Horror Criticism

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Horror tropes from the 1980s have generally subjected women to sex objects who were then punished for their behavior; however, in several instances, those same films have empowered women as the “final girls” who fought back against the killers and ultimately survived the films. Movies such as *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *The Slumber Party Massacre* embody these concepts. While female characters such as Marcy in *Friday the 13th* and Linda in *Halloween* are seemingly killed as a consequence of being sexually open and active, their counterparts, including Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, Alice in *Friday the 13th*, and Valerie in *The Slumber Party Massacre* all readily attack the killer without hesitation, and seek to protect themselves and their friends from the murderous onslaughts at hand. These characters and contexts prove that, although women were often stereotyped in 80s horror films as being “easy” for being sexually free and then reprimanded for it by falling victim to the killers, other female characters in the same movies demonstrated strength and power even when faced with seemingly hopeless odds of escaping their fates.

The character of Laurie from *Halloween* exemplifies many of the qualities present in the quintessential and stereotypical “final girl” horror movie trope that has come to be seen in numerous films of later decades. She is quiet, studious, and virginal; while her friends tease her about her crush on “Ben Tramer” from their class, she does not appear to have an actual boyfriend at hand. Linda, by contrast, is dating Bob, and their mutual friend Annie is also dating Paul. The killer of this film, the now-infamous Michael Myers, opens the movie by killing his sister, Judith after he witnesses her making love with her boyfriend in her bedroom (*Halloween*, 1978). The killer, Michael Myers, breaks free and catches sight of Laurie at his old home initially. He then continues to follow her throughout the day, thereby becoming acquainted with her routines and those of her friends. Similarly, his murders follow these same conventions, as Myers murders Linda at a home where she was to be babysitting, but instead, she indulges in sex with Bob since the home was empty upon their arrival (*Halloween*, 1978). Bob is also killed in this same setting. Likewise, Annie is attacked and murdered in her car by Myers when he hides in her backseat and startles her as she is heading to pick up her boyfriend for the evening (*Halloween*, 1978). When Michael comes for Laurie last, it is almost an afterthought and a means of tying up loose ends for those who have trespassed on his property. Additionally, Laurie is unwilling to go without a fight, and she battles to protect the children she is babysitting as well as herself. A harrowing scene in which Laurie appears to be trapped in a closet, and she uses coat hangers and the removal of Michael’s mask as weapons, reveals her ingenuity and determination to survive in this scenario. Hence, her overcoming Michael cements her abilities as a “final girl” and her ultimate power and strength in this backdrop.

Likewise, Alice from *Friday the 13th* is presented as the final girl, though her initial appearance makes her appear to be far from the role. While she is assertive to some extent, as when she is conversing with her boyfriend Steve and discussing possibly leaving the camp, she is also meek when compared to others in the camp, such as the outgoing Marcy, who is focused on her boyfriend Jack. Their open displays of affection, which ultimately lead to their having sex in a cabin (and their subsequent murders at the hands of an unseen killer) would reinforce the notion that women who have sex in these films face consequences for doing so, including their deaths, as a direct result of their conduct. Conversely, although Alice has a boyfriend, she appears almost estranged from him, does not engage in overt affection with him nor does she have sex during the film, and when she is confronted by the murderer near the movie’s end, she is nearly hysterical, but still able to function to defend herself as much as possible (*Friday the 13th,* 1980). Her quiet strength is comparable to that of Laurie from *Halloween*; in both cases, the women are willing to face the killers without hesitation and use whatever advantages they can find to overpower the attacker.

Lastly, *Slumber Party Massacre* has deranged killer Russ stalking Trish and her friends as they have a slumber party in Trish’s home. While sex is not as prominent in this film (except Diane, who goes outside to meet her boyfriend and is killed in doing so), the fact that Russ’ weapon of choice is a phallic-appearing power drill implies his masculinity over his young female victims and underscores his self-perceived prowess (*Slumber Party Massacre*, 1982). The young victims in the story do engage in drinking and marijuana use, but sex is left out for the most part. Nevertheless, their “bad behavior” of using drugs and drinking appears to justify their demise. The new girl at school, Valerie, who is babysitting her sister across the street, comes to the rescue when she attacks Russ with a machete and fights him off at the swimming pool outside. While Russ does not initially succumb, her second attempt does kill him, and Valerie and Trish remain as “final girls.” Although Trish supplied the setting for the party, with the intent of offering a venue for the youngsters to do as they wished (and with young men sneaking around outside spying on them as well), she was unable to aid her friends in protecting them from the killer; that was largely left for Valerie, who had not joined the party, to accomplish. Again, however, the fact that Valerie declined the invitation and was engaged in babysitting rather than partying demonstrates her focus on responsibility and the basis for her subsequent actions to help others. This also highlights the power of a strong final girl and the qualities which women in horror can possess, as contrasted with those who appear simply to serve as sex objects and to be killed accordingly.

The premise of killing teenagers who engage in illicit conduct, as well as a meek girl who transforms into a formidable final girl against the killer at a horror film’s culmination, has transcended through numerous films and which has remained pervasive throughout the genre. These films have endured not only as classic examples of the genre but as precedent-setting movies that have implemented standards and guidelines for these tropes to continue in future horror films and related works.

References

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