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Bad Boys and Final Girls: Fleshing Out Gender in Slasher and Horror Media

Brandon Bosch

When it comes to the slasher genre, typically only three types of people matter: the Slasher Villain, the Victims, and the Final Girl. Today I want to talk about how gender is often represented with these characters.

Slasher villains—like many media villains—are often lacking in masculinity. We have characters like Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*), Leatherface (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), Michael Myers (*Halloween*), and Norman Bates (*Psycho*) that are shown as being childlike and/or obsessed with family members (especially moms). We also see horror villains (not just slasher) having makeup (e.g., Leatherface, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; Pennywise, *It*), doll avatars (e.g., *Child's Play*, *Saw*), and speaking softly (e.g., Norman Bates, *Psycho*; Hannibal Lecter, *Silence of the Lambs*). The killers tend to be men, and most of them—in the words of Dr. Loomis (*Halloween*)—are “purely and simply evil.”

Female killers are a bit rare, and tend to have somewhat deeper (albeit stereotypical) motivations. Women villains want to avenge the death of a son (Pamela Voorhees, *Friday the 13th*; Mrs. Loomis, *Scream 2*), the death of a mother (Hester Ulrich, *Scream Queens*), the death of a lover (Brenda Bates, *Urban Legend*), the poaching of a lover (Lori Spengler, *Happy Death Day*), to punish premarital sex (Mrs. Tredoni, *Alice, Sweet Alice*) or out of familial jealousy and a desire to be “famous” (Jill Roberts, *Scream 4*).

Of course, what women are known most for in slashers is being Victims and Final Girls. Despite the fact that men are more likely to be victims in a slasher than women, the genre is typically

seen as being misogynistic. This is because the slasher genre will often contain scenes that feature sex and violence in close proximity. *Halloween* (1978) provides a few examples. The film opens up with a naked woman (who just had premarital sex) being stabbed to death. Later in the film, a visibly nude Lynda (who just had sex earlier) is strangled to death by Michael Myers while on the phone. Moreover, the groans that Lynda makes while being strangled is misinterpreted by Laurie Strode as a prank sexual call. In a content analysis of slasher films, Welsh (2009) finds that not only are sexualized female victims more likely to be killed in slasher films than men, but they also tend to receive longer death scenes than non-sexualized female victims.

Finally, we have the Final Girl. As discussed at length by Carol Clover (1992), the Final Girl is a staple of slasher films. The Final Girl label refers to the fact that the primary protagonist and often sole survivor of these films is a female. However, the title can be slightly misleading. First, although the character is a woman, this character is often made slightly more masculine or androgynous, at least relative to the other female characters in the film. Names of Final Girls are often gender neutral, such as Tree (*Happy Death Day*), Laurie (*Halloween*), Stevie (*The Fog*), Erin (*You're Next*), Jess (*Black Christmas*), Sidney (*Scream*), and Jay (*It Follows*). Overall, Final Girls tend to more composed, resourceful, and rational (e.g., Nancy Thompson, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*; Ginny Fields, *Friday the 13th Part 2*; Tree Gelbman, *Happy Death Day*).

The Final Girl also tends to be more of a "good girl." The character is one of the most likable characters, is generally responsible, is usually not highly sexualized, and does not engage in premarital sex. There are exceptions to this, but many of them seem to prove the rule. Sidney is a Final Girl who has sex, but it turns out

that she actually slept with the slasher villain (*Scream*). Premarital sex is what causes Jay to be stalked relentlessly in *It Follows*, and Tree only stops being murdered at the end of the same repeated day when she transitions from being a vain “cheap slut” and “dumb bitch” to a nicer, less shallow person.

The Final Girl is also not necessarily “final.” Sometimes her status as a survivor is left open-ended (e.g., remakes of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *It Follows*). Sometimes she is killed off in sequels (*Friday the 13th Part 2*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 4*). More common, however, is the tendency for the Final Girl to be left visibly traumatized by the ordeal, with the last few scenes devoted to showing them as emotionally and/or physically broken (e.g., *Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 1-2*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th Part 1-3*).

In sum, the slasher genre tends to cast more effeminate villains (as well as a few female villains driven by more stereotypical feminine concerns like family, love, and fame), punish overly sexual and feminine women, and typically spare less feminine, less sexual women. Arguably, these categories are based in part on our society’s attitudes on gender and how it relates to (1) What makes people creepy? (2) What makes victims more deserving of punishment? And (3) What makes for a likable and effective survivor?

The conventions of the slasher genre were laid down roughly 40 years ago by John Carpenter’s influential *Halloween*. This film—and its imitators—have long been attacked for being misogynistic and a cinematic backlash against the sexual revolution. Are these criticisms still relevant for more recent slashers? And if so, why? Attitudes about gender have changed a lot since 1978, whether it be women in the workforce and politics, a growing acceptance of gays, lesbians, and transgender people, to the #MeToo movement and

beyond. Which brings me to my bigger question: to what extent have slashers really changed in how they depict gender, and is it really reflective of how young people (who are the main consumers of this genre) think about gender? Or are we in essence, still watching our parents' slasher genre? And if we are, is this a problem? Moreover, if and when the slasher genre does change substantially in how it depicts gender, what will it look like?

References

Clover, Carol. 1992. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP