

# Feminism in Horror: A Semiotic Analysis of *Crimson Peak*

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## Introduction

This research paper intends to conduct a semiotic analysis of the 2015 film *Crimson Peak* directed by Guillermo Del Toro. Though some may be quick to label the film as horror based on the ghosts creepy setting, and murder, *Crimson Peak* is a gothic romance first—as stated by del Toro himself—and a horror film second, and directly draws inspiration from classic gothic romance literature. To provide a simple description, gothic romance is often marked by desolate settings such as castles, supernatural or semi-supernatural phenomena, and a female lead who endures horrors and struggles to balance her independent nature with her feelings toward the male love interest (Pagan). The film follows Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska), an aspiring writer from Buffalo, New York who finds herself enamored by enterprising baronet from England Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston). After her father's sudden and mysterious death, Edith marries Thomas and moves with him back to his crumbling estate in England where he lives with his sister Lucille (Jessica Chastain). Shortly after her arrival Edith mysteriously falls ill and begins to unravel the mysterious and bloody past of her new husband and his sister. Periodically throughout the film, Edith is confronted by various ghosts who—though appearing at first to be menacing—aim to help her escape her deadly circumstances.

Expanding upon the previously mentioned intent, this project will examine *Crimson Peak* using semiotic analysis to determine if it is a feminist film, taking into account the general treatment of women in horror as a whole. Horror has not been particularly well known for being kind to female characters, generally either painting them as too fragile to handle the object of the horror, or, if they *are* capable, stripping them of their femininity (Ahmad). Sexuality is another important factor for women in horror, with female protagonists often being portrayed as sexually pure conversely to female antagonists and victims (Wellman et al). There are multiple works of

existing literature on these tropes, which are often packaged into the singular trope of the “final girl,” which references the trend of women being the sole survivor in a given horror film (Ashley). As a popular film genre, this matter of the representation of women in horror is something that should be more widely addressed in the mainstream. Though *Crimson Peak* is not a well-known film, it feels worth an examination considering how its categorization as a gothic romance sets it apart from many other horror films that have already been analyzed through a feminist lens in the past, namely slashers. Slashers are a subgenre of horror, usually categorized by a singular killer who murders several people throughout the film with a bladed weapon, and many popular horror films of the 1970s and 1980s fall into this particular category. While this does not necessarily describe *Crimson Peak*, Kindinger and Roche write it contains enough slasher elements to warrant an understanding of the horror aspect of the film through this particular lens.

The primary research question for this project is, is *Crimson Peak* a feminist film? For the purposes of this research, a feminist film in this case would be considered one where female characters are given depth and agency and avoid the perhaps more two-dimensional tropes that many female characters in horror frequently get bogged down in. As previously mentioned, horror does not always treat women well, and they tend to fall into the general categories of “too feminine” and “not feminine.” To provide general definitions, a character that might be categorized as “too feminine” could be Mina from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. While acknowledging that not all films adapt the story in the same fashion, Mina’s character is portrayed as a helpless victim of Count Dracula who must rely on others—namely men—to save her from a terrible fate. Conversely, a “not feminine” character might be Jamie Lee Curtis’ Laurie from *Halloween* whose appearance borders on androgyny while her ability to fight off

and survive the killer—a man—masculinizes her (Ahmad). The objective of this research project is to determine if *Crimson Peak*'s female characters end up falling into either of these categories of “too feminine” or “not feminine,” or if a healthy balance is able to be reached. To answer the posed question, a semiotic analysis of the film would be conducted to specifically examine the characters of Edith and Lucille in how they interact with each other and other characters within the film. As evidenced by various texts on the film, there is an abundance of symbolism in the costuming of Edith and Lucille and the design of the sets and lighting, which adds additional content to be taken into account in analyzing these characters.

### **Literature Review**

Horror films have long been criticized for their sometimes flawed portrayals of female characters, an issue that is notably prevalent in slasher films of the 1970s such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978). This is not a problem relegated exclusively to the 1970s of course, as stereotyped, sexist portrayals of women in horror films have existed before then and still continue to exist in contemporary horror cinema. According to director Guillermo del Toro, his film *Crimson Peak* (2015) is not a horror film but rather a gothic romance, however it contains enough elements familiar to horror—ghosts, a serial murderer, and a dark crumbling house on a desolate landscape—that horror is at least a secondary genre. In addition to these elements, *Crimson Peak* is also noted in various literature to contain elements of a slasher film as well as the associated trope of the “final girl.” Taking into account the film's interesting genre categorization, the research area of interest is in determining if *Crimson Peak* is a feminist film based on the elements it takes from slashers and traditional gothic literature, as well as through a semiotic analysis of the two primary female characters.

## Elements of Gothic Works

According to Pagan's 2018 article, the genre of gothic fiction was established in 1764 with the subgenre of gothic romance following shortly after in 1790. She writes that gothic fiction is marked by elements of "isolated settings with semi-supernatural phenomena," while gothic romance adds "female protagonists battling through terrifying ordeals while struggling to be with their true loves." Weeber (2018) mentions similar themes of gothic works in the particular context of *Crimson Peak*, including a haunted manor, the metamorphosis of the female protagonist, and supernatural beings caught between the living and dead. Adding a different perspective, both Murphy (2016) and Kindinger (2017) reference female gothic literature of the 1970s though from different angles. Murphy specifically mentions the article 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband' (Russ, 1973) that introduces its own criteria of contemporary—for the time—gothic literature, which includes elements such as an isolated manor and a "young, orphaned, and inexperienced heroine." Kindinger on the other hand discusses second-wave feminist readings of traditional gothic literature that emerged in the latter portion of the twentieth century, namely in that the ghosts in gothic literature are metaphors for the female experience.

## Defining the "Final Girl"

Ashley (2020) and Ahmad (2016) both provide descriptions on the horror film trope of the "final girl," which is a term used to describe the female character who—often but not always—is the sole survivor of whatever brutal killer happens to be the film's antagonist. Ashley and Ahmad also note how intrinsically connected sexuality is to the role of the "final girl," with her character being notably less sexual compared to other female characters within the particular film. Wellman et al. also bring attention to this issue of sexuality with their article 'Lady and the

Vamp: Roles, Sexualization, and Brutalization of Women in Slasher Films' (2020). This work is a content analysis of nearly fifty slasher films from the 1960s to the 2010s covering two hundred and fifty-two female characters that found that “purity was significantly related to lower brutalization and lower rates of death for all women,” while “[female] killers were most commonly portrayed having sex ... and actual/potential victims were brutalized and killed most for their sexualization.”

### **Gender Roles in *Crimson Peak***

Roche (2019) and Mucci (2020) discuss in their works the subversion of gender roles in *Crimson Peak*. In ‘Celebrating Imperfection Through Perfect Images: Guillermo del Toro’s Work,’ Roche notes that the character of Thomas—the primary love interest—is more feminized than perhaps the two main female characters and also points out the fact that he is the only character in the film to appear nude, thereby entertaining the female gaze rather than the oft catered to male gaze. Mucci also points to the fact that Thomas’ method of courting Edith, the protagonist, is via a dance. While addressed by Roche and Mucci as well, Opliger (2016) and Wagner (2015) place their focus on the subverted roles of the primary female character Edith and Lucille. In his review, Wagner writes that in *Crimson Peak* “[it’s] women driving the narrative, and the central conflict is over a woman’s understanding of love,” and Oplinger concurs, writing in her review that “[strong] female characters drive the plot of *Crimson Peak*...”

This literature review suggests that matters of gender and feminist ideology in horror films are fairly popular subjects. As previously stated, horror films have been particularly scrutinized in these areas, stemming especially from slasher films. However, these elements are not exclusive to films categorized solely as slashers and it therefore appears to be worthwhile to conduct an analysis of such a film. *Crimson Peak* makes an especially good subject as it contains

an interesting crossover of the slasher's "final girl" with the female-driven narrative of gothic romance. In conducting a semiotic analysis of the film's female protagonists, this capstone project will attempt to determine if *Crimson Peak* is able to balance these somewhat opposing elements to create a feminist film, or if it falls into the tropes that have been plaguing the horror genre for decades.

## **Analysis**

Semiotic analysis is the study of signs, which involves the examination of the sign itself as well as the explicit and implicit culturally determined meanings behind it. For example, a sunflower's explicit meaning would simply be that the particular structure and color of the flower indicates that it is a sunflower, while some possible implicit meanings could be summer, happiness, Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflower* paintings, or any other individually or culturally assigned meanings. In film, semiotic analysis is used the same way but specifically to determine the director's intent in using particular signs, which can often include certain uses of color or costuming to indicate meanings about the film's characters or plot. Semiotic analysis is very versatile and can be applied to a variety of subjects, and in this case it will be used to analyze Guillermo del Toro's 2015 film *Crimson Peak*. The intent of this analysis is to determine whether or not *Crimson Peak* is a feminist film by conducting a semiotic analysis of the film's primary female characters, main protagonist Edith Cushing and main antagonist Lucille Sharpe, and determining if either character falls into the previously defined categories of "too feminine" or "not feminine." Taken into account for this analysis will be dialogue—from the characters themselves as well as what other characters say to and about them—costuming, characterization,



sets, and lighting, in addition to concepts and tropes from the literature genre of gothic romance and film genre of horror.

Horror is a fairly big part of cinema—nearly 900 horror films were made globally in 2006 alone (Ahmad). However, many of the genre’s most iconic films emerged around the 1970s and 1980s, including *Halloween* (1978), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Friday the 13th* (1980), to name a few. In addition to all falling into the horror subgenre of slashers—defined by a singular killer murdering a group of people over the course of the film—these films also contain the trope of the final girl. Erik Piepenburg of *The New York Times* describes the final girl as “almost always white, young and straight(ish)” and “a sexless ‘good’ girl, usually with a masculine name like Chris...” (qtd. in Ahmad). The final girl is strongly tied to slasher films—notably the ones previously mentioned—as by the end of the film she manages to be the sole survivor of the killer. These concepts are integral in this analysis of *Crimson Peak*, as several works of existing literature point to the film’s slasher elements, as well as Edith’s fate being akin to that of the final girl.

Despite this discussion of horror, director Guillermo del Toro does not consider *Crimson Peak* to be a horror film, tweeting before the film’s October 2015 release, “*Crimson Peak*: Not a horror film. A Gothic Romance” (qtd. in Murphy 159). Gothic romance is a subgenre of gothic, and both generally contain specific elements such as foreboding, isolated settings, supernatural or semi-supernatural occurrences, and an overall gloomy atmosphere. On its own, the gothic romance subgenre usually features a female protagonist who “[battles] terrifying ordeals” and “[struggles] to maintain her independence” while falling for a man who is her one true love (Pagan). This is undoubtedly quite similar to the plot of *Crimson Peak*, so it is understandable why del Toro would rather his film be categorized as such. Furthering this notion—in relation to

the female protagonist—Brandon Wagner of *The Emory Wheel* writes that, “this is a film from the perspective of a woman. It’s women driving the narrative, and the central conflict is over a woman’s understanding of love. *Crimson Peak* [sic] gives women the narrative power...”

The woman with the most narrative power is of course Edith. She is the central character of the film, and it begins and ends with her. As we see at the start of the film, Edith stands in stark contrast to her fellow women of society. While Mrs. McMichael, her daughter Eunice and the other women in the group are dressed quite opulently in many colors and patterns with excesses of ornamentation, Edith dons a fairly understated—save the large sleeves—muted yellow ensemble. Her blunt way of speaking also sets her apart, as she describes baronet Thomas Sharpe as a “parasite with a title,” and when Mrs. McMichael mocks her and likens her to Jane Austen, who died a spinster, Edith declares that she would rather be Mary Shelley, who died a widow. Continuing the exposition of Edith’s character, she subsequently meets with a publisher to review a story she’s written but he dismisses her, complimenting her penmanship while claiming that as a woman she ought to consider adding a love story. Frustrated by this feedback, Edith resolves to submit her writing to a different publisher, this time typed up on a typewriter so that her feminine handwriting will not prevent her story from being taken seriously. All these pieces ultimately connect to the trope of the final girl, and how she is usually presented as more masculine or androgynous compared to her other female counterparts. However, Kindinger argues that “[Edith] might choose to not participate in established rituals of femininity, yet this does not masculinise her” (65). This statement seems most supported by her relationship with Thomas and Dr. Alan McMichael’s amorous affection towards her, as the final girl—being more masculine—is not often associated with romance, yet despite some of her more “unfeminine” characteristics Edith is still able to be perceived in a romantic way. It is especially notable in the

sex scene between her and Thomas about an hour into the film, where Edith is presented as sexually desirable and not, as previously quoted, “a sexless ‘good’ girl.” Sex is another major component of slasher films and the final girl trope as Kiri Blakely writes, “final girls and victims alike suffered from what Syracuse University professor Kendall Phillips calls ‘sexualized terror,’ wherein any woman who was sexually active got axed (or knifed or strangled or garroted)” (qtd. in Ahmad). Wellman et al support this claim in their content analysis of forty-eight popular slasher films between 1960 and 2018. Their findings determined that female characters categorized as pure were less likely to experience violence, while expressions of sexuality were more often tied to female killers and victims (660). This contrasts Edith’s experience who has sex in the film and manages not to be killed off, and is a fairly large subversion of the final girl and slasher genre. In relation to the tropes of the gothic genre, Gregory Mucci writes that “Edith...is the counter weight to this traditional crutch of dependency. She constructs a foundation of empowerment and identity lacking from the countless women of Gothicism...” which is another equally important perspective.

Perfectly contrasting Edith is Lucille Sharpe, Thomas’ elder sister. As Hayley Roche writes, “Edith represents everything Lucille is not; she is warm, loving and sane” (86). The visual differences between the two women are immediately apparent, with blonde Edith wearing lightly colored, modern clothing and dark-haired Lucille in dark, outdated fashions. These visual differences as well as character differences are made most apparent in the park scene (about twenty-five minutes into the film), where Edith and Lucille sit side by side as Lucille makes conversation about how the black moths at her home eat butterflies in a thinly veiled metaphor of herself and Edith. While viewers may not receive as much in-depth information about Lucille as with Edith, enough of her and Thomas’ past is revealed throughout the film to paint a decent

picture. As children, the two of them were confined to a room in the attic which is presumably when their incestuous relationship began. Their father abused their mother and eventually abandoned the family and their mother abused them in turn, leading to Lucille, at fourteen, to murder her and subsequently be sent to a mental institution. Whenever the siblings reunited again it appears Lucille formed the plan that Thomas seduce and marry wealthy women, and upon gaining access to their fortunes Lucille would kill them off—notably through slow poisoning. Multiple works of literature discuss the interesting dynamic between the Sharpe siblings, pointing out that Lucille is the one in charge of the two. Dina Pedro writes that “Lucille adopts traits that have traditionally been associated with men—authority, physical superiority and brutality—whereas Thomas displays attributes typically considered to be feminine—submission, compassion and empathy. Lucille is also the active villain, since she is the one that commits the horrendous crimes...” (88). Virtually every murder in the film—visually observed and referenced in dialogue—is committed by Lucille, save her own death which comes at Edith’s hands. This is again where the slasher aspect comes into play, as Lucille is the brutal serial killer contrasting Edith’s final girl. Her role is made most evident towards the end of the film, starting with the moment she stabs Edith’s would-be rescuer Dr. McMichael (at approximately one hour and thirty-four minutes), and followed by her murder of Thomas and attempted murder of Edith. In addition to her actions, Lucille’s choice of weapons—a kitchen knife and later a butcher’s knife—are typical of a slasher where the preferred weapons are generally sharp, bladed, and, as Kindinger notes from Carol Clover’s work, pretechnological. One final aspect of Lucille’s character to consider is her sexuality. As previously stated, research conducted by Wellman et al determined that female killers were most often depicted having sex, which is true in the case of Lucille—at approximately an hour and twenty-nine minutes into the film she and Thomas are

shown engaging in a sex act. However, as Edith is also shown having sex with Thomas, this particular point is somewhat negated. From the perspective of gothic works, Rose-Anaïs Weeber discusses Lucille in relation to the genre's popular trope of the temptress, who she describes as "the embodiment of feminine power, unrestricted sexuality and violence, untamed by society's codes of conduct and patriarchy" (123).

From the title alone, one can most likely determine the importance of the color red in the film. As Weeber aptly puts it, "[red] is only found associated with the ghosts, the red clay, Edith's wedding ring – which was Lucille's mother's ring – and Lucille herself. Red is, therefore, the colour of murder" (122). It is in the ballroom scene (at approximately sixteen minutes and thirty seconds) that viewers are first overtly introduced to red, as it is the color of Lucille's dress. The train of the gown lays at her feet like a pool of blood, and the small jewels dangling from her collar like blood droplets. This aggressive presentation of red contrasts the other female guests in attendance as they don mainly whites, creams, and muted pastels, and the style of the dress also stands out with its dated look of full sleeves and neck, opposing the modern look of bare necks, shoulders, and arms. Even the lighting of the room which is warm and mainly candlelit makes Lucille stand out. Lucille is also wearing her mother's ring which is put on display briefly before she covers it, most likely to conceal it from who she assumes is still Thomas' bride-to-be, Eunice McMichael. As is evidenced by her and Thomas' discussion later in the park scene, it is understood that Thomas uses the ring as a wedding ring for his doomed brides, but it also doubles as a signifier of the siblings' bond as Lucille firmly states, "The ring's mine. I earned it. I *will* want it back." Returning to the ballroom scene, Edith's dress contrasts Lucille in the same fashion as her peers. Additionally, Edith's dress is simple in its ornamentation with a few strings of pearls and a black bow at the back of her creamy pale pink

dress, opposing Lucille's excess of jewels and ruffles. For her part, Edith never wears red, excluding the ring after she marries Thomas. The most red associated with her is at the finale of the film, when Lucille's blood stains her hands, her own blood stains her right cheek—an injury sustained from Lucille—and the clay stains the bottom of her gown. Keeping in mind Weeber's interpretation, if red is the color of murder, for Edith in this scene it symbolizes her character evolution. She has been dipped in the red, in the murderous history of Allerdale Hall and its inhabitants, and she emerges stronger from her experience. It could perhaps be that she is now “tainted” by murder, but it has helped her gain a better understanding of herself and the world, whereas Lucille, surrounded by murder, has succumbed to it. Her life is bathed in red, from the blood of her victims, to her mother's ring, to the clay that oozes through the house and the ground, and it has ultimately warped her beyond redemption.

Based upon the above understandings of Edith and Lucille's characters, it is reasonable to conclude that *Crimson Peak* can in fact be considered a feminist film as outlined by this project. Neither of the women can be categorized as “too feminine” or “not feminine,” and instead reach a fairly perfect balance between the two. In Edith's case, her depiction as being outside the norm of her female peers does push her character in a relatively unfeminine direction, but this is tempered by a feminine appearance and her romantic and sexual desirability. Bonnie Rose Oplinger writes that “[*Crimson Peak*] grapples with Edith's coming of age from a virgin to empowered heroine...” (160), and while many films might go over-the-top to depict this as a great feminist awakening a la Logan Ashley's “#GirlBoss glitter,” *Crimson Peak* is far more understated. The intent is not necessarily to say that Edith's empowerment means she is a superior version of herself at the end of the film compared to when she started, so much as a way to show how she has grown and developed as a person. Additionally, in spite of categorically

fitting most of the criteria of a final girl, Edith very notably is able to be depicted as sexual without being punished (i.e. killed) for it like many other women of slashers. As for Lucille, her depiction of femininity is quite similar to Edith's at its core in that her traditionally masculine traits—in this case her violence and dominant personality—are balanced with her feminine appearance and romantic and sexual desirability, even if the latter two exist solely in relation to her own brother. While the incest does perhaps cast a deviant light on Lucille's sexuality, del Toro does not necessarily frame it as evil but rather the cause of the evil. As Pedro writes, “[t]he only love the Sharpe siblings ever experienced was from one another, and it is their perpetual solitude and interdependence that made them establish such a morbid bond” (87), and the morbid bond in turn leads to Lucille's long string of murders. Interestingly, both women in the film are victims despite being opposite archetypes of protagonist and antagonist: Lucille is a victim of her past and Edith is a victim of the Sharpes. The primary difference is of course that Lucille remains a victim even after her death while Edith is able to move beyond her victimhood and emancipate herself, effectively ending the ever-repeating cycle of victimization perpetrated by the Sharpes. Edith and Lucille are simultaneously doubles and opposites; contrasting in looks and demeanors but both struggling because of love. Though some may argue that love for a man being the central conflict is contrary to the ideals of feminism, both women are very much their own individuals, and as strongly written characters with strong personalities, it is abundantly clear that *Crimson Peak* revolves around its women.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations for Future Research**

*Crimson Peak* is a woefully underrated film for all the beauty exuding from its visuals and characters, whose particular quality can be primarily attributed to the film's gothic

inspirations. The horror, though not the main focus of the film, is also well-executed, and breaks several conventions of ghost-centric and especially slasher films. Though a final girl, Edith is never masculinized to the point of being seen as asexual or undersirable, while at the same time her character does not veer too far in the other direction where she finds herself a helpless victim of the Sharpes in need of rescue from her true love Dr. McMichael. As Thomas says in the film she is “so different,” not only from Lucille and his previous wives, but from many slashers’ final girls—though of course the latter is not referenced within the film. Lucille, for her part, is actually quite similar to Edith. Though her stereotypically masculine traits of aggression and dominance push her in one direction, it is balanced by her feminine appearance and—though incestuous—sexual desirability. Neither character sits at the pinnacle of stereotypical masculinity or femininity, but rather they are nuanced, sometimes leaning one way or the other but never too far from the center. This of course does not imply androgyny, but rather that their aspects and presentations of masculinity and femininity are more or less equal, and that one does not overpower the other. Also important to note is the period the film is set in, 1901, and how even as women in the very early twentieth century—when women had fewer rights than those of the present, and even women depicted in 1970s slashers—Edith and Lucille are not solely defined by their womanhood, and possess the agency to present themselves however they wish. Granted they *are* film characters and del Toro could have realistically portrayed them in any manner of his choosing, but even with the unreal elements of some of his period films, he is generally faithful about creating historically accurate representations.

For future research on the particular subject of feminism in *Crimson Peak*, it seems reasonable that others may find different measures of feminism in the film as opposed to “too feminine” and “not feminine.” Also a worthy endeavor would be to look outside solely *Crimson*



*Peak* and conduct a similar analysis of femininity and feminist messages in other non-traditional horror films. The pervasive narrative is that horror films on the whole treat female characters poorly and write them into stereotypical boxes, but as evidenced here that is not always the case. Perhaps there are other films that are not strictly horror that have similar themes of feminism and a trend will emerge, or perhaps it will confirm that there *is* an overwhelming problem in the treatment of women in all facets of horror film, and *Crimson Peak* is one of the exceptions. Regardless, the issue of female representation of women in horror films is far from resolved, and requires further attention if any widespread, long-lasting change is to be implemented.

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