

2017

# The Final Girl Grown Up: Representations of Women in Horror Films from 1978-2016

Lauren Cupp  
*Scripps College*

---

## Recommended Citation

Cupp, Lauren, "The Final Girl Grown Up: Representations of Women in Horror Films from 1978-2016" (2017). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 958.  
[http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps\\_theses/958](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/958)

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

**THE FINAL GIRL GROWN UP: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN  
HORROR FILMS FROM 1978-2016**

by

**LAUREN J. CUPP**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR TRAN  
PROFESSOR MACKO**

**DECEMBER 9, 2016**

I was a highly sensitive kid growing up. I was terrified of any horror movie I saw in the video store, I refused to dress up as anything but a Disney princess for Halloween, and to this day I hate haunted houses. I never took an interest in horror until I took a class abroad in London about horror films, and what peaked my interest is that horror is much more than a few cheap jump scares in a ghost movie. Horror films serve as an exploration into our deepest physical and psychological fears and boundaries, not only on a personal level, but also within our culture. Of course cultures shift focus depending on the decade, and horror films in the United States in particular reflect this change, whether the monsters were ghosts, vampires, zombies, or aliens.

The 1970's to the late 1980's gave rise to the slasher film, and with the genre came a need for the character of the Final Girl. These women were defined as pure virginal female figures with their main goal being to kill the killer. In contrast, movies released after 2010 after the post-apocalyptic zombie craze, don't include many iconic Final Girls. The trope is instead parodied to appeal to those in the know (like in 2011's *Cabin in the Woods*, 2014's *The Final Girls*, etc.) Because of Hollywood's newest trends in paranormal films and movie remakes, we look to independent cinema for see films that define what our new Final Girls look like. But can women in the genre be classified as such today, and is there even a need for the Final Girl in modern cinema? I argue that Final Girls now do not exist to be attractive or virgins, nor do they need special survival skills or gifts to survive a film. In my perspective, the point of the Final Girl now is to be a relatable point of view for both male and female audiences, and thus far in cinema history, the majority that are

glorified in slasher films in the 1980's satisfy a predominantly male audience with their looks. Films such as *Halloween* and *You're Next* present better representations of the surviving Final Girl, and more recent films like *Final Girls* and *Scream* exploit how ridiculous the trope can be. Furthermore, most filmmakers write characters that do not fit the definitions of stereotypical Final Girls, but create strong developed characters that provide more accurate representation and reach a wider audience. I argue that the term Final Girl doesn't fit with what we as horror fans want to see in current horror movies; it is possible to have a Final Girl today, but the trend in women character now has shifted more to mature, grown up, dysfunctional women, starting at a low point and rising to the challenge of not only surviving horror films, but assuming the responsibility of protection over their home, family, children, and their own identities. The Final Girl trope works for previous slasher films, but for more contemporary films leaning towards the paranormal and supernatural, the icons of Sidney Prescott and Laurie Strode fade away to give way to female characters that are older, well structured, more relatable to audiences, and more diverse than what the Final Girl trope allowed previously.

To show the history of women in horror, my project is a short documentary-style video discussing the change in women characters from the 1970's Final Girl to the more mature female characters of horror cinema today. I'm using video interviews with writers, and horror fans to supplement the research I've done, and to provide different perspectives of horror audiences. I'm also using video examples from films that I believe best embody the ideals of women in horror and speak to

how the Final Girl was, is, and will become in horror cinema, and to show the maturity and evolution of filmmaking.

In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover defines the term Final Girl as the main female protagonist in slasher films in the period from Hitchcock's *Psycho* to the late 80's, just after *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Clover originally coined the term Final Girl, and in summary describes her as the final character to survive her film, often gaining an active defense and killing the killer. She is 'boyish', 'watchful', 'intelligent and resourceful in a pinch', often virgin, and often drawn out from the group of friends as the outside character. (Clover 40) Audiences identify with her in the end because psychologically she is the most realistic; she sees what is wrong, and ultimately is the one to fight. At the time, the Final Girl was put in place for a predominantly male audience, since it was thought that mainly teenage boys watched and enjoyed slasher films in the 70s and 80s. The supply of female characters in these movies during this time was made to satisfy this 'male gaze', i.e. be attractive to entice the audience and bring them from identifying with the killer, to identifying with the female protagonist. According to Clover, The Final Girl acts as the only psychologically developed character that the audience sides with, and filmmakers purposely underdevelop all other side characters to highlight the Final Girl early on in the film. Laura Mulvey even relates this change in gaze as a submissive act, as the male viewer submits to the victimization and then triumph of the Final Girl. Since there is no stereotypically male character to side with in the end, these Final Girls became the masculinized power icons of the horror genre; from Sally in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* continuously escaping Leatherface's house, to

Laurie Strode using multiple phallic-looking weapons (knife, knitting needle, coat hanger) to fend off Michael Myers in *Halloween*. Arguably the most iconic Final Girl of the time, Laurie's struggle with Michael at the end of *Halloween* shows her actively fighting against her antagonist, and while she does not kill Myers, she gains power through the movie from the babysitter/girl-next-door character to a protective and dominant female power.

Proceeding *Halloween* are Final Girls like Kirsty Cotton in *Hellraiser*, who becomes more active in fighting- and in a way partnering- with the antagonist to survive her film. She sides with the demon Pinhead in order to defeat the real monster, which is the reanimated corpse of her stepmother's boyfriend. These characters are the precursor to the 1996 film *Scream*, the first film to consciously subvert the slasher genre. The smart referential tone of *Scream* being a slasher movie breaks the fourth wall of film; scenes of Final Girl Sidney Prescott undressing and making love to her boyfriend are intercut with her friend Randy telling viewers explicitly what *not to do* during a slasher movie in order to survive (ie have sex). In an article about *Scream* and post-modern cinema, Jon Lisi describes Craven's movie as 'celebrated for its willingness to portray characters who have seen horror films', and because the fans in the audience know that's what is going on, they enjoy the movie. However, the slasher film was on its way out by the time of this film's premiere in the late '90s, and it's likely that audiences weren't interested in seeing the same characters act in the same situations. *Scream* provided smart commentary on the genre and on the audience in a way that didn't make viewers feel lesser, and gave the audience a Final Girl that not only watched horror movies,

but was also a real character that owned up to the unoriginal plot the movie followed. Lisi also points out that Sidney cannot just avoid the slasher cliches in order to survive the movie- she has to fit the mold somehow to make it to the credits. However, she does leave the trope of 'damsel in distress' to male character Stu, as Sidney fights as heroine and reconstructed Final Girl, saving both herself and Stu at the end of the film. The Final Girl is broken down by this point, as Sidney isn't one to kill the killer outright, neither is she a virgin, or the only one to survive.

I argue that since *Scream*, there are no recent iconic Final Girls that we identify as such; rather good characters that either subvert the genre, or strong female characters that don't fit the trope and suggest another type of heroine entirely. In terms of Final Girls, there is the case for Max in the appropriately titled movie *The Final Girls* from 2014. Max finds herself and her four friends transported into a campy 80's slasher movie where she is easily fitting into all the necessary stereotypes in order to defeat the killer and escape the movie. Max is a virgin, shown as the most innocent of her friends, is the least sexually desired in terms of her boyish dress and attitude, and also happens to be the daughter of the original Final Girl presented in this film. The film sets her up as the outsider dealing with the loss of her mother, and continuously refers to her tragedy throughout the film. It is also mentioned constantly the tropes of the Final Girl- a whole list of what a Final Girl should be is presented within the first 20 minutes of the movie to show that the characters, filmmakers, and the audience knows about this trope. I don't believe this film is meant to be a serious conversation about the

genre; rather a parody slasher for those who know the genre. Therefore, it's a reinforcement of the stereotype and serves as a nostalgic reminder of 80's slashers. Other recent movies that subvert the genre include *Cabin in the Woods*, the *Scary Movie* franchise, and *Feast*.

Even the 2011 remake of *Evil Dead* relies on nostalgia and references to the original 1982 film to appeal to audiences, however the protagonist is changed from a male to a female, making *Evil Dead* a contemporary Final Girl movie. The more contemporary and most successful example of the Final Girl appears in the 2011 film *You're Next*. The character of Erin in *You're Next* is the outsider in the film, acting as the new girlfriend arriving to an awkward family reunion. Throughout the film, she proves herself to be the most useful in terms of surviving the assassins hired to kill her boyfriend's family. Unfortunately the tone of the film is ruined by some critics when it is revealed that Erin only has the survival skills because she (conveniently) grew up in a survivalist compound. While she is brutal when facing off against the masked killers, and is the final girl to survive, using knives, arrows, and a broken blender to survive the film, it is unnecessary to say in the middle of a film that she is only able to survive because of her skills, not just because she is who she is.. Erin is an example of conveniently being trained to survive the horror film, and is punished at the end, though she was the only one to survive. She is portrayed as a very strong character, but is always the outsider, which in turn makes her realize there is something wrong before other characters. I believe that for the most part, this film is a good example of how Final Girls have developed because she is active throughout most of the movie, not just the final third of the film. Also because



this is not a slasher film, she takes on multiple enemies, including her fiancée who is revealed to have orchestrated the entire home invasion plot for financial gain.

When asked about the current state of horror today, fans and filmmakers alike would probably give mixed answers. The independent film industry is overflowing with brilliant and genuinely scary horror films, while mainstream Hollywood is focused on making sequels or rebooting old franchises without breathing new life into the genre. The article “The 5 Huge Mistake Horror Movies Are Making Today” highlights that in addition to remakes, Hollywood is “stuck on old gimmicks”, and that “we’ve stopped confronting our own fears” (Cannata-Bowman). The current trend of Hollywood film is reliant on paranormal films like the most recent *Ouija* series, *Insidious*, *The Conjuring*, and *Lights Out*, all of which are very reliant on the unknown haunting the present, and are arguably very built on presenting fear through jump scares instead of building tension throughout the entire movie to build to something greater. On the other hand, recent successful independent horror films don’t follow the supernatural- with-jump-scares formula. There are the nostalgic flashbacks to other 80’s and 90’s horrors like horror VCR games in *Beyond the Gates*, fears of the unknown following you in *It Follows*, and fears of false identity in *Goodnight Mommy*. The independent film industry is best at churning out many low-budget horror films that prove wildly successful because of their new takes on the genre, and the rise of different women characters besides the Final Girl.

I would argue that with the rise of the supernatural horror film in the late 2000’s, the threat to the characters is one of identity, and from this new threat

arises the older, more responsible, and more relatable character of the Dysfunctional Mother. One of the most successful examples of this in indie horror films is 2014's *The Babadook*. It centers around a mother Amelia struggling with the death of her husband and raising her psychologically troubled son, while a demonic spirit is summoned out of a children's book. Similar is Barbara Crampton's character Anne in *We Are Still Here*, released in 2015. A mother grief-stricken by her son's death attempts to move on by moving to another city, but is unable to let go of her son's spirit, and is faced with darker spirits in her new home. Both of the films are about regaining protection over the household or their family. In *the Babadook*, Amelia is possessed by the titular demon and is constantly put in danger until she is faced with the reality of dealing with both her husband's death and her son's mental health. Anne in *We Are Still Here* is faced with the sacrifice of letting the spirit of her son go so that she can live in peace while fighting off restless spirits who fight to claim her life. Even recent Hollywood films like 2013's *The Conjuring* and this year's film *Ouija: Origins of Evil* deal heavily with motherhood in relation to the supernatural. The first film of *The Conjuring* series is centered on two mothers; the demon-possessed mother fighting to protect her four children and herself, and paranormal researcher Lorraine Warren who is sent to help the family while also worrying about her own daughter at home. A similar plot is at the heart of *Ouija*, where instead the daughter of widowed mother Alice is possessed by a demon in a Ouija board, and Alice fights to save her.

The representation of the dysfunctional mother is often violent instead of caring, often 'potential dangers for their children' and challenge the traditional

definitions of what motherhood is (Bitoun). In an essay about Maternal Horror Films, Rachel Elfassy Bitoun categorizes the fears of the Dysfunctional Mother as having the fear of not meeting adequate expectations of being a mother, fear of an absent father, a haunted past, and repression or confinement of the maternal body (ie a homebody). When compared to those of a Final Girl, the fears a Dysfunctional Mother faces are very real and personal. While a Final Girl is very much centered on herself physically surviving the horror film and escaping the killer, the Dysfunctional Mother has more to be concerned about, namely herself and her children. It can be argued that the role of the young Final Girl has grown up from her role in the 1980's, gained these responsibilities as a mother, and is afraid of confronting them. Paired with the supernatural fears of the unknown and possession, movies featuring the Dysfunctional Mother show her facing these threats head on as a more diverse and grown up female character.

For my final project I created a short five-minute documentary video summarizing the history of the Final Girl and the Dysfunctional Mother characters in horror films. I included two interviews in my project; Kyle Anderson, a film critic and horror writer for Nerdist, and actress, writer, and online host Clarke Wolfe. I cut my interviews and placed them alongside clips from films that represented both tropes in the 1980's slasher genre and the early 2010's supernatural horror genre. For the Final Girl, I chose to use *Halloween*, *The Final Girls*, and *Scream*, because each film has unique commentary on the existing trope, whether that's to originally set up the trope and make it an icon in *Halloween*, to subvert the trope in *Scream*, or to directly parody it some twenty years later in *The Final Girls*. I used clips from other

slasher films as well to highlight points made in my interviews that couldn't be touched on in my main set of films. For the later half of the video discussing the present state of women in horror, I use clips of two independent films *We Are Still Here* and *The Babadook*, as well as Hollywood film franchises *The Conjuring* and *Ouija*. I chose to only select a certain number of films to highlight in my project because not only would it be too overwhelming to analyze that many films, but also the tropes exist similarly in every slasher movie in the 80s, as does many recent supernatural horror movies. In no way do I intend to say all slasher movies or supernatural movies are the same, but many follow the same tropes, and I have picked what I think are the strongest choices. I also contributed my own voice giving commentary to the Final Girl and the new Dysfunctional Mother tropes to either highlight on points made by my interviews or introducing ideas that were missing from the project.

One of the first difficulties I came across in my thesis was obtaining interviews from those working directly in the field. I wanted experiences and opinions from those with knowledge and experience with horror films because I wanted my film to be a conversation about horror rather than facts listed out in video form. I also wanted to add credibility to the trends that I was noticing as an adult female watching horror films. It was important to me that I achieve a balance of male and female opinions on horror as well as different levels of expertise, and both Clarke and Kyle are fans that are to a certain degree known for their involvement in horror. I have connections to both my interviewees from a summer internship at a pop culture news website, and I grew to know them from our shared

passion in horror. In retrospect, I would have liked to interview more directors and actors in the field, but due to time constraints and limited availability I was not able to interview more people. That being said, I am fortunate for the two interviews I do have, because they provide my project enough discussion and experience to establish my project and provide opportunity to expand my thesis in the future.

A difficulty I struggled with early on was trying to find the second part of my argument. I've had prior experience in this subject from classes in my college career, and I knew that from watching dozens of horror movies that something was not quite right with the trope of the Final Girl. This one-dimensional non-relatable character appeared so often in horror films past and present that I knew I needed to address it. I knew that Clover suggested the Final Girl is very much a product of the 1980's slasher film, and my first thought was to argue that what had replaced it was a different version of the same Final Girl. Perhaps all that changed about her was her clothing and the way in which the Final Girl killed the killer in the end. However, that did not satisfy how I felt about all of the more recent horror films that do not deal with serial killers in the way slasher films did in the '80s. Certainly those films are still being made, however many of them play upon the fact that audiences are in the know about the trope and therefore exist to subvert the genre in a new way. Often times these subversions do nothing to advance the state of the Final Girl; they only solidify her more in the trope. I didn't come to my conclusion on the Dysfunctional Mother until my second interview. From there, the argument pieced together with enough specificity to be a complete project. I believe that the ties between a young a pure Final Girl and a mature responsible Dysfunctional Mother

character shows not only more diversity in women characters, but also a sense of growth from those who have watched horror movies the past twenty years, as my two interviewees have. After bringing up my new argument in my critiques, it was more widely understood what I was arguing, how I was going to show what I have learned, and overall showed my passion in the subject. This realization came at a natural pace in the thesis process, albeit a little later than I would have liked.

However, I learned to take insight and critique as it comes, regardless of how late in the game.

After almost three semesters studying horror films and their conventions, I have learned that I have nothing to be scared of when it comes to horror, and I believe my younger self would be proud and horrified at what this thesis topic is. Being at Scripps College for four years has taught me to challenge gender roles, and doing so with horror films by comparing women stereotypes in slasher and supernatural films is an ideal way to leave my college experience behind.

## Cited Works

- Cannata-Bowman, Nick. "The 5 Huge Mistakes Horror Movies Are Making Today." The Cheat Sheet. N.p., 25 Oct. 2016. Web. 17 Nov. 2016.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. Print.
- Elfassy Bitoun, Rachel. "Maternal Horror Films: Understanding the 'Dysfunctional' Mother." The Artifice. The Artifice, 8 June 2016. Web. 17 Nov. 2016.
- Halloween*. Dir. John Carpenter. Perf. Jamie Lee Curtis and Donald Pleasence. Compass International Pictures, 1978. Online.
- Lisi, Jon. "The Rules of Reviving a Genre: 'Scream' and Postmodern Cinema." The Artifice. The Artifice, 20 Aug. 2014. Web. 17 Nov. 2016.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18. Web. 15 Nov. 2016.
- Ouija: Origin of Evil*. Dir. Mike Flanagan. Perf. Annalise Baso and Elizabeth Reaser. Universal Pictures, 2016. Film.
- Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Neve Campbell and David Arquette. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1996. Online.
- The Babadook*. Dir. Jennifer Kent. Perf. Essie Davis and Noah Wiseman. Causeway Films, 2014. Netflix. Web. Nov. 2016.
- The Conjuring*. Dir. James Wan. Perf. Vera Farmiga and Patrick Wilson. New Line Cinema, 2013. Film.
- We Are Still Here*. Dir. Ted Geoghegan. Perf. Barbara Crampton and Andrew Sensenig. Snowfort Pictures, 2015. Film.