

From the Late 70's to Modernity: The Socially Transformed Final Girl

By: Ashley Maldonado

The Final Girl trope in the horror genre has become subject to various fundamental changes, as well as simultaneous reversions to ties of its original criteria. The origins of this trope began in early films such as 1978's *Halloween* and continues persisting into today's acclaimed modern twists such as 2022's *Barbarian*. Carol Clover's coined term is used to describe the slasher genre's tradition of eliciting a female survivor under attack by a male subject or monster. She also foregrounds how this trope positively allows male viewers to sympathize, identify, and relate to the female protagonist. The original trope's characteristics have become revolutionized through contemporary influence under a social lens, while continuing to solicit male audiences to undergo the perspective of a woman. While Laurie falls under the direct conventions of the final girl trope in *Halloween*, Tess as a female protagonist and final girl reflects an updated version in *Barbarian*, signifying the cultural and historical transformations embedded throughout the ever-evolving horror film genre in relation to the societal changes of the world.

The traits which have originally shifted a female character into a final girl are outdated, misogynistic, and impede diverse progression, reflecting the earlier representations of gender and race. According to Clover, the final girl is a socially awkward, smart, clear-headed girl without any ties to romantic or sexual relations. She is different from others in that her focused and active gaze grants her the ability to survive until the end of the film. She undergoes the torment of the antagonist, or prevailing monster, and defeats the evil against all odds. In *Halloween*, Laurie exudes all these traits through her portrayal as a level-headed female who is not interested in engaging in sex, carefully watches her surroundings, and thus ends up escaping from the hands

of Michael Myers. Her observations get continuously undermined by her two best friends, and in turn they begin to get murdered as they themselves engage in sexual relations amidst Laurie's precautions. The film's use of shot-reverse-shots allow the audience to convey what Laurie sees and what her friends do not, separating her from even the people deemed closest to her. As she walks with her friends from school on Halloween day, Laurie sees Michael staring and standing right before her near a bush. Her sluggish walk, soft spoken lines, recluse posture, and tower of books, all appoint her as an awkward tentative education-oriented girl with self-awareness, posing a direct contrast to her loud best friends, who are outspoken about their vices, participate in romantic relationships, and have confidence. Laurie's overall appearance and movement indicate her restraints against being a woman who conforms to societal expectations, such as being a sexually active woman. Upon raising her concerns and suspicions, Annie tantalizes her by rushing towards the bush and pretending Michael is still there. Laurie is undermined by her own friends because of her own reputation. Laurie's representation of the original final girl trope emphasizes that her "othered" and sharp perspective is what allows her to abstain from being a part of Michael's killing spree. She is also unaware of her female sexuality, which pertains directly to her imminent survival. In turn, female sexuality is weaponized against women as an indictment of their downfall. The trope's relationship to the slasher binaries of the killer as a male and the victim as the female is founded within *Halloween* as well. Although Michael's motive to kill is left ambiguous, his position as a male killer juxtaposes Laurie's as a female victim.

Many decades later, the horror film genre and its use of the final girl trope finds itself undergoing a continued renovation sparked through prevalent social commentary, while still connecting the male audience with the female perspective. The usual white woman is exchanged

for a black woman in *Barbarian* as the lead protagonist of a horror film. The placement of black people within horror film shifts from an easily killed side character to a resilient survivor, and a newer version of the Final Girl. When Tess first arrives at the Airbnb house on Barbary Street, she receives various phone calls from a person named Marcus, indicating the romantic male relationship Tess has, which automatically alienates her from the affirming Laurie, who rejects the idea of a romantic interest. While Laurie's investigating gaze relies on Michael's physical appearances, Tess is already being very cautious of her surroundings when she exits her vehicle. Upon meeting Keith at the door, she remains actively aware of her surroundings even after checking his booking confirmation and wallet. Based off Tess's tense demeanor, the audience outside the diegetic world can assume she is being cautious because of her identification as a woman, reflecting the real experiences of the oppressed gender. This is later referenced when Tess begins to get friendly with Keith, and they conversate about Tess's relationship problems and the major differences between living as men and women. Shot reverse shots in this newer film seek to not only visualize their conversation, but also to communicate two different worlds with juxtaposed views based off of their gender. When Keith disagrees with her point that "guys will walk all over you as long as you let them", she emphasizes that he cannot see her perspective because of his identity as a man. She explains, "The world's different for you. Guys get to blast their way through life, making messes. Girls have to be careful". The contrasting perspectives being relayed in this intimate scene designate their gender differences and further explains Tess's intensified awareness from the very beginning. Gender difference is established early in the film to ground Tess's survival tactics, shifting the Final Girl's characteristics away from innocence and curiosity and onto lived experiences as any type of woman in society.

Just as Laurie's cautions against Michael Myers are neglected, Tess's cries for help are also rejected. Although both final girls are undermined, *Barbarian* seeks to simultaneously highlight the socially embedded rejection of Tess as a woman and as a black person. After Tess escapes and seeks help for AJ, the cops she finds disregard her claims and treat her shallowly. The film utilizes the final girl trope's original characteristic and amplifies it by sourcing it against authoritative figures and intensifying the social aspect of being a racialized minority in America. Dissimilarly, at the end of *Halloween*, Laurie is helped through the assistance of Doctor Samuel Loomis, who shoots Michael six times before his body disappears from the scene. As a white woman, she is serviced by a white blue-collar man who sought Michael's whereabouts throughout the Haddonfield suburbs. In *Barbarian*, the only person who helps save Tess is a homeless black man living among the rubble of Brightmoor ruins. The film critiques the treatment of marginalized areas and groups, spotlighting the control societies and authorities and reflecting the realities of injustice surrounding black minorities.

The binaries accompanied by the final girl trope gets overturned in the modern day as well, pointing the killer as female and the victims as male. These reversing roles play a crucial part in the transformation of the trope. *Barbarian* uses flashbacks and changes the misce-en-scene of the diegesis to inform the audience of the origins and source of horror. A man named Frank begins a horrifying spree of abusing, torturing, and killing women around his neighborhood. While the original killer is a male at the commence of the diegetic world's narrative, the mother monster in the present-day shifts to a female, mimicking the drastic changes of conventional slasher binaries associated to the Final Girl trope. The female monster takes over the killings of a now frail and old Frank. She appears to have no remorse for male victims, smashing Keith's head against the tunnel wall multiple times, and in turn, empathizes

with female victims like Tess, who is not directly harmed by her throughout the film. The history of the house on Barbary Street symbolizes the origins of a male monster and the female victims. Somewhere between the past and the present, Frank's reign ends, and the female monster is born, as well as the accompanied dynamic of men as victims. The source of horror lies within the acts of men towards women and Frank's creation infers a collective entanglement of victims seeking liberation from men. These flipped binaries subvert the dynamic in *Halloween* and aid in a progressive standpoint of the socially transformed girl.

As stated by Stacey in "The Slasher Film and the Final Girl Gets Makeovers", "In Clover's model, when the Final Girl takes up her weapon, arms herself and does battle with the monster, she is reduced to a 'congenial double for the adolescent male'" (126). In *Halloween*, Laurie utilizes a kitchen knife to defend herself against Michael, which exposes her to phallic symbolization. Even when facing the monster, the audience cannot separate her from the male perspective or symbols. Laurie's battle against Michael contrasts Tess's long fight against the incest monster living in the basement. Her precise, quick-witted, and non-violent strategies during her time in the hidden tunnel garner her a sense of seamless survival. She plays the part of a newborn baby, receiving milk bottles from the monster and allowing the mother monster to cradle her. When AJ, the owner of the property, gets thrown into the cage, Tess implores him to keep his composure calm and to do exactly as the monster instructs. She has figured out a strange but effective way to suppress the attacks of the monster and simultaneously reject a male gaze; her role as a mere baby estranges her from being viewed as a phallic symbol by the male audience. In turn, AJ's act of rejection towards the female survivor and female monster makes him become the new victim.

The earlier representations of the final girl heavily relied on a linear depiction of a virginal, innocent damsel in distress, exuding a misogynistic view of women. Laurie represents a cookie-cutter execution of Clover's conceived trope, which reflect the current politics of the times of its invention. The Final Girl within the context of the modern day, however, differs drastically from its predecessor because it becomes an embodiment of being a woman and reflects her hardships and experiences of reality living in a male-dominated world. Modern film utilizes this trope to demonstrate why a woman knows how to survive because of the continued treatment of women past many waves of societal change and feminism. As a black woman, she is no longer portrayed as the side character scapegoat who gets killed at the end. Crucial binaries in the horror film are overturned, confining the male as the helpless victim and the female as the monster, a direct result of the horror of men. The modernized final girl presents a juxtaposed view of history and recent years, one which highlights the societal changes and critiques the continued marginalization of women of color on a wide screen.

Works Cited

Rusnak, Stacy. "The slasher film and the final girl get makeovers: It follows and the politics of fourth wave feminism." *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture*, 2020, pp. 115–133, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31523-8_6.

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