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The Call from Inside the House: The Final Girl Trope as
a Reflection of Cultural Anxiety of Race and Gender

by

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Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University (2022)

The 1970's and 80's saw the rise of the slasher subgenre of horror films. Slashers follow a distinct outline, where a killer systematically murders their way through a group of young adults. In turn, slashers gave birth to the trope the "Final Girl": the woman who outlasts her peers who have been slaughtered on screen. This thesis will investigate how the Final Girl has evolved and left her original genre and has spread to other horror films. Using the lenses of critical race theory, intersectional feminism, and film studies, I will analyze three works, *Halloween* (1978), *Scream* (1996) and *Midsommar* (2019), to illustrate how the original trope reinforces and reflects changes to traditional gender roles and racial views as well as how the trope in its most recent form reveals how white femininity is a key feature of the Final Girl trope.

Key Words: Horror, Final Girl, Slasher Film, White Feminism, Intersectionality

Introduction

The slasher film has been a hallmark of the horror genre since its introduction in the mid-twentieth century. The core of any slasher film is a killer, sometimes multiple, who kill their way through an assembled group of people, usually teenagers. Examples include such films as, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Despite being a microcosm of horror as a whole, the sub-genre maintains a steady grasp on the imagination of horror enthusiasts and the general public alike. Slasher films brought many now standard elements to the genre, such as explicit gore and torrents of sequels, but perhaps most notable of all is the “Final Girl”. The term, first coined by Carol J. Clover in 1993, is used to describe the female character who out lives her friends and out wits her would-be killer, often by killing him before he kills her. The Final Girl is a staple of the slasher, dating back to the genre’s earliest establishing works, such as *Black Christmas* (1974). She remains as the hero, and victim, of the genre even now.

Outside of the simple mechanics of surviving the movie, Clover defines the Final Girl through several key characteristics that make her unique to her peers and, ultimately, lead to her survival. She is more sexually reserved, or even stunted, as Clover specifies, which often sets her apart from her friends (39). She is resourceful, watchful, and possibly even paranoid. Through these aspects, Clover argues that she is also boyish. But, most of all, the Final Girl is the “victim-hero” and “is abject terror personified” (35).

Through this definition we can also see that she has grown beyond her origins of the slasher film. Clarice Starling, the lead in 1999’s *Silence of the Lambs*, is often counted amongst the Final Girls, despite that *Silence of the Lambs* is widely considered a psychological thriller, and while she does defeat Buffalo Bill, she does not escape the influence of Hannibal Lecter. The

trope of the Final Girl remains solidly lodged in the consciousness and narratives of present-day horror, although, ostensibly, the time of the slasher film has come and gone. However, this persistence through genres also allows for a more thorough study of the Final Girl to be done. This thesis will study the Final Girl as she has evolved over the decades to understand how she reflects cultural feelings and anxieties about womanhood, race, and women's roles in the horror genre.

The theoretical approach was built from Carol J. Clover's book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, as it the defining, foundational work about the Final Girl. Clover's study, however, stays strictly within the sphere of the slasher film, and will give a basis for comparison to understand what happens when the Final Girl leaves the slasher. Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema", specifically her argument on the female character as a passive object, is used to identify how the horror genre has traditionally objectified its female characters. This essay also helped shape my theory as to why men can identify so closely with the Final Girl, something that Clover finds puzzling and, as I explain, gives a less than satisfying answer to. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, specifically her work on gender as a performance, also gives shape to my argument and allows me to further analyze the act of being female on screen. Barbara Creed's book *The Monstrous- Feminine* was vital in this process, specifically in my third chapter, where the concept of the witch is discussed. Creed gives an excellent analysis on how such female monsters came to be and their ties to more modern horror. Also crucial, if not outrightly stated, is Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. This text proved an excellent resource in understanding how American literature is built upon the construct of whiteness, and how this whiteness can only define itself through Blackness. This was vital in helping me understand and extend my analysis on race in films without Black characters.

The following films will be analyzed and investigated using the theory outlined above: *Halloween*, *Scream*, *The VVitch*, and *Midsommar*. Other films discussed are *Alien*, *Ready or Not*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. These films have been chosen because I believe they reflect significant shifts or changes in the concept of the Final Girl. Through these films, the cultural understandings of race, sex, and horror of the Final Girl can be more thoroughly understood.

Chapter One: The Original Final Girl *Halloween* (1978)

John Carpenter's *Halloween* is certainly not the first instance of the Final Girl trope. At the time of the film's release, the main protagonist, Laurie Strode, joined the ranks of a small number of Final Girls, such as Sally Hardesty (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). However, whether it's due to the thirteen entries in the *Halloween* franchise or if it's the iconic look of Michael Myers, the killer and lead of the franchise, *Halloween* stands as one of the defining movies of the slasher genre and the Final Girl trope. Its release, a few years after the successes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Black Christmas*, allows for the film to present the tropes of a slasher in a cohesive manner that earliest of slashers weren't able to, as it is the third entry in the sub-genre, *Halloween* solidifies the tropes and ideas from the earlier films into a distinct pattern. Which takes *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Black Christmas* from two films with similar concepts and turns them into a genre.

The protagonist is Laurie Strode, a high school student from a generic, white suburb. She is immediately set apart as different from the girls around her. She's dressed remarkably modestly in a knee length skirt, cardigan, turtleneck sweater, and completely opaque tights. Once she joins her peers, Annie and Lynda, walking home from school, the differences only become more apparent. She's focused on school with an intensity that her friends openly mock, disinterested in boys and assumingly sex, genuinely enjoys her job as a babysitter, and, most of all, she's aware and alert of the danger. Her reserved nature is what makes her suitable to be a Final Girl.

However, it's not just Laurie's inclination towards school and away from boys that gives her more brain power to notice what her friends do not. Her attitude protects her from the murderous punishment Michael Myers is doling out, although his murder spree is not outrightly

labeled a punishment by the film, it becomes clear after the circumstances of when and where he kills reveal a pattern. The opening scene of the movie depicts a six-year-old Michael murdering his sister after she has sex with her boyfriend, instead of fulfilling her duties as his caretaker, as is implied by the movie. After Michael escapes from the asylum fifteen years later, in a spiteful moment of rage, he physically removes his sister's gravestone on his way back to Haddonfield, Illinois. Annie, Laurie's friend from earlier, attempts to leave her job babysitting to meet her boyfriend to have sex. But it is Michael waiting for her, not her boyfriend, and he strangles her to death. Next, Lynda and her own boyfriend meet their end after having sex in the same house Annie just met her own end. It is clear that Michael's murders are retribution for illicit, teenage sex. This becomes evident through the repeated instances of murder but becomes compelling after the vandalism of his sister's grave. Myers is angry, violently so, at his sister and it is not enough to just murder her the first time. Perhaps he views her choice to have sex, as something she did *to* him. Thus, he finds himself compelled to punish her, over and over again, through the murder of teenage girls doing what she once did.

Once Myer's mission is juxtaposed with Laurie Strode, and her modest dress, attitude towards boys and dating, it becomes evident that what makes Laurie odd with her friends, may save her life. Most striking, however, is how Laurie approaches her babysitting job and the children in her care. Shortly after her initial introduction to the screen, Laurie is depicted interacting with the boy she watches in an earnest, caring way. This attitude is only further emphasized on her walk home with her friends when Annie laments that her boyfriend Paul won't be joining her that night, with Lynda explaining to Laurie that "The only reason she babysits is to have a place to--". Laurie, however, is clearly and genuinely engaged with her job and the children she cares for, one of whom is the same child Annie left with Laurie in order to

see her boyfriend. The audience watches Laurie as she reads a story to the children, watches a movie with them, plays with them, comforts them, and cares for them. This seems to set Laurie as the most ideally feminine amongst her friends, the one most likely to live up the suburban ideal of womanhood and motherhood.

Laurie's engagement with the home as a physical place and theme is clear. Her friends have no interest in staying home and childcare, what they do have is an interest in defying the roles and expectations of womanhood set before them. Annie and Lynda both explicitly engage, and have engaged, in premarital sex. They smoke and drink and talk dirty. Lynda even goes so far to say to her boyfriend: "Get me a beer" shortly after they have sex, explicitly defying the quiet and subservient expectations of her gender. This request results in her boyfriend's murder as well as her own. Laurie, on the other hand, is aligned with the home and the patriarchal connotations that come with it even outside of her seemingly enthusiastic active participation in childcare, but also visibly. Laurie wears a floral apron when she's carving a pumpkin and talking to her friends over the phone, which is a small gesture that speaks loudly, painting her into the role of caregiver and homemaker. She even brings a bag full of yarn and knitting needles, assumedly to pass the time after the children in her care fall asleep, where Annie seems to be determined to spend her time calling her friends and boyfriend even while her own ward is awake.

The one time when Laurie leaves home is also the only time her actions lead her directly to Michael. Despite his determined stalking of her earlier, it is questionable that if Laurie had never gone to investigate the fates of her friends, then perhaps she would have ever been forced to face off with Michael Meyers. Regardless, fight him off she must, and she does so, unfortunately, in the home where the children under her watch are as well. But, in the end, after

Laurie uses her knitting needles, a wire hanger, and ultimately his own knife, to fight him off, she lives, though not through her own actions. Laurie survives due to the timely arrival of the doctor who was Michael's primary caseworker in the asylum, called Doctor Loomis. Loomis shoots Michael, albeit not fatally. Michael lives, but it's unclear where he is. The implicit message about the domestic sphere is clear: stay in the home, and you'll survive. Laurie's story speaks to a white, middle-class fear, that there is something in the suburbs, among the neat houses, that is corrupt and inhuman.

What makes Laurie's relationship to the home and womanhood striking is not its existence in the narrative, but rather, the way it contradicts perceptions of the Final Girl and Clover's argument. Clover in her work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* argues that the Final Girl must, in order to gain the sympathy of the male audience and to act as their focalizing point, be masculine. Clover's argument itself is not unfounded. Many Final Girls that she discusses certainly seem to be masculine. One of her central supporting arguments is many final girls have gender neutral names, if not outright masculine ones. Think Ripley from *Alien* or Sidney from *Scream*. She expands on this, saying: "The Final Girl is boyish—in a word. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects" (40). While it is clear that Clover is attempting to describe the inherent difference between the Final Girl and her female peers, this lens of analysis falls quite short of doing so. And while Clover certainly seeks to avoid accusations of gender essentialism, even going back to Elizabethan ideas of gender and gender roles in her introduction, this particular analysis relies on outdated, gender essentialist ideas that ultimately fall on the sword of "men are strong and smart, and women are not". To argue that a woman who is smart, resourceful, and survives is one who is masculine is

to support harmful, untrue rhetoric. Not only that, but Laurie's characterization contradicts much of Clover's claims on this front.

Laurie, as stated before, is introduced to the audience in a modest and inarguably feminine outfit. She's good with children and seems to enjoy working with them as well. She is timid and sexually inexperienced. If we are to accept Clover's analysis, then what makes Laurie masculine enough for male audiences to sympathize and identify with her is her intelligence and resourcefulness -- which, if her girlhood is such a roadblock to male audiences, does not seem like it would be enough, as she is always visibly a woman on screen. Nor is it right to claim intellect as solely a man's territory. Thus, it is not the apparent masculinity of any Final Girl that makes her a compelling figure for audiences in general, but something else.

I would argue that instead of dwelling on *how* male audiences can sympathize and identify with a female character, it is better to accept that men can and often do sympathize and identify with women. It is not like people spend pages determining why women can understand and relate to the male leads of the movies they watch and books they read. These arguments rely on the idea that men and women are innately different, which, when applied in a theoretical and practical manner, falls apart and does more to uphold and extend the influence of gender essentialism, rather than add anything of meaning to the existing scholarly conversation. The underlying logic of such thinking implies, if not outrightly states, that men and women are two entirely different species, and are incapable of sympathy and care for the other even in the simplest of terms. Such arguments treat women as second-class beings and privileges masculinity as the humanizing factor for all characters as well as accusing men of being incapable of treating women as people.

However, if Laurie does seem to hold some kind of masculinity to her, it is not that she *is* masculine, but that she is a fictional character created *by* men. Extending the framework introduced by Laura Mulvey in her work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, where women are “raw material for the gaze of a man” (815), allows us to consider that Laurie is not just for male audiences to look at, but is also created by a man, who is in this instance, John Carpenter. It is important to understand that most female characters who seem “masculine” were created and written by men. A man will create a woman that they believe will best fulfill a certain role on screen, and male audiences will then accept that role. So, in Laurie’s, and the Final Girl as a whole, case, if a man is imagining a woman who can survive where others cannot, then he will imbue her with the characteristics he thinks he needs.

In this context, I would say that Clover’s observations about the perceived masculinity of these Final Girls are helpful to understand the Final Girl, even if the perceived stability of gender is disagreeable. Rather than asserting that these attributes are statically male, and thus making the women who hold them unalterably male somehow, I would suggest, rather, that we use Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a performance that is shaped by the cultural and political context of the performance, rather than immutable and essential traits that are inaccessible to the other sex. As Butler states:

If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive...because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (3).

Under Butler's frame of analysis, the question about the perceived masculinity of the Final Girl's gender shifts. It is no longer, "how are these Final Girls masculine?", but rather "what gender are these women performing?" and "what does it mean for them to perform gender roles to the audience?" and, perhaps most pressing, "what are the audience's perceptions of these performances?"

When applying Butler's theory to Laurie Strode in particular, then very different questions arise. As earlier established, Laurie is strikingly different from her friends. However, what is indisputable is that both Laurie and her friends, Annie and Lynda, are performing femininity and womanhood, just in two different ways. Annie and Lynda are certainly performing a specific type of woman. They are sexually aggressive and active, prioritize boys over their schoolwork, and also dress in a modern (for the time) manner. Yet, despite these seeming transgressions, they still enact a version of being a woman that is undeniably female. Laurie is also performing a version of femininity that, while uniquely hers, is still inarguably tied to the expectations and perceptions of womanhood of their time. So, the question shifts from how these girls are rejecting or accepting the burden of womanhood, to how they are choosing to perform womanhood.

From a certain perspective, Lynda and Annie are attempting to perform a kind of femaleness that affords them the independence and liberation that Laurie, who allows herself to be "tied down" by the traditional performance, is denied. They get to have fun, do drugs, and have sex. Yet, these choices are also the ones that doom them in the end as Michael Myers seems to seek them out and murder them because of these choices. And even their womanhood seems to make them more of a victim than if they were a man. Yes, Lynda's boyfriend does meet a grisly demise at Myer's hands, but Lynda's death is preceded by an inexplicably cruel trick, as

Myers impersonates her boyfriend long enough to see her breasts before he kills her. Her murder, unlike her boyfriend's, is long, loud, and exposed. Her dying noises, accidentally overheard through the phone by Laurie, are sexually implicative, with Laurie explicitly assuming that's what she's hearing, and chastising Lynda for it. It seems that, by seeking out sex in life, Lynda's death is up for sexualization for the satisfaction of the audience.

But Laurie is the only woman the audience sees who comes face to face with Myers and survives. The film makes it clear why. Laurie is not distracted by boys and sex and drinking, so she is the only who sees the danger and the only one smart enough to avoid Myers and even attack him back. She's allowed, in the film, to break the glass to get out of the house, to stab him with knitting needles, his own knife, and even a wire hanger. It would seem that Laurie's conservative gender performance is rewarded with the agency to survive the night. Simply put, Laurie survives because she chooses the right kind of performance for her cultural context, as according to the analysis of Butler. She gets to be the smart one who survives, and her friends are the "big breasted girls who can't act and is always running up the stairs when she should be running out the front door" (*Scream*) that Sidney Prescott will refer to in her own movie, *Scream*, eighteen years later.

Using Butler's analysis in this manner also helps clarify why the Final Girl, at least in her originating form, is sympathetic to the audience. It's not so much that the Final Girl is inherently masculine, but she enacts the kind of performance of womanhood that the modern audience wants to see from her. She gets to be more sympathetic than her friends. Laurie's performance of womanhood is judged to be the better one, and thus watching her die would be less narratively satisfying to contemporary audiences of the time than her friends' own who have spent the run time of the film disregarding such expectations.

However, not every Final Girl from this era seems to enact the same kind of conservative performance that Laurie does. Ripley, *Alien*'s final girl, seems to be subverting and disregarding many traditional ideas about gender that audiences may have still held. After all, released in 1978, *Alien* was only released one year after *Halloween*. Ripley's gender performance is more ambiguous than Laurie. She does not wear feminine clothes or makeup, and her outward presentation, including her name, is gender neutral. The film, set in the future, depicts Ripley as she works amongst men and women in a time and place where race and gender seem irrelevant. Yet, Ripley still performs a version of womanhood that attempts to be both satisfyingly tough but is still portrayed as an available sexual object by the camera. Ripley is still visibly a woman, and treated so by the camera, spending a not insignificant amount of time on screen clothed only in her underwear. Rather, Ripley's performance has changed due to the context of the film. Where Laurie is a teenaged babysitter, Ripley is attempting to outrun an alien predator that is out to kill her. It seems that a woman who is "tough" in this manner is also a woman that will survive that kind of encounter, except tough means to perform the traits and abilities of a man, while still existing in a woman's body. In order for Ripley to be a character that the audience roots for, she has to perform the audience's expectations of masculinity, which she does successfully, especially when compared to her crew mate Lambert, a woman who breaks down into tears and does not get to survive. This instance demonstrates that for early Final Girls, these two kinds of performance seem to be the only options to be fit for survival. You can be Laurie, and conform to the rigid standards of womanhood, or be Ripley and be tough because you are performing masculinity. However, since the "identification factor," or the ability for a predominantly male audience to identify with the main character, for these Final Girls hinges on their ability to

perform to the audience's expectations. And, as these audiences and their own cultural contexts change quickly then these performances also change rapidly over time.

This idea of gender performances being affected by cultural contexts is demonstrated in both films. The social conservatism of the eighties is felt deeply in both *Alien* and *Halloween*, as the Moral Majority rose to push back against the left-shifting morals of the past two decades (Plummer). Ronald Reagan would ride this conservative backlash into the Oval Office the same year *Alien* was released. This well-known brand of conservatism shaped both of these seemingly different Final Girls into a more cohesive figure and defines them as two sides to the same coin. However, it's not just the conservative gender performances that link Ripley and Laurie together. Both of these women, separated by time and setting, are white. Laurie's story is completely devoid of any person of color, though one of Ripley's crewmates, Parker, is a Black man, whom she eventually outlives. This difference is yet again notable for the ways it unites these two women together. Despite the presence of Parker, who ultimately dies in the genre's unfortunate tradition of killing racial minorities, Ripley, the white woman, is still the hero of a story about a dark, inhuman, deadly presence that made its way into their ship through means that no one could stop. Just as Laurie's echoes with the fear of an outsider invading the suburbs. *Alien* and *Halloween* are both stories about women under threat by an inhuman force, and it is telling that both times, the survivor is a white woman.

Chapter Two: A New Monster in the Dark

Wes Craven's 1996 film *Scream* is the next seminal entry in the slasher genre. *Scream* was not the next film to feature a Final Girl, nor was it even Wes Craven's first slasher with such a character. But Sidney Prescott's debut as the main character and Final Girl of *Scream* marks a distinct shift in the depiction of the Final Girl. This movie, released twenty years after *Halloween* and influenced by the rise of Moral Majority in the nineteen eighties (Plummer), still maintains much of the same fascination with sex and gore that made *Halloween* what it is.

Scream opens with a murder scene, quite like *Halloween* does. But the camera does not take on the shaky perspective of the film's protagonist. Rather, we open on a teenage girl, named Casey, who is home alone and answers a call from a wrong number who asks her what her favorite movie is. These opening scenes already mark a clear distinction between these two movies: genre awareness. The characters on screen are aware of horror films as a genre, and frequently talk about themselves and their actions as taking place in a horror movie, though it is crucial to note these characters do not break the fourth wall. They are not aware that they are characters in a film. Rather, they are just aware of horror movies as a concept, an attribute that past horror film characters do not seem to share.

Casey, after being persuaded by the mysterious caller to stay on the line, starts to answer his question. "Uh, *Halloween*. You know, the one with the guy in the white mask who just sorta walks around and stalks the babysitters?" she says. This is not the last time *Halloween* gets mentioned explicitly in *Scream*. Nor is it the only horror film the characters explicitly discuss; so are *Friday the 13th*, *The Exorcist*, *Psycho*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Silence of the Lambs*, just to name a few. This film is preoccupied with its own genre, so much so that genre awareness becomes a hallmark of the series in every installment. The franchise even goes as far as to invent

its own in-universe version of itself, lovingly called *Stab*: a pretend film within the *Scream* franchise that is based on the events of Sidney's life. This preoccupation allows the characters, and the writers, to talk about the state of modern horror directly.

For example, when asked about her favorite scary movie, responds: "No, what's the point? They're all the same." Another character named Randy explains how predictable the film genre became, saying: "there's a formula to it—a very simple formula" (*Scream*). This "formula" that these characters note is observable in the slasher film writ large. *Halloween* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* introduced the genre, as well as the basic premise of the plot, and subsequent slashers modeled themselves after the initial formula quite closely. Each film introduces a group of teenagers who are then systematically killed off, with one sole survivor. After a run of these movies, a clear code of conduct emerges. The character, Randy, later in the film, explains this, saying:

There are certain laws that one must abide by to successfully survive a horror movie.

Number one, you can never have sex. Sex equals death, okay? Number two, you can never drink or do drugs. The sin factor, it's a sin, it's an extension of number one. You push the laws, and you end up dead. (*Scream*)

The characters of *Scream* are fully aware that the events around them belong to a horror movie. This creates a discursiveness that allows the movie to use the same tropes as all the other slasher films, but present them in a different, sometimes even humorous light. For example, in the same scene where Sidney declares her disinterest in horror movies, she explains why: "Some stupid killer stalking some big breasted girl who can't act, who's always running up the stairs when she should be going out the front door." Moments later, after being pursued by Ghost Face, *Scream's* killer, she runs up the stairs of her home, rather than out the door.

The genre awareness of the characters allows the movie to revise the tropes of the genre. Crucial to Laurie Strode's survival in *Halloween*, as we have seen, is her virginal status. Like *Halloween*, the sex in *Scream* is an undeniable presence for both the audience and the characters. Sidney's first time on screen has her boyfriend, Billy, sneaking into her room, where they begin making out, but she stops him. She's not ready to have sex. This begins a "will-they-won't-they" that eventually ends in Sidney having sex with Billy. The audience is promised that this means she'll die. This idea of "sex means death" is repeated by multiple characters. Sidney's (presumably) promiscuous friend Tatum is murdered onscreen after spending much of her time wearing short skirts and cut off T-shirts, and even *Halloween* plays on an abandoned television screen during the third act of the movie. But remarkably, Sidney does not die. She is the Final Girl. By directly referencing the "rules" of this movie genre, Sidney is then able to directly contradict its tropes, and in turn, challenge the real-life social norms that shaped them. One example of this is Sidney's choice to have sex with her boyfriend, Billy, seemingly reflecting the changing cultural attitude around sexual behavior of the late nineties. This character is given to be sexually active, on her terms, and is not ultimately punished for it. However, further analysis reveals that this is not the pro-sex move it seems to be.

American teenagers have, for quite some time, been a key demographic to market these kinds of horror films towards, and the entertainment landscape of the nineties was no exception to this. Multiple movies and television shows were released that were directly marketed towards teenagers, even more specifically to teenage girls, such as *Clueless*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, and so on (Wee 54). This also affected the slasher genre, which, as Valerie Wee argues, is demonstrated by *Scream*, because the creators were "keen to revive the genre with the conscious intent of making it more relevant to female audiences" (54). It would

make sense that *Scream* would be more feminist and more progressive than the slasher films of the past. Compare, once again, the events and characters of *Halloween* to those of *Scream*, where Laurie's survival is tied to her virginity and her capability to correctly carry out the typically female role of homemaker. Sidney's own survival is not. Sidney, unlike her friends, has sex. There are no children under the age of Sidney herself, and there are no explicit references to Sidney acting as a homemaker. On the surface, this makes the movie out to be leagues more of a feminist film than *Halloween*.

However, adding in the rest of the context quickly betrays the truth. Like Laurie, Sidney dresses notably more conservatively than her friend Tatum, who will not survive the movie. Where Tatum chooses short skirts and cropped shirts, Sidney wears jeans and modest shirts for the entire length of the film. There's an unspoken, but not unclear, difference between the two girls' attitudes towards sex, but only one ends up dying in the film. And, despite that Sidney's choice to have sex does not lead to her death, she is still punished for it. Her boyfriend, Billy is revealed to be one the murderers who have been terrorizing Sidney and killing her friends, the other being Stu, Tatum's boyfriend. But, perhaps even more horrifying than that fact alone, is the revelation that Billy is also the culprit of the rape and murder of Sidney's mother a year prior and is intent on framing Sidney's father as the one behind that and this most recent string of murders. And while Sidney goes on to outlive and outwit both Billy and Stu, this reveal is still a devastating betrayal to Sydney and a clear punishment by the movie for her choice to sleep with Billy. It reaffirms that the choice to have sex, especially for an unwed, teenage girl, is still a dangerous one.

This thin veneer of progress is also indicative of the social atmosphere of the nineties. Still fresh from the actions and legislation of the so-called "Moral Majority," but eager to mark

itself as different from the past, the American culture of the decade found itself eager to claim progress had occurred for women, both in the public and domestic spheres (Yarrow para. 1) but was still not able to fully let go of the misogyny of past decades (Yarrow para. 6). This odd dichotomy is fully embodied on screen in *Scream*. The movie is unable to deny the ways women were entering the public sphere, clearly demonstrated by the ways Sidney is allowed to exist as a female character, but is perhaps best exhibited by Gale Weathers, the other final girl of *Scream*.

Gale is a news anchor, who is introduced as an antagonist, primarily because she believes the man currently being held responsible for the death of Sidney's mother is innocent. She is characterized by her cut-throat, fame-seeking attitude towards her job. She's unafraid, and has seemingly no qualms, using Dewey's attraction to her for her own gain. She is, quite simply, a real bitch, and unafraid to be so. Gale's presence in *Scream* is something unlike other past slashers. She is a woman who is completely detached from the home, and completely concerned with her career. And, as one of the survivors of the film, she seems set to break boundaries. In some ways, Gale does.

But Gale also finds herself in harm's way because of her ambition. In her hunger to get the first, best, and freshest news, she uses Dewey, Tatum's older brother and member of local police force, to plant a camera in the living room of Stu's house, the place of an ill-advised party and the location of the final act of the party. She then parks her news van across the street to monitor things. Of course, there's a few seconds delay between the camera and the television Gale has in her van. Her attempt to get the most inside and newest intel results in the murder of her camera man, Kenny, and her crashing the van in an attempt to get away. The film implies that, if it was not for her seemingly bottomless ambition, perhaps this could have been avoided. This isn't to say that any harm that befalls a female character in a horror movie is a direct result

of misogyny from the writers or directors. After all, the very premise of a horror movie demands that principal characters suffer in some way, whether that be physically, or psychologically. However, the ways these two women in particular carry themselves through the movie's run time is marked by the way it proves Clover's hypothesis on the "relatability" of the Final Girl.

As outlined in the previous chapter, Clover supposes that the Final Girl only works as a main character for a horror genre, one that is traditionally considered of male interest, because she is, through a series of different methods, coded male. "Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects" (Clover 40). Both Gale and Sidney seem to fit this description. Sidney, unlike her friend, dresses more ambiguously, she is clever and resourceful, and, when it counts, fights back with a remarkable level of ferocity. Gale Weathers, despite being outfitted in power suits, full makeup, and perfectly coiffed nineties hair, is remarkably "male" in her dedication to her career, even down to their traditionally masculine names, which Clover argues as being key to a Final Girl's inherent masculinity. However, applying the previous analysis of Butler's gender performance theory and Mulvey's work on the male gaze, it becomes clear that both women are still performing gender in the manner most acceptable to contemporary audiences.

Gale and Sidney must perform a certain kind of masculinity that is required for them to be taken seriously, but at the same time, still be an acceptable woman, the kind the audiences want to see. This subtle tight rope balancing act defines both Sydney and Gale throughout the film. Sidney is allowed attack her would-be murderers, throw a punch at Gale, and even choose to have sex, but she must also be a girl. Her hair is done, she wears makeup in every scene, and is introduced for the first time on screen in a delicate nightgown. Gale is power-hungry and

determined in a way that may be read as masculine, but the thornier parts of her personality are smoothed over by perfect hair, perfect makeup, heels, and skirts. There's a pull and tug going on behind the gender of these characters, where they are allowed to take up more space than Laurie, who was much more demure than either of them, but they must reassure the audience that they are still women. They can "kick ass" and wear lipstick, which is only a revelation if kicking ass is still primarily considered a male only activity.

These women on screen are allowed to have careers and be powerful, because the women of the nineties were doing the same thing. Where *Halloween* expresses a distinct anxiety about this becoming more commonplace, about women becoming masculine, *Scream* was made at a time where women leaving the domestic sphere was a fact of life. However, the movie betrays a distinct nervousness about women being too feminine and too masculine, and pins women into a dangerous tight rope act, where failure to be the correct amount of masculine and feminine is to pay with your life. This is a distinct turn from *Halloween*, where Laurie survives because of her unerring dedication to the domestic sphere, and instead, *Scream*'s Final Girls survive because of their existence in both the domestic and public spheres.

Scream depicts this by having Gale and Sidney walk a very, very fine line between embodying masculinity in the right ways but being feminine enough to not truly challenge any preconceived notions of the audience of what a woman can be. Each woman exercises bodily autonomy and is their own person outside of the home and their relationship to men, but they cannot forget to be women either. This is especially evident when compared to Ripley, who is characterized as more typically masculine. She does not wear makeup, and is tough, resilient, and capable of fighting back. Her masculinity is not couched, with her femaleness only becoming relevant when she is depicted in her underwear in a overt instance of objectification.

However, both Sydney and Gale must “soften” their more masculine aspects through traditional femininity.

However, this is not the only shift in the public consciousness that *Scream* reflects. Billy Loomis and Stu Macher are striking as the killers of the movie, especially when compared with past slasher villains. Traditionally, the monster of the slasher flick has been just that, a monster. Think of Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, and Jason Voorhees. All of these characters are large, looming masculine men who wear masks, or, in Freddy Krueger’s case have a disfigurement, that make them seem inhuman. They walk slowly, seems to survive un-survivable blows, and do not speak as they mechanically kill their victims. In *Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)*, this is taken to the extreme as Freddy Krueger works through supernatural means to stalk and murder his victims. He is no longer a person.

Billy and Stu, on the other hand, are wholly human. They are two teenage boys who have committed murders. They talk, and laugh, and are completely undetectable till they decide to reveal themselves as the murderers to Sidney. They still stay human, even after the reveal. In a moment where Sidney has escaped Billy and Stu and threatens to call the police, Stu whines: “My mom and dad are gonna be so mad at me.” Unlike their slasher predecessors, they are able to lie and deceive those around them until it’s too late for their victims, which only serves to make them more dangerous, more frightening.

Sidney directly reckons with the ramifications of their ability to blend in. After all, on the same night she was convinced to trust Billy again and have sex with him, she also learns that Billy, her boyfriend, was the one who raped and killed her own mother, that he is the one who killed her classmates, principal, her best friend, and is now trying to kill her so he can frame her own father for it. There was no way for her to know, and no way to save those around her. The

film doesn't give Billy and Stu a background for the audience to understand their proclivity to violence; there doesn't even seem to be a history of such actions. While Billy has a motive, his willingness to murder and capacity for cruelty seems like it came from nowhere. There were no signs given to Sidney, or the audience, to indicate that he was capable of such violence, that there was a sign somewhere that someone missed.

This anxiety over missing the signs of oncoming violence can be traced back to the mass cultural consciousness of America, a culture that fears being a victim of violent crime, even today (Taunton para.7). The Columbine mass shooting would not happen for three more years after *Scream*'s release. But in the aftermath, and after the startling increase of mass shootings, people naturally began trying to discern how to look for future perpetrators of such crime. Many researchers and experts claimed that all sorts of things could indicate that a student was likely to commit such an act, such as a history of mental illness, an interest in rock music, watching violent movies, and even a history of bullying (Leary et al.). However, each of these indicators has been proven incorrect, or too broad, leaving us with very little to look for in people who might do this (Peterson et al; Lockett and Cangemi). But trying to understand why people commit such horrible crimes has hardly ever given a true, satisfying answer. Famously, Ted Bundy blamed porn (Casuso), and even that seems to fall short of thoroughly explaining why.

Scream is overtly preoccupied with this lack of a satisfying answer. "It's the millennium, motive is incidental," Randy, the residential horror expert, says at one point. Even Billy's own motive seems incidental to the murder spree he's going on. When revealing himself and his plan, Billy says: "Did we ever find out why Hannibal Lecter likes to eat people? Don't think so! See, it's a lot more scarier when there's no motive, Sid." And, when Sidney has the upper hand over Billy and Stu, she asks them what Stu's plan is to get himself out of trouble: "Peer pressure," he

says: “I’m far too sensitive.” Which indicates that he is planning to blame his actions on something he thinks the authorities will buy, which simultaneously undercuts the credibility peer pressure has as a legitimate motive. At one point, when it’s insinuated that the reason Billy and Stu are doing this is because they have seen too many horror movies, Billy responds: “Movies don’t create psychos. Movies make psychos more creative!” According to these characters, people who do terrible things don’t do it because of neat, distinct reason, but they were always going to do something awful. Which, in turn, means there is no way to find them, and there is no way to stop them. In *Scream*, the fact that the killer exists isn’t scary. The fact that they are our neighbors and live among us is scary.

In her book, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison sees whiteness as a construct, one that shapes itself through the presence of Blackness, and how whiteness treats Blackness as a subordinate. She goes on to examine the ways that American literature are shaped by the construction of Blackness, that “American literature could not help being shaped by that encounter [with racial ideology]” (16). I propose that this argument can be extended even to texts with a distinct lack of non-white characters, like *Scream*.

This omission of Black people from *Scream* speaks to a racial tension that, while a mainstay of American culture, was particularly strained that decade. With the Rodney King Riots a few years prior and the criminal trial of OJ Simpson ending only a few months before principal filming began, it is safe to assume that none of those who were involved in making the film were unaware of the tensions boiling in the country. Yet, the refusal to depict any Black characters is unsurprising. Avoiding the discussion of race entirely is a tactic white people often employ to avoid seeming prejudiced and is often seen as the “graceful” thing to do (Morrison 9), even though this often has the opposite effect. So, while *Scream* may have avoided any

outrightly racist tropes or accusations, it still does not remove the element of race from the story itself. Rather, it makes *Scream* a conversation about whiteness and white suburbia.

Due to the zoning laws that were systematically put in place to keep poorer, non-white populations out of the suburb (Whittemore 168), the concept of the suburb is an explicitly white one, both in theory and in practice. This trend of movement, where white people moved out of cities and Black people moved into them, was first observed in the post-World War II 1940's (Tucker and Reid) and remains steady even today (Perry para. 1). This migration, divided among lines of race, has implicitly linked the Black population of America with major urban cities in the white, American mind, so much so that even former president Donald Trump callously equated city residents with being Black (Semuels para. 2). Combine this with the fact that cities were considered hubs of crime and were even demonstrably so (Glaeser and Sacerdote 228), and that the "War on Drugs", a movement that originated from the Reagan administration, mostly targeted Black citizens (Nunn), then it comes as no surprise that in the late eighties and early nineties, the Black population was connected to both cities and with crime by mainstream white society, but, in turn, suburbia became a metaphorical safe haven for white families (Dickinson 215-216).

In *Scream*, suburbia plays a significant role. Sidney and her friends live in a very particular kind of suburbia, where each house is large, speaks to an abundance of money, and, crucially, seems quite isolated from any potential neighbor. The events of the film put the promised safety of their neighborhood into question by capitalizing on the very characteristics of suburbia. When Casey is murdered in the opening minutes of the movie, we see that her house overlooks an empty field, which means that no neighbors are close enough to hear her scream or to help her. Sidney's large house is nice, but very quickly becomes a maze with a number of

dead ends. Both of these are taken to the extreme in the last act of the movie, where Sidney faces off with Billy and Stu in a house that is too far away from anyone to hear her, she is isolated from the rest of community and thus cannot run, and she is eventually forced into the attic, a supposed dead end. The place where she should be safe is now a playground for her killers.

The construction of white suburbia is a character in *Scream*, one distinguished by the things it was created to avoid, in this case, Blackness. Historically, and in practice, the suburbs are implied to be a place of safety, and a place to aspire to live in, but it strictly defines itself through the absence of Blackness. If the pitch of the suburb city is unsafe, crowded, and Black, and the suburb is not those things, then, in turn, the suburb is also white. This is, under the analysis established by Morrison, demonstrates the way Blackness becomes unavoidable, even in stories that seemingly lack any Black characters. Here, in *Scream*, suburbia is an unavoidable presence that defines the rest of the characters.

However, through suburbia's very existence, it becomes unsafe. This frame of analysis can be extended to both Billy and Stu. Their ability to blend in is notable when compared to how past monsters have been othered, both textually and sub-textually. Take Michael Myers and Leatherface, for instance. Both of these characters wear masks, are much larger and stronger than their victims, do not speak, and walk in a slow, lumbering way. Conversely, Billy and Stu are both products of suburbia. They should be safe examples of why someone would raise a family in the suburbs. Instead, they are monsters that thrive because of the inherent racism of their upbringing, not in spite of it, and threaten the stability of suburbia and whiteness. It is notable, however, that their victims are still white women, like Sidney. Where Michael Myers reflects a fear that there is an outsider coming into the traditionally white suburb, and making it unsafe for her, Stu and Billy reflect the growing fear that the suburb is creating its own destruction and that

it will be too late to stop it once the danger makes itself known. *Scream* is a story of how the social construct of whiteness and white supremacy create its own monsters.

Chapter Three: Leaving Suburbia

The VVitch, purposefully stylized to be spelled with two capital v's, is a horror movie written and directed by Robert Eggers. Set in early seventeenth-century New England, it follows a family's attempts to survive on their own following their banishment from their Puritan colony, a result of a religious dispute between the father, William, and the rest of the town. The film, which is quiet to mirror the isolation of the family, depicts what happens as mysterious events, that seem to be coming from the forest that edges the family's farm, begins to interfere with the family's lives. This film is quite a departure from the slasher films previously discussed. However, much of *The VVitch* echoes of the Final Girl trope, despite not being a slasher, which means that Thomasin, the protagonist, is an example of how the Final Girl has spread beyond the subgenre of the slasher. Once she has left the slasher behind, and its formulaic structure, this allows the film to subvert many of the key characteristics of the Final Girl.

Thomasin is the eldest child and daughter of the family. And, as seems typical for the period, she is given a notable portion of work to keep the small settlement working. She is often seen completing chores, such as taking care of the livestock, and, crucially, is the one watching the baby of the family, Samuel, when he disappears. It happens when Thomasin is playing peek-a-boo with the baby. One moment she is laughing and smiling with him, and the next, after she uncovers her eyes, he's gone, but the blankets that he laid on remain. It becomes evident, to the family at least, that witchcraft is involved in some way. After all, no natural force could silently steal a baby in a matter of seconds, and with the baby unbaptized, his fate appears doomed.

Unfortunately for Thomasin, she quickly becomes the scapegoat for her family's trouble. Her parents blame her for the disappearance of a silver cup that would have bought them food to survive the winter. When her brother, Caleb, goes out into the woods, with Thomasin only

accompanying him after she catches him, she's blamed for his death, despite the fact that she was unconscious during it. Her father accuses her of being a witch, and locks her and her remaining siblings, the twins, in the goat house with a large black goat named Black Phillip. In the morning, her father finds Thomasin alive, but the goats and twins mysteriously murdered. Before he can do anything though, he is then gored to death by Black Philip. The mother, Katherine, enraged and grieving, accuses Thomasin, once again, of being a witch and attempts to kill her. Thomasin, sobbing and terrified, wins the struggle by killing her mother.

After this encounter, Thomasin is alone on the settlement, covered in blood and reckoning at the destruction her family has suffered. Later, at night, she seeks to speak with Black Phillip. He, now transformed into a man, offers her a chance at a new life, and asks her: "Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?" She signs her name in his book, and joins him, and her new coven, in the woods.

The ages of the characters are never confirmed, but it can be assumed, both through the appearance of the actress and a conversation William and Katherine have about their daughter, that Thomasin is somewhere between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, right on the cusp of adulthood and womanhood. Thomasin's impending entry into adulthood and independence worries her parents, leading them to treat her with caution. At one point in the film, they consider sending her away to work for a different family. This anxiety revolves around Thomasin becoming an independent adult, as well as a sexual being, and ultimately manifests itself as a fear of witchcraft, and, more specifically, Thomasin.

A link between witches and female sexuality, including puberty, is well established, as Barbara Creed argues in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine*. She primarily makes her point with the film *Carrie*, where a young girl's psychic abilities manifest along with her first period. But,

traditionally, accusations of being a witch consisted of the describing sexual acts that the accused allegedly took part of. This, theoretically, was because, according to *The Malleus Maleficarum*, a guide to identifying witches from the fifteenth century, women: “are more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations” (qtd. in Creed 75). During historical witch hunts, the accused were eventually pressured, through torture, to admit crimes of a sexual nature like “stealing men’s penises and having sex with devil” (75). This establishes a direct line between the fear of witches and the fear of a woman’s sexuality.

This link is present in the film, and becomes most explicit in the final act, where Katherine attacks her daughter, saying:

“The Devil is in thee and hath had thee. You are smeared of his sin. You reek of Evil.

You have made a covenant with death! You have bewitched thy brother, proud slut! Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore? And thy father next! You took them from me! They are gone!” (Eggers 98-99)

Katherine has watched her daughter cross the boundary between childhood and adulthood, or simply puberty. Thomasin is now old enough to have sex and is thus susceptible to giving in to her carnal instincts. For Katherine, just being capable of wanting sex makes her daughter a potential source of evil, or a “natural temptation,” as *The Malleus Maleficarum* would say, to the men in her family. It is only a natural step in her logic that once her daughter could possibly want sex, she would become an agent for the devil and use her body to tempt her brother and father away from God, and away from Katherine.

Much of Katherine’s and Thomasin’s relationship echoes the analysis Creed presents about Carrie and her own mother, Mrs. White. Though the events of each movie are separated through hundreds of years, the religious mania of Mrs. White echoes Katherine’s Puritan ideals.

When Carrie is sent home after unexpectedly getting her period for the first time, her mother is less than sympathetic. “She raves hysterically about the sins of woman and she and Carrie must pray for their ‘woman-weak, wicked, sinning souls’” (79). Creed identifies how Mrs. White’s following rant about Eve and the curses every woman bears because of Eve, insinuates that she sees Carrie, not as her daughter, but as a monster in Eve’s creation. This rings true for Thomasin and Katherine as well. While fending off her attacks, Thomasin finds herself begging her mother to stop attacking her, crying: “Let go! Stop, stop. I love you! Please, Mother I love you!” To which her mother only responds with: “Witch! WITCH!” Puberty has made these daughters strangers to their mothers.

This underlying theme of anxiety about sexuality, adulthood, and puberty is a key aspect of the slasher, and also of the Final Girl. However, Thomasin’s journey seems contradictory to much of what Carol Clover outlines in her chapter “Her Body, Himself” in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Clover argues that the Final Girl and her foe are linked through a joint sexual repression, where the killer is a man unable to fully act out his “masculine” sexual urges and the Final Girl is unwilling to indulge them (49). This does not follow through into Thomasin’s story. The killer of her story is the Devil, and the witches, sexually uninhibited women, who serve him. They are not sexually repressed, and so, do not attempt to kill her in an effort to play out repressed urges. Thomasin does not appear to even be the main target of their violence and murder. Rather, the Devil is attempting to sway Thomasin away from her family that views her as inherently sinful and would suppress her, and towards himself and sexual freedom.

This only further complicates the traditional roles of the Final Girl. Clover says: “The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically ‘unmans’ an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with” (49). But this begs the question, in what way does Thomasin

“man herself” in the narrative? By “manning,” Clover refers to how the Final Girl will attempt to kill or fend off the killer, usually through stabbing them with another object. This, Clover argues, is phallically suggestive, and once the Final Girl penetrates the killer, she is then more man. And while Thomasin does murder her mother in self-defense, it less phallically insinuates. This act does more to emphasize how Thomasin finds herself at odds with the ways her family and their Puritanical values. They limited her ability to express her individuality as well as her sexuality, and these differences, as suggested by the film itself, could not be reckoned with if her family was still alive. This does indicate that her parents are the “oppressor” that Clover identifies, and not the Devil, which further indicates that the role of the Devil is not as simple as one would think.

In a more traditional Final Girl story, the Devil, who takes the form of Black Phillip, would be the sexually frustrated antagonist, pursuing Thomasin in an attempt for sexual release. However, here, the Devil acts as the agent that *allows* her to become a fully-fledged, sexual being, both by breaking down her Puritan family and the boundaries that come with them and by explicitly inviting her to take part of a lifestyle that will allow her to indulge her sexuality. He asks her, after the death of her family: “Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst, thou like to live deliciously?” Both of these objects are items of indulgence that she would not have been allowed to enjoy while living with her family. Thomasin takes the offer up and writes her name in his book. And, when she joins him and her new coven in the woods, she abandons her Puritan style of dress for nudity. This abandoning of her clothes is the ultimate signifier that Thomasin has left her old life of restriction and oppression for one where she is in charge of herself and sexuality.

In slashers of the past, a nude or partially dressed woman on screen is an invitation for the viewers to gaze at her body for their own gratification. This objectification is a feature of the slasher, rather than a flaw. Take, for instance, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, released in 1984, which is considered a staple of the genre. It depicts a group of teens being attacked and killed by a man named Freddy Krueger, who can enter and control dreams. Near the end of the movie, Nancy, the Final Girl, changes her clothes before facing off with Krueger again one last time. The camera faces her back and includes her body from the waist up. She pulls off her shirt, pauses, and looks behind her towards her bed. In this brief moment, the side of her breast becomes visible, just for a second. Earlier, Krueger attempted to drown Nancy while she slept in her bathtub. The camera positions itself near the end of the tub, by her feet, and “looks” up to her face. Krueger’s arm reaches out of the water, in between Nancy’s legs, in a clearly suggestive manner. In the ensuing struggle, Nancy’s naked body is on screen, darkly lit to avoid explicitness, but enough to make out the form of her body. Even the poster for the movie, which shows Nancy in bed, heavily implies that she is naked underneath the sheets. This pattern of exposing a woman’s body enough to “excite” male audiences is objectification, and another example of Mulvey’s work on the male gaze. It is clearest in these instances, that Nancy’s body is “raw material” for the male audiences to take an erotic pleasure in looking at. This objectification of the female body is a mainstay of the slasher, and even horror at large.

This norm is something that *The VVitch* seems aware of and also seems to reject. There are deliberate steps taken to avoid the objectification of Thomasin. The screenplay specifically states: “Note: while appearing nude to the audience, Thomasin’s breasts, ‘etc.’ will never be in frame” (Eggers 103). While it is obvious that she spends the last minutes of the film in a state of undress, it is never used to tantalize the audience. Rather, her undress is used to be a genuine

mark of her newfound sexual freedom. This is another indicator of how *The VVitch* is a sincere attempt to subvert the past formulas and sexual undertones of the Final Girl. Rather than being a story of a young woman, subject to the sexual frustrations of their sexually oppressed killer, this film tells the story *of* the young woman and her own journey into adulthood.

What is particularly interesting about this film is how this story gives Thomasin access to her agency. If she stayed inside the social and political bounds of Puritan society, she of course would not be able to truly be a free person, at least not to the conceptions of a twenty-first century audience, so it is inevitable that she must return to it. However, it is notable that she makes a literal pact with the Devil himself in order to achieve her freedom, the very force that is also responsible for the death of her family members. Thomasin fully aligns herself with an explicitly evil force. This sets her apart from other Final Girls, who *defeat* or *escape* the “evil” in their own stories and maintain their virtue. Laurie escapes from Michael Myers, Ripley successfully leaves the alien behind on the spaceship, Sydney kills Billy, so on and so forth. But not Thomasin. This marks a distinct shift in the stories we tell ourselves about women in horror. Thomasin is still a sympathetic character, and, even more importantly, the lead character of her story. It would seem that it is no longer satisfying for the Final Girl to survive, but rather to join in on the horror, to become a part of what is so terrifying in the first place. This certainly seems to indicate that audiences have become more tolerant, or even eager, for horror that allows women to be complicated figures in their own right. However, it must be noted that Thomasin’s story seems to make good on the threat made in movies like *Halloween*. Though her family’s cottage is a far cry from the suburb that Laurie calls home, it is still a place that should be relatively safe for her and her family by protecting them from the worldly evils. And, once again

like Laurie, that safety is threatened by an outside, inhuman force, though this time it is the Devil that threatens the stability of the home, not Michael Myers.

In simple terms, Thomasin's story is one of moral corruption. The Devil seemingly chooses her to join his ranks, and so he, whether by his own hands or the witch in the woods, systematically dismantles her family structures, till she has no choice but to choose him. After all, even if she told him no, and walked back to town, she would be hard-pressed to present a story that would not end with her death. Taking the color symbolism into account only complicates this story even more. The Devil takes the form of a goat, named Black Phillip, who is named after the color of his black hair. However, when Caleb's encounter with the witch is considered, this color choice becomes more pressing. When Caleb approaches the witch at her cottage, she is dressed in black, with a red cloak. Clearly, the film associates black with evil and the Devil. While this symbolism is one that is widespread in American culture, it is still concerning that the film depicts a young, white woman under pursuit by an evil force, dressed in black.

This is a film that includes no characters of color in its entire run time, much like *Scream*. While this lack of inclusivity is its own problem, it is troubling that these white characters are beguiled and tormented by unquestionably evil, supernatural entities that are associated with the color black. This element becomes pressing when the analysis from Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* is applied. If the concept of whiteness can best be defined by the concept of Blackness, then, in this instance, it appears that whiteness defines itself as good and pure, while Blackness is diametrically opposed to it, as a signifier of evil. Even when divorced entirely from present day and modern suburbia, the trope of the Final Girl seems unable to unentangle itself from race and the white fear of the racial other.

Chapter Four: Evolution into an Agent of Horror

Ari Aster's sophomore feature film *Midsommar*, released in 2019, does not immediately seem to fit in with the other works discussed earlier. The film follows Dani, an American, who, after the sudden death of her entire family, travels with her boyfriend, and his friends, to Sweden. Pelle has invited them to travel back to his home, an isolated commune called the Hårga, to observe a midsummer celebration that only occurs every ninety years. Unlike *Scream* or *Halloween*, the events of the movie do not transpire in an American suburb populated by large, neat homes on normally quiet, dark streets. Rather, the characters of *Midsommar* spend nearly the film's entire run time in a foreign place, surrounded by people who do not speak the same language they do. The movie takes place almost entirely in daylight, not because of editing, but because the sun does not set during this time of the year. Again, it's another striking difference between *Halloween* and *Scream*, as both movies have long, climactic scenes that occur at night. And, most crucially, *Midsommar* is not considered a slasher film.

I do not propose that *Midsommar* is somehow secretly a slasher film. The movie is decidedly a different genre of horror altogether and has even been defined as a "break up film" by director Ari Aster (Rao para. 3). Others call the movie a psychological horror, citing the hallucinogen induced scenes, the exploration of cults, and the themes of grief that unwind themselves over the course of the film. For whatever *Midsommar* is, it seems diametrically opposed to the slasher. Where the slasher film is preoccupied with exploring how the familiar and safe, like the home, a summer camp, even your dreams, can become deadly, *Midsommar* pushes its characters into unfamiliar, unknown territories. The never-ending daylight of the movie creates a sleepless, yet dream-like, atmosphere. And, where the characters struggle to get rest, so, emotionally, does the viewer. The sunlight also makes it impossible for the audience to

miss the oddities and horror that evolve on screen. The strangeness of the daylight only accentuates the way the characters are strangers in this commune. They do not speak the language of the people around them, they do not know the culture or traditions, and they cannot leave without assistance. It appears that *Midsommar* wants to know what happens when someone is put into a place they cannot know, not what happens if something invades a safe place, like the slasher. However, if *Midsommar* is not a slasher, then it begs the question: is there a Final Girl? Yes, I would argue that Dani is the Final Girl, and that *Midsommar*, like *The VVitch*, signifies the rippling influence the Final Girl trope has on the horror genre.

To recall Clover's point, early slasher frames the Final Girl as a "victim-hero." The Final Girl does win, for she survives when others do not, but at a great personal expense. Dani is quite the victim-hero and even begins the film as a victim. The first few minutes of the movie depict Dani's sister committing murder-suicide when she kills herself, and their parents, via carbon monoxide poisoning. Dani, suddenly and brutally, finds herself an orphan. She blames herself for the tragedy as she followed Christian's advice to ignore her sister's final communication. Throughout the rest of the film, Dani is further traumatized. She witnesses the brutal suicide of two elderly members of the commune, is lied to by her boyfriend, manipulated by the commune, undergoes a bad mushroom trip where she sees her sister's face at the moment of her death in the hills and scenery of Sweden, witnesses Christian's infidelity, and has a panic attack because of it. For all intents and purposes, *Midsommar* appears to follow Hitchcock's advice to "Torture the women!" (Qtd. in Lord para 4). Dani also, critically, survives, while the other members of her group do not. While being a sole survivor is not an explicit requirement of the Final Girl, as exemplified by Gale Weathers in *Scream*, it is a common hallmark. Through these two markers, Dani is clearly fit to join the ranks of the Final Girl.

Unlike the movies previously discussed, *Midsommar* directly contends with race. One of the people Dani and Christian come to Sweden with is Josh, a Black man portrayed by William Jackson Harper. Josh is a cultural anthropology student in the same program as Christian. He hopes to write his thesis on the commune, the Hagar. A thesis that Christian will later plagiarize, much to the irritation and frustration of Josh. Two other travelers also join the group, Connie and Simon, who appear to be of Indian and African descent respectively. All three of these characters meet their deaths in ways that are markedly different than their white counterpoints

After witnessing an *ättestupa* ritual, a pre-historic Nordic ceremony, where two of elderly members of the commune jump to their death, although one survives and is then crushed to death with a mallet, both Connie and Simon insist on leaving. They're obliged and taken to a train station one at a time. Christian later finds Simon's corpse, mutilated, and strung up, with his lungs cut out and arranged to look like wings that sprout from his back, and flowers stuffed in his eye sockets. Though it is never explicitly revealed what Connie's fate was, it's clear that she was one of the four outsiders sacrificed for the *Midsommar* ritual. Josh is bludgeoned to death while trying to secretly photograph of an important text. These deaths, especially when compared to Christian and Mark's (another fellow student that is killed after urinating on a sacred tree), seem run of the mill for a horror film of *Midsommar*'s ilk. However, their deaths become much more suspect after the origins of the Hårga commune come into question.

In the dormitory style accommodations Dani and her group stay in, she observes a display of photographs of past May Queens on one of the walls. There seem to be thirty photographs on the wall, and while a number of them are in black and white, none of the photos seem to be much older than the 1980's. Which is a suspiciously brief history for a community that seems to claim much older roots and is claiming to celebrate a "once every ninety years

tradition.” What is more compelling than this seemingly insufficient history are the runes that the Hårga surround themselves with. The half-sun rune that marks the entrance to the commune seems to be an adaptation of the Black Sun, a symbol used by Nazis before World War II and fascists at the 2017 Charleston rally (Al-Sibai). And the Odal, a symbol deeply imbedded into white supremacist culture (Al-Sibai), can be spotted incorporated in the clothing of the commune. The Hårga aren’t just suspiciously new, their origins seem to neatly match with the late twentieth century wave of fascism and white supremacy that lingers today. This racism, though subtle, is pervasive through the entire commune. For example, when the tradition of the maypole dance is explained, the elder tells them that they do this in order to spite the “Black One” who cursed their women to dance hysterically to death. This “Black One” carries heavy meaning, and racially codes whatever outside entity the Hårga may identify as their enemy. It is also vague enough that those who are not on the lookout for it, like Dani, will miss it.

In the light of this new context, the fates of Connie, Simon, and Josh take on a new, more horrifying meaning. If it is accepted that the commune is built upon the precepts of modern white supremacy, then the lives of Connie, Simon, and Josh are more disposable than their white counterparts. This is evident in the case of Josh, when the Hårga elders excuse his disappearance by claiming he, or Mark, has run away with their sacred text. In reality, they have murdered Josh, but neither Dani nor Christian is aware of this. Christian quickly backs up the idea that Josh took the text, rather than Mark, another white man. This act seems to suggest that he is well on his way to embracing the ideals and “traditions” of the Hårga.

Furthermore, Christian is told at one point that the commune will bring in outsiders to “avoid incest,” and is then shortly thereafter propositioned, which he declines. Before this, Mark seems to be seduced before his death and subsequent skinning. But Josh, along with Simon and

Connie, are disposed of quickly, brutally, and without the element of bringing in “new blood.” This is explicit as Aster divulges in an interview that: “He’s thrown away in a way that the other members of the main cast are not. And that is because these people have no further use for him” (Qtd. in Ganz para. 12).

There is also an argument to be made, which Noor Al-Sibai posits, that Josh, Connie, and Simon are also disposed of due to how outside they are of the culture and will not be swayed. Actor Will Poulter, who plays Mark, also touches on this idea that Connie and Simon are deeply horrified and unlikely to be inducted to the cult and are: “totally on the outside looking in” (Qtd. in Ganz para 6). Josh, at his core, is a cultural anthropologist, who remains on the metaphorical outside as well, and attempts to record the sacred text which, if he manages to do so, may reveal the commune as the racist farce that it is. These characters, because they are not white, cannot be manipulated into joining a force that is actively built around the belief that they are inferior, and as such, are an existential threat to the existence of the Hårga. With this context, it comes as no surprise that Dani, a blonde, fair-skinned, young woman becomes a target for indoctrination for the Hårga.

What may come as a surprise is how effective their tactics appear to be. One of the most unsettling scenes, in a movie full of unsettling imagery, are the moments after Dani walks in on Christian in a moment of psychedelic drug-induced infidelity. She staggers away, crying and breathing quickly, clearly attempting to stave off a panic attack. Looking for privacy, she finds herself once again in the shared dormitory, but she does not stay alone for long. A number of young women from the commune quickly surround her and join her in kneeling on the floor, mimicking her cries of misery. The group quickly becomes one in a swaying, heaving, weeping, swarm. This is not the only time members of the commune copy the sounds of someone

groaning, wailing, howling, etc. This practice is first encountered after the second elderly member survives his suicide attempt. While someone else approaches him, preparing to end his life, the rest of the group mimic his groans of pain and anguish. Later, when Christian is impregnating a young woman, older women stand in a circle around them, naked, and imitating her cries (which Dani walks in on). These choruses are eerie, and deeply unsettling. Yet, this practice must serve a purpose other than adding to the unnerving atmosphere of the movie. This seems to be a tactic used by the group in order to bring about a feeling of “oneness,” where the boundaries between one person and another are blurred, and emotions become a shared experience rather than a singular event for one person. Studies have shown that activities such as dancing and singing, when done in a group, tend to result in higher levels of oxytocin, a hormone normally associated with mothers who have just given birth and is believed to induce feelings of bonding and love (Montell 21). In Dani’s case, in the middle of a panic attack, this action could cause her to identify with the Hårga and associate them with belonging and being cared for. This seems to be the final nail in the coffin for Dani but is certainly not the first.

Throughout her time with the Hårga, Dani’s isolation and emotional devastation seems to be preyed upon. She presents as a prime target for them already, not just because of her white skin and blonde hair, but because of the recent death of her family. Outside of Christian and his fellow students, Dani is alone and seeking community after the tragedy she just suffered. The Hårga, conveniently, are there to help her. Pelle, the commune member who met them at school and brought them back, relates to Dani, telling her the story of his parents who died in a fire, leaving him and his brother as orphans. But he explains that the Hårga were there for them after the tragedy, that they make him “feel held.” He asks if Christian makes her feel held, a question that she seems perturbed by. Later, before walking in on Christian’s infidelity, she participates in

the May Queen dancing contest, after ingesting a hallucinogenic. The dance starts slowly, with Dani smiling and laughing with the other girls, but it quickly becomes a frenetic, hysterical event. Dani seems to lose herself, and suddenly gains the ability to speak Swedish, no longer needing the help of a translator. Shortly after, she wins, and is crowned the May Queen. She's become one of them. She speaks their language now, has become entrenched in their traditions, and has found a place of belonging. In this context, her final decision in the film is a deliberate choice to destroy her last remaining bridge to her life before the Hårga.

But what also makes Dani compelling is how much of what defines the previous iterations of the Final Girl does not define her. Like Sidney, Dani's story is not confined to the landscape of the home and homemaking. However, unlike Sidney, Laurie, and Thomasin, Dani's story has very little to do with her own sexuality. As an adult woman in a four-year long relationship with Christian, the audience can assume she is no longer a virgin. But the audience can *only* assume this as her sexual experience, or even lack thereof, is never explicitly discussed on screen. Even more, unlike Ripley in *Alien* or Nancy in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Dani remains fully clothed at all times on screen, with no scandalous and objectifying glimpses of her breasts or scenes spent in her underwear. In fact, the most sexual scene in the movie, which is a literal sex scene between a drugged Christian and a young woman from the commune, involves full frontal nudity only from Christian. As a whole, the film seems fully uninterested in Dani as a sexual object. This departure signals a larger phenomenon in more recent horror, specifically for the Final Girl. The Final Girl is growing up.

This growing up of the Final Girl is notable as the slasher flick, from its conception, has largely been targeted towards teenagers (Kvaran). This is evident not only through the cast being made up largely of teenaged characters, but also through the particular teenaged anxiety around

sex, more specifically, who's having it and who isn't. The subsequent vanishing of the teenage horror movie over the last two or so decades has resulted in a horror movie market that is primarily geared towards adults. Consequently, the newer iterations of the Final Girl are no longer teenagers, but rather fully-fledged adults with adult concerns.

Take, for instance, *Ready or Not*, a horror comedy film released in 2019, the same year as *Midsommar*. Grace, portrayed by Samara Weaving, is much more the typical slasher flick Final Girl than Dani. However, like Dani, her story is much more "grown up" than the slashers of the past. During the film, she marries into the Le Domas family, that made their extraordinary wealth from board games. On her wedding night, the family insists she plays a game of Hide-and-Seek, where, if she loses, she will be ritually sacrificed to Satan. This game is played as a part of a deal, made years ago with a man called "Le Bail," in order to keep the family wealthy. The movie contends with some very different and, perhaps, more complex themes than sex.

For instance, a surface level analysis reveals themes of class and economics exist quite visibly in the film. Raised as in the foster care system, it is quite clear that Grace is not in the same economic class as her husband, Alex. One can safely assume that her life did not have the same financial ease his did. Yet, his family's continued financial security depends on the *literal* sacrifice of her well-being. But it is not enough to just kill Grace either, the family literally hunts her down in an exhausting, painful, and horrifying manner. She isn't fully human to them, rather she is more akin to an animal or object to use and discard. The La Domas family feel entitled to her life, regardless of the pain and terror they will cause her.

Combining this with the secret conversation Grace and Alex have shortly after the game starts, after Grace witnesses Emilie, Alex's sister, accidentally kill a maid after mistaking her for Grace. He informs her of the reality of the game, that it is a fight for her life, and she asks him

why he would even propose if he knew this might happen. Alex explains that between the choice of letting Grace go, and keeping her, he selfishly chose to marry her. Again, Alex displays a concerning tendency to destroy something, rather than live without it. There is the underlying implication that Alex would let Grace unknowingly and inadvertently join a family that would require her to also participate in a similar hunt in the future, as stopping or avoiding the murder would also end in her death. This action reflects a carelessness for Grace as a whole person. First, Alex is willing to risk her life for his own happiness. And second, he does not seem to think about whether or not Grace would want to join a family with the caveat to uphold a deal with the “Dark One” and risk her soul and other lives to maintain a wealthy lifestyle. Alex clearly values his own financial security, sexual pleasure, and feelings over Grace’s well-being, and, when any of those are threatened, he will do what it takes to satisfy that. Just like his family.

The idea of the lower economic class being a disposable means to an end is only further enforced through the casual murder of two of the three maids. Emilie kills two of them by accident and feels no real remorse other than a childishly frustrated attitude and disappointment that it’s not actually Grace. To Emilie, and the rest of her family, these women aren’t real people, but props that can be replaced when convenient or “broken.” The La Domas clan even has a cellar in their barn explicitly for throwing away the bodies of the people they’ve killed. The movie goes to great lengths to demonstrate the ways these rich people do not view the lower economic classes as people, even though they ensure their survival.

Another theme is the anxiety around the idea of the family structure. Grace, who, as a former foster child, does not have a stable family. As a result, she yearns for one that mirrors what she believes she’s been missing. She tells Becky, Alex’s mother, “I always dreamed of having a family.” And, when Alex tries to convince her to run away and snub his family, she

insists on staying because: “they’re the family of the man that I love.” Grace is anxious to impress them, even though multiple members express disdain for her on the basis that she is not one of them. While most women will not be hunted down to be sacrificed to Satan, the movie reflects the anxiety and fear of women who marry into a family that is not their own. Grace ends the movie alive, and still wearing her wedding dress, albeit it is now filthy from the dirt, blood, and gore of the night. She smokes in front of the burning La Domas mansion, and when asked what happened, she replies: “In-laws.”

However, Dani is the Final Girl who pushes further than her contemporaries. In her chapter “‘Don’t Fuck with the Original’: Final Girl Impact on the Twenty-First-Century Horror Film Industry,” Cheryl Hague argues that horror was the first film industry to take an interest in women as more than “just” a victim, and, because of that, modern-day horror is still pioneering the way women and women’s stories can be the focus of films. Hague’s focus is, understandably, the power dynamics that surround and create the Final Girl and how those dynamics has influenced real women into making “female-centered” horror. She notes that recent horror has shown: “The demure debutante and the hapless bad girl have been stripped of their facades and revealed to be flesh-and-blood women who are capable of not only intelligence and ingenuity, but of rage and violence as well” (224). This seems fundamentally true for Dani. She is neither a “demure debutante” nor a “hapless bad girl.” She is a traumatized young woman, attempting to navigate a strange, brutal setting, and her boyfriend’s growing distance, but, as we find, she is also full rage and violence, especially towards the men who’ve ostensibly mistreated her.

Past Final Girls have enacted their fair share of violence. Laurie stabs Michael Myers in the eye with a wire clothes hanger, Ripley tries multiple times to kill the alien stalking her on the ship, Nancy hits Freddy Krueger with a sledgehammer and douses him with accelerant to light

him in fire, Sidney pushes a nineties style television, complete with a thick, glass screen onto Stu, as well stabs Billy with an umbrella before shooting him at close range. Thomasin kills her mother. Even Grace kills Becky, the mother of the groom. But, crucially, all of these acts are in self-defense. These women do not hurt someone who is not actively trying to kill or hurt them first. Dani, in contrast, does not experience any first-hand physical violence. This distinction is important to understand the one act of brutality Dani commits during the film. While dressed in a massive robe and crown made of flowers, both bestowed upon her after she is crowned the May Queen, she is asked to choose one more sacrifice to complete the Midsommar ritual. She can choose a villager at random, or she can choose Christian, whom she witnessed being unfaithful (though she does not know he was drugged), as the final victim. She chooses Christian. Truth be told, Christian does not seem to be a great boyfriend. Out of irritation, he convinces Dani to ignore her sister's final message, he initially withholds information about the trip to Sweden from Dani because he was planning to break up with her, he is distant, short-tempered, and not particularly kind to her. This does make Christian underwhelming at best and a jerk at worst, but that does not seem to truly justify Dani's ultimate choice to have him killed.

Christian, once again drugged but this time to an awoken paralysis, is stuffed into the skin of a bear, placed inside a building, where the other commune sacrifices wait, along with the bodies of Mark, Josh, Connie, and Simon. The building is then lit on fire. He burns to death, aware the entire time, as the Hårga with him scream in agony and fear. Dani reacts to this from a distance, at first sobbing and screaming, but eventually coming to a stop, and watches the fire burn, with a smile.

Dani sentences Christian to a horrific death, where the punishment does not fit the crime. This cruelty sets her apart from her past compatriots. Sure, death by your living room television,

the method by which Sydney kill Stu, sounds brutal, but at least Stu had murdered people and was trying to murder Sidney as well. Christian, for as unlikable as he is, does not take the life of anyone else on screen. But Dani does. This certainly complicates Clover's establishing of the Final Girl as a "victim-hero." For she is still a victim to the cult that has successfully indoctrinated her, but hero, in the sense of being the "good guy," is now a fraught term. For if the Final Girl is no longer a hero, is she still someone the audience can rally behind?

People certainly still appear too. Dani appears on Indiewire's list of "The Top 25 Most Killer Final Girls Every Horror Fan Should Know." The article demonstrates the ways viewers have embraced Dani as a Final Girl, saying that she: "dump[s] his bear ass before lighting a barn on fire" (Foreman para. 19). The acceptance of Dani as a Final Girl seems to indicate that modern audiences no longer need their Final Girls to be "good," that they have learned to accept a more complicated narrative and complicated heroine. It also seems to show that audiences have had enough of women surviving in horror films and are now eager for them to become agents of the horror themselves. However, the reception of Dani as a Final Girl, a well-liked one even, is troubling. Dani kills her boyfriend and joins a cult that is explicitly white supremacist. Why is she still so sympathetic? This new aspect of the Final Girl trope is still unfolding, which makes it hard to fully explore, but I believe there is one element to help decode the sympathy audiences feel for Dani.

Conclusion

The Final Girl is many things, and can be many things, but, historically, she has been the one that the audience is supposed to root for. When Laurie is hiding from Michael Myers in a closet, the audience wants him to miss that she's there somehow. Audiences are supposed to cheer when Sydney triumphs over Billy and Stu and laugh at her jibes, they sigh in relief when Grace narrowly dodges getting ritualistically sacrificed and watch in fear when Thomasin grapples with her mother. Historically, the Final Girl is a sympathetic figure, but that sympathy often hinges on one key aspect of her identity.

In Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, Chris, a Black man, finds himself in unfamiliar territory when he accompanies his girlfriend, Rose, who is white to visit her wealthy parents over the weekend. Eventually, it is revealed that Rose's family is systematically kidnapping and hypnotizing Black people to insert the consciousness of other wealthy, white people inside them. At a crucial moment, Chris attempts to escape the house, and assumes that Rose is unaware of her parents' activities. But, as it turns out, Rose is not only aware, but an active participant in their business. Her role is to go out into the world and lure Black people back to her parents, who then go on to sell the bodies of the victims to the highest bidder.

Rose's villainous role is a direct subversion of the Final Girl trope (Greven 192) by taking what the audience expects from her, innocence, and making her, instead, another villain for Chris to survive. This subversion relies on the viewer to assume that Rose is innocent, building upon preconceived and underlying assumptions that audiences hold about innocence and white femininity, usually by conflating the two with each other (Wilz). Even Chris himself makes this mistake. Instead of assuming she is in on the conspiracy, he wakes her up, explains what's happening, and asks her to run away with him by relying on her to give him the car keys.

This subversion, however, reveals the underlying truth about the Final Girl trope as a whole. It is her *whiteness* that makes her sympathetic.

There are multiple entries in the horror genre that have examples of Final Girls who are not white, one of those being another Jordan Peele film, titled *Us* (2019), with the character Adelaide. However, the staples that make up the Final Girl trope, the mainstream movies that define her, consist of movies that privilege white. The conception of the Final Girl is a white woman. In the films mentioned here, the underlying anxieties of these movies are depicted as monstrous beings attacking white women. This formula is consistent with a long-held white anxiety that has roots in Jim Crow-era stories about Black men raping and kidnapping white women (Pilgrim). The mainstream, white audience has been trained to see the white woman as the ideal sympathetic character.

This aspect, troubling in its own, becomes even more worrisome with the recent developments of the Final Girl. Thomasin and Dani, but especially Dani, are reflections of efforts made in horror films to tell stories about women that give them more agency and power than just being the victim-hero of the film. Both entries, *Midsommar* and *The VVitch* do so by allowing these women to do terrible things or join terrible causes. Yet, neither film is fully able to let go of the Final Girl trope, either in its direct text or in audience reception. This comes to a head in the case of Dani. Despite the purposeful depiction of the Hårga as white supremacists, and her choice to kill Christian, she is identified as a Final Girl, and audiences are, overwhelmingly, sympathetic, if not outrightly identifying with her, claiming that she is a depiction of woman being allowed to grieve “publicly” or that they are grateful to: “have a group of Hårga-esque women who laugh, cry, scream, and go through it all with me—women who never alienize my experiences and give me unconditional support” (Lavalle para. 6). While this

article by Michaela Lavalle briefly discusses the ways women of color would not be allowed to be so openly emotional, it does nothing to address how the women who “laugh, cry, scream, and go through it all” with Dani do so in an effort to manipulate her into joining a cult. Or how that cult is directly responsible for the deaths of multiple people. It has to be asked: would Dani be so sympathetic if she were not a white woman? The obvious answer seems to be no. As Greven and Wilz so aptly identify, the conflation of white femininity with innocence is obscenely common in American culture and media. If Dani was anyone else, her choice to kill Christian would not be valorized, instead, it would be condemned.

The Final Girl, since her conception, has gathered a following who adores her. She has captured the imaginations of audiences, writers, and directors over the decades. However, her existence in popular culture is damning. She is the meeting place of misogyny and racism in film. Audiences love to watch her be tortured, to gaze upon her like she is an object, but also, she is a prime example of how being a white woman is to always be presumed innocent. If future horror films wish to expand her role, to allow her to exist in the narrative in ways that make her evil, then the assumption that she is innocent, no matter what she does, will follow, inextricably. And while there are people subverting the trope, like Jordan Peele and Stephen Graham Jones, in order to investigate her whiteness, it would seem, overwhelmingly, she is still a white construction. Perhaps, then, it is time for film-makers to let go of the Final Girl.

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