

Modern Horror Film and the Evolution of the “Final Girl”

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond its surface-level entertainment value, film can serve as a window into the deeply-held and automatic beliefs of a time and culture. When viewed critically, movies are a way to study culturally-held attitudes about both minority and majority groups, as well as the power structures that hold these beliefs in place. In particular, mainstream Hollywood films are produced by those in positions of power, and their content is a reflection of what it is believed will please a mainstream audience. Often, this means producing media content which follows trends and patterns that reinforce the power of a dominant group over minority groups. This concept is referred to as hegemony, and it is key to the study of media criticism (Storey, 80).

Women are among those who are typically marginalized and misrepresented in mainstream media, both behind and in front of the camera. On the production end, women make up a tragically small proportion of popular film writers and directors (*Women Make Movies*). On screen, male and female characters alike are often written and portrayed in ways which reinforce rigid gender roles. Female characters are often limited in their importance within stories, and in the types of roles they are permitted to fill. In many genres, it is rare to come across a film which features a woman as its protagonist (*Women Make Movies*). This is not the case within the horror genre.

Strong female characters abound within contemporary horror film, a phenomenon which warrants investigation. How has the female horror protagonist changed over time, and how has she stayed the same? How are these characters portrayed, and what effect does this have on audiences? To answer these questions, I examined 3 popular contemporary horror films featuring strong female protagonists: *Evil Dead* (2013), *You're Next* (2011), and *Jennifer's Body* (2009). Though much about the traditional horror movie formula has remained the same since the

1970's, modern horror films tend to present their female protagonists as more morally ambiguous than ever. Additionally, instead of featuring senseless violence, these modern films tell stories of women fighting violent to overcome various dependencies in their lives. While the genre succeeds in offering complex depictions of strong female characters, the use of brutal violence in these depictions may lessen from their positive impact.

## METHODS

By analyzing the above films through the lens of feminist criticism, I hope to answer some of my questions surrounding the modern horror protagonist. According to feminist theory, we currently reside in a patriarchy, a set of power systems in which men have dominance of women. According to feminist criticism, representations of gender within media often work to reinforce patriarchal ideals (Watkins and Emerson, 153). One of the ways in which this has historically been accomplished within film is through the exclusion of women from central roles. When women are featured in film, they are often oversexualized, underdeveloped, flat characters (*Women Make Movies*). Even dynamic female protagonists often follow domestic, romantic storylines and can rarely be seen accomplishing the great feats attained by the male hero of the action, sci-fi, and fantasy genres. The Bechdel Test is a simple assessment tool used within feminist film criticism to illustrate this issue, and it can be applied to any film. The test originated in Alison Bechdel's comic, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and in order for a film to pass it, it must meet the following three requirements: 1.) It must contain at least two female characters 2.) Two female characters must have a conversation with one another 3.) The conversation must be about something other than a man (Bechdel). Approximately half of all popular films fail this test ("Stats and Graphs").

In addition to their absence, the sexualization and objectification of female characters is a key grievance of feminist film critics. The objectification of women on screen is best discussed in Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic interpretation of visual portrayals of women in cinema, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." According to Mulvey, the camera in film views women much in the same way that men do, objectifying the female body. Audience members take on the active male role of looking, and women on screen take on the passive, feminine role of being looked at (Mulvey, 837). Taking Mulvey's perspective, female characters in film automatically are ascribed a certain amount of passivity and vulnerability.

Many feminist critics of the horror genre contend that the vulnerability of women is accentuated in horror, where women are shown in fear for a disproportionate amount of time when compared to their male counterparts. Deeply embedded within the horror film genre is the classic image of woman in fear. Misogynistic trends and tropes pervasive in all forms of media become especially disturbing with the incorporation of the brutal and often sexual violence depicted in horror films. According to the 2003 study, "Sex And Violence In Slasher Films: Re-Examining The Assumptions," by Barry S. Sapolsky, Fred Molitor and Sarah Luque, slasher films have historically portrayed violence against their male and female characters in drastically disparate ways. This qualitative study looked at the top slasher films from the 1980's and 1990's and found that in both groups men were actually physically victimized at a slightly higher rate than women (Sapolsky, Molitor, and Luque, 35). However, the researchers also counted the time in seconds both male and female characters were shown on screen in fear. The results showed that, on average, female characters were depicted in fear three times as often as their male counterparts (Sapolsky et al., 35).

According to Carol J. Clover in her 1993 book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Laura Mulvey's notion of the woman as "looked at" and man as the "looker" falls in line with the male and female roles assigned to the killer and victim in the classic, formulaic slasher film. The killer in the slasher film (invariably male) follows his female victim around, watching her as she becomes more and more frightened, intentionally delaying the moment when he finally goes in for the kill in order to revel in her suffering. Through strategic camera angles, the audience is offered the killer's perspective, taking on the male gaze (Clover, 8).

Here and for the rest of this paper I will focus specifically on "low horror," set apart from more artistic, highly respected horror such as *The Shining*. Included within the category of "low horror" is the slasher film subgenre. According to Clover, "low horror" in general and the slasher film in particular is "a transparent source for subcultural attitudes toward sex and gender" (126). She identifies pornography and low horror as "body" genres, claiming that within both genres, a film's success is associated with the intensity of the physiological response the audience experiences. With pornography, this physiological response is physical arousal. With low horror, the response can be measured in physical fear reactions such as heart palpitations. Carol associates pornography and low horror with issues of sex and gender, respectively, making low horror the ideal lens through which to analyze modern understandings of gender (126).

There is a clear historical tendency within the slasher genre to present women as frightened victims, perhaps encouraging audiences to revel in their emotional and physical suffering. However, Clover argues that audiences of slasher films are meant to side not with their sadistic killers, but with the sole-surviving female characters who succeed in vanquishing them

in the end (60). Clover refers to this tormented but victorious female character as the “final girl,” a now established trope within feminist criticism (35).

According to Clover, the “final girl” began (with the slasher film) in 1974 with the classic *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (36). The “final girl” is not a typical girl with typical feminine characteristics, and this is essential to her survival. Contrasted with other characters, the “final girl” is shown throughout the film as being intelligent, resourceful, and level-headed (Clover, 39). Clover also emphasises the importance of sexual abstinence in the “final girl,” as sexual transgressions lead to destruction in the world of slasher films (39). While she is comparatively strong and level-headed and fights back against the film’s antagonist with purposeful aggression, she is still a victim. Much of the movie focuses on showing the “final girl” in fear, and the climactic scenes of the film show her screaming as she is beaten, tortured, and chased by the male killer (38). It is her victimhood that encourages her to become a hero in the end.

Since the publication of much of this research, writers of horror movies have continued to prominently feature female protagonists, allowed them more agency, and moved away from portraying them solely as victims. While I do not disagree with Clover’s generally positive assessment of the “final girl,” I contend that a critical look at this empowered victim is necessary as it may shape the way female audience members view their own empowerment. Special attention must be paid to the role of victimization in character development as well as overlapping themes of violence and sexuality.

## DESCRIPTIONS

## **You're Next**

In *You're Next*, a young woman named Erin goes with her boyfriend to his family's remote home for a family reunion. Toward the beginning of the film, Erin is bubbly, friendly, and almost ditzy. She attempts to gain favor from her boyfriend's mother by offering to do domestic chores. When her boyfriend's brother sarcastically mocks the couple's relationship directly to her face, she either does not understand the insult or chooses not to be angered by it. Erin is also depicted as being dependant on her boyfriend, almost physically clinging to him during scenes. She is described by another character as "annoying."

When the family is attacked by three masked intruders, Erin's personality immediately changes. She takes charge during the crisis, helping the family members get to safety, dressing wounds, and setting traps. As everyone else is killed off one by one, Erin outsmarts and outmaneuvers the intruders, brutally murdering all three of them throughout the film as they attempt to take her out. When questioned about her competence in the situation, Erin reveals that she was raised on a survivalist compound.

Toward the end of the film it is revealed that Erin's boyfriend Crispian, his brother Felix, and Felix's girlfriend Zee hired the three intruders to kill off their family members so the three of them could collect their family's substantial inheritance. Without hesitation, Erin kills Felix and Zee when they come after her, stabbing the latter through the head with a screwdriver and shoving the blades of a blender through the former's skull before plugging it in and turning it on. When Erin comes face to face with her boyfriend after learning of his part in the plan, she stabs him in the jugular. The police arrive at the house just in time to see her attack him, seemingly unprovoked, and shoot her.

## **Jennifer's Body**

*Jennifer's Body* tells the story of a teenage girl named Needy (short for Anita). Needy is intelligent but awkward, passive, and, as her name suggests, overdependent on her best friend Jennifer. When Jennifer convinces Needy to go to an indie rock concert with her at a local dive bar, disaster strikes. The bar catches fire during the middle of the band's set and Jennifer leaves with the rock group in the ensuing chaos. Needy is worried about her but goes home, only to become more worried when Jennifer shows up in the kitchen covered in blood and vomiting an animated black goo.

Throughout the course of the film, Needy discovers that when Jennifer went away with the indie band, they attempted to use Jennifer as a virgin sacrifice in a demonic ritual meant to help them gain fame and success. Due to Jennifer's status as a non-virgin, the ritual backfired, and Jennifer became a succubus, a demon who seduces her victims before killing them. Jennifer must regularly seduce, kill, and feed on boys throughout the film in order to keep her new, unnatural strength.

Needy is mostly absent from the action of the film, acting mainly as an observer until the very end. Even after figuring out what Jennifer is and what she has been doing to Needy's male classmates, Needy's affection for Jennifer keeps her from intervening. This is true until near the end of the film, when Jennifer goes after Needy's boyfriend, Chip. Needy finally steps in to attack Jennifer in defense of Chip, who dies anyway. Finally, to avenge Chip, Needy goes to Jennifer's house and attacks her with a boxcutter. After a brief struggle peppered with witty banter, Needy stabs Jennifer through the heart, and she dies.

We next see Needy imprisoned in a mental institution. This version of Needy, post-Jennifer, is angry and rebellious. She talks back, kicks orderlies, and shares with the audience an angsty internal monologue. The film ends with Needy escaping from the mental institution by kicking a hole through the wall of her cell, off to kill the members of the indie band.

### **Evil Dead**

The film centers around a young recovering heroin addict named Mia who is taken to a cabin in the middle of the woods by her brother David, his girlfriend Natalie, and their two friends, Eric and Olivia. Mia goes to the cabin voluntarily at first as a self-imposed rehab, showing her dedication to her recovery by pouring her last dimebag down a well. Mia is initially depicted as quiet, somber, and unhealthy. During a conversation with her brother, it is revealed that she resents him for being absent during their mother's death. Her personality is characterized by anger and fear.

The group discovers an old book in the cellar bound in human skin and Eric reads aloud the Latin passages within, summoning a demon. Mia, who is pacing outside the cabin suffering from withdrawal, sees the demon and says she wants to go home. Her friends and family, however, have already decided that they are going to keep her at the cabin against her will until she is clean. It is revealed that a previous heroin overdose legally killed Mia for a small amount of time. Her friends use this as justification for her kidnapping. Mia asserts that she will stay clean after leaving but does not feel safe at the cabin, but her friends still refuse to let her leave. She takes the keys and drives away on her own but is intercepted and possessed by the demon.

Once her friends realize that Mia has become violent, they lock her in the cellar. This is where Mia spends a large part of the film while the possession spreads between the rest of the

cabin's inhabitants like a zombie virus. In the meantime, Eric reads more of the sinister skin-bound book and learns that the possession can be ended by burning, burying alive, or dismembering a possessed individual. One by one, Mia's friends become possessed and kill one another. Finally, only Mia, her brother David, and a possessed Eric remain alive. David saves Mia by burying her alive, digging her up after she has died, and defibrillating her. Mia is alive and back to her normal self when David is attacked by Eric. David sets the cabin on fire with both Eric and himself still inside.

A monstrous demon is summoned from the earth and Mia, the sole survivor, must fight him on her own. After spending the majority of the movie possessed and in a cellar, Mia exhibits extreme bravery during this final battle. Blood rains down from the sky as she wields the iconic chainsaw against the demon, cutting off his legs. When during the struggle her arm is pinned underneath a car, she rips her flesh off to escape, grabs once more for the chainsaw, and saws through the demon's face until he is dead. The sky stops raining blood. Mia walks with purpose into the rising sun.

## ANALYSIS

### **You're Next**

Of the three films discussed in this paper, none exemplifies Clover's "final girl" as fully as *You're Next*. Erin, the protagonist, remains level-headed throughout the various crises of the

film, shown in stark contrast to the panicked uselessness of the other victims and aggressors. She is never depicted in a sexual situation, and her relative sexual innocence is highlighted by the promiscuity of three other female characters, who all die. She fights back against the film's many antagonists brutally and without hesitation, living to be the sole survivor, yet she is still a victim. By the end of the film, Erin embodies almost every characteristic of the "final girl," with several significant alterations to the trope. While Erin is presented as being sexually innocent, her emotionless physical brutality detract from the complete moral purity of the "final girl." And though Erin is subjected to fear, trauma, and physical violence, her greatest suffering comes from emotional betrayal.

Clover claimed that a strong moral code is necessary for the survival of the "final girl." (39). She must abstain not only from sexual activity but all vices. Erin is in fact depicted as being sexually pure relative to most of the film's other female characters. For example, the film opens with a young woman having sex with a much older man. The man then gets up to shower and the woman goes downstairs into the kitchen, where she becomes the film's first victim, murdered by an unseen intruder. Sexually promiscuous women are more explicitly connected to corruption later on in the film. Zee, the female conspirator after the family's money, attempts to initiate sex with her boyfriend and co-conspirator Felix on the bed next to his deceased mother, whose death they facilitated. "Fuck me next to your dead mom," she insists. Horrified, Felix declines. On the contrary, Erin is never shown in a sexual situation, making her appear innocent by comparison. However, Erin still does not quite fit the criteria for innocence set for the "final girl" by Clover.

While it has always been necessary for the "final girl" to commit at least one violent act upon finally overcoming her tormenter, Erin kills a total of seven people, often using excessive

violence and showing little emotion. For example, Erin kills the aforementioned Felix by shoving the blades of a blender base through the top of his skull and plugging it into the wall. Panting and covered in blood, she slumps to the floor in relief, apparently not at all emotionally disturbed for having committed such a brutal act. But even the blender assault is accomplished out of self defense- Erin's life is in immediate danger when she resorts to weaponizing kitchen utensils. On the contrary, Erin kills her boyfriend Crispian out of anger. Crispian is unarmed and unthreatening when he confesses his part in the plan to Erin, who stabs him in the jugular. While she remains a likeable, sympathetic character, Erin's hidden animalistic violent tendencies prevent her from quite fitting into the "final girl" trope defined by Clover.

Though Clover's "final girl" is strong and victorious, she remains a vessel for the audience's terror and is frequently shown in fear, fulfilling the voyeuristic desires of the audience (36). Yet the bulk of Erin's victimization is not visually represented. Erin's greatest suffering in the film occurs when she discovers Crispian's furtive involvement in the murder of his family. Unlike the slasher films dissected by Clover, the violence in *You're Next* is not committed at random by faceless men for the sake of violence itself. Erin's boyfriend Crispian planned and organized the attacks to achieve a specific purpose, not with the intention of physically harming Erin, but complacent with the knowledge that she will likely come out of the experience severely traumatized.

Erin's dependence on her boyfriend is apparent from the beginning of the film. Until the bodies start to drop and Erin takes charge of keeping everyone in the house safe, she is shown almost exclusively by her boyfriend's side, grasping for his attention and the approval of his family. Nothing is revealed to the audience about Erin's life or history, and her personality is

defined by her relationship to her boyfriend. As the plot progresses and Erin is separated from Crispian, she easily assumes the role of leader. In fact, this change takes place as soon as the family's first victim falls. As the rest of the family sits screaming in the dining room, Erin seems to go momentarily into a state of shock, staring off blankly. When she snaps out of it, she proclaims that it's not safe in the dining room, there are too many windows. She begins rallying everyone into the foyer, yelling at them to move faster and offering them chairs for cover. Powerful and cunning, she is drastically different from the clingy girlfriend of the opening scenes. It's as if something within Erin snaps, and the dire situation mixed with separation from her boyfriend gives her the agency and individuality she needs to survive. At the film's climax, when Erin learns of Crispian's participation in the plan to collect his parents' inheritance, she immediately kills him. After killing five others, this is the first true "murder" she commits. It is not out of self-defense, but self-respect. It is a final, brutal separation from the boyfriend upon whom she was previously dependant.

Read in this way, *You're Next* is the story of a strong woman who has lost herself to her relationship with an abusive man. The film chronicles her journey to reclaim her individuality as she allows herself to be separated from her abuser. Erin's victimization is not a visual display to please a voyeuristic audience. It is a plot device crucial to the development of her character.

### **Evil Dead**

As a protagonist, Mia follows a very unique storyline as she spends a good percentage of the film possessed and locked in the cellar, out of sight. Like Erin, she is like the "final girl" in that she is the sole survivor of her story and brutally vanquishes the antagonist using level-

headed thinking and sheer force of will. Also like Erin, Mia is deeply flawed. Mia's victimhood does not derive from the obvious external source of "horror" in the film. The demonic forces which take over Mia's body and the massive corporal demon she slays during the climax serve as a metaphor for her heroin addiction, her main source of torment throughout the film.

Just as *You're Next* illustrates Erin's flaws through depictions of her brutality, *Evil Dead* makes it clear that Mia as a character is morally ambiguous. Clover describes the "final girl" as a bookworm and a Girl Scout (39). Mia, on the other hand, is presented as a washed-out heroin junkie, whose dependency serves as the driving force in her narrative, the entire reason she and her friends and family retreat to the solitude of the woods. The seriousness of Mia's drug addiction becomes apparent early on in the film when her friends reveal to her brother that a recent overdose left Mia legally dead for a while before she was resuscitated. This story informs both the audience and Mia's brother that Mia's addiction is such that her very life depends on the success of her forced recovery. Her friends need to keep her in seclusion, even against her will, because she herself lacks the fortitude to make her own decisions and save her own life.

Mia's character follows three stages of development as she, like Erin, gains independence from that which is limiting her. Initially, she is pitifully addicted to heroin. Her weakness is highlighted by her face, dark and sunken-in despite her youth, her shaking hands, and her frantic pacing as she struggles with the pain of withdrawal. Her family and friends talk to her like she is fragile, something to be protected. Yet, in line with Clover's "final girl" trope, Mia displays intelligence and perceptiveness. For example, before anyone else in the film has an inkling, Mia knows that there is something evil in the cellar. "I don't know what's wrong with you people," she says shortly after they have entered the cabin. "There's something dead, and it reeks." Her

eyes are wide and she is visibly disturbed, yet her friends discredit this as hypersensitivity due to her withdrawals. The group later ventures into the cellar to find it filled with the corpses of cats. Mia is also the first to experience the demonic force which antagonizes the group. When she tells her friends what she has seen and that something terrible is going to happen if they do not leave, this too is brushed off as a symptom of her withdrawal. Though like the “final girl,” Mia is portrayed as competent and intelligent compared to her peers, her heroin addiction to some extent defines her.

When Mia is possessed she is physically violent and verbally obscene. The parallels between Mia’s possession and her addiction become apparent once she has been locked in the cellar. She says and does anything she can to lure the cabin’s other inhabitants into the cellar with her, much like someone with a severe addiction will say or do anything to get a fix. When she makes uncomfortable sexual advances toward her brother, this affirms the notion that Mia is no longer in control of her actions. “Why don’t you come down here so I can suck your c\*\*\*, pretty boy?” she yells to her brother from the cellar. He replies “Mia?” only to be informed by the demon inhabiting her body that Mia is no longer “there”. She has become a victim of her addiction. She watches helplessly as, one by one, she loses her friends and family to that which has taken her over.

Once Mia has lost all of her friends and family and recovered from her possession, she enters the third and final stage of her character development. Showing bravery and resourcefulness for the first time in the film, Mia violently destroys a giant demon which rises from the earth. Like Erin seals her independence from her abusive boyfriend by stabbing him in the neck, Mia recovers once and for all from her dependency on heroin when she saws the

demon in half. In both narratives, a dramatic display of violence is used as a vessel for character development.

### **Jennifer's Body**

Of the three films examined in this paper, *Jennifer's Body* strays the furthest from the traditional slasher narrative. Most of the film takes place not in an isolated and foreign area like the previous films discussed, but in the town where the protagonist resides. Additionally, said protagonist is not the sole survivor of *Jennifer's Body*, though she still embodies many characteristics of the "final girl." Not only is Needy portrayed as almost comedically innocent compared to Jennifer, she is resourceful throughout the film and exceptionally brave by its end. For example, she realizes before anyone else in the film what is going on with Jennifer, and takes to the library to conduct further research about her friend's condition. She then successfully deduces that Jennifer has been transformed into a succubus and that her next victim will be Needy's boyfriend Chip. Like in *You're Next*, Needy's innocence is highlighted by Jennifer's overt sexuality. However, unlike Clover's "final girl," Needy is not sexually abstinent.

Sexuality is a key theme in *Jennifer's Body*, with Jennifer serving as the archetypal oversexualized seductress. When mistaken for a virgin, Jennifer indignantly asserts, "I'm not even a backdoor virgin," as if insulted. In contrast, Needy is meek and inexperienced in the realm of sex. Even so, she is shown having sex with her boyfriend, something that is forbidden to Clover's "final girl."

Needy's sexuality is most explicitly depicted during her interactions with Jennifer, and it is her bisexuality which truly sets her apart from the "final girl." Needy's sexual and romantic

fascination with her best friend is first hinted at in one of the first scenes. Needy is watching intently and affectionately as Jennifer cheers at a pep rally in slow motion when a girl sitting in the bleachers near her observes this behavior and calls Needy a lesbian. Needy's queerness is more explicitly implied when she leaves Chip's house in a panic after having a vision about Jennifer killing someone. She arrives home to find Jennifer in her bed. At first she is upset by her own vision as well as Jennifer's intrusion and recent suspicious behavior. However, Needy is quickly calmed by her friend's advances. Jennifer tries to convince Needy to let her stay the night. "We can play boyfriend/ girlfriend like we used to," she pleads before kissing Needy, who responds passionately.

Like in *You're Next* and *Evil Dead*, *Jennifer's Body* is the story of a woman violently extinguishing her own dependency. It is clear at the beginning of the film that Needy is obsessed with Jennifer, perhaps to an unhealthy extent. It is also clear that Jennifer knows this and abuses it. During a play fight when the two friends are preparing to leave for the fateful rock concert, Jennifer pushes Needy somewhat violently against the wall. Needy stumbles and the room goes momentarily quiet, but Needy moves past the assault almost immediately. She lets Jennifer boss and drag her around constantly, and puts up with her occasional verbally abusive jabs. Needy's boyfriend is outspoken about his disdain towards Jennifer and the way she treats Needy, calling her "evil." Needy brushes this off just as she brushes off Jennifer's more literally demonic behavior. The first time Needy encounters said behavior, Jennifer is hunched over on Needy's kitchen floor, covered in blood and eating a rotisserie chicken with her hands, Needy's only objection to this behavior is a gentle protest that her mom bought the chicken at Whole Foods and it is off limits for consumption. As time progresses and Jennifer's behavior becomes more

explicitly “evil,” Needy slowly becomes aware of it. It isn’t until Jennifer threatens Needy’s boyfriend that Needy decides to take action against her by stabbing her in the heart. Like Erin in *You’re Next*, Needy struggles with dependency in a relationship which she slowly discovers is abusive. Even her name suggests this. As Needy learns more and more about her friend and takes action against her, she becomes stronger. The meek and awkward high school student at the beginning of the film is eventually replaced by a tough-as-nails convict powerful enough to kick through the metal bars of her cell and make her escape.

## DISCUSSION

Clover's "final girl" is alive and well in these contemporary horror films, though she has been adapted to please modern audiences. In analysing which of the "final girl's" traits have survived and which of them have become outdated, we gain insight into the transformation of gender expectations through time. There are two primary transformations apparent in Erin, Mia, and Needy. The first is their relative lack of innocence. In the films discussed by Clover, the "final girl" needed to be conspicuously intelligent and perceptive, possess traditionally non-feminine qualities, and display a virtuous nature which sets her apart from the other characters in the film.

In accordance with her strong moral character, the "final girl" is rarely shown engaging in sex, drugs, or other vices. As Clover discusses in her book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, the deaths of the "final girl's" peers can usually be connected to an apparent moral flaw or mistake on their part (34). She calls gender into play here with the assertion that while men in horror films are, for the most part, only killed in connection to some form of on-screen immoral

behavior, this does not necessarily apply to their female counterparts. Women in horror movies, according to Clover, can be killed just for being women (34). Femininity, in the slasher movies of Clover's writing, is enough of a moral flaw to warrant a character's death, hence the necessity of the "final girl's" rejection of traditionally feminine traits (38). This phenomenon reinforced a harmful worldview in which femininity is depicted as being undesirable, and in which women must prove their worth by not only adopting masculine personalities, but by refraining from any sort of morally questionable behavior.

Erin, Mia, and Needy are all flawed, complex characters. Erin's brutality, Mia's drug addiction, and Needy's bisexuality and infidelity would lead to their certain demise in the morally black and white universe of Clover's "final girl." In that universe, the virtuous female protagonist, perfect in every way, justly prevails against the monstrously violent male antagonist. This type of narrative upholds essentialist views on gender. In his 1968 essay, "Some Remarks on Essentialism," Richard L. Cartwright defined the essentialist view as that which prescribes a necessary set of attributes to any specific entity. In slasher movies of the past, the female protagonist was essentialized as virtuous, confined to a box of behaviors acceptable for her role and gender. This indicates (or is meant to appeal to) an audience which has trouble sympathizing with women who are flawed, and which is reluctant to see imperfect women succeed. In contrast, Erin, Mia, and Needy hold very little in common except for their gender, race, intelligence, and the fact that they are (as most people are) flawed. Contemporary films such as *You're Next*, *Evil Dead*, and *Jennifer's Body* move away from essentializing successful women and toward an increasingly realistic depiction and celebration of moral ambiguity.

This moral ambiguity is becoming more and more widespread across genres with the common phenomenon of the antihero. According to a study conducted in 2015 by Sophie H. Janicke and Arthur A. Raney, the antihero can be defined as “protagonists whose conduct is at best morally ambiguous, questionable, and at times unjustifiable” (485). The purpose of the study was to investigate why and how audiences enjoy antiheroes. Janicke and Raney found that by identifying with the antihero protagonist, audiences are enabled to partake in a moral disengagement which is key to their enjoyment of the narrative. The trend of the antihero’s rising popularity may indicate that audiences are growing bored with the essentialist narrative of good and evil, of protagonist and antagonist. That this trend is leaking into slasher films is perhaps an indication that audiences of the genre are simply growing tired of seeing the same “final girl” overcome the same struggles in a different body. Audiences have developed a hunger for films featuring complex, realistic women over pure victims who only commit sins out of absolute necessity. The fact that audiences of both genders now find a sense of identification in strong female heroes with moral complexities suggests a loosening of societal gender-based expectations relative to the views represented in the 20th century slasher films on which Clover wrote.

The second notable factor differentiating the protagonists of *You’re Next*, *Evil Dead*, and *Jennifer’s Body* from Clover’s “final girl” is the way in which each of their stories serve as a metaphor for overcoming dependency. Previous slasher films depicted seemingly random acts of violence perpetrated against women whose pasts the audience knows little of. However, in each of the three films examined here, the protagonists are victimized as the direct result of some form of dependency in their life. In *You’re Next*, Erin is presented as being dependant on her

boyfriend. In *Evil Dead*, Mia suffers from an extreme heroin dependency. In *Jennifer's Body*, Needy (whose name is no accident) answers to her best friend's beck and call and allows herself to be blatantly mistreated by her. In each case, the audience knows little about the protagonist's backstory except for her dependency, which in turn nearly defines her.

As the films progress and the protagonists distance themselves from their dependencies, they begin undergoing personality changes. The women who were initially presented as relatively meek and nonthreatening transform into formidable killers who are more than capable of defending themselves. In the climaxes of the films, each of these women succeeds in brutally destroying that on which they depend. Without hesitating, Erin stabs her boyfriend in the neck when she learns of his betrayal. Mia introduces a chainsaw to the face of the demon which throughout the film represents her heroin addiction. Needy pierces Jennifer's heart out of vengeance for her dead boyfriend. Each of these scenes is presented with an epic finality which assures the audience that these women have completed their transformations and achieved independence.

The violence by which the women of these films overcome dependency is problematic. Erin, Mia, and Needy all participate in graphic, gratuitous, and hate-filled violence as a means of defeating their antagonizers. The use of excessive violence in defeating one's enemies is cited by Janicke and Raney as being one of the attributes of an antihero (486). As mentioned earlier, audience members find identification with antiheroes while at the same time morally distancing themselves. They disapprove of the actions the hero is taking but can set that aside in their liking of the character. While it is uplifting that these films encourage audience identification with likable, relatable, and strong women, the excessive violence they utilize in accomplishing their

goals may in fact serve to undermine their strength. Female audience members, instead of being presented with inspirational role models, may morally distance themselves from these characters. Women watching these women find strength in overcoming their demons may wonder if such behavior is permitted. Gaining independence is ultimately depicted as not a necessarily pleasant way for a woman to behave.

In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Carol J. Clover argued that slasher films' depictions of the "final girl" were complex, and in some ways problematic. Yet overall, she viewed these characters positively from a feminist perspective. The "final girl" of today should if anything be welcomed even more positively. She is no longer required to be virginal or free of blame in order to be sympathetic to audiences. Audiences may not necessarily be encouraged to approve of the violence of the modern "final girl," which does limit her effectiveness as a role model for female strength. However, the fact that the genre is so full of stories of women finding strength through overcoming dependencies in their personal life should nonetheless be counted as progress. Over 20 years later, the horror genre remains home to some of mainstream media's strongest representations of admirable, realistically flawed women.

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