

THE ENEMY IS FEAR: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF THE HORROR  
GENRE THROUGH RESILIENCE AND COPING

by

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HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
graduation in the Honors College  
May 2022

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## **DEDICATION**

My mom has encouraged my love of horror ever since I was a child obsessed with *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. She taught me that if I ever saw something too scary, I could close my eyes and wait it out. Horror is always something that we will share together, and I am forever so grateful to be uplifted in every strange interest I may have.

Thank you, mom.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following mentors, friends, and family whose support was instrumental in the completion of this thesis.

My advisor, Dr. Amy Meeks, for offering feedback and guidance from the beginning to the end of this process. I cannot emphasize enough how helpful each contribution was—every single meeting and suggestion made my work stronger.

My parents and grandparents for supporting and making my academic career possible. I would not be able to pursue my passions and interests without the help of my family.

My friends Erin, Natalie, Isaiah, Sara, and Em for the encouragement and years of movie watching.

And Wes Craven, for the quote this title is derived from.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines how the horror genre can psychologically benefit audiences by enabling coping mechanisms and a greater resilience to fear. The common assumption is that horror films exist merely to terrify audiences with well-timed jump scares and gory death scenes, however these films are wildly diverse in their methods of evoking fear and are far more valuable than they are often given credit for. Viewing one's own fears through the controlled environment of fiction can allow viewers to face anxieties head on and consider ahead of time how they would cope when confronted with fear in the real world. The horror genre allows for anxieties and phobias to be captured through a large scope, employing antagonists that are truly terrifying in order to fully explore the reality of fear in a way that validates the feelings of the viewer. Existing research on the link between horror and psychology is discussed, accompanying the analysis of several horror films which deal with a variety of issues. Horror is an ideal setting to discuss some of the most serious topics of today's society and human nature in general such as disease, misogyny, parenthood, and the broader topic of death. By analyzing films that depict these themes through the scope of horror, this thesis aims to support the idea that horror is a meaningful medium which can truly benefit viewers.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF HORROR

For many casual movie-goers, the phrase “horror film” conjures up the classic image of terrified camp counselors running through a darkened wood, chased by a man in a mask accompanied by the sound of revving chainsaws. Among the vast variety of sub-genres that make up the collective of horror films, this particular image would be designated as a “slasher” movie, wherein the ultimate story is about a group of young friends being picked off one by one in an assortment of brutal deaths. The aforementioned variety of subgenres extend into a long list, ranging from found-footage horror where the entire story is relayed through the shakily held camera of the protagonists hoping to record their adventure, to the newly popular elevated horror, usually touching on deeper societal issues with inventive and distinct cinematography. While the latter genre is certainly more likely to be outright in its presentation of themes relevant to the audience, the average horror film can still achieve meaningful story elements capable of heavily impacting the viewer.

Horror as a genre is often misunderstood and underestimated. After ninety-four years of the Academy Awards presenting the front-runners of acclaimed cinema with the highest possible accolade in film, only six horror films have ever been nominated for the ultimate title of Best Picture. Only one film, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), has ever won Best Picture. It seems inane to suggest that out of this diverse and prolific genre, there have only been six total films worth awarding as significant. Horror films, or the more casual and commonly used title “scary movies”, are largely viewed as unserious and unworthy of consideration as exceptional cinema. Where does this bias stem from? The obvious answer is that horror makes audiences uncomfortable by nature. The



exploration of our collective deepest fears through the means of grotesque villains, violent imagery, and the bloody death of beloved characters is not what some people have in mind when they tune into a movie as a method of escapism. The same argument could be made for other genres, however, especially those that often receive critical acclaim. Dramas and biopics often delve into equally uncomfortable territory, just with a more sanitized image. Are the deep-rooted family issues and depictions of violence in the 2020 Best Picture winning drama *Parasite* distinct enough from those shown in *Hereditary*, the popular elevated horror film from 2018, to be considered a wholly different genre with a different potential for acclaim?

Perhaps the dissonance could be attributed to the more technical aspects of filmmaking. Horror films are often considered to be less effective in terms of cinematography, writing, acting, etc. compared to films of other genres. Acting specifically is a common yet confusing complaint considering the involvement of highly awarded actors in horror films. Jack Nicholson's performance in *The Shining* (1980) (though highly controversial due to the full story) is not any less worthy of consideration for acclaim than his Oscar winning performance in *As Good as It Gets* (1997) just because the former was a horror film. The rise in popularity of elevated horror has brought several big-name actors into the world of horror. The efforts behind the camera in areas like cinematography, editing, and sound design are not suddenly lesser if the film happens to belong to the horror genre. In fact, the practical effects used in horror before the age of computer-generated imagery demanded some of the most innovative problem-solving on movie sets in order to pull off realistic depictions of decapitated heads or spurting blood.

Ultimately, the main critique of the horror genre is likely to be its supposed lack of substance. Even beyond slashers, which are arguably considered the lowest form of horror, films that deal with supernatural monsters attacking our planet or the apparition of an angry spirit charging at a peaceful family in their new home likely does not inspire confidence that the horror genre contains the thematical importance of other film genres. However, a story does not lose its ability to convey complex themes and ideas just because it falls under a specific genre. The intent of the filmmakers and writers does not falter due to jump scares or monsters existing within the script. Horror is ultimately a vehicle to discuss some of the most relevant topics in today's society and humanity in general. It brings its audiences up close and personal with death, either flaunting it with gory kills like your average slasher movie or more subtly demonstrating its presence through psychological and elevated horror. The genre also allows for certain topics to be discussed in a large and graphic enough scope to capture their seriousness. Social commentary thrives in horror movies, phobias are fully explored, and the darkest fears of our collective psyche are not ignored.

Through the lens of horror, audiences gain the ability to cope with and become resilient to fear. While it is important to acknowledge that not every viewer will find horror films beneficial, there is a strong basis for the argument that the existence of comfort and courage through horror exists. This thesis will examine several different subjects covered by horror movies throughout recent history, delving into the potential these specific films have to benefit their audiences. In a controlled fictional setting, viewers can see otherwise inaccessible scenarios played out by characters who represent us. Whether it be a specific phobia, a social issue, or a real-world disaster, horror allows

exploration into these subjects and the potential for audiences to come away feeling braver rather than scared.

## **II. LESSONS FROM SETH BRUNDLE: DISEASE IN HORROR**

The concept of horror films as preparation for real world disasters is illuminated best by the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the official announcement that the novel coronavirus had been categorized as a global pandemic in March of 2020, viewings of the 2011 pandemic horror film *Contagion* skyrocketed. The film became one of the top ten most rented movies in America via iTunes in 2020, an entire 9 years after its release. In 2011, *Contagion* was considered by the general public to be a horror movie despite its lack of most common horror elements. The movie contains minimal gore, no specific antagonist, and exclusively deaths of natural causes. Nevertheless, audiences found *Contagion* horrifying.

The film follows multiple characters as they are confronted by a global outbreak of a highly contagious respiratory virus. The narrative weaves throughout the individual journeys of biologists working with the Center for Disease Control (CDC), a conspiracy theorist who believes the virus to be fabricated by the government, and average Americans dealing with a quickly spreading disease. Watching the movie in a post-COVID world is eerie for a reason entirely unintended by the filmmakers--it almost seemed to predict the future. Alan Krumwiede, the conspiracy theorist character who runs an online blog dedicated to exposing what he believes to be government secrets, uses his platform to peddle a miracle cure in the form of a drug called Forsythia, a shockingly accurate prediction of the demand for Ivermectin in the real world. The same character

refuses to take the newly manufactured vaccine in the final act of the film, advising his viewers to do the same. This is yet another plot element that reflects the reality of controversy over the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine. Violence and tension grow among the general populace of *Contagion*'s world, accurately mirroring the clash of different viewpoints on our coronavirus pandemic. Considering the film came out 9 years prior to COVID-19 creating a global pandemic, *Contagion* hits every major plotline in our own pandemic within its two-hour runtime.

What compels the general public to actively seek out a film which delves into potential disaster and death following a pandemic while entering the first stages of a real one? Would the possibilities presented by the fictional pandemic exacerbate anxieties about an actual pandemic keeping most Americans locked in their homes? Perhaps instead the depiction of a real-life disaster would help audiences handle reality in a healthier way. A study done by Scrivner et al. (2021) found that those who self-identified as horror fans and those categorized as the "morbidly curious" showed lower psychological distress in response to the current pandemic. Using surveys to first determine the genre of movies which participants consumed most, then evaluating their psychological response to the ongoing pandemic, the study found that those who frequently chose to watch horror films showed less anxiety, pessimism, and irritability than those who consumed other genres.

The horror genre takes the worst-case-scenario and runs with it, hoping to scare its audiences and, to some degree, immerse themselves in the story. Rarely does a horror film scare someone because they are scared on behalf of the characters, but rather because of the lingering question after the credits have rolled: *What if that happened to*

*me?* This pattern of thinking prompts audiences to consider what they would do in the unique situations proposed by the movies, which genuinely helps prepare them when the situation becomes real. *Contagion* asked its audience if they would trust the CDC during a global pandemic, if they would take a vaccine created in a short timeframe, and if they would remain calm and rational amidst the panic. Scrivner et al. (2021) found that those who have frequently run through these scenarios in the safe and controlled setting of fiction are less likely to feel terror in the face of a real-world situation.

*Contagion* depicts a disaster scenario which effects the global population and is undeniably horrifying, even to audiences currently living through a strikingly similar situation. However, not every horror movie depicts widely held fears. In comparison to other genres, where aspects of the film such as quality of the directing, writing, acting, etc. determine audience reception, horror has another key element at play. Whether or not a horror film is truly scary is subjective, and if an individual does not see the terror associated with certain topics, they will likely feel less of an impact than someone who does. Someone with a specific and intense fear of sharks may be told by their friends to never watch *Jaws* (1975) to avoid future trips to the beach being inhibited by paranoia. However, seeing one's fear depicted in a horror film can also be incredibly validating.

Some fears are irrational. What starts out as a rational idea, like wanting to avoid getting sick, can spiral into an incessant fear that every routine ache or pain is indicative of a terminal disease. These instances of extreme and inexplicable fears can be isolating as the individual knows, logically, that they do not make much sense and likely are not shared by many others in the same scope. Horror offers the comfort that filmmakers and audiences alike *do* share in these unlikely fears. *Cujo* (1983) demonstrates that the

potential for man's best friend to become as terrifying as any other big screen monster. *The Descent* (2005) showcases claustrophobia through its' tightly filmed journey through underground tunnels. *Arachnophobia* (1990) depicts exactly what is promised through its title: the exploration of arachnids as a horrifying stimulus. Even if the movie goes unwatched entirely, someone who suffers from a particular phobia can take comfort in the mere existence of a film created entirely to capture the scope and legitimacy of their fear.

Horror also offers the ability to adequately capture the intensity of fear unlike any other genre. Fear can be all-consuming and debilitating, which requires an onscreen depiction that does not pull any punches. Through the use of grotesque and gory visuals, horror can exemplify the true scope of fear. David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1987) inspired this thesis due to its graphic depiction of disease which I found myself unable to look away from because, for the first time, I felt as though my own incessant fear of disease was being adequately conveyed to those who do not share the same anxieties.

The film follows Seth Brundle, a young research scientist experimenting with the world's first method of teleportation. Brundle's ambitions lead him to disregard safety measures and test the teleportation pods himself. Without his knowledge, a fly enters the pod with Brundle and they are teleported together, fusing their DNA into one creature that slowly takes over Brundle's body, creating a human-fly hybrid that wreaks havoc on his physical form and ultimately leads to his death. Director David Cronenberg is famous for his work in the horror subgenre of "body horror", although Cronenberg himself does not consider his work to fall under that category. According to Cronenberg, the common imagery in his films depicting graphic deterioration of the body is employed because,

“It’s natural for someone to be interested in what happens to their body” (Natasi, 2014). For Cronenberg, the goal is not to be as disgusting as possible to elicit shock and repulsion from audiences, but rather to explore a natural human curiosity in an entirely honest and upfront way.

What can be learned from Seth Brundle? Aside from a cautionary tale about safe research practices, Brundle demonstrates the absolute worst state a human body can be in. Losing appendages, unable to consume food, and slowly becoming unable to stay in touch with his sanity, he becomes unrecognizable from the charming character we meet at the start of the film. Disease has utterly ravaged his body and ultimately leads to his violent end, when he begs to be shot in the head to end the ongoing suffering and save others from his destructive tendencies. Watching this film could have worsened the paranoia I feel about the state of my own body, but instead I found myself comforted by several aspects of its story. The validation that enough people shared in my own fright to make the film into what is now considered a horror classic was incredibly impactful. Likewise, I felt as though my fear was being taken seriously through the creation of such a horrific monster. The film took my worst-case scenario, a body that is utterly destroyed by disease, and treated the subject with a sense of gravity which reflected how serious my fears were. And though it may seem ridiculous, watching the fusion of man and fly left me with the comforting thought that at least I would never experience *that*.

### **III. THE MAIN ATTRACTION: DEATH IN HORROR**

Beyond their specific scenarios of a worldwide pandemic and a freak scientific accident, *Contagion* and *The Fly* both touched on a general topic that most audiences

associate with the horror genre: death. Whether it be the typical summer camp killer or the more elevated psychological horror where the true killer comes from within, death looms over the cast of characters in every horror film. Audiences who avoid the entire genre of horror may be, consciously or unconsciously, avoiding the depiction of death rather than specific fears like aliens, clowns, or sharks. There are common assumptions that horror films treat death flippantly, disposing of characters for shock value or to feed a unifying formula that looms over the genre, forcing the death of each character one by one to satisfy a checklist. However, many horror films have more to say about death, even if the message is surprisingly simple.

The *Final Destination* franchise (2000-2011) is comprised of five films, each following the same simple premise established in the first movie. High school student Alex Browning boards a flight set for Paris with his classmates and teachers about to embark on a school trip. Before the plane can take off, Alex has a strikingly vivid vision of the plane's engine exploding, forcing him to watch helplessly as the passengers around him are brutally killed one by one. This vision leads Alex to panic, insisting aloud that the plane is destined for disaster and that everyone must evacuate before it takes off. This outburst gets Alex and a few other classmates who joined the commotion kicked off the flight and sent back to the airport, where they watch the plane explode a few minutes later in a shocking confirmation that Alex's premonition was real. For the rest of the film, Alex's surviving classmates are killed one by one in freak accidents as the film's thesis unfolds--death cannot be cheated. If someone was meant to die in a particular situation and managed to avoid it by pure luck, their end is still inevitable according to the lore of *Final Destination*, where the antagonist is not a masked lunatic or a rampaging monster,



but death itself.

As the resulting four sequels to the first film were made, the *Final Destination* franchise grew a reputation for its outrageous but memorable death scenes. One particular scene recalled by many viewers occurs at the start of the second film, where another protagonist has a vision similar to Alex's, this time predicting a highway pile-up caused by logs coming loose from an eighteen-wheeler and barreling down the road. The iconic scene was inspired by writer Jeffrey Riddick driving behind a log truck, after which he "Pulled off the road and called the producer and he said: 'That's it!'" (Billson, 2021). This real-life inspiration highlights the strength of the franchise; everyday situations can become deadly in an instant. Tanning beds can malfunction, bridges can collapse, rollercoasters can derail.

For some viewers, the exploration and gory depiction of these possibilities only serves to provoke anxiety and an avoidance of *Final Destination* movies when they hit theaters. For others, the main idea of the movies can be comforting. According to the recurring character William Bludworth, played by horror icon Tony Todd, death cannot be cheated or outsmarted. No matter how the characters attempt to protect themselves, death finds a way to correct the moment they initially avoided their demise. This concept of death as an equalizer which cannot be staved off using wealth, intelligence, or other such resources is an appealing idea. Death as a predetermined event rather than a consequence of one's own actions or lifestyle evokes the idea that worrying about death is not productive. Fearing one's own demise will not prevent it from occurring. Rather, as each *Final Destination* movie suggests, accepting one's own fate is the better solution. For the viewers who can withstand the franchise's brutal, oftentimes cartoonish

depictions of freak accidents, they are rewarded with an outlook on death that advises them not to worry.

For horror buffs or general audiences who prefer their deaths less cartoonish and their discussions on the topic more complex, the *Final Destination* franchise may not cut it. In order to fully discuss death in a scope wide enough to cover such an expansive topic, horror films must also focus on the living. The divide between life and death is a delicate one, especially within the context of a horror movie where each character making up the main cast shares a mutual high likelihood of not surviving until the credits roll. In-between life and death, there exists certain movie monsters and tropes deployed to discuss this balance. Most notably, zombies. Davis & Crane (2015) assert that zombies are a perfect vehicle in complex discussions of life and death because they exist in the exact middle. No longer human, but definitely not gone for good. Zombies range in meaning from film to film, with horror-comedies like *Zombieland* from 2009 aiming to tell an ultimately heartwarming story about finding a family and community in the wreckage of a past life, to classics like *Dawn of the Dead* from 1978 acting as a cutting commentary on consumerism.

Davis & Crane (2015) analyze AMC's *The Walking Dead*, the show credited for bringing zombies back into the mainstream of film and television in the late 2010s. Much like many other forms of zombie media, characters in *The Walking Dead* find themselves at conflict due to a disagreement over the true nature of zombies. One group of survivors is of the belief that zombies represent a human who is fully dead, their wandering corpse only an anomaly that does not necessarily mean they still live. Another group believes that zombies are merely sick humans with the potential to still be cured. Using a specific

scene from the show's second season where this conflict culminates, Davis & Crane ask "No matter how dangerous, are [zombies] really Other?...These are the questions of life and death" Davis & Crane (2015). This question can be applied to practically any zombie media, which at one point or another questions when a human is fully considered to be "gone". It is a question that can be applied in an abundance of real-world situations. Patients without brain function, missing persons, those living in the space between a terminal diagnosis and death. It is naturally difficult to comprehend that someone is, or soon will be, gone without a definitive final answer.

As Davis & Crane suggest, zombie media like *The Walking Dead* allow for the discussion of these nuances through the mouths of characters that hold the variety of beliefs audience members may hold. Even without using the term "zombie", several horror movies capture the essence of a character who appears no longer human, caught between passing on to the afterlife and continuing to roam the earth. Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* and the resulting two movie adaptations discuss what makes someone alive after the main character revives his deceased son through ancient magic, accidentally bringing back a walking corpse that no longer resembles his child in personality. *Re-Animator* (1985) brings a comedic tone to the idea of raising the dead and the ethics behind trying to extend the natural life of a human. *28 Days Later* (2002) is considered one of the most iconic zombie movies of the past decade despite its monsters not technically being dead, but rather infected with a virus that produces uncontrollable rage, thereby stripping victims of their humanity and making them essentially non-human.

Zombie movies became so popular in the early to late 2000's that audiences are now suffering from what has been dubbed "zombie fatigue"—interest in this familiar

monster has dwindled after an over-saturation of the subgenre to television, film, and even literature. Despite the weariness many viewers now have for zombies, the stories became popular for a reason. You would be hard-pressed to find a zombie story that does not at least once contemplate the implication of its main characters having to shoot down the mindless corpse of their brother, friend, neighbor, etc. Zombies offer endless opportunity to discuss the various questions we may have concerning death, especially the question of when it becomes official.

Zombies are not the only method horror films deploy to discuss death and those who are left behind in the aftermath of loss. Though it is easily the most common, fear is not the only emotion horror movies encapsulate throughout their narrative. In a genre so ripe with death, it is only natural for the topics of grief and mourning to manifest within the characters. Some may believe that death in a horror film is meaningless, only serving the bloodbath necessary to keep audiences entertained. On the contrary, there are many horror films that look beyond the initial slashing of a minor character to explore those they left behind; their friends and loved ones become a representation of grief. Becky & Lee (2021) suggest that many horror films even use monsters not as the cause of the characters' grief, but as a means of exploring it. They argue that "horror films about grief institute a narrative association between the resolution of the protagonist's emotional need and the resolution of the protagonist's struggle with the monster" (Becky & Lee 2021).

One example offered is *The Descent* (2005), a film in which the opening scene is a shocking and brutal accident that kills the protagonist's husband and child. At first glance, the scene may only appear to exist in the movie for shock value, to grab the

attention of viewers right off the bat. However, after the main character, Sarah, embarks on a spelunking expedition with her friends and becomes entrapped within an unexplored cave system filled with subterranean monsters, it becomes clear that the fight for her life reflects her process of grief. As Becky & Lee (2021) suggest, the disruption of loss in Sarah's life changes the way she sees the world. Nothing makes sense in the aftermath of her family's deaths, and she is forced into a new life without them. For the first half hour of the film, the element of horror appears to be Sarah and the group becoming lost in the cave system they set out to explore. Tight crawlspaces, deep chasms, and the growing panic of not knowing the way out is the main source of fear for both the characters and the audience. When the cave-dwelling monsters first make their appearance, it changes the entire trajectory of the movie and re-establishes new rules for the world in which it takes place. Audiences are forced to accept the existence of these monsters in a film that did not immediately introduce them. *The Descent* blindsides its viewers twice: first with the jarring opening scene and once more with horrific monsters that appear behind a character as she films herself with a video camera. In this way, the audience is in Sarah's shoes. The monsters are a direct parallel to her loss, bringing a new and terrifying reality for her to cope with. When Sarah escapes the cave at the end, breaking into daylight after hours of darkness, she is symbolically breaking free from the catatonic state that her grief left her in.

The death of a loved one and the grief that inevitably follows is an experience that most audience members have, or will at some point in their lifetime, endure. Most would assume that watching a horror film would be the furthest thing from comforting in the aftermath of a loss. How does watching fictional characters die aid in our own mourning

process? Similar to the previously discussed process of fearing our own death, horror can act as a sense of validation. Seeing one's own struggle represented onscreen through a character who has also lost family or friends can offer the notion that we are not alone. The character may be fictional, but their dialogue and behavior reflect our own experiences, giving us an outlet through which we can explore feelings of grief. Horror can be inherently hopeful. Most horror films have a sole survivor who has likely lost their group of friends or family members to whatever monster or villain was pursuing them. Some characters are drawn to the allure of avenging their loved ones through sequels where they will face off against the killer once more. Some start a new life in a different town or city, leaving behind the site of their trauma. Some have an ambiguous ending when the film draws to a close, letting viewers make their own guess as to what would happen next to the surviving protagonist. In any of these scenarios, the survivor continues to move forward into a life without those they lost, offering a symbol of strength and healing.

#### **IV. SIDNEY, JENNIFER, AND ROSEMARY: MISOGYNY IN HORROR**

Women are at the forefront of horror. The term "Final Girl" originated from author Carol J. Clover in her 1992 novel "Men, Women, and Chainsaws" to describe the consistent recurrence of women who are left alive at the end of a horror film. Iconic films like *Black Christmas* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) introduced Final Girls that have become synonymous with horror. In the new age of reboots and remakes in Hollywood, actresses like Jamie Lee Curtis and Neve Campbell are reprising their roles with a certain gusto, bringing back their beloved characters to fight the killers they once overcame

again. The Final Girls of horror rarely survive based on dumb luck—without their intelligence, strength, and will to survive, the credits would roll without a sole survivor. An analysis done by Weaver et al. (2015) examined ten of the top highest grossing slasher movies from the past three decades to investigate the appearance of Final Girls within the subgenre and question whether or not their role has changed in the past decades. The analysis found that of the thirty films selected, every single one featured a Final Girl with some even having multiple, for a total of thirty-four Final Girls among the thirty movies (Weaver et al., 2015).

The representation of women in horror is a somewhat controversial topic full of nuance. It is important to acknowledge that not every horror film can be defined as feminist. Several films have garnered a justified criticism over their over-the-top brutalization against women, specifically women who are sexually active. Interestingly, Weaver et al.'s study actually found that Final Girls were not referred to as virgins significantly more than other female characters within their respective movies, supporting the idea that only virgins surviving a horror film is somewhat unfounded in the past few decades. Conversely, the study did find that Final Girls were also “less likely to engage in any significant onscreen sexual behavior” (Weaver et al., 2015). Even if the stereotype of virginal girls being the sole survivor is somewhat exaggerated by audiences, modern horror films of the last few decades have begun criticizing these tropes within their own stories. The *Scream* franchise dedicates itself to satirizing popular trends within the genre. The first film provides certain rules characters must abide by to survive a horror movie, one of which is remaining a virgin to avoid the misogynistic pattern of women being killed off immediately after having sex. To flip this trope on its head, *Scream*

(1997) makes a point to show its lead, Sidney Prescott, lose her virginity to her boyfriend and still survive to the end of the movie—and the next four resulting sequels.

Horror comedy *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) follows in *Scream*'s footsteps by deconstructing the common formula of horror films to tell the story of a group of friends forced into a ritualistic sacrifice to appease ancient gods. The group embarks to spend a weekend at the titular cabin, only to be attacked by an army of the undead and killed off one by one. The main character, Dana, and her only friend left alive realize that the events of the night have been orchestrated by an agency that must kill a group like theirs every year, fulfilling certain expectations as they do so, in order to keep the gods at bay and prevent the destruction of the world. The gods in the story represent horror audiences at large who reward movies that stick to the formula with larger box office numbers and reviews. Each member of the friend group in *The Cabin in the Woods* represents a different character archetype that has been historically repeated in horror for decades. As explained in the movie's final act, a jock, a fool, a scholar, a slut, and a virgin make up the main characters of countless slashers with minimal variation. The virgin's death is optional in fulfilling the ritual, the agency says, as long as she suffers. Dana has been assigned the role of the virgin, which immediately elicits her confusion because it is not an accurate title. The movie jokes that the agency is only "working with what they have" in a clever commentary on how horror movies historically force their characters into certain outdated stereotypes. In the end, Dana resists the ritual knowing it will destroy the world, deciding that it is time to give someone else a chance. The "someone else" in this context is a new era of horror movies which will break away from the tired and outdated patterns of misogynistic tropes.



Beyond mere commentary on the misogyny in existing horror films, the genre is rife with potential to represent the different struggles women face in everyday life. The slasher subgenre captures a widespread fear among women by definition—the masked killers chasing girls down in the darkness can easily be related to the anxiety of abduction and assault that keeps women from taking late night walks. In other subgenres, monsters can be a stand-in to represent the enormity of misogyny or a vessel for women to become “monstrous” themselves as a means of self-defense. *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) became a cult classic among horror fans, specifically women, despite having poor ratings when it debuted in 2009. Taking a comedic tone similar to *Scream* and *The Cabin in the Woods*, *Jennifer’s Body* follows Anita “Needy” Lesnicki as she unravels the truth that her best friend, Jennifer, has become a demon that must feast on boys to survive. Jennifer’s demonic state is brought on by an unequivocal representation of violence against women—she is sacrificed to Satan by a hopeful local band in exchange for their rise to fame. However, the ritual requires a virgin to be sacrificed, which Jennifer claimed to be despite the truth. Again, the trope of women in horror being punished for sexual activity is intentionally played upon.

The core of *Jennifer’s Body* is the relationship between its two main female characters. In a plotline that would feel similar to a typical coming-of-age movie if it weren’t for the blood and guts, Needy and Jennifer continuously clash over their individual statuses. Jennifer is conventionally beautiful, desired by several boys at school, and consistently put on a pedestal by those around her. In an episode of *Eli Roth’s History of Horror*, director Diablo Cody points out that “Jennifer is cursed before she’s cursed” through her constant objectification by the boys around her. Jennifer’s solution to

her new lifestyle of bloodlust is to lure boys with the promise of a hook-up, only to then devour them to fuel her power. The tables are turned, giving a sense of agency to a girl who otherwise was at the mercy of those around her and suffered a traumatic act of violence. As she kills numerous boys at school and eventually takes the life of Needy's own boyfriend, Jennifer becomes the "villain" of the story. Typically, Jennifer's death in the final act would suggest that the plot is fully resolved, and the story can draw to a close. In the final minute of the film, rather than satisfying herself with defeating Jennifer, Needy continues on to defeat the source of the violence and kills each member of the band that attacked Jennifer.

The story is a tragic one. Many viewers may not agree with Jennifer's actions of retaliation. Many do, however, as the movie is commonly grouped into the colloquial subgenre of "Good For Her" films, a recent title often used on social media platforms like Twitter and the film-based Letterboxd to describe movies in which women get revenge for their suffering in a bloody, violent way. Whether or not audiences can fully empathize with Jennifer's violence, it is easy to understand that the true villains of the movie are the men who objectified and assaulted her. If the film was uninterested in making a feminist statement, it would have begun with Jennifer already possessed by her new demonic state, or perhaps had it come about as a consequence of her own actions. Instead, the story gives us a character who embodies darkness, powerfulness, and violence as a direct result of her mistreatment by men. Through such a drastic transformation from a typical cheerleader to a fanged monster who vomits black ichor, the film captures the true scope of the consequences of misogyny on women in a way that other film genres would not be able to mimic.

While *Jennifer's Body* utilizes dark comedy and a high school setting to comment on the strife of being a teenage girl, more mature topics of womanhood are captured through the lens of horror as well. Pregnancy can be a time of extreme anxiety in a woman's life, especially considering the natural loss of bodily privacy when recurring doctor's visits and others' investment in the mother and baby are occurring at once. Women often feel as though they are not listened to when receiving healthcare. Ideas of feminine hysteria and heightened emotions already plague women who have to fight to maintain their credibility amongst patriarchal concepts of women not being reliable in their assessment of reality. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) combines all of these concepts and presents the story of Rosemary, a young expecting mother whose autonomy and credibility is stripped from her. It is crucial to acknowledge the obvious involvement of director Roman Polanski in the making of *Rosemary's Baby*. Polanski was convicted after pleading guilty of statutory rape in 1977. These charges complicate the ability to refer to the film as entirely feminist, considering the man behind its creation contributed to the abuse of women and girls within his lifetime. However, the story and the character of Rosemary originate from the 1967 novel by the same name, written by Ira Levin. Considering the following analysis focuses on the plotline and characterization drawn from the novel, Polanski's involvement in the film does not erase its significance in representing the mistreatment of women.

Unbeknownst to her, Rosemary's husband is a member of a coven of demonic worshippers who have decided to use Rosemary as a vessel to give birth to the next coming of Satan. After being drugged and violated without any specific memory of the incident, Rosemary quickly realizes that her pregnancy is not progressing in a healthy

way. She feels constant pain, a sense of dread, and is told by female friends that she looks visibly unhealthy. Her doctor, recommended to her by friends of her husband who are also secretly in the coven, ignores her concerns and insists that he knows her body better than she does in a remarkably relevant criticism of women's treatment in healthcare for a movie that debuted in 1968. One of the most strikingly horrifying moments in the film occurs when Rosemary seeks out a new doctor and tells him of her concerns for herself and her baby. The doctor assures her that he will help find her a safe escape away from the coven, only to secretly contact her husband and return Rosemary into his care. The scene does not adhere to most people's expectations of a truly scary moment from a horror film. There is no bodily injury to Rosemary at this moment, no outright threats being made against her, and nothing that would seem that out of the ordinary without the context of the rest of the movie. It simply depicts Rosemary's doctor arriving with her husband with the intent to bring her back to their shared home. The audience watching knows that the moment represents two concurrent fears for women colliding at once. Rosemary is both dismissed in her attempt to receive assistance in her own health *and* is returned into the hands of her abuser.

The representation of women in horror is undeniable. In few other genres are the main characters consistently women who consistently triumph over their main antagonist. Discussion on whether or not the representation itself is worthwhile or helpful towards the feminist movement is ongoing. Violence against women does thrive in horror, and it is remarkably easy for these depictions to become glorification through the film's execution, or lack thereof. This violence, though, is clearly framed as objectively wrong within the context of the films. It seems like a low bar to clear, but in a society where the

violence against and mistreatment of women is often outright denied or downplayed, a genre that is honest in telling the stories of women facing these injustices is welcomed by many female horror fans. For decades, the Final Girls of horror have been overwhelmingly white, thin, and young. In recent years, intersectional representation has begun to reach the forefront of horror. The past decade alone has brought forth a diverse main cast of women, a movement that is crucial in representing all women's struggles and fears through horror rather than a select group.

Women do not have to be informed through a film that they are often threatened by hostility and unsafety in their everyday lives. This is an idea that is instilled in our young girls at an early age through discussions about how to protect themselves at parties, at work, or even just walking home after dark. Due to this existing knowledge, the effect of movies like *Contagion* that prime audiences with scenarios they may not have otherwise considered is not as relevant. What is relevant when looking at the crossroads of feminism and horror is the awareness these films can bring to society at large, as well as the representation of female characters who are confronted with these challenges and manage to overcome. Characters like Dana and Sidney act as physical representations of the ridiculous roles women are forced into both in film and reality. Jennifer and Rosemary give names and voices to women who have suffered at the hands of men. Through fiction, women can discuss their identity and role in the world. Through horror specifically, women can fully capture how scary it can be to exist in a hostile world and offer solace to each other with strong, enduring Final Girls.

## **V. FOR MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY: CHILDREN IN HORROR**

Children are typically excluded from the target audience of a horror film for obvious reasons. Overactive imaginations give way to irrational fears in young children, which creates the potential for the amplification of already disturbing images to become truly horrific. Parents usually see it as an inevitability that if their child watches a scary movie, they will wake up from nightmares later that night. Despite the norm of horror existing strictly for adults, children are common subjects within these films. There is something decidedly unsettling about the innocence and purity of children becoming corrupted, whether it be from demonic influences like twelve-year-old Regan in *The Exorcist* (1973) or spirits of the undead like seven-year-old Carol Anne in *Poltergeist* (1982). The larger theme employed in these movies centered around children is often parenthood. Scary enough on its own for many young people considering the potential future of having children, or even those who already are parents, the theme is often explored in film in general due to its seemingly never-ending complexities. Horror brings forth a new opportunity to delve into the greatest fears of many parents. The previously discussed *Pet Sematary* (1989) goes to the most extreme version of this idea by depicting a father who is driven to experiment with ancient forces in order to undo the death of his young child. *Poltergeist* threatens the parents within its story with the same idea by taking Carol Anne into a ghostly realm, forcing them to enter the unknown themselves to get her back. The potential loss of a child is well established as a common driving fear in horror.

Not every horror movie detailing the struggles of parenthood is necessarily about death, however. *The Babadook* (2014) introduces us to a single mother, Amelia, who lost her husband only hours before the birth of her son, Samuel, and finds herself unable to

handle the behavioral issues of the young boy. Amelia is told by school administration that Samuel's frequent screaming fits and tantrums are potentially signs that he needs to be monitored full-time. Her own sister informs Amelia that she cannot stomach spending time with Samuel due to his constant outbursts. It is not specifically said what Samuel's diagnosis is, but the frequent disruptions in his behavior and inability to listen to instruction from teachers and his mother imply a case of oppositional defiant disorder, or ODD. Samuel, of course, is not a villain. He is a young child dealing with an untreated and apparently undiagnosed behavioral disorder. Amelia's subdued resentment of Samuel begins to grow as he becomes increasingly paranoid about a monster lurking within their house, originating from a picture book called *The Babadook*. Signs of destruction around the home are immediately blamed on Samuel until Amelia is faced with the reality of the threat. The film culminates in a powerful final act where, possessed by corrupting forces of *The Babadook*, Amelia is taunted an apparition of her deceased husband who suggests that she kill Samuel to restore peace to her life. The colliding moments of her husband's death and Samuel's birth has led her to associate her son with grief, a feeling that has only been worsened by Samuel's behavior. In a sudden role reversal, Samuel is the one to protect his mother when he manages to pull her from the grasp of *The Babadook* by forcing her to confront the reality of her husband's death and the new life that she and Samuel must begin to share.

Though *The Babadook* is kept at bay, the story establishes that he cannot be fully killed. The final moments of the film reveal that Amelia routinely ventures into the basement where the creature is contained to feed and continue to let it grow within the home. This twist ending is remarkably distinct from other horror films simply on the

basis that the antagonist survives—and not in order to set up a sequel where it will begin its terror anew. Rather, *The Babadook* represents the mental illnesses that have driven Amelia and Samuel apart for the majority of their lives together. Amelia's grief and Samuel's behavioral disorder drove a wedge between the mother and child. The film offers a more nuanced look at mental illness than its predecessors in the genre by asserting that these struggles will not just magically disappear after the ordeal the characters have survived through. Instead, the manifestation of Amelia and Samuel's grief and mental illnesses continue to exist and influence their lives. They are managed, as seen by Amelia's markedly improved mood and attitude towards her son during the final scene where time has clearly passed since the culminating battle, but they still exist.

The depiction of parenthood and its resulting struggles is brutally honest in *The Babadook*. Amelia finds herself unable to cope with Samuel's behavior and clearly reaches the point of viewing her son as a burden when she is at her lowest. Also incredibly honest is the portrayal of Samuel, as the movie takes care to depict him not as a villain or a mere prop used to spook audiences by juxtaposing his youthful innocence with creepy dialogue. In a society that often misunderstands and lacks empathy for children dealing with behavioral disorders or other mental illnesses, *The Babadook* offers a new perspective. The film also somewhat encompasses the overarching message this thesis aims to portray. The Babadook is a classic symbol of horror with his pale white face, spindly fingers that reach towards his victims, and gaping open mouth. He is the prime example of horror being used to represent a larger, complex issue due to his existence as the manifestation of Amelia and Samuel's mental health struggles. Their ability to cope through their horrific experience can be mirrored by audiences watching.



The film is a clear example of how horror facilitates the necessity in facing one's fears and being able to move forward, even if they are not entirely conquered.

The depiction of child characters in horror comprise an entire subgenre of “creepy kids”, a self-explanatory title given to any film that uses a child as means of scaring audiences. Outside of this subgenre, however, there are child characters used in horror stories that are manufactured entirely *for* children. The idea may seem taboo to some, as seen through widespread discussions on censorship in schools concerning any reading material that parents feel may be too disturbing for children. The series *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* by Alvin Schwartz compiles folk tales and urban legends accompanied by chilling illustrations into books intended for children. This series has faced mass amounts of criticism and demands that they be removed from the libraries of schools due to the potentially upsetting content. It is obviously true that some children will be scared by content designed to evoke fear. The same can be said for some adults. Horror as a comfort, as previously acknowledged, is not an all-encompassing idea that can apply to everyone, especially children. However, the opposite generalizations should not be made. Children are not necessarily incapable of engaging with work that depicts their anxieties just because of their age. New experiences are constantly being presented to children, a novelty which gradually decreases in frequency the older we get. Consider being a young child attending school for the first time. Being dropped off in a new location by your parent, surrounded by new peers with a new schedule to partake in every day is daunting to say the least. Yet children are able to adapt and overcome these potentially frightening instances in their everyday lives. It is not a stretch to consider that some children may not be bothered by—and even enjoy—media which aims at presenting them with new and

unexpected scenarios.

Another example of children exemplifying the ability to meet the challenges of horror content in their everyday lives is the act of play. All children play in some form or another. Play is incredibly important in both giving insights to the child, as well as allowing them to explore the world through a fabricated reality. Bloom (2021) suggests that play and the intake of purposefully frightening activities share notable similarities. Speaking on both play and engaging in fear, Bloom points out that “We are motivated to experience, in a safe context, situations that we might have to deal with in the future” (Bloom 2021). Considering the parallels between the natural behavior of a child to play and seek out experiences in the safe context described by Bloom, it is unsurprising that certain films, television shows, and books qualify both as children’s media *and* horror media. The success of cartoons like *Invader Zim* (2001) and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (1999), as well as movies like *Gremlins* (1984) among young audiences suggests that the horror-inspired aspects of those stories do not deter the target audience from enjoying them.

Horror media intended for children can also help its viewers discover what they may not like experiencing on a smaller, more practical scale. Horror for children is obviously going to be reeled in compared to that which is made for adults. This can be contributed both to the rational conclusion that little kids do not need to see blood and guts, as well as the existence of network censorship and aforementioned banning of certain media from schools and libraries if it is considered by parents to be too scary. Through these tamer depictions of fear, children can determine for themselves what specifically makes them uncomfortable or causes distress. Nearly everyone has a specific

movie or show that terrified them as a child for an unusual reason—the monsters themselves in *Monsters, Inc* (2001) did not bother me at age five, but the scene depicting a biohazard containment breach was genuinely horrifying. Moving forward, I had a better sense of what to avoid both in fiction and in real life. Even if a child engages with a specific piece of media that scares them and finds no personal benefit in the experience, they still come away with the knowledge that they do not like the discussed topic of the film. It is not always possible to avoid fear in the real world, but the opportunity does arise from time to time. The popularization of content warnings online reflects this shift towards providing viewers with more comfortable experiences. Websites like doesthedogdie.com exist to warn people ahead of time which common fears and phobias might occur within the movie they intend to watch, with subject matter like needles, snakes, drowning, etc. included amongst the categories.

Both the depiction of children *in* horror and the horror media that is actively being made *for* children today are incredibly relevant when discussing the psychological benefits of the genre. Films like *The Babadook* have the potential to help us understand anxieties revolving around parenthood and the act of raising a child, which gives viewers who may experience those anxieties representation on screen alongside a hopeful message about overcoming that fear. Horror stories written with children in mind allow for the discovery and exploration of potential fears in a safe environment where the fear is neither forced upon the child nor inescapable. For many horror fans, the fixation starts young with early viewing experiences that shape a love and appreciation for the genre. The commonly accepted idea that being exposed to fear is damaging without exception should be challenged. Allowing children to partake in stories that expose them to

potential anxieties gives them the agency to determine whether or not those anxieties apply to them.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The horror genre is unique in its divisiveness; few other genres have two distinct groups of those who consume as many stories as possible and those who avoid them at all costs. Those who are adamant about their dislike of horror are entirely valid in this self-assessment. Likely, this decision stemmed from exposure to the genre at a certain point, even if it was just a trailer or commercial for a horror movie they never viewed in its entirety. Even for this group, horror helped them realize which subjects they do not enjoy seeing depicted through fiction or in everyday life. The misassumption that the genre as a whole is devoid of meaning or substance is incredibly harmful—not only does it disregard the collective work of each and every writer, director, actor, etc. who crafts these stories, but it dissuades audience members from potentially seeing themselves reflected on screen. The crux of the argument that horror can psychologically benefit those who partake in it is the representation of ourselves and our fellow humans through these stories. Whether it be a deep, provoking film that falls under the category of elevated horror or a more casual slasher flick, horror stories have something to say.

Fear plays an incredibly important role in our lives. It can inhibit, motivate, and dictate our actions and behavior. Certain phobias and anxieties may never fully go away but learning to cope with the existence of these stressors in real-world scenarios is crucial. The previously discussed research on horror fans' resiliency to challenging world events like the COVID-19 pandemic supports the idea that being exposed to such threats through media has a real-world effect. Just as children are capable of exploring situations

through hypothetical play, audiences of all ages can use horror as a template to safely explore and better understand the root of their fears. The representation and validation of our fears in horror is also incredibly important. Having filmmakers who aim to discuss why certain subject matter evokes fear helps comfort those who may think their feelings are irrational or something to be ashamed of. The lens of horror provides an opportunity to amplify the stories of those who are otherwise underrepresented. Social issues like misogyny and ableism towards those struggling with mental illness can be treated with the seriousness those issues require through the life-or-death situations that play out in a horror film. All of these factors contribute to the value of horror and exemplify its potential to truly help those who partake in the stories of the genre. It is undeniably true that horror plays upon our fears, but through the bright red blood splatters and revving of chainsaws, it also offers solutions.

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