Film.

Craven, Wes. *Scream*. United States: Dimension Films, 1996. Film.

Cunningham, Sean S. *Friday the 13th*. United States: Paramount Pictures, 1980. Film.

Flanagan, Mike. *Hush*. United States: Netflix, 2016. Film.

Garcia, David Blue. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. United States: Netflix, 2022. Film.

Gillett, Tyler & Matt Bettinelli-Olpin. *Ready or Not*. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2019. Film.

Green, David Gordon. *Halloween Kills*. United States: Universal Pictures, 2021. Film.

Green, David Gordon. *Halloween*. United States: Universal Pictures, 2018. Film.

Hitchcock, Alfred. *Psycho*. United States: Paramount Pictures, 1960. Film.

Hooper, Tobe. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. United States: Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974. Film.

Nelson, Mike P. *Wrong Turn*. United States, Germany, Canada: Saban Films, 2021. Film.

Peele, Jordan. *Us*. United States: Universal Pictures, 2019. Film.

Radio Silence. Scream (Scream 5). United States: Paramount Pictures, 2022. Film.

Schmidt, Rob. Wrong Turn. United States, Germany, Canada: 20th Century Fox, 2003. Film.

Takal, Sophia. Black Christmas. United States: Universal Pictures, 2019. Film.

Zombie, Rob. Halloween. United States: Weinstein Company, 2007. Film.

Bibliography

Armus, Isabella. "Why the 'Final Girl' Still Lives - Women's Republic." *Womensrepublic.net*.

N.p., 3 Nov. 2020. Web. 28 Oct. 2021.

Bose, Shakya. "Phallic Fallacies: Perceptions of Gender and Power in Slasher Movies." (2016):

n. pag. Web. 28 Oct. 2021.

Brunell, Laura and Burkett, Elinor. "feminism". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Invalid Date,

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>. Accessed 10 November 2021.

Clover, Carol J. "Carrie and the Boys." *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern*

Horror Film. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print.

---. "Her Body, Himself." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry

Keith Grant. 2nd ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015. Print.

Ebert, Roger. "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Movie Review (1974) | Roger Ebert." n. pag.

Web. 28 Oct. 2021.

Foundas, Scott. "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre." *Variety* Oct 2003: 41. ProQuest

Langlois, Justin H. "The Vernal, the Visceral and the Violent: The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

and the Final Girl." *Off Screen*, vol. 20, no. 7, July 2016, [https://offscreen.com/view/the-](https://offscreen.com/view/the-texas-chain-saw-massacre-final-girl)

[texas-chain-saw-massacre-final-girl](https://offscreen.com/view/the-texas-chain-saw-massacre-final-girl).

Lanza, Joseph. “‘The Texas Chain Saw Massacre’: A Metaphor for Nixon-Era Mayhem.”

Salon.Com, 26 May 2019, <https://www.salon.com/2019/05/26/the-texas-chain-saw-massacre-a-metaphor-for-nixon-era-mayhem/>.

Mee, Laura. “Murders and Adaptations.” *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre*.

Ed. Alison Peirse. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020. Print.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Web.

<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey,%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf>

Paszkievicz, Katarzyna, and Stacy Rusnak. “Revisiting the Final Girl Looking Backwards,

Looking Forwards.” *Postmodern Culture* 28.1 (2017) *ProQuest*.

Phillips, Jevon. “A Timeline of Horror: Influential Moments from ‘Nosferatu’ to ‘Paranormal

Activity’ - Los Angeles Times.” *The Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 13 Oct.

2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-horror-timeline-20171012-htmlstory.html>.

Piepenburg, Erik. “In Horror Films, the ‘Final Girl’ Is a Survivor to the Core.” *The New York*

times 22 Oct. 2015. Web. 28 Oct. 2021.

Rubin, Rebecca. “Diverse Audiences Are Driving the Horror Box Office Boom.” *Variety*, 25

Oct. 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/box-office/horror-movies-study-1202994407/>.

Stommel, Jesse. “Something That Festers: The Silence of the Lambs, The Texas Chainsaw

Massacre, and the Visual Pleasures of Horror.” *Brightlightsfilm.Com*, 31 Jan. 2011,

https://brightlightsfilm.com/something-that-festers-the-silence-of-the-lambs-the-texas-chainsaw-massacre-and-the-visual-pleasures-of-horror/#.YI9_stPMKpo.

Tamhaney, Anish. "The Immortal, Genre-Blending Impact of 'Black Christmas.'" "

Michigandaily.com. N.p., 25 Nov. 2018. Web. 28 Oct. 2021.

Williams, Linda. *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant.

2nd ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015. Print.