



What Does it Mean to be a Woman in Horror?

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CONTENT WARNING

This presentation contains descriptions of violence, torture, kidnapping, and murder.

There are no explicit images of these acts taking place, but these acts are mentioned and (briefly) described.

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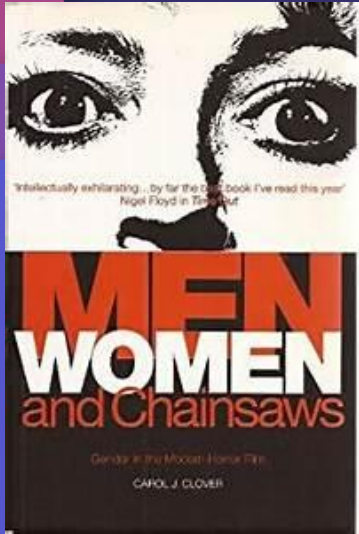


1

Final Girls

Exploring what they are, why they exist, and the contexts in which they exist

What Does it Mean to be a “Final Girl”?



The term “final girl” was coined by Carol J. Clover in her 1993 book *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. The “final girl” is the last woman or girl left alive in a horror movie, most often within the slasher genre, that must confront the killer. Clover describes final girls as typically being sexually unavailable at the start of the film, as having sex in a horror movie is a common trope that will most likely get you killed (Alternative Press Magazine).

Clover goes on to describe how, once the final girl survives, she “is ‘purged’...of undesirable characteristics, such as pursuit of pleasure in her own right. An interesting feature of the genre is the ‘punishment’ of beauty and sexual availability” (Horror Fandom Wiki).

Why Do Final Girls Exist?

In horror films, women are more often than not left to fight the big bad all on their own. Why is this? In short, it is because it is easier for us to see women in the victim role than men.

We, as a society, are socialized to see women as being innately weaker than their male counterparts. This hegemonic idea is not reinforced strictly through “ideological articulation. [It is] enforced by [d]ominant ideological streams [that] must be [reinforced] in the activities of our most basic social units—families, workplace networks, and friendship groups in the many sites and undertakings of everyday life” (Lull, 62).

Because the idea of weak women is constantly being reinforced through the media we consume and through our most basic social units, it becomes easier to see all women that way. Many develop the notion that women need to be saved from harm, and that the very idea of a male victim is ludicrous. We see this in horror when male characters are killed off quickly and before the audience can become attached to them. Additionally, there are seldom few examples of “final boys / guys.”

Classic Examples of Final Girls

In classic examples of final girls,
it usually goes one of two ways:
they are either rescued by a man,
or never truly escape the danger

Classic Examples of Final Girls: Being Rescued by a Man

- Wendy Torrance from *The Shining* (1980)
 - Wendy is only able to escape from her murderous husband Jack and the evils of the Overlook Hotel because Dick Holleran, the hotel's head chef (who Jack murders before he can reach Wendy or her son Danny), used a snowcat to return to the hotel to check on the family.
 - Wendy and Danny escape in the snowcat as Jack freezes to death outside while trying to find them



Classic Examples of Final Girls: Being Rescued by a Man

- Sally Hardesty from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974)
 - Sally escapes Leatherface and his cannibalistic family by climbing into the back of a man's pickup truck as he is making his way down the old Texas road. Were it not for this stranger, the injured and bleeding Sally would have met her end at the hands of Leatherface and his infamous chainsaw.



Classic Examples of Final Girls:

Being Rescued by a Man

- Lila Crane from *Psycho* (1960)
 - Lila's fruitless search for her sister Marion, who was murdered by Norman Bates, culminates in her discovering the long-deceased body of Norman's mother in the basement of his house. She turns around to see Norman in a wig and a dress, wielding a knife. She is rescued by Sam Loomis, who wrestles the knife away, just as Norman is about to stab her.
 - It is important to note that there is a strong link between Norman Bates' character and the false notion that transgender women are just men in dresses who are hell-bent on harming "real" women.



Classic Examples of Final Girls: Being Rescued by a Man

- Laurie Strode from *Halloween* (1978)
 - In her final showdown with Michael Myers, Laurie is saved by Dr. Sam Loomis (Michael's psychiatrist) as he fires several rounds into Michael's chest. Michael falls off of a balcony into an empty swimming pool, and all seems safe. However, when Dr. Loomis and the police go to inspect the body, it is discovered that Michael has vanished.



Classic Examples of Final Girls: Never Truly Escaping the Danger

- Sarah from *The Descent* (2005)
 - All seems hopeful as Sarah crawls out of the cave system to freedom from the creatures lurking there. She runs through the woods and drives away. She leans out of the car window to vomit, understandably distressed after watching her friends devoured by the cave crawlers. When she sits upright, she sees Juno, one of her friends who was killed, sitting in the passenger seat with blood coming out of her eyes.
 - Sarah jolts awake, still trapped in the cave system. The film ends as Sarah hallucinates that she is sitting across from her (deceased) daughter Jessica, a birthday cake between them. They sing happy birthday as the crawlers can be heard slowly closing in.



Classic Examples of Final Girls: Never Truly Escaping the Danger

- Nancy Thompson from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)
 - After her final showdown with the dream demon Freddy Krueger, it seems as though all is well for Nancy as she wakes up the next day. Her mom informs her about her decision to stop drinking; she had been clearly struggling with severe alcohol addiction throughout the film. The two say their goodbyes, and Nancy gets into a convertible with her friends. Suddenly, the top smacks down, decorated with Freddy's signature red and green stripes. The car drives away as Nancy screams, unable to get out.



Classic Examples of Final Girls: Never Truly Escaping the Danger

- Alice from *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980)
 - After finally killing Pamela, the woman who had murdered her fellow camp counselors, Alice gets into a canoe to await help. She wakes up the next morning to see that police cars have arrived, as well as an ambulance. As peaceful music plays, Alice smiles as her horrifying ordeal seems to finally be over.
 - Suddenly, the decomposing body of Pamela's son, Jason, jumps out of the lake, grabbing Alice and attempting to drown her. She wakes up in the hospital, and is told she was pulled out of the lake by police. When she asks about the boy who pulled her under the water, she is informed that they "never found any boy." Alice eerily states "then he's still there."
 - At the beginning of *Friday the Thirteenth Part 2*, a now adult Jason tracks Alice down to her home, and kills her.



Classic Examples of Final Girls: Never Truly Escaping the Danger

- Clarice Starling from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)
 - Though Clarice kills Buffalo Bill, the serial killer she and the FBI were searching for, she does not escape the patriarchal boys' club culture of being an FBI agent. In addition, Dr. Lecter, the cannibalistic killer she was interviewing, escapes from prison. He calls her during her FBI graduation ceremony to congratulate her, and to tell her he wishes he could chat longer, but is “having an old friend for dinner.”
 - The double meaning of his statement is not lost on Starling, but Dr. Lecter hangs up before the call can be traced





Nonconformist Examples of Final Girls

There are, of course, subversions to the commonalities among the idea of final girls. These examples are able to hold their own and escape the danger

Nonconformist Examples of Final Girls

- Sidney Prescott from *Scream* (1996)
 - After the killer disperses a house party the killer is able to corner Sidney
 - She finds the dead body of Dewey, her friend's brother and police officer, and takes his gun as protection
 - She also finds her boyfriend Billy is wounded but still alive
 - Sidney gives the gun to Billy, who immediately shoots Randy, another one of Sidney's friends
 - Billy and his friend, Stu, reveal that they have been working together in order to go on a murder spree, are going to frame her father for all of the murders, and that they were the ones who murdered Sidney's mother one year previously
 - Gale, the reporter following the story, arrives at the house, providing Sidney with the the distraction she needs
 - Sidney hits Billy with an umbrella and drops a TV on Stu's head
 - Billy wakes from his unconsciousness and attacks Sidney, at which point Gale shoots him
 - Randy, a scary movie buff, is discovered to be alive, and remarks that the killer always comes back for one last scare at the end of the movie. To this, Sidney responds "not in my movie," and shoots Billy in the head



Nonconformist Examples of Final Girls

- Ellen Ripley from *Alien* (1979)
 - After members of the *Nostromo* crew go out to investigate a distress signal, Ripley refuses to let the three crewmembers back on board, citing quarantine procedures, as one of the members has come into contact with an unknown alien species that has attached itself to his face
 - Against Ripley's wishes, the rest of the crew are allowed back onboard
 - The alien eventually detaches itself from Kane's face, now dead, and Kane appears to be unharmed
 - During dinner, Kane begins to choke, and an alien rips its way out of his stomach, and escapes into the ship
 - The crew scour the ship, and a now fully-grown alien picks off the crew members one by one
 - The crew is whittled away until only Ripley and the crew's cat, Jones, remain
 - Ripley is eventually able to escape in a shuttle, destroying the *Nostromo*, and blasting the alien into the cold vacuum of space



Nonconformist Examples of Final Girls

- Erin from *You're Next* (2011)
 - While she and her boyfriend Crispian are visiting his family, they find themselves in the midst of a home invasion
 - People wearing animal masks begin killing members of Crispian's family, and it is later discovered that two of Crispian's family members hired the killers to off the rest of the family in order to collect all of the inheritance money
 - Erin has past survivalist training, and is able to use makeshift weapons (i.e. a meat tenderizer, nails, a screwdriver, and a blender) to defend herself and set traps to stop the killers



Nonconformist Examples of Final Girls

- Grace from *Ready or Not* (2019)
 - Grace meets her fiancé, Daniel's family on the day of their wedding
 - Daniel belongs to the Le Domas family, owners of a large board game empire
 - That evening, the family sit at a table, and explain to Grace that each new member of the family must draw a random card that has the name of a game they must play
 - Grace draws "hide-and-seek" and as she hides, the family arms themselves
 - Alex, Daniel's brother, tries to help Grace escape the mansion after he reveals to her that, due to a curse on the Le Domas family, Grace must be killed before dawn or else the rest of the family will die
 - It is Daniel who eventually captures Grace and restrains her
 - Once the family gathers in the room, he gives his other family members a non-lethal poison and attempts to free Grace
 - They all begin to fight, and Daniel is killed along with two of his other family members
 - As the sun rises, the remaining members of the family explode in a spray of blood, with Grace left as the only survivor





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Female Antagonists

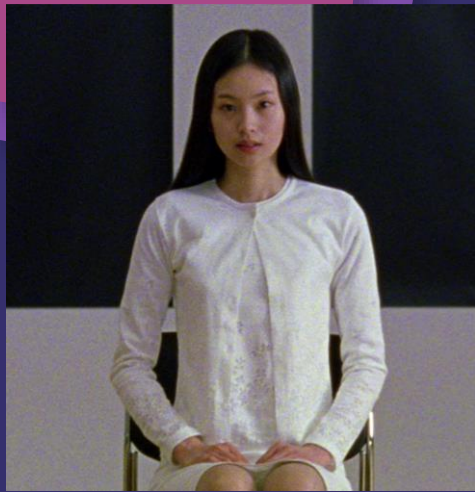
What makes them so scary? Are their actions understandable?

What Makes Female Antagonists So Scary?



- Female antagonists in horror often completely take away the autonomy of their victim(s), while male antagonists heavily rely on being able to physically overpower their victims
- “Studies looking at the MO of [real life] women that kill have found that they’re much more likely to kill by poisoning, drowning or suffocating. Whereas men are happier using brute force and more violent means such as shooting, stabbing, strangling, bludgeoning or beating to death” (Crime + Investigation UK)

Female Antagonists that Revoke Autonomy from their Victims



- Asami Yamazaki from *Audition* (1999)
 - In order to “get back out there,” after the death of his wife, Aoyama agrees to set up “auditions” for a potential new girlfriend, with the help of his friend Yoshikawa
 - Asami catches Aoyama’s attention
 - Asami has Aoyama pledge his love to her, and no one else before they have sex
 - She drugs his liquor upon discovering a picture of his late wife
 - She the injects him with a paralytic agent and tortures him by sticking needles all over his body (including in his eyes), and cutting off his left foot with piano wire



Female Antagonists that Revoke Autonomy from their Victims



- Annie in *Misery* (1990)
 - After a nasty car crash during a blizzard, author Paul Sheldon is rescued by a nurse and superfan of his, Annie Wilkes
 - When Paul wakes up, he finds that both his legs are broken, and that his shoulder is dislocated
 - Upon finding out that Paul plans to kill off her favorite character, Annie flies into a rage, telling Paul that no one knows he is in her house
 - When she finds out Paul has been sneaking around the house, Annie breaks both of Paul's ankles using a sledgehammer, which leaves him dependent on her to care for him and unable to escape her



Female Antagonists that Revoke Autonomy from their Victims

- Rose and Missy Armitage from *Get Out* (2017)
 - The Armitage family belong to a cult that kidnaps black people in order to use them as vessels for their own consciousness
 - Rose forms relationships with people, then lures them into her parents' home, under the guise of meeting her family
 - Her mother Missy then hypnotizes their victim in order to prepare them for Dean, her husband, to perform neurosurgery on them
 - This is done so that another member of the whites-only cult can inhabit the victim's body
 - These members are elderly, or ailing from medical conditions
 - These members bid on victims in a silent auction that is eerily reminiscent of slave auctions
 - The victim's consciousness is still present, trapped in the "Sunken Place," unable to control their own body - existing as mere passengers



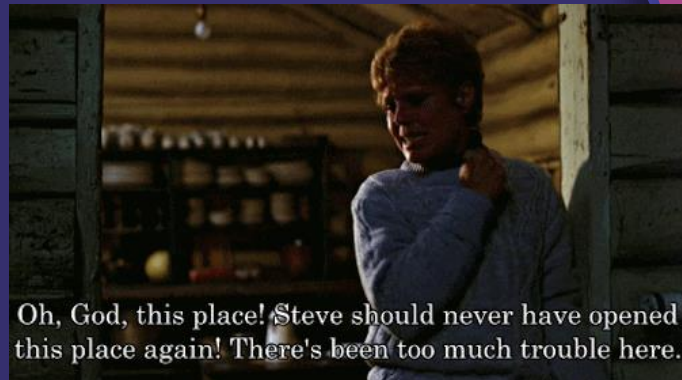
Are Female Antagonists' Motivations Understandable?



- “[To real-life male serial killers] the identity of the victim isn’t even that important. Compare that to female serial killers and we see a polar opposite. When a woman kills, there’s usually ‘a reason’. There’s pragmatism and justification (at least in the killer’s mind, anyway)” (Crime + Investigation UK).
 - Can any female horror antagonists’ motivations for killing their victims be sympathized with?

Sympathetic Female Antagonists: Pamela Voorhees from *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980)

- Her disabled child, Jason, was unable to swim, and drowned after the other campers threw him into the lake
 - The counselors who were supposed to be supervising the children as they swam had snuck away to have sex
- After only a few years, the owner decided to open the camp back up without making any changes to counselor training or implementing new safety features
- In *Friday the Thirteenth*, the final girl Alice is able to kill Pamela in self-defense by decapitating her with Pamela's own machete
 - Pamela's goal was to ensure that the camp never be reopened
 - A zombified Jason watched Alice kill his mother, which acts as Jason's motivation to kill anyone who steps foot onto the camp grounds, in order for it never to be reopened
 - "...the only person that ever knew him was his mother. He never went to school, so he never had any friends. She was everything to him...I mean, I doubt Jason would have even known the meaning of death. Or at least until that horrible night. He must have seen the whole thing happen. He must have seen his mother killed, and all just because she loved him. Isn't that what her revenge was all about? Her sense of loss, her rage at what she thought happened, her



Sympathetic Female Antagonists: Carrie White from *Carrie* (1976)

- Raised in a fanatically religious household
 - Was locked in a “prayer closet” by her mother for committing the “sin” of getting her first period, as well as being called a witch because of her telekinetic abilities
- Relentlessly bullied by her peers
 - Got her first period in the showers after gym class, and panics because no one ever told her about menstruation
 - The other girls in her class threw tampons at her as she cowered on the floor of the showers as they chanted for her to “plug it up”
 - Was asked to prom by the popular Tommy Ross, the boyfriend of Sue (the only one of Carrie’s tormentors who felt remorse for how she previously treated her)
 - Carrie’s tormentors planned to rig the prom king and queen election so that Carrie and Tommy would win, and dump a bucket of pig’s blood on Carrie when she got up on stage
 - After the blood is dumped on Carrie, the metal bucket falls, striking Tommy in the head
 - The crowd is stunned into silence, but Carrie hallucinates that they are all mocking her, with her mothers words “they’re all going to laugh at you” repeating in her head
 - Carrie uses her powers to lock the doors to the gym and set is on fire, before returning home, still severely psychologically distressed
 - Her mother comforts her before chasing her around the house with a knife, trying to kill her
 - Carrie uses her telekinetic powers to use sharp objects to crucify her mother, then destroying the house and herself



Resources and Works Cited

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A special thank you to Professor Jennifer Braverman for being
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