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MADNESS IN THE WESTERN HORROR FILM**

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OPHELIA, THE MONSTER:
REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE MADNESS IN THE WESTERN HORROR FILM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
of

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
New York

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Date Submitted : _____

Date Approved: _____

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ABSTRACT

OPHELIA, THE MONSTER: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE MADNESS IN THE WESTERN HORROR FILM

Alexandra Fitzpatrick

Horror, as a whole, is preoccupied with madness. How else can one characterize a genre largely based in ambiguity and potential hallucination?

So it should come with no surprise that horror is also preoccupied with gender. Mental instability has been associated with femininity from the dawn of Western civilization. The Ancient Greeks coined the term hysteria from their word for uterus, subscribing to the theory that the womb could move about a woman's body and cause her to behave irrationally. Up until the nineteenth century, hysteria was believed to be an exclusively feminine condition. With potential symptoms comprising a seventy-five page pamphlet, anything a woman did carried the potential of getting her labeled hysterical. Father of psychoanalytic theory Sigmund Freud initially posited his seduction theory as an explanation for hysterical and neurotic symptoms—the idea that psychosexual trauma in childhood that had been repressed was the source of subsequent mental instability. This gendering of trauma goes hand-in-hand with the gendering of the horror film. Horror sees the return of the repressed.

The role of the woman in horror is one that has been examined at length. Carol Clover's Final Girl archetype is often viewed as the epitome of cross-gender identification. Harkening back to the single sex model of gender, the Final Girl is elevated to the status of heroine through the adoption of masculine characteristics.

Yet horror's madwomen do not play with gender in this way. They are always explicitly feminine—their psychosis serves as an extension of this. While the madwoman is often antagonistic—Stephen King's *Carrie* being a prime example—she is also sympathetic. She wears many faces and presents herself in many different ways—angry and unhinged, hyper-sexual and violent, traumatized and screaming—yet she is always a manifestation of some sort of societal or interpersonal anxiety and/or trauma,

Horror's madwomen serve as successors to folklore, sharing the menstrual imagery prevalent in the fairy tale. She is both a source and a conversation starter for intergenerational trauma and family violence. She is a way to converse about both gender and blackness, examining America's history of racial gaslighting. She may even be a more autonomous being than the Final Girl.

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Horror's Madwomen: A Cultural Introduction

“Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.”

- *“Lady Lazarus”, Sylvia Plath*

The madwoman is hardly a modern invention. From the age of antiquity, femininity has been equated with irrationality; the Egyptians blamed behavioral abnormalities in women on “wandering uteruses”. The behavioral “defects” a displaced uterus could cause ranged from mutism to paralysis. While the word hysteria was not yet applied and the ill effects of a roaming womb were not entirely mental, the idea that there was an inherent wrongness lurking in the female body would later come to be interconnected with an inherent wrongness lurking in the female psyche. Female anatomy and mental instability are inextricably linked in cultural consciousness. There is a shared element of interiority- mental illness itself exists exclusively in the brain, whereas other ailments may have a more external origin; where the penis and testes are on the outside of

the male body, the uterus and ovaries are located inside the female body and can be entered.

It's fitting then, that hysteria would become a psychiatric term referring to general mental instability. At the height of the diagnosis's usage, an incomplete list of its symptoms comprised seventy-five pages. The inherent broadness of the condition's symptoms, combined with a dismissal of female Using a group of eighteen patients, Freud outlined what he called his seduction theory. While the group was mixed-gender, it was predominantly female, as most of Freud's patients were women. The core of his argument was that repressed memories of sexual molestation and trauma were the root cause of hysteria and other neuroses. Initially, Freud believed that the memories of his patients were genuine. Foreshadowing his later repetition compulsion and theory of the uncanny, he argued that these patients relived the unconscious memory of their abuse; hysterical and obsessional behaviors were simply a manifestation of not dealt with trauma. The abuser was almost always the father; the intimate nature of the trauma contributed to the subject's repression of it.

"The Aetiology of Hysteria" was largely ignored by contemporary medical journals. Freud himself would later go on to abandon his seduction theory, citing the inherent unreliability of the unconscious and the unlikelihood of such widespread pedophilia on the part of fathers.¹ He later developed his theory of infantile sexuality, which argues that sexuality is developed in childhood in five stages. Neurosis is born when an individual gets stuck in one particular phase. Freud's acknowledgement of the unstable nature of the unconscious and his doubt in his initial seduction theory, coupled with the development of the Oedipus complex and its argument that children develop

sexual attraction towards their parents rather than the other way around as a consequence of the genital phase of sexual development, led to the dismissal of many legitimate accounts of childhood molestation as fantasy or somehow desired by the victim. Furthermore, the Oedipus complex played into medieval and classical assertions of woman as “incomplete” and defect. While women were not literally undeveloped men, they subconsciously were—they saw their lack of a phallus and came to envy their fathers’ and brothers’ possession of the organ. The Oedipus Complex, according to Freud, could result in a girl becoming either too dominant or too submissive; hypersexual or frigid.

These sociocultural assumptions around what it means to be a woman gave us a dearth of fearsome witches hiding in cottages deep in the woods, waiting to gnaw upon the bones of lost little children and wicked stepmothers, eager to punish their virginal stepdaughters. These fairy tale mothers of the madwoman were not only irredeemable, they also served as a warning. Little children are far less likely to steer away from the path in the woods if a cannibalistic witch is hidden in the trees. And the fairy tale villainess is almost always a witch, reflecting the medieval Church’s preoccupation with painting the deviant woman as in league with the devil.

Fairy tale monsters, much like horror film monsters, vary in their level of awareness. At times they are borderline sympathetic, seeming to function on the behest of some higher power. It is in their nature, so to speak, to be malevolent and crazy. More commonly, however, fairy tale villains are simply bad—there is no sympathy to be had for the vicious stepmother who places her own beauty and self concept above the safety of her stepdaughter. She is little more than a caricature, a warning for women and girls.

Even madwomen who are not overtly malevolent are punished by their narratives. *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason is perhaps the most famous Victorian madwoman. Her circumstances are nothing short of hellish—kept locked away in an attic by the husband who wishes to marry someone else, in a country thousands of miles from the one of her birth. And perhaps most disturbingly, Brontë's narrative shows her comparatively little sympathy. Instead, we are expected to pity Mr. Rochester, who was woefully unaware that the lovely Creole girl he wed came from a “spoiled”, mad bloodline and would rapidly deteriorate after their wedding into a raving, bestial lunatic:

“I thought I loved her. ... Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! ... I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her.”²

Jane herself is the “good” woman—sane, sensible, and pious, meant to serve as the aspirational double to Bertha. The reader is meant to respond with fear and revulsion to everything Bertha does—when she laughs, when she destroys Jane's wedding veil. Even her final moments, which are ultimately what allow Jane and Rochester their happy ending, are fear inducing: she sets a fire in the house and leaps off the roof to her death. Her appearance is characterized as resembling that of a vampire, one of the most prevalent monsters in the human psyche. Bertha Mason's madness is a form of deviance, and for all of *Jane Eyre*'s emphasis on female agency she is not allowed to take part in it.

Yet there's another cultural approach to the madwoman, one quite different from the scorn and revile leveled at Bertha Mason and the Wicked Stepmother. William Shakespeare's Ophelia is a beautiful and pitiful muse, a lithe delicate maiden swathed in flowers and swamp water. Hamlet is not mentally stable by any means. Either he's been driven mad by resentment and grief; or like many a female horror protagonist he's being haunted and effectively possessed by a vengeful ghost. Yet he has not inspired the same level of artistic fervor his lover has. The Pre-Raphaelites crafted various images of a beautiful, crazed young woman with yards of red hair adorned with flowers and bare feet, the center of the painting, often with no Danish prince in sight. Ophelia's drowning, a scene which is only alluded to and not actually shown in the play proper, is one of the most often depicted images associated with the play. There is something about the image of her, wide eyed and on death's doorstep, that triggered the artistic impulse.

And Ophelia is never a monster. She is frightening—in the play itself, her sanity slippage is marked by incoherent ramblings and singing, chattering either to herself, and in the paintings of her, she often appears rigid and pale, corpselike. Yet she is also always sympathetic. We are meant to pity her when she is the subject of Hamlet's abuse, when she sobs over the grave of her father. The young woman the pre-Raphaelites present to us is physically alluring, if horribly traumatized and tragic. In many ways, Ophelia mirrors some fairy tale protagonists—young and gentle, warped by trauma because she is so good and pure. Isn't a virtuous, gentle maiden more likely to be driven

to madness by loss and abuse? And isn't a good natured, moral reader meant to sympathize with her?

Horror, in general, lends itself to madness. It is a genre built upon disturbing visuals and subject matter, often depicting violent deviance including serial axe/chainsaw/torture murder, rape and other sexual violence, and cannibalism. Further, it is often ambiguous, both in terms of the nature of the plot's events (is Michael Meyers an unusually physically resilient serial killer, or some sort of supernatural being?) and in its visuals (what exactly is happening in *The Shining's* man-in-dog-costume-fellatio scene, other than the bizarre obvious?). This ambiguity is a visual representation of the trauma with which horror is so fixated on. Past events come back in monstrous masks. In *The Uncanny*, Freud argues that the unsettling comes from the resurgence of what has been buried; fear is born when a subject is forced to confront something that they have been attempting to repress. American horror has an overabundance of Indian burial grounds as setting and racially coded movie monsters for this reason—an until recently unexamined shameful history of racial discrimination has to come back to haunt the culture responsible for it somehow. Trauma, and the neurotic, hysterical state it causes, is at the horror film's heart.

Fittingly, horror films are also preoccupied with women. The aesthetic image of the female corpse, the shocking image of the beautiful blonde in pain and dying—part and parcel of the slasher film. The Final Girl seems to be Carol Clover's answer to Freud's claims of penis envy, somewhat boyish and often gaining a phallus in the form of a weapon yet still overtly feminine. Female monsters, while often not as famous as their male counterparts, are just as common. They appear, however, mostly in

backstory—Norman Bates’s abusive mother, the source of the trauma that would drive him to kill; Mrs. Voorhees in the later *Friday the Thirteenth* movies is usurped by her for some reason fully grown resurrected son. And where male monsters are given sympathetic backstories explaining why they are the way they are, or subject to a degree of narrative admiration, their monstrous mothers, it initially seems, are not leveled the same courtesy.

Indeed, it’s easy to dismiss horror as falling into the good woman/bad woman paradigm often perpetuated by Western culture, with woman being object to be observed rather than doer to identify with. Yet the horror film’s ambiguous nature makes it difficult to morally quantify. The Final Girl is the archetypal example—both the narrative and the audience begin experiencing a certain degree of voyeuristic pleasure in her initial abject fear and torment. Yet both the narrative and the viewer ultimately end up cheering her on when she turns her tormenter’s chainsaw on him. One might be able to argue that the source of the cheering is the Final Girl’s appropriation of masculinity, making her “acceptable” to relate to and engage with.

Yet the same cannot be said of horror’s madwoman. She is always feminized, occupying a unique gray area between woman-monster and Final Girl. She can be both; she can be neither. She often is meant to inspire fear; she may kill, often violently and bloodily. She is sexually transgressive and arousing. Where her Final Girl sisters get to live, she often does not. Yet she is just as often sympathetic and tragic, her interpersonal trauma serving as the source of the repressed from which her media’s uncanniness springs forth. Even when she is not tragic, she is as oddly likable as male slasher killers. Horror is at its core transgressive—its complex treatment of the subject of

female lunacy reflects that. The madwoman is both something to be rebuked and something to be pitied. This is why her viewer engages so deeply with her: they can both fear her and root for her regardless of whether or not she is antagonistic. This makes the madwoman a uniquely multilayered archetype, in a genre that often falls victim to accusations of being morally and narratively simplistic. There is no such thing as a simple or straight forward madwoman.

My goal for this project is to examine the ways in which the American horror film engages the concept of the madwoman in relation to five paradigms: the fairy tale, which I argue horror is a modern answer to due to a similar centrality of both trauma and puberty, particularly menstruation; madwoman as both mother/caregiver and daughter/care-receiver, the cycle of abuse and the concept of intergenerational trauma; the madman, and how the gender relation between male and female presents in conversation of horror's portrayal of madness, as well as how the madwoman relates to both the Final Girl and the slasher killer; blackness, and how the historic stigmatization of black emotion ; and finally, agency-whether or not the madwoman has it and how her possession or lack of agency (or the perception of her as having agency) effects her audience's perception of her.

I. MONSTROUS MAIDENS: HORROR'S MADWOMEN AS SUCCESSORS TO THE FAIRY TALE

The horror film has more in common with the fairy tale than one might initially assume. At their core, fairy tales are focused less on individual character traits and stories than they are on archetype and motif. And much like the oral tradition that brings us our most famous fairy tales, horror shares this usage of the fixed tale type. As with the fairy tale, there is no “original”—the text of the film is almost always a variant on something else that came before it, whether it be adhering to the traits of a certain genre, adapting another text, or simply drawing on age-old cultural fears or anxieties. This is why sequels and remakes are so prevalent in horror—they are essentially variations of the prior text. The *Friday the Thirteenth* and *Scream* franchises have as much in common with the dozens of variations on Snow White and Goldilocks and The Three Bears as they do the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The quality of the horror film “lies in the way it delivers the cliché”, the way in which it distinguishes itself from the tales it is a variation on. Just as the fairy tale engages the repressed and centers around its return, the horror film draws its terror from the ghosts of our individual and collective pasts.³

When the fairy tale focuses on the figure of the female, puberty and the beginnings of menstruation—often culturally treated as something which makes women “crazy” and highlights what is presumed to be the latent potential for mental instability present in all women—are bound to be central themes. The female fairy tale protagonist is often a girl at the cusp of womanhood—either pre-menarchal or just past the beginning

of menstruation. She has the naive, wide-eyed innocence that is prescribed to virginal girls by society; often, the loss of this naivety and defilement of her innocence comes with her adventures. *Little Red Riding Hood* is perhaps the most obvious in its puberty and period imagery. Believed to have been born in oral tradition, passed down from mothers and governesses to small children, the fable was first adapted into written word by the Frenchman Charles Perrault. It is Perrault's story that has served as the skeletal base of all red riding hood tales—our red clad protagonist is traveling to her grandmother's when she meets a seemingly pleasant wolf who inquires as to where she is going. Red Riding Hood makes the mistake of telling him, and the wolf suggests they race along different routes. The wolf reaches poor Grandmother's house first. He devours her and wears her clothes, waiting patiently for Red Riding Hood to arrive and serve as his dessert.

She does, but not before undressing and joining the wolf in bed, as he has beckoned her to do in her grandmother's voice. This undercurrent of sexuality is at the core of what Perrault and the mothers and nursemaids before him are warning adolescent girls about—uncontrolled, unsanctioned sexual activity leads to disaster and death, figurative as well as literal. The Brothers Grimm's adaptation of the story adds another angle. After eating Little Red Riding Hood and Grandma, the wolf falls into a deep sleep. A passing hunter notes the loud, inhuman snoring and becomes concerned, reasoning that an old woman would not be able to produce such a noise. He goes in, kills the wolf, then, realizing the creature's distended abdomen means he's recently eaten, cuts him open, freeing Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother who are miraculously unharmed. Little Red may wander off and get into bed with a monster, but she is freed by an

upstanding member of society. Puberty may bring sexual drives that can lead to deviance, but the conventions of Christian heterosexual marriage provide an acceptable outlet and save women from ruin. By staying to the path bestowed upon her by her mother, and avoiding the seemingly friendly outsider, Little Red avoids the death of not only herself but her grandmother, who she is effectively responsible for.

Little Red Riding Hood is not, despite her name, a little girl. She is an adolescent on the cusp of womanhood; the redness of her cloak symbolizes the redness of her menstrual blood. Her talking to the wolf in the first place is driven by a sort of subconscious sexual desire. As noted by critic Emanuele Antonelli, Red Riding Hood “is not innocent, yet still in danger...she needs to be told that wolves—and men—are dangerous even if they look attractive.”⁴ The theme of resisting an attractive outsider is prevalent throughout media directed at adolescent girls. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* must resist first the soul-possessing vampire Angel and then the soulless vampire Spike; *Twilight*'s Bella Swan must ostensibly avoid brooding vampire Edward Cullen, but the real outsider the narrative wants her to stay away from is working class and nonwhite shapeshifter Jacob Black. We still desire to tell our teenage daughters that while yes, that man may look attractive, his interior can be quite dangerous.

But what about when it is the girl herself who is the wolf? Teen girl horror—B rate supernatural movies aimed at adolescent girls—is awash with she-wolves, both metaphorical and literal. John Fawcett's 2000 film *Ginger Snaps* gives us Ginger Fitzgerald (Katharine Isabelle), a vaguely goth high school outsider who is bitten by a werewolf around the time she starts her first period. Ginger's subsequent behavior worries her little sister and best friend, Brigitte (Emily Perkins)—she becomes sexually

aggressive and transgressive, engaging in unprotected sex with a boy from school (which ends up infecting him with lycanthropy as well, in a fairly obvious S.T.I metaphor); she violently beats and later accidentally murders bully Trina; her wounds heal unnaturally quickly and she begins to grow hair from the scars they leave.

Ginger is Little Red Riding Hood—she and her sister stray off the path of conventionality (to kill their bully’s dog), and she is violently punished by the wolf as a result. Both Brigitte and drug dealing classmate Sam serve as the Huntsman— Brigitte, who manages to drive the werewolf away from her sister by beating it with her camera and getting the flash in its eyes; and Sam, who hits the werewolf with his van while on a drug-run. But having two Huntsmen is not enough to save Ginger—she spends the rest of the movie becoming the wolf, embracing its violent sexuality and rage.

In a way this was almost inevitable. The symptoms of lycanthropy include alterations in voice and body hair, as well as extreme mood swings. One could be forgiven for assuming that people recording these symptoms were simply confusing puberty with turning into a monster. Were it not for the sudden interests in eating raw flesh and Satanism, that is. The overlap is even more noticeable in the case of female puberty, which marks the start of menstruation. Both lycanthropy and menstruation are linked with the phases of the moon—for the woman and for the werewolf, lunar changes mean becoming a monster. There’s also a direct connection with mental illness. The term lunacy, from the Latin *lunaticus*, harkens back to an age where madness—which could mean anything from bipolar disorder to epilepsy— was viewed as a consequence of the moon. *Lunaticus*’s direct translation is “of the moon” or “moonstruck”, suggesting that the ailments lumped under the term lunacy were directly caused by changes in the

moon's phases. In essence, the moon itself is the source of a kind of The timing of Ginger's biting is no accident—the wolf that changes her is explicitly attracted to her because he can smell her menstrual blood.

Ginger's monstrous puberty is not something she wants: she explicitly refers to her first menstruation as her body "betraying her", and the fact that she and Brigitte have a pact to commit suicide by the age of sixteen suggests an extreme aversion to growing up. Yet once she enters into her transformation, which she believes to be entirely hormonal, she embraces the aggressive sexuality and physical violence that come with it. To her, these are the hallmarks of womanhood. Taking the undertones of sapphic incest present in Perrault's original *Red Riding Hood* (namely, the fact Red strips before getting into bed with what she thinks is her grandmother), Ginger seeks to spread this sexual aggression to her sister—when her transformation is nigh complete, she climbs on top of Brigitte and whispers "You know, we're almost not even related anymore", before attempting to convince her to "swap juice" and become a werewolf herself. Even earlier on, the sisters' relationship is laced with incestuous energy. Brigitte elects to test the theory that silver cures lycanthropy by piercing her sister's navel. The scene is rife with uncomfortable sensuality—as her stomach is penetrated by her sister's needle, Ginger writhes and groans, arching her back and gripping the bed post. There's an interplay between Ginger's pain and her pleasure—her expressions of pain are decidedly sexualized, and she says she feels "wicked" once the needle is removed and the ring is inserted. Tellingly, this scene takes place directly after Ginger recounts the loss of her virginity with noticeable disappointment in the boy's performance—taking umbrage with his "...squirming and squealing [and then] he's done".

Both *Ginger* and *Red Riding Hood* embrace casual, aggressive sexuality—the difference is that *Ginger* is conscious of it. That fear of adolescent girls becoming “naive participants in their own objectification” through casual sex is one that has only grown throughout the late twentieth into the early twenty first century.⁵ Teen girl horror like *Ginger Snaps* and 2009’s *Jennifer’s Body* embraces the monstrosity that comes with casual sex. Good girls, like protagonist Needy (Amanda Seyfried) only have sex with boys who are just as inexperienced as they are in the context of a relationship. The girls who end up becoming perversions of what girlhood is meant to be, like the titular Jennifer (Megan Fox), are the ones who allow themselves to be sought after for casual intercourse.

Jennifer’s Body gets its name from the title of a Hole song, which contains the lyrics: “he keeps you in a box by the bed/alive but just barely”. This lyric encapsulates the film’s thesis on casual sex—that the young women involved are not, in fact, actively choosing it but rather being tricked into thinking they are exercising their autonomy by boys and men who view them as objects. The girl who truly “chooses” casual sex is not a girl at all—she’s a monster. Jennifer is effectively tricked into seeking out what she assumes will be casual sex by the members of the rock band Low Shoulder following a bar fire. She’s only able to actively choose casual sex after she’s been permanently possessed by a demon and become a succubus. She, like *Ginger*, is *Red Riding Hood* turned into the Wolf.

And Needy, like Brigitte, makes an earnest attempt at being the Huntsman. While she has sex with her boyfriend, Chip, Jennifer murders a boy from school she has

taken out on a date. Needy immediately is able to intuit that something is amiss, leaving her lover in a state of panic. She then encounters a blood covered Jennifer who informs her of what truly happened after the fire and promptly tries to find a way to fix what has happened.

But Jennifer, like Ginger before her, is not Red Riding Hood anymore. She is the Wolf now, and as the Huntsman Needy must get rid of her. It is killing Jennifer that leads to Needy's own monstrosity—she is bitten by her possessed former best friend as they fight. Just as Brigitte is infected by her older sister's lycanthropy towards the end of *Ginger Snaps*, so is Needy poisoned by Jennifer's demonic sexuality. Yet where Brigitte is ostensibly “allowed” to remain a teenage girl (not being revealed to have succumbed to Ginger's curse until the sequel), Needy is not—Jennifer's mother catches her in the act of killing her daughter and she is committed to a mental hospital. When she escapes in order to exact bloody revenge on Low Shoulder, she too has become the Wolf: she possesses Jennifer's supernatural powers and need to sexually feed on young men.

Brian DePalma's 1976 adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie* is something of a proto- teen girl horror movie. Like *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body*, it is preoccupied with the problem of female adolescence as a “source of two fold “curse” - menstruation and monstrosity”, as well as the fear anticipated by Little Red Riding Hood of unguarded female adolescent sexuality.⁶ If Jennifer and Ginger become the Wolf through sexual intercourse and Red Riding Hood becomes the Wolf's target through menstruation, Carrie (Sissy Spacek) is somewhere in the middle. Her position as a target of the overtly sexual and vindictive bully Chris (Nancy Allen) is amplified by her first period in the girls' showers. Yet it is also Carrie's menstruation that serves to unlock her

own psychic powers. The famous pigs'-blood-prom-scene serves as an inversion of the gym-shower-period-scene—while the blood exiting Carrie's body marks her as a victim, the blood bathing her body anticipates her emergence as a wolf. There is an undoubtable element of fear of female sexuality through this fantasization of female puberty. Carrie's womanhood announces itself violently and traumatically, and her development into a woman corresponds with her development into a monster. Critic Shelley Stamp Lindsey argues that *Carrie* “presents female sexuality as monstrous and constructs femininity as a subject position impossible to occupy”.⁷ One can argue this anticipates later teen girl horror's treatment of the objectified girl—both Jennifer and Ginger are turned into monstrous living dead girls; and is born from the failings of Red Riding Hood—namely, how her burgeoning sexuality and womanhood result in the death of both her grandmother and herself.

Yet the “monster school girls” of *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body* do elicit sympathy from their viewers, just as their cinematic mother *Carrie* does. *Carrie's* rampage against her schoolmates and mother is framed as both a consequence of the monstrous nature of teenage femininity but also as a justified rebellion against the oppressive nature of both teenage interpersonal relationships and familial ones. We are supposed to root for Carrie as much as we are supposed to cringe from her; her creator's all but stated this. Stephen King was open in his identification with Carrie, taking the cross-gender appeal of the Final Girl to the creator level; furthermore, he states that her power comes from the fact she is female and exercising her powers as Woman.⁸ Her “daughters” *Ginger Snaps* and *Jennifer's Body* go a step further in specifically courting a female, adolescent audience who can identify not only with the girls they are supposed to

(Brigitte and Needy), but also the girls they're ostensibly told not to (Ginger and Jennifer). Becoming sexual beings and monsters is what gives Ginger and Jennifer their power. And to teenagers, who very often feel powerless, seeing a powerful character on the screen is a point of identification. As teenage boys identify with the masculine figure of the slasher killer, so do teenage girls see themselves in the sexually predatory demonic schoolgirl. She's a "safe", acceptable way for them to exact revenge on not only the boys who would take advantage of them, but the authority figures who attempt to constrict their behavior. While the slasher killer-Final Girl dynamic forces the viewer to be both Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, the monster schoolgirl makes the viewer bear witness to Red Riding Hood's metamorphosis into the Wolf.

Horror does not only draw on the problems of menstruation and sexuality presented by Little Red Riding Hood. It shares subject matter with a wide variety of fairy tales, from doppelgängers to incest. Jordan Peele's 2019 film *Us* not only uses fairy tale tropes and imagery, its purpose and narrative structure echo that of the folk tale. The fairy tale may be fantastical, but it is not a fantasy story—rather, it is a complex social metaphor used to impart some sort of moral or societal truth.⁹ *Us* does exactly this—while ostensibly a film about doppelgängers rising from the beneath to take the places of their originals, it reads as a mediation on the oppression of the lower class and anxiety around social mobility—namely, the idea that one can move up in society and later be found to be a "fraud". Because the Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o) we spend the film with is *not* the original Adelaide, but rather her tethered, Red, who lured her into the hall of mirrors precisely so she could take her place above the tethered's underground prison. The original Adelaide's return is both a classic Freudian expression of the uncanny, but

also a manifestation of the new Adelaide's subconscious fear of being forced to return to what is essentially both abject poverty and imprisonment.

When the Wilson family first encounters their doppelgängers, "Red" sits them down in the living room and tells them a story of two little girls. One who lived in the sun, who could make her own choices and live freely. The other in the cold and the dark, forced to mirror the girl who lived the life she so envied (and, we find out at the end, was originally hers). The very concept of Adelaide and Red's youths sounds like something out of a fairy tale, and the fact that Red communicates this through sitting the family around the hearth and telling them a story, rather than simply stating her and her family's purpose and intent, places the film in the position of the oral tradition. This is fitting—while the fairy tales in our public consciousness come from the transcriptions of writers like Perrault and the Grimm brothers, and are therefore sanitized to fit bourgeois social norms and expectations, the progenitors of these stories came from peasants who passed them around orally. *Us* itself can be seen as doing the same work as Perrault and the Grimms—taking the oral tradition of the lower classes (Red's account of her experiences) and translating them into a work more palatable to the upper classes (the positioning of the tethered as violent and monstrous, inspiring fear in the film's mostly middle class audience.) Red's naming is also not an accident—while the color carries Marxist connotations (and is, indeed, worn by all of the tethered), it also reflects her position as yet another successor to Little Red Riding Hood—and her possession of a sexuality that has an inhr. She went into the forest of mirrors and found a wolf. And, like the adolescent protagonists of *Carrie*, *Ginger Snaps*, and *Jennifer's Body*, she too becomes the wolf and returns to take her revenge.

The 1990 television series *Twin Peaks* shares *Us*'s preoccupation with the double, as do its 2017 revival and its 1993 film *Fire Walk With Me*. The Black Lodge produces Agent Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan)'s villainous double, infused with the spirit of primal evil BOB (Frank Silva); the ending of the 2017 revival sees Cooper encounter Carrie (Sheryl Lee), a double of Laura Palmer, as well as the earlier reveal that, like Adelaide Wilson in *Us*, the Diane (Laura Dern) we have gotten to know is not the true Diane, but rather a tulpa. Where the repressed returning in *Us*'s use of the doppelgänger is class struggle and trauma, *Twin Peaks*' is interpersonal—namely, the traumas of incest and sexual violence. It is yet another medium that uses the language and imagery of *Little Red Riding Hood*; Laura “voluntarily channels this persona when engaged in sexual activities with Jacques and Leo in the cabin in the woods. Additionally, in *Secret Diary*, Laura likens her catching a ride with four truckers to Red Riding Hood's getting lost in the forest...although she escapes the four truckers/wolves, Laura ends up fulfilling her own prophecy that eventually she will never make it out of the woods”.¹⁰ Laura's wolf is not Leo, or Jacques, but BOB using the form of her own father, Leland (Ray Wise). In the original, the Wolf is dangerous because he is outsider; in *Twin Peaks*, it's because he is family.

Laura's backstory not only draws on *Red Riding Hood*, but also princess fairy tales like *Donkeyskin* and *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, an earlier version of *Sleeping Beauty*. Recorded by Charles Perrault, *Donkeyskin* glosses over the trauma of father-daughter incest that *Twin Peaks* centralizes. A widowed king was told by his late wife he may not remarry until he found a woman as beautiful as she. As their daughter grows into

adolescence, it becomes apparent that only she is equal to her mother's beauty. The king becomes obsessed with her. The princess gives him seemingly impossible tasks in order to get her to agree to wed him. Horrifically, he is able to complete them, forcing his daughter to don the hide of a donkey and run away. After that, the princess's incestuous trauma all but fades into the background of her relationship with a handsome prince, only mentioned again towards the end with the neat resolution of the king having wed a beautiful woman, allowing father and daughter to reconcile. In contrast, Laura's trauma is not allowed to slip into the background of her romantic and sexual relationships—it dominates them. James, Bobby, even Leo and Jacques—they're all completely secondary in Laura's life to the threat and trauma that her father presents. For the real daughter of an incestuous king, there is no prince to save her: the trauma of intrafamily sexual violence does not magically go away. It follows those involved to the grave. Or to the beach, where she lies wrapped in plastic.

The image of Laura's dead body calls to mind both Edgar Allan Poe's idea of the seductive dead outlined in "Annabel Lee", as well as the story of *Sleeping Beauty*. Laura is the sleeping beauty who will never wake up; no kiss could end her slumber. And where *Sleeping Beauty*'s status as sleeping is what makes her vulnerable, Laura's "sleep" is a consequence of her waking vulnerability. *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, recorded by Italian poet Giambattista Basile, bears *Sleeping Beauty*'s early plot: Talia, the daughter of a lord, is put into a deep sleep by a splint of flax. Her father, unable to bury his beloved child, places her within one of his estates. A king following his wayward falcon happens upon her. After unsuccessfully attempting to wake her, he rapes her, resulting in a pregnancy. Talia's sleeping state is what allows her to be visited by sexual violence; were she awake,

we are meant to infer, this may well have been a consensual encounter. The rest of the tale certainly frames it as such—Talia bears twins named Sun and Moon, spared any of the trauma that comes with both rape and birth. If anything, she is ecstatic when she suddenly wakes and has two children, immediately falling into the role of loving mother. In fact, the real conflict and trauma comes from the king's wife, who orders Sun and Moon to be cooked and served to their father and plans to have Talia thrown on a pyre. Talia is forced to strip—she screams with the removal of each garment, an uncomfortable call back to her earlier rape at the hands of the man she's since “fallen in love with” and is now being used to exact revenge upon.

The king arrives in the nick of time. As with *Donkeyskin*, there's a happy ending—it turns out Sun and Moon were not, in fact, slaughtered and served to their unknowing father. Rather, the cook, who is quite possibly the only person in the story with any recognizable morals, prepared two lambs instead. The queen and the king's secretary are thrown into the fire; Talia is saved, and gets to marry her royal rapist. The dissonance between the earlier appearance of borderline necrophilic sexual assault and the conventional fairy tale ending is jarring—and very much deconstructed by the atmosphere of *Twin Peaks*. In theory, Laura's life is perfect—she's beautiful, popular enough to be voted homecoming queen. She has an attractive football player boyfriend, a caring best friend, and her parents are ostensibly loving. Yet beneath this gilded veneer is something very dark and very tortured, that cannot be discarded to give Laura a false happy ending. Cooper finds this out the hard way—he spends the final episodes of *The Return* trying to undo Laura's murder, taking her by the hand and leading her out of the

woods. Her blue lipped, plastic wrapped corpse disappears from Twin Peaks's rocky beach, leaving her fate ambiguous.

The final episode does not give us a fairy tale ending, for Laura or for Cooper. Cooper finds a waitress named Carrie Page, a doppelgänger or alternate universe version of Laura. He himself has become Richard, losing his identity for the second time in twenty five years. He takes her to the Palmer home, only to find it is now owned by a family named Tremond. Despairingly, Cooper asks the woman at the door what year it is, as Laura looks up at the house. She hears her mother, Sarah, call her name and begins to scream. While it is difficult to ascribe a singular meaning to anything Lynch does, Laura's reaction to hearing her mother's voice seems to deconstruct the endings of *Donkeyskin* and *Sun, Moon, and Talia*—no matter how good the intentions, one cannot simply make trauma go away. It will always be there.

Not all horror that draws on folklore and fairy tales is quite so subtle. The genre of folk horror is explicitly based in folkloresque imagery. It is set in the pastoral, often with pagan religious backgrounds and traditions, focusing on “localized “skewed belief systems and moralities””¹¹. If the written fairy tale sought to sanitize the oral traditions of the medieval peasantry, folk horror seeks to demonize them. It paints a picture of pre-Christian tradition as dangerous and often inherently mad.

This, naturally, makes it prime for the woman question. 1973's *The Wicker Man* centers around a Christian policeman named Neil Howie (Edward Woodward), who travels to a remote island off Scotland to investigate the disappearance of a teenage girl named Rowan Morrison (Geraldine Cowper). He's disturbed to discover that the inhabitants, including local nobleman Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee), not

only refuse to admit Rowan existed but are also openly pagan. Howie comes to find that the villagers are planning a sacrifice to their gods. Convinced they plan to kill Rowan, he crashes their May Day celebration and frees Rowan, running with her into a cave.

Yet Howie has horribly misread his situation. Rowan is not only not a sacrifice, she is a willing participant in the lure of the true sacrifice—Howie himself. Rowan seems to symbolize early Christian beliefs about the pagan woman—that she is duplicitous, that she is dangerous, that she will use her beauty and sexuality and perceived vulnerability to bring ruin upon good Christian men. The pagan woman was the madwoman to the early Christians, and Rowan fits this to a tee—eagerly participating in her own purported abduction and sacrifice and later joyously singing a Middle English folk song with her neighbors as they burn Howie alive.

Ari Aster's second feature *Midsommar* is something of a *Wicker Man* for the modern age. Centered around a group of college students who travel to a remote Swedish commune to witness a midsummer celebration that only happens every ninety years. Unbeknownst to them, they're intended to be sacrifices as part of the celebration. Plied with psychedelic drugs, they bear witness to horror and ruin.

Midsommar is unique in that it contains multiple madwomen—protagonist Dani (Florence Pough), a traumatized psychology student with a family history of mental illness, and the women in the commune, who are not only active participants but also out and out aggressors in the cult's activities. Maja (Isabelle Grill) stands out—it is she who drugs and rapes Dani's emotionally distant boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor) as part of a fertility rite. As in *The Wicker Man*, mad pagan women bring death and ruin to Christian

men —and to women. Dani ends up being so warped by both the cracks formed by the trauma of her older sister's family annihilation-suicide early in the film and by the horror of what the cult has wrought that she ends up becoming an active participant in the midsummer rituals. Crowned the May Queen, it is she who chooses Christian to die over a local villager. While she initially weeps as Christian, his friends, and four villagers are burnt to death inside a small wooden temple, she eventually smiles, suggesting that not only has she been mentally broken by her experiences but that she has been conditioned to accept horror.

II. BARBARISM BEGINS AT HOME: MAD MOTHERS AND HEREDITARY TRAUMA

“Don’t you swear at me, you little shit! Don’t you *ever* raise your voice at me! I am your mother! All I do is worry and slave and defend you, and all I get back is that fucking face on your face!” Annie (Toni Colette) screams at her teenage son Peter (Alex Wolff) during a particularly disastrous dinner scene in Ari Aster’s *Hereditary*. The title of the film is not insignificant. It reflects both the inherited presence of demon king Paimon, forced upon Annie’s family by her late mother, and the inherited trauma of mental illness that increasingly destabilizes both Annie and Peter. I’d go as far to argue that the latter is the true strength of the film, and that one of its ultimate failings is the ending’s sudden reliance on the supernatural. What starts out as a rather unique meditation on the inherited nature of both trauma and mental illness takes a 180 and becomes a relatively run of the mill possession narrative. The title of the film loses its impact in the final scenes.

Annie is a unique protagonist in that she seemingly is and isn’t the main character of her film. For the first quarter or so, her daughter, Charlie, seems to be shaping up to be the subject of a possession narrative ala *The Exorcist* or even *Rosemary’s Baby*- that is, Annie will be put in the position of either having to save or vanquish her child, with her husband and son functioning as essentially background characters. But as soon as Charlie’s cranium is detached from the rest of her body that changes. The focus shifts to

the understandably traumatized Peter—and to Annie’s increasingly evident resentment towards her oldest child. In her dream, she admits to Peter that she never wanted to have children, that she went as far as trying to force herself to have a miscarriage, but her own mother was the one who effectively forced her into birthing him (later, we learn, for supernatural purposes). Peter weeps, claiming his mother tried to kill him. “No, I love you!” Annie exclaims, visibly distraught at the idea that her son could believe otherwise. “I didn’t [try to kill you]! I was trying to *save* you!”

Save him from what, one may ask? Was it her own awareness of her family’s history of mental illness- a father who starved to death due to his mental illness, a mother with dissociative identity disorder, and a schizophrenic brother who committed suicide as a teenager, to say nothing of Annie’s own neuroticism and mental fragility? Or the dark cloud presented by her mother in general? Annie doesn’t figure out her mother, Ellen’s, occultist activities until after she is already dead. Yet the destructive presence her mother creates, both while she is alive and in absentia, is one Annie has spent her life all too aware of. Even in death, she is inescapable—every single event that happens in the film goes back to her.

Ellen is the definition of the archaic mother. She is absent and not; the “primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end”.¹² She is a callback to fear inspiring creation goddesses, who birthed not only men but the monsters who would plague them. It is creation without moral, creation without purpose. The archaic mother’s sole concern is procreation; Annie’s mother forcing her into motherhood is for the explicit purpose of the continued survival of her cult. She cares not for her offspring, only for what they can be used for.

This idea of child-as-tool intersects with the positioning of mother-as-tool. Ellen certainly subscribed to this way of thinking—how else can one characterize her forcing her daughter into pregnancy and motherhood for the explicit purpose of providing her demon king with a host? By treating a child as a means to an end, one does not only strip it of its agency. The mother too has her autonomy taken from her, because her role as mother is tampered with or even not chosen. Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow) of *Rosemary's Baby* is Annie Graham. She is forced into motherhood by the cultists next-door and by her husband. Guy (John Cassavetes) doesn't care to have a child, doesn't care what the horrors of birth and motherhood may do to his wife. He cares only for his own financial gain.

Like Annie would admit to several years later, Rosemary knows that there is something wrong. It's an instinctual sense of wrongness that is both maternal and not: the mother is meant to know her child better than anyone. Yet the expectant mother is formally discouraged from experiencing the negative aspects of pregnancy; any experience differing "from [the fulfilling, delightful aspects of maternity...is] regarded as "a sign of maladjustment""¹³. This, just as much as her insistence that her neighbors are Satanic witches, is the reason that her gynecologist believes she is going mad. Rosemary's very real fears of an abnormal child being born into a fundamentally unsafe environment are summarily dismissed. It doesn't matter that the homeopathies her neighbor, Minnie Castevet, has been giving her are making her sick, nor does it matter that cult selected OB-GYN Dr. Saperstein's treatment is having the same effect. To Dr. Hill, Rosemary's talk of demons and witchcraft is merely the marker of a hysterical

woman and a sign that she needs a rational minded man to make decisions for her. The source of fear in *Rosemary's Baby* is just as much the stripping of agency and autonomy that comes with pregnancy and maternity as it is the demon baby. We never see Rosemary's son—the true core of the film is the trauma and loss of autonomy that come with pregnancy itself rather than the consequences of bearing a Satanic child¹⁴.

Yet that does not mean the demon baby is any less horrific. Initially, Guy and the cultists lie to Rosemary, telling her the child died at birth. Rosemary doesn't believe them. Using the closer that acts as a pathway between the Woodhouse and Castevet apartments, she happens upon the cultists celebrating her son's birth.

Her reaction to her child is unadulterated horror. "His eyes," she cries, her own going wide. "What've you done to his eyes?" "He has his father's eyes," Roman Castevet replies. Rosemary pitifully insists that Guy's eyes are normal, but even then, she already knows. Any denial of Roman's brusque response—"Satan is his father! Not Guy"—is performative. Rosemary has been so completely stripped of her agency that she hasn't even been allowed the most basic maternal activity: selecting who will father your young.

And she knows this. Her fear and revulsion is a consequence of her lack of agency in a situation in which she should be the one calling the shots. When Roman orders her to rock the child in his cradle, her initial refusal is an attempt at being able to reclaim her agency. "You're trying to make me his mother," she sneers, attempting to divorce herself from her child. "Aren't you his mother?" Castevet responds. The wind is taken from Rosemary's sails. She passively agrees to mother her demonic child, gently rocking his cradle. The only way she can exercise her agency is by giving her son no siblings—when

Guy attempts to comfort her by saying they can have children of their own, she spits in his face.

Rosemary's son's strange combination of presence and absence is a necessity. For the audience, many of whom are not and will not become mothers but all of whom have mothers, the abjection of the maternal cannot fully come with the idea of the mother finding something worthy of abject in the child (the viewer). The aspects of maternity that do not have to do with the child—the blood, the womb—are worthy of inspiring revulsion; positioning the child as something that can inspire the same level of fear and disgust insults the viewer himself.¹⁵ The anxiety that the child may be something that can inspire repulsion and abjection in the mother is central to both *Rosemary's Baby* and *Hereditary*. The only difference is perspective: Rosemary is the mother, fearful of fearing and rejecting her own child. Peter is the child, grappling with the anxiety that his mother may never have wanted him and actively resents him.

This portrayal of children as a source of fear and trauma rather than happiness and fulfillment is inherently taboo. Of course, this makes it prime subject matter for the horror film. In *The Babadook*, single mother Amelia Vandek (Essie Davis) must grapple with not only the monster in her basement, but also her deep seated resentment towards her own child. Six year old Sam (Noah Wiseman) is, for lack of a better word, a terror: he destroys other people's property, shoves his own cousin and breaks her nose, and openly discusses his deceased father with strangers in the grocery store. His behavior, combined with the circumstances of his birth (Amelia's beloved husband was killed while driving her to the hospital), position him as something of a monster to his mother. He is the

source of her repressed maternal anger, which results in the creation of the Babadook (Tim Purcell).

Amelia's status as grieving widow and single mother marks her as different. She is stigmatized both by the prolonging of her mourning and the fact that her child acts out. The hint in the complaints about Sam's behavior is that Amelia is not doing an effective job parenting him. That the reason there is something wrong with him is because there is something wrong with her. This suggestion of wrongness, combined with misdirected anger for the death of her husband, is what births Amelia's second son. The Babadook is Amelia—he is the manifestation of “her repressed feelings of depression and anger....a monster that wants to kill her own child, so that she can finally be free of the reminder of the death of her husband”.¹⁶ Sam is all that Amelia has left of her late husband. Rather than treasuring him, as society would doubly tell her to as both child and reminder, she resents him. He is the manifestation of her wound, just as his “brother” is that of her anger. It takes Amelia confronting the Babadook and seeing “what is underneath”—her own pain—for her and Sam to be freed.

And even then, they aren't completely free. The trauma of their loss and Amelia's grief is still real, still beneath the floorboards. Yet the Babadook has proven he can be managed. Amelia can spend her life mother to two sons, not letting one overtake her, and move on.

Not all fear-filled mothers are biological. In Flora Sigismondi's *The Turning*, governess Kate Mandell (Mackenzie Davis) occupies the same position as Rosemary Woodhouse and Amelia Vandek. She finds herself in charge of the wealthy Fairchild orphans, who despite their angelic faces and beautiful home are eerie and often violent.

Yet there are complications that arise from the fact she is not the mother of the children she is simulatenously meant to protect and fears. The source material for *The Turning*, Henry James's 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw* has often been argued to be more about mental instability and repressed trauma than it is about ghosts. The ambiguous nature of the story serves to highlight not only the governess's mental disturbance and probable sexual trauma but also the children's. The specter of Peter Quint seems to "particularly want(s) to seduce [the governess's] young ward Miles into some kind of indecency"—¹⁷ given the description of the late Quint and former governess Miss Jessel as being too "free", it is clear that the indecency the governess fears is unchecked sexuality.

That fear is only magnified in the film. Kate has visions of the ghost of Peter Quint violently raping the ghost of Miss Jessel beneath her bed; a disembodied hand gropes at her while she sits on her bed. Yet the greatest threat isn't the adult dead; it's the child living. *The Turning*'s Miles (Finn Wolfhard) is older than he is in the novella—old enough that he can be placed in the category of predator as easily as he can prey. He's precociously aggressive. The reason he's been sent home from his elite boarding school is that he was caught strangling another boy; when a bird drops a fish by his feet his immediate reaction is to stamp upon its head to kill it. Most disturbingly, he forces himself upon Kate, kissing her. They enact the roles of the ghosts beneath Kate's bed: Kate as Jessel/victim, Miles as Quint/rapist. It is a pseudo-Oedipal perversion of the relationship between female caregiver and male child. While it lacks the incest present in a biological relationship, it rouses just as much fear and anxiety in Kate.

Miles's in between age opens up the door for the fear of boy-child-as-victim. The rust colored sweater he wears is noted to have belonged to the late Quint; housekeeper Mrs. Grose notes that Quint was a "bad influence" on Miles and frequently took him out of the house. Combined with the fact Quint himself was noted to be both sexually violent and frequently drunk, this does not paint a comforting picture. When Kate tells him that they need to leave, Miles looks more like a child than he has at any other point in the film—he's trembling, tapping drumsticks on his shaking legs. He refuses to make eye contact with Kate before tearfully admitting that Quint "won't let him leave". While he is ostensibly being literal, its far easier to see the statement as figurative: the trauma of whatever it is Quint has done to him, be it grooming or out and out sexual abuse is not something Kate can save him from. They are both powerless.

Like *The Turn of the Screw* before it, *The Turning* has an ambiguous ending: Mrs. Grose's, whose death at the hands of Quint's ghost is what spurs Kate's escape with Miles and Flora, voice breaks Kate out of her reverie. She is brought back to a moment in which she received a drawing from her own mentally disturbed mother in the mail and Grose commented that she hoped whatever she had "wasn't genetic". The movie makes it clear that it is—Kate rants and raves about Quint's ghost, demanding Flora to admit that she has seen it too. Flora recoils and Miles sneers that Kate's delusional. The entirety of the film is cast into doubt—what have we seen that we can trust? Where this works for the book, it falls flat in the film—part of the reason James was able to craft a successfully ambiguous ending was that he was not allowed to fully say what he was referring to. The ideas of trauma and sexuality had to remain somewhat hidden; it is their hiddenness that

is the source of the ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw* in the first place. *The Turning*, by contrast, lays its cards on the table: Quint is confirmed to have been raping Jessel¹⁸ and Miles's behavior is so consistent with those of a child sexual abuse survivor that it is extremely difficult to imagine that it was unintentional.

Perhaps what undermines the ending the most is the simple fact that Miles gets to live. James kills the boy off, leaving it ambiguous whether or not the cause of his death was a ghost or the governess herself. Sigismondi leaves him alive—a sneering, obnoxious contrast to the genuine vulnerability seen only minutes before, serving only to remind Kate of how fallible she truly is. Kate's madness is centralized, but in such a way that it is a detriment to the film. The horror of *The Turn of the Screw* comes from the governess's inability to protect both herself *and* the children; in *The Turning*, this is set up and then the latter is disregarded. The children don't need Kate to protect them from ghosts or even herself. Miles's death makes it clear just how much he was at the mercy of the adults around him in life—something that serves as a parallel between himself and his governess, who is also under the control of patriarchal power structures and her own trauma and repression; by allowing him to live, this parallel is lost, despite the film planting the seeds for it. There is also something genuinely troubling in Miles's earlier, sexual-abuse-victim consistent characterization being disregarded; given his gender and the all too common cultural assumption that males cannot be victims, the film almost seems to suggest that only a “crazy woman” would see a victim in a boy.

The disgusted caregiver is not always the protagonist of her film. She serves as a shaper even more often than she does as protagonist. Norma Bates (voiced in an uncredited role by Virginia Gregg), the archetypal Castrating Mother, is one of the more

famous destructive maternal forces in American cinema. Her watchful eye remains on her son, Norman (Anthony Perkins), long after he has mummified her. It is her voice we hear in Norman's head at the end of the film, it is her clothes he wears in an attempt to grasp at some of the power she held over him. The birds that Norman taxidermies serve as a visual metaphor for his relationship with his late mother—they are exclusively birds of prey “frozen in time at the very moment when they are most dangerous, most threatening—the moment where they are poised, motionless, just prior to the kill...[Norma] was the parent who hovered over him, watched his every move, threatening to pounce when he committed a mistake”.¹⁹ Norma's predatory helicopter parenting turned Norman into the man we see in the film—seemingly frail and meek, yet actually extremely dangerous—and worst, uncontrolled.

And what was it Norma was waiting to pounce on him for? The film makes it clear Mrs. Bates felt incredibly enraged by the very prospect of her son's sexuality. She (speaking through her son) denounces “filthy appetites”, spews misogynistic vitriol, and belittles Norman regularly, eager to keep him under her thumb. In essence, she is Carrie's pop culture grandmother—these are the exact attitudes Mrs. White (Piper Laurie) directs towards her daughter. She treats Carrie's menstruation as something sinful and dirty; she ridicules her on her way to prom, taunting “They're all going to laugh at you” in an uncomfortably prophetic moment; she even goes as far as to attempt to kill her child by stabbing her in the back. Like Norman before her, Carrie ends up killing her mother; unlike Norman, this comes after she has killed outside of her family unit. For Norman destroying the source of his trauma is what leads him on the path to madness; for Carrie,

whose trauma comes both from the home and from school bullying, destroying the secondary source must come before she can win in a face off against her mother.

III. FINDING HAMLET: HORROR'S MADWOMAN AND MADMAN IN CONVERSATION

“Let them see what kind of person I am,” Norma Bates’s voice echoes in her son’s head, his face spreading into a smile. “I hope they’re watching. They’ll see... “she couldn’t hurt a fly”.” Twenty years later, as Pamela Voorhees (Betsy Palmer) stalks and prepares to murder final girl Alice, her voice takes on a higher pitch as she cries: “Kill her, mommy! Kill her!”

The possession of Norman and Pamela directly invert one another. Norman is driven to kill by the mother who abused him and whom he killed; he internalizes her violently misogynistic rhetoric and kills the young women his mother would disapprove of. Pamela is driven to kill by the son she was unable to protect. As such, she assumes his identity and takes revenge on the teenage counselors she views as surrogates for the ones culpable in her child’s death. Both are aware of their “passengers”—the only difference is Norman thinks his is alive. Pamela’s awareness of her son’s death, and the fact her actions are born from acknowledged rage in addition to trauma, make her dangerous. Unchecked feminine rage, not a for some reason fully grown ghost of a drowned child, is the monster of *Friday the Thirteenth*.

The *Friday The Thirteenth* franchise has a complex relationship with gender. In the first film, the supposition is initially that the killer is Jason himself. We experience the murders through the perspective of the killer —through what little glimpses the viewer gets of “Jason” throughout most of the film, it’s easy to assume the person we’re

seeing through is male. As Carol Clover notes, “we are invited by conventional expectation and by glimpses of “our” own bodily parts—a heavily booted foot, a roughly gloved hand—to suppose “we” are male, but “we” are revealed at the film’s end as a woman.”²⁰ Initially presuming we are participating in male violence and destruction, we are actually bearing witness to an extremely feminine rage—the mother who has had her child stolen from her. This angle is lost in the sequels. *Part Two* reveals Jason to be alive; the viewing experience returns to slasher film form. We are invited to partake in male rage and adolescent resilience²¹; maternal rage is turned into a footnote, something to merely serve as an explanation for why Jason himself is violent and crazy. No longer an inversion of *Psycho*, the *Friday the Thirteenth* franchise follows its path, giving in to the slasher horror conventions of male monster-female victim and endless sequels.

Horror’s madman and madwoman most often come face to face in domestic settings; mother-son relationships are a common expression of gender anxieties. *Hereditary*’s whole premise is centralized around the topic of gender—Paimon’s displeasure comes from the fact his host, Charlie, is a little girl instead of a little boy. The unisex nature of Charlie’s name highlights this—we can make the assumption as the audience that she’s Charlotte, when what Paimon really wants is a Charles. Charlie’s death happens only because Paimon is displeased with the sex of his host and wants to “trade her in”, so to speak, for her brother. She dies because and only because she is a little girl; the real world parallel is uncomfortable and unsettling.

The real gender conflict of *Hereditary* is not between Paimon and Charlie. It manifests between Annie and Peter, who are, in many ways, two sides of the same coin. Both are psychologically destroyed by Charlie’s passing: Annie as a mother, suffering the

greatest loss a parent can experience and later forced by Peter to confront her part in it; Peter as the survivor, wrecked with guilt and post traumatic stress disorder. Their mental destruction feeds off one another: from the disastrous dinner scene, to the way Peter sobs while a possessed Annie chases him. The crying parallels Annie's earlier screaming—it is uncontrolled and childlike. Peter has been so psychologically broken that he reverts back to an earlier stage of childhood.

The fact that Peter is the one who cries and Annie is the one who screams is both a return to an earlier stage in Peter's life and an inversion of typical gender roles. Aggression is masculine, sadness is feminine. Adult men do not cry, women do not express anger in an explicit/violent manner. The only time this rule is inverted is in the mother-son relationship—young boys are at the mercy of their mothers, who are often characterized as overbearing and emotionally violent. And children, particularly children under the age of ten, are spared the scrutiny of gender roles—they exist in an androgynous bliss, largely spared the explicit gendering of their bodies and personalities that comes with puberty. The only time a boy is allowed to cry is when he is very young. And the harried, hysterical way Peter cries indicates that his situation is a traumatic return to his early youth. To the years he was at the complete and utter mercy of his mother.

Annie's dream sequence brings to light her and her son's shared trauma. Them both waking up after she's doused her children and is preparing to light them on fire, whether Peter truly remembers it or not, is a mutually traumatic experience. Annie was forced to confront the hereditary nature of her family's mental illness; Peter, the reality that his mother may not have truly wanted him. This undercurrent of trauma is what makes them both so susceptible to Paimon's influence, even more than Charlie who was

implicitly ‘bred’ for the purpose of housing him. Of all the members of the Graham family, Annie and Peter are both the most psychologically vulnerable and the most similar. They are two sides of the same coin.

William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has a particularly powerful cultural impact. It has spawned adaptations, reinterpretations, and visual art. The Pre-Raphaelites in particular were infatuated with Shakespeare’s premier madwoman Ophelia—an infatuation that foreshadows horror cinema’s similar preoccupation with its own madwomen.

But what of Hamlet himself? The Danish prince is no more mentally stable than his lover. Depending on one’s interpretation of the play, he is either possessed or schizophrenic. This cultural forgetting of Hamlet’s own mental frailty and overemphasis/fetishization of Ophelia’s is no more apparent than it is in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*.

An adaptation of a Stephen King novel, the text of *The Shining* centers more around the deterioration of Torrance family patriarch, Jack (Jack Nicholson)’s mental state. The malevolent spirits inhabiting the Overlook Hotel prey upon Jack’s fraying nerves and explicit-in-the-book-implicit-in-the-film alcoholism, using him as a vehicle to terrorize his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and son Danny, who possesses psychic abilities known as the shining.

Nicholson’s performance, combined with Kubrick’s direction, paint an image of Torrance as a living nightmare. His smile is ghoulish, more of a sneer or scream. Yet the camera is just as fascinated by the expressions of terror and trauma found on his wife. During what is arguably the film’s most famous scene, we are treated to both Torrance’s expressions of madness/fear. As Jack hacks at the door of his family’s hotel room with an

axe, it is Wendy's face we focus on. Her eyes are screwed shut and her mouth is open in repetitive screams, a fun-house mirror version of her husband's wide eyes and twisted smile. As in *Hamlet*, the content of the film is about male madness. But the visual story telling is just as preoccupied with feminine trauma as it is masculine psychological deterioration.

Stephen King himself has a particular preoccupation with feminine madness and trauma. This is both sympathetic and not: *Misery's* villain is the violent madwoman fan of a successful writer who kidnaps and tortures him; *Dolores Claiborne's* protagonist is a battered wife driven to murder by her husband's incestuous desires towards their teenage daughter. Even Pennywise's final form is that of a female spider, taking up the role of Archaic Mother.

Carrie is easily the most famous of King's women—she is his first, after all. King himself seems to have seen something of himself in her. In *Danse Macabre*, he wrote of Carrie as a surrogate for a male audience:

“...one reason for the success of this story in both print and film, I think lies in this: Carrie's revenge is something that any student who has ever had his gymshorts pulled down in Phys Ed or his glasses thumb-rubbed in study hall could approve of.”

Carol Clover points out that the ““any student” in [King's assessment of Carrie's popularity] looks a lot like an adolescent boy”²². She becomes something of a Final Girl outside of text: she is not masculinized in universe, but out of universe her creator feels the need to position her in a way that mirrors his own, male experience. It is telling that King would select a teenage girl, and an extremely feminized teenage girl at that, to

explore the horrors of adolescence and bullying. A teenage boy is too old to cry, too old to crack under the pressures of emotional violence. Teenage girls are allowed to go mad; by filtering masculine rage through feminine experience, King explores both male and female madness. Trauma is universal, but it is culturally gendered female. The madwoman is both more and less sympathetic than the madman—more because her trauma is allowed to exist as a result of her feminine frailty; less because the violence and rage that comes with it is horrific and unbecoming. Carrie could not exist if she were a boy. She would not provoke the same response.

IV. CALIBAN, THE WOMAN: RACE, GENDER, AND MADNESS

As horror is inherently preoccupied with gender, so to is it preoccupied with race. This is particularly true of American horror, which uses both racial coding and Indian burial grounds to express anxiety around the potential for consequences for its colonial past—and to displace some of the guilt for slavery and manifest destiny onto the victims of these projects. After all, a victim who is savage and monstrous does not deserve to be thought of as a victim. By convincing themselves that black people were inherently violent and backwards and "needed" to be civilized through initially slavery, later Jim Crow laws, and currently racially motivated policing, or that indigenous peoples had to be removed for the sake of "societal progress", white Americans were able to justify their continued reverence for and obedience towards a government which subjugates those people through violence. If the stereotypes of black men as angry and violent and black women as mouthy and bitchy are born out of a subconscious effort to discredit their gripes with white supremacy and misogyny, so too is the racial coding of movie monsters (and the uncanny tendency for characters of color to die off before their white counterparts do).

Yet as is so often noted by critics and fans of the horror film alike, it is the monster who receives both the most recognition and at times, even the most sympathy. This is the whole lynchpin of Carol Clover's argument: that for all teenage boy viewers of slasher films might identify with the Final Girl, they get there through first identifying with the killer that preys upon her and her friends . This seems to be equally true regardless of whether the monster in question is coded as nonwhite or as a

disenfranchised white. Something about the monster's outsider status sparks a particularly strong fascination that often becomes admiration or even empathy.

George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* has a unique relationship to blackness, both in terms of its portrayal of its sole black character—who is the closest the film gets to a “hero”, yet is only black by virtue of casting rather than a conscious decision made in the script—and also in its metatextuality as a zombie film. The concept of the ‘zombie’ is taken from voodoo, an afro-Caribbean religion that has its origins in West African mythology. Where the western horror genre has appropriated the term to refer to a sort of man eating remnant, in its original context a zombie is simply an individual who is under the hypnosis of a voodoo doctor. The appropriation of part of a black religion as the basis for a white film genre is not insignificant. The monster is always going to be the Other; in Western, white society, who is more Other than the nonwhite?

Night of the Living Dead does not, in fact, use the term ‘zombie’ in its script. Romero would later acknowledge that he was perhaps influenced by the Haitian conception of the zombie, but he viewed his own revenants as something distinct and different.²³ That said, the plot structure of *Night of the Living Dead* became the basis for other films that would later explicitly refer to their monsters as zombies: corpses begin suddenly raising from the dead and attacking people with no real explanation, turning the living into more instances of the undead. The film opens with white siblings Johnny (Russell Streiner) and Barbara (Judith O’Dea) visiting their father’s grave. Johnny is bitten and killed by a zombie in a tattered suit, who quickly turns his attentions to Barbara. She runs into an abandoned farmhouse for safety. It is here she runs into Ben (Duane Jones), the film’s sole black character and its arguable protagonist. His portrayal

is a startling mix of racial stereotype adherence and breaking. He's often physically rough and domineering with Barbara. When Barbara smacks him in an attempt to get outside to reach a newly-zombie Johnny, Ben responds by hitting her so hard he knocks her out. And Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman) inspires a volatile anger in Ben, his incessant poking at him getting an aggressive result.

Yet he's also consistently portrayed as the one character with the intellect and logic to serve as the makeshift group of misfit survivors' leader against the impending horde of the undead. Harry himself is too selfish and boorish to serve as an effective leader, placing the needs of himself and his wife and daughter (who has already been bitten) over those of the rest of the group; Tom (Keith Wayne), the only other male in the group, is too young and naive to serve as an effective leader on his own. Only Ben has the wherewithal and intelligence to step into a leadership position. It is Ben who figures out that the zombies fear fire; it is Ben who, for all his conflict with Harry, devises a plan to get medical supplies to help Harry's daughter, Karen (Kyra Schon). He is the character we root for—not in spite of what the narrative wants, but in accordance with it. It is he, not Barbara, who is *Night of the Living Dead's* Final Girl figure—not only is he the last one standing, he's also the one who kills the monster(s) in the house.

But Ben, unlike *Halloween's* Laurie or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* Sally, doesn't get to live. As soon as he leaves the cellar upon hearing the Sheriff's arrival, he is spotted through the window, assumed to be a zombie, and shot. In essence, a black man is spotted by a lawman, assumed to be doing something wrong, and killed based upon that assumption. It does not matter that we the audience know that assumption to be

inaccurate; it does not matter that Ben has done little more than move the window blinds. He is Other; in the eyes of the white cop, being Other makes him a threat.

There is an undeniable similarity in the ways in which white male patriarchy dismisses the concerns of black men and of white women. Where the woman experiencing distress and frustration with her circumstances is “crazy”, the black man is “angry”. Barbara and Ben can easily be twisted into being examples of this: Barbara is traumatized and hysterical, Ben is volatile and violent. Yet where the woman is protected by her whiteness, the black man’s blackness makes him an inherent threat to white male hegemony. The white woman must be coddled and diminished because she is an accessory to whiteness; the black man must be eliminated and destroyed because he opens up the potential for a masculinity that is *not* white masculinity. In *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, film critic Richard Dyer presents the compelling argument that whiteness creates a hierarchy for itself based upon gender and class—and that in that hierarchy, women are viewed as whiter (read: purer) than men. This supposed purity does open up the opportunity for oppression; because a white woman is meant to be more innocent than her white male counterpart her transgressions may be treated more harshly as she has defied her part in upholding whiteness. Alternatively perceived innocence may be equivalent to stupidity, resulting in white women’s control over their lives and bodies being severely diminished for the sake of “protecting” them. Yet by being constructed as a symbol of the purity of whiteness, the white woman becomes a tool of oppression. The fear around black men’s supposed violence and aggression is born from a fear of that being directed towards white women; by being the symbol of the purest and whitest, the white woman becomes a useful tool in the white man keeping the black man down.

If Romero briefly touches upon the consequences of being a black man in a white dominated world accidentally in *Night of the Living Dead*, Jordan Peele uses *Get Out* to examine the ending of *Night of the Living Dead*. The film's very premise—a black man (Daniel Kaluuya) goes to meet his white girlfriend's (Allison Williams) family, only to discover that they are part of a white supremacist group that uses supernatural means to allow the consciousness of elderly whites to possess the bodies of young black people, mostly men—is centered around the insidious ways in which white supremacy sustains itself through the suffering of black men. In essence, Peele has made a film proving Dyer's theory of whiteness—that whiteness “is a kind of disembodiment, a transcendence and mastery of the body wherein the “white spirit” rises above and overcomes the darkness of the body and its weaknesses.”²⁴ Critic Laura Thorp formulates her analysis of the film around this conception of whiteness, arguing that the film both explores the “notions of the construction of whiteness while rendering hyperbolically the white fantasy of freedom from finitude and the violent reality of death”.²⁵

Get Out is part sci-fi horror and part incredibly dark satire—even before the more overtly supernaturally nefarious elements are revealed, Rose's parents (Bradley Whitford and Catherine Keener) and brother (Caleb Landry Jones) make a variety of tone-deaf and disconcerting comments about black people: Jeremy insinuates that Chris must've gotten into a lot of fights as a child and that “with his genetic makeup he could be a beast”; Rose's father Dean notes that he “would've voted for Obama a third time if he could've”, a rote white liberal preemptive gotcha from any potential accusation of racism. For all of

white neoliberal America's claims that it "does not see color", it very much does and no amount of performative allyship can hide that.

Chris is a madman in the same way someone like *Twin Peaks*'s Laura Palmer can be construed as a madwoman: he is traumatized and the people around him twist his trauma into a weapon to keep him powerless. There's a certain type of agency loss that is experienced by the traumatized—the loss of control over one's own body combined with a wholesale dismissal of any negative feelings one might have towards their situation. The existence of the Sunken Place—a place either outside of or deeper within the body in which the black consciousness is violently forced in order to make room for the white consciousness—is of particular note in comparing *Get Out* to *Twin Peaks*. Laura Palmer is stripped of her agency and trapped in the Red Room; Chris narrowly escapes a similar fate and others, like Andre (Lakeith Stanfield) have already been violently forced out of their own bodies and into the void that is the sunken place. Both places are accessed by trauma—the trauma of Laura's sexual abuse and death at the hands of her father for *Twin Peaks*; the trauma of white supremacy and the hypnosis sequence for Chris and Logan. Where the two diverge is that the Black Lodge is exclusively supernatural; any human involvement (Leland Palmer, the Cooper clones in *Twin Peaks: The Return*) is implicitly nonconsensual. Human form is a vessel for some sort of larger, metaphysical evil in *Twin Peaks*. The Sunken Place, on the other hand, is manmade; Missy Armitage willingly utilizes it in order to trap her victims. It is a metaphor for the evils of white supremacy and systemic racism.

When discussing the parallels and divergences in the types of oppression faced by black men and white women—and more importantly, how white women are often

willing tools in the subjugation of black men—it is of the utmost necessity to analyze a character like Rose Armitage. Rose can be interpreted as a villainous example of horror's madwoman. She possesses a sociopath-like disregard for Chris and for the other young men she lures to her family home, perfectly willing to play the role of loving girlfriend for as long as she needs to, all the while viewing her partners as little more than targets. For all that her father and brother are the source of the physical violence of the film, for all that her mother is the one who actively forces her victims into the sunken place, it is Rose who is the most dangerous Armitage. She is able to feign disgust with her family's underhanded white supremacy; up until the third act of the film, Chris and the viewer can be forgiven for believing her to be unaware of what is truly going on.

Yet Rose's performance of innocence is her way of holding up whiteness. She uses her sociocultural position as a white woman as a weapon, just as she is supposed to. The crucial moment just before Rose's presumed death is perhaps the greatest example of this. Assuming that Chris's friend Rod's (Lil Rel Howery) TSA vehicle for a cop car, Rose begins to scream maniacally, flashing a Joker-like smile. Her intentions are beyond clear: she wants to goad Chris into causing her further physical harm so she can make herself out to be the victim and use her victimhood as a weapon to punish Chris with. Chris's refusal to further engage with her—his refusal to fulfill the white supremacist stereotype of the black man as a threat to white women—is his way of reclaiming his agency. While perhaps the fact Rose is left to die is not as cathartic for the viewer, who has been conditioned to demand a visually explicit punishment for moral transgression, it is more cathartic for Chris. It is him fully breaking with white supremacist expectation of himself (and, likely, him leaving Rose to a slower and more agonizing demise).

Peele's sophomore film, *Us*, initially appears less overtly preoccupied with race than its predecessor. It's far more easily read as a film about class struggle: the Tethered, doppelgängers created by the United States government in the 1980s, are forced to quite literally live beneath the aboveground citizens whose souls they share; they also are clad in red, a color often associated with Marxist ideology. Adelaide (Lupita N'yongo)'s "doppelgänger" (revealed at the end to be the true Adelaide, the woman we've spent the movie with being Tethered herself and having switched places with her upper ground counterpart back in the 1980s) is even named Red.

Yet class and race are inextricably linked, and *Us* does not let us forget that. As Harry Olafsen notes in his article "'It's Us': Mimicry in Jordan Peele's *Us*", Adelaide and her family are constantly placed in contrast with their white friends, the Tylers. While Adelaide's husband Gabe (Winston Duke) has the same job as Josh Tyler (Tim Heidecker), he appears to not get paid as well; this is evidenced by the scene in which he purchases a boat in order to compete with Josh's flaunting of his yacht. While both the Wilsons and the Tylers "are clearly middle class, as they are able to afford luxuries working class families could not, the Wilsons always fall just short of maintaining the status of the Tylers....their black identity holds them back from achieving the same standard of living...."²⁶. If the Tethered are relegated to mimicking their above ground counterparts by their status as Tethered, the Wilsons are relegated to mimicking their white class counterparts by their status as nonwhite.

The fact that *Us*'s protagonist is black woman gives the film a unique and far too often unexamined perspective on the ways in which oppression functions. The fact that

the Adelaide we spend most of the film with is actually a Tethered adds yet another layer to this—not only is she implicitly experiencing the cultural biases that come with being a black woman, she has explicitly experienced the Otherness that comes with being a Tethered. She does not have maleness or whiteness to protect her; in the context of the film, she does not even have an identity as an original person. She is a copy and she knows it.

Olafsen points out that, upon switching places with her above ground counterpart as children, Adelaide's inability to speak is mistaken as being a result of her being traumatized rather than accurately recognized as being the result of her being Tethered. Yet there is a certain sort of collective trauma the Tethered experience that their silence is symptomatic of. When Red speaks, it is in a thick, scratching voice, the sort that is unused to speech. This is because her voice has been stripped from her, both by her Tethered by virtue of her taking her place and forcing her below ground and by the experience of living below ground. If one sticks with the Marxist allegory *Us* is so oft characterized as, the Tethered are the proletariat: forced into subjugation and silence by those above them; able to do little more than mimic a living standard they can't hope to actually reach.

The madwoman is not just traumatized or unstable; she is often literally mad. Rage in women is culturally unacceptable and particularly frightening; rage in black women doubly so. Where a black male has his maleness to grant him some small privilege and a white woman has her whiteness to grant her a great deal of privilege, black women have access to neither. They are more likely to be silenced and denigrated, to be labelled “crazy”, than either that white or male counterparts. *Us* shows us a prime

deconstruction of this. Red's position as angry and disheveled places her in the role of "movie monster" visually speaking. Yet it is nigh impossible to not sympathize with her, particularly after the reveal. The life that was hers was taken away from her; she was forced into subjugation. Even before the reveal it is difficult not to feel for Red. The story she tells the Wilson family—eating cold rabbit, while knowing there was a girl above who got warm meals; being forced into a marriage with a man she doesn't love solely because the woman above fell for his aboveground counterpart—reads like a particularly sad and disturbing fairy tale. In the same way adrenaline and their oft-abusive backstories inspires an audience to cheer for slasher film serial and spree killers, a viewer can easily identify with the Tethered and Red in particular even as they attack our protagonists.

But what then of Adelaide? It would be easy to dismiss her as the film's true monster: the smile she gives Red in the mirror house when they're both little girls is truly horrific; she gives the same exact expression to her son at the end of the film once he has discovered the truth of what she is. Yet can one truly blame Adelaide for wishing to escape the underground tunnels? Given Red's story, it's easy to conclude that Adelaide herself would've been in the exact same predicament had she stayed. It is difficult for any viewer to claim that they wouldn't have done the same things both Red *and* Adelaide did in order to survive; just as they are two sides of the same coin by virtue of being doppelgängers within the narrative, so too are they in terms of identification. They're both victims of social structures beyond their individual control; the viewer is inclined to sympathize with both.

“One Chance Out Between Two Worlds” Madness as the Source of Potential Agency and Concluding Thoughts

Older Generation Z and younger Millennial women of a certain disposition feel a deep connection with Jennifer from *Jennifer's Body*. It is a phenomenon remarkably similar to the one teenage boys experience with slasher killers: there is a certain type of vindication in seeing Michael Meyers inflict pain upon an attractive, topless blond, just as there is in seeing Jennifer rip an attractive, shirtless boy to shreds.

Yet where Carol Clover's *Final Girl* comes into play and inspires cross-gender identification between male viewer and female victim, there is no such male equivalent in a movie like *Jennifer's Body*. Sure, a more sympathetic viewer might acknowledge that sweet natured goth boy Colin (Kyle Gallner) didn't deserve to die; and perhaps one can make the argument that Needy has some traits of the final girl. But the general response from the viewer—especially the young, female viewer—consistently stays in support of Jennifer. It is the same reaction reserved for the more contemporary *Midsommar*: it does not matter that Maja has raped Dani's boyfriend; it does not matter that when one truly views the film with some critical nuance, Dani herself is little more than a mentally broken pawn of the cult by the end, shuffled from her emotionally unfulfilling relationship to being the May Queen. The viewer still will say “good for her” when Dani elects to kill Christian and his friends; the fact that this is not a truly autonomous action and misses the point of the film doesn't matter. For some mad girls, the appearance of agency is more important than actual agency; by her very existence of being a woman who is screaming and mad outwardly she disrupts the patriarchy. The fact that several of

the more prominent cult members are women adds to the misconception of *Midsommar* as a feminine power revenge narrative; in reality the film has more in common with *Rosemary's Baby*, in that it centers around an abused and gaslit woman giving into her abusers, than it does with *I Spit on Your Grave*, in which a rape survivor actively goes after the men who wronged her. Dani starts and ends her movie a victim. Her smile at the end as Christian burns is vacantly serene, a parallel to Rosemary ultimately giving into the cultists and cradling her child . For all that she appears to be happy, for all that she appears to be the one in control, she has been hollowed out. The film's horror comes from Dani's acceptance of her loss of agency. She is not her movie's monster. She isn't powerful enough to be.

While the mad girls that female viewers identify with are often at the very least mildly antagonistic (Dani, for all that she isn't antagonistic on her own, does technically become the May Queen, making her apart of the film's source of conflict), they aren't always. Laura Palmer is definitively not antagonistic—she goes from troubled dead girl in the first two seasons to the tragic antiheroine of *Fire Walk With Me* to hinted messianic archetype in *The Return*. She does not wreak bloody havoc like Jennifer or Ginger of *Ginger Snaps* ; she does not get to, however indirectly, lash out at her tormentors like Dani or Carrie. Yet it is perhaps because of these things that Laura resonates with a young and troubled female audience; she is the realistically traumatized madwoman. For all of the *Twin Peaks* franchise's surreal and supernatural elements, it is at its core a story about the ways in which the traumatic lurks underneath the surface and what happens when it is unearthed.

Laura is a lot of things: beautiful prom queen, two timed and two timing girlfriend²⁷, cocaine addled sex worker, abused daughter. In his essay on Lynch for *Premiere* magazine, David Foster Wallace argued that *Fire Walk With Me* was fundamentally about Laura's "bothness": the fact she is both "good" and "bad", both victim and in her own way, victimizer. Foster Wallace, while he argued that Lynch didn't necessarily succeed in this project, stated that this was the source of *Fire Walk With Me*'s initially negative reception: people didn't like being forced to face Laura's complexities. They would rather dismiss her as a tragic dead girl than view the actual person Lynch crafted. This is not to say that *Twin Peaks* is without its flaws or that Lynch doesn't participate in a certain type of trauma fetishism to a degree. No piece of media or content creator is infallible, after all. However Lynch is a great deal more sensitive to his female subject than some of his critics are willing to give him credit for, and the fact that Laura is so complicated is testament to that. Rather than merely using his dead woman as an accessory, or treating the living Laura as a "hot crazy chick", Lynch allows her to be a multifaceted human being, with all the unpleasanties that come along with that. In a way, it's related to the way Stephen King views Carrie White. Carrie is a projection of a revenge fantasy; she may be female but she's still "every kid who got his glasses thumbed or pants pulled down in the locker room". She's a fusion of Final Girl and slasher killer; both and neither. Carrie's bothness, however, is fundamentally less disconcerting to a viewer (especially a male viewer) than Laura's because it can fit more easily into the paradigm of "angry woman=threat/crazy=bad". Furthermore, King's identification with Carrie hinges on her being easily masculinized. This is not to deny the

very overt feminine aspects of Carrie's tale—the preoccupation with menstruation; the suffering she faces as a result of her female body and puberty being demonized by those around her— or to suggest that a female viewer would be unable to connect with Carrie. All evidence shows the opposite. But Carrie's experiences not only cross gender lines more readily (bullying as opposed to father daughter incest), her response to them is so explicitly unreal that she feels safer. Laura Palmer is all too close to a real troubled teenage girl for some audiences.

The fact that the madwoman is often the one who gets to be both active and victimized, both good and bad and everything in between, is why a female audience member is likely to identify with her regardless of whether or not she's actively villainized. The dismissal of women as crazy and angry *is* misogynist and problematic; however, horror's madwomen often have good reason to be troubled (abusive parents, bullying classmates, neglectful boyfriends). And when society tells you you aren't allowed to overtly experience negative emotions lest you be crazy, seeing someone who actually acts upon those negative feelings and thereby gets "revenge" on society, regardless of whether the revenge is intertextual (Jennifer's ripping out the throats of young men) or metatextual (the discomfort inspired in the literal audience of *Fire Walk With Me* by Laura's trauma and overt sexuality), regardless of how real or shallow that revenge may be (Carrie's giving her bullies and mother their comeuppance vs Dani's becoming the puppet of a cult), serves as a type of catharsis. The teenage girl watching in the movie theater may not be able to terrorize the boys who've wronged her, the teenage girl watching in the movie theater may not be able to , however passively, get violent

vengeance upon the neglectful boyfriend she sits beside. But she'll get to cheer on the woman on the screen who can, and maybe that's enough for her.

Endnotes

1. From an 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess

2. Brontë,

3. Clover, 10-11

4. 109

5. Renner, 34

6. Miller, 281

7. 281

8. Clover, 4

9. Stallings, 99

10. Penderson, 181

11. Cowdell, 296

12. Creed, 17

13. Fischer, 416

14. Fischer, 425

15. Fischer, 421

16. Riggs, 35

17. Riede, 136

18. incidentally, this relationship is implied/assumed to have been consensual in

the original text

19. Creed, 142-3

20. 56

21. both male and female—in addition to famous final girls Alice and Ginny, the franchise gets a final boy in the form of Tommy Jarvis

22. 4

23. Robey, Tim. “George Romero: Why I Don’t Like the Walking Dead”

24. Thorp, 204

25. 205

26. Olafsen, 21

27. indeed, Bobby and Laura’s relationship is probably one of the more emotionally complex in the series: both are often toxic to one another and belittle each other, Laura seeming to take exceptional pleasure in making Bobby feel pressured and emasculated, and both seem to constantly cheat on one another. “You never loved her anyway,” Cooper coldly notes when Bobby is brought in for questioning on Laura’s murder. This is likely a correct statement; Laura and Bobby’s relationship is more about two hurting kids deciding to hurt one another than be in pain alone than it is anything like love or affection.

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