

Teen Slasher Horror Movies And Gender Play

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Abstract: *The Teen-Slasher movies under the horror genre has held the sway of the audience. All these movies follow a similar pattern in which they portrayed the genders. This pattern was established with the release of Halloween by John Carpenter in 1978 and only has developed since then. Wes Craven made various Teen-Slasher movies throughout his career. A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984) and Scream (1996) are the best examples of the Teen-Slasher movies made by him. He too adopts the same pattern for his Teen-Slasher movie- Scream. However, he doesn't strictly adhere to it in A Nightmare on Elm Street. His movies present to us women of elevated intellect. This is what the paper seeks to study.*

Keywords: *Teen-Slasher movie conventions, A Nightmare on Elm Street, Scream, Wes Craven, Second Wave Feminism, Simone de Beauvoir.*

Most of the English horror movies have their origins in urban legends. The well-known ghosts, psycho-killers or monsters are the ones originating from some or the other urban legend. According to Mary B. Nicolini, the urban legends have a 'FOAF' about them; that is, a Friend of a Friend basis. These are basically modified versions of rumors like 'the hitch-hiker' or 'the candy-man'. These tales are generally very disturbing and basically told by parents to keep their children away from the threat of strangers and to set it deep in their minds the fear that there is a supernatural force out there which will harm them if they don't behave properly. The most refined of such legends make it to the movies with a very intricate plot which in turn become horror of the greatest sort. Folklores exist for generations and are passed on from one generation to the other by recitation. Karra Shimabukuro in her article explains it further. She takes the examples from Grimm's Tales and simplifies that the mellowed down villains of all the popular fairy-tales are, in one way or other, punishers who are out there to check immoral behavior. She terms the villain in slasher movies as the 'Bogeyman'. She quotes "the essential quality of the bogeyman is his (or, at times, her) relationship to cultural boundaries" and that the "bogeyman becomes an example of what happens to those who transgress the boundaries" (Kendall R. Phillips). This is what the genre picks on. The villain/bogeyman punishes teens for behaving in an immoral fashion. In this light the bogeyman

is to be seen as the enforcer of order. 'Ghost-face'(img1)- as the killer is known in the movie *Scream* and 'Freddy Krueger'(img2) in *Nightmare*. The face here is hidden in one case and deformed in the other. This is the trick adopted in Teen-Slashers, the idea of which is taken from urban legends and folk-lores. This strikes fear in the mind of the audience as they develop a fear of the unknown with the progression of the movies. It is one of the most established and somewhat cliched convention of a Teen-Slasher movie.



Image 1



Image 2

In Ken Gelder's *The Horror Reader* Vera Dika states that the stalker-slasher movies come and go in cycles. These movies were at their peak in the 1980s and it was an area that was fully exploited with no further scope to explore. The slasher movies followed a certain convention followed by almost every slasher movie released at the time. These movies were "characterized by a shadowy, resurrected killer who was identified on-screen primarily through a set of 'visual and aural markers'." At such a time Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* was released. This movie challenged all prevailing rules and regulations and set a trend of its own (The Horror Reader, 273). The killers in both the movies trace their origins in folk-lore and urban legends itself. Freddy Krueger in *Nightmare* and the masked killer in *Scream* both can be seen as the society's agent's serving justice, eliminating the elements they see as threat to the society. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street* several teenagers are tracked and killed by a supernatural villain who stalks and kills them in their dream and they die in reality. In the *Scream* series however, the killer changes in every movie but the conventions remain the same. This paper will take only *Scream* (1996) into account. The movie borrows heavily from the contemporary slasher movies and has a parodical tone. Daniel Martin considers such movies to be horror of inferior kind in his article. It is a convention of Teen Slasher movies that the main trick to create horror in the audience is to display blood and guts on screen. At one point in *Nightmare* we see Nancy's boyfriend Glen dragged into the bed after he falls asleep and tornado of blood visible which paints the whole screen red (img3). When the cops arrive after his death they tell the folks that they'll need a mop to clean him up. . This is the most followed cliché in a Teen-Slasher movie: the depiction of blood and gore on-screen. Since they do not follow the horror-by-suggestion belief, they take to this route. Both these movies depict some of the goriest deaths. In *Scream*, the death of Casey Becker right in the opening scene is enough to terrify the audience. She is chased, stabbed with her insides gutted out and then hung on a tree (img4). According to Martin the ultimate terror is the one left to the imagination which is done in movies such as "The Shining" or "The Ring". These movies use suggestion to create horror, nothing is explicit, everything is left to the imagination. The subject matter is treated with seriousness unlike *Scream* which is a parody of all its contemporary Slasher flicks. In an interview Wes Craven, the director of these movies himself accepted that he wanted his audience to laugh at disturbing subject matter. As a result, the *Scream* has comic elements in it and *Nightmare* has the wittiest comebacks from the villain-Freddy Krueger. The incentive behind the murders in both movies is revenge. In *Scream* the killer- Billy Loomis blames

the protagonist's mother for the infidelity of his own father. In order to take revenge, he plans an elaborate scene with his friend Stu Macher and kills several teenagers en-route to get to the final girl- Sidney Prescott.



Image 3



Image 4

Carol J. Clover makes close observations to come up with the concept of the 'Final Girl'. The Final Girl is the young woman who survives the attacks of the villain. This is one of the things that can easily be missed by the casual eye. The final girl is chaste and abides by the rules of the society. She generally has a name which is not gender specific, like-Sidney, Ripley, Laurie etc. She is not too effeminate, somewhat masculine in her manners. She is not seen smoking, drinking or doing drugs. She abstains from sex. She is the ideal character. In her contrast we have the character of her best friend Tatum Riley in Sidney's case and Tina Gray in Nancy's case. These are the typical sexually active young women who flout the rules of the society and live their lives to the fullest. They die one of the most horrid deaths on-screen. They are collectively termed as the 'Popular Girl'. As stated above, she is the one who is sensuous, rich, high-maintenance and in relationship with the jock. Both, Tatum Riley (*Scream*, img5) and Tina Gray (*Nightmare*, img6) fulfill this criteria.

This is the main character highlighting the Final Girl's capabilities. Also, this is the character which is subjected to the male 'gaze', as termed by Clover. In a society which sees a sudden decline in its morals, these could very well be seen as a warning for its youth. The ones who don't follow the codes of conduct of the society have to pay at the end of the day. Second, she takes up the topic of "the gaze". Horror as a genre is seen as something of the interest of the males. The teen-slasher movies had young males as its target audience. At the beginning of the movies the audience relates with the villains for their masculinity. Their targets, the supporting characters who don't have a very active role in the movie become a subject to the audience's gaze. They are presented having fun and partying, indulging in the so-called immoral actions. But, as the plot unfolds and the audience gets to know the final girl, their inclination changes. They then relate with the intelligent young woman who fights on for her life. Since, the final girl is not very girly in her manners it is easy for the audience to relate with her. So, females evolve from being just an object of gaze to the hero for which the audience is rooting. Also, the weapons used in these movies are generally representative of the phallus. Teen-slashers has no fire-arms. The preferred weapons are knives, chainsaws, machetes, arrows etc. The victims are stabbed to death. The place where the victims die is termed as 'the terrible place' by Clover.(Clover,)



Image 5



Image 6

While *Scream* fulfills most of the criteria of a typical Teen-Slasher, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, though released in 1984 redefined the feminist approach to the slasher genre. Kyle Christenen is of the view that Nancy, though the protagonist of a slasher flick, is very different from all other female protagonists. As Clover puts it, she is the "grittiest of the final girls". She is determined to defeat the monster. She doesn't wait for him to come to her. Instead she works on her

own designs. This, in turn, once again takes us back to the point that the men in the slasher genre, time and again, prove to be just another irrelevant characters. Her father couldn't get himself to believe her, her boyfriend dies and she is left to fight her demons on her own. She is clever, independent and assertive enough to not to succumb to her boyfriend's desires. She has her priorities straight. When she realizes the intensity of the danger that has befallen them, she makes a plan to fall asleep on purpose. She fights off her fears and refuses to give Freddy any power over her. She calls it all "just a dream". Eventually, her plan of pulling Freddy into the real world and killing him does work. A close analysis of these elements bring our attention to the subtle gender play done in these movies. The male characters are either shown helpless, of no use or just portrayed masculine to the point when they are confronted to the killer. 'Rod'- the most masculine character in *Nightmare* couldn't bring himself to believe his girlfriend until he witnesses her death himself. Glen- Nancy's boyfriend, believes her, but is of no help as he adds on to the casualty (James Kendrick). Nancy's father again is proved of no use as he just couldn't believe his daughter. Similarly, in *Scream*, although most of the victims are female, we see a subtle hint of gender-play. In a situation where everyone is doubting everyone, we see the male characters helpless and begging the final girl for help.

This is what Simone de Beauvoir argued in her treatise "The Second Sex". According to her, one is not born a woman but becomes one. his is the construct of the society. One becomes what one does. Men are considered to be ideal in a society and women are seen aspiring to be more like them. As Clover puts it, in the "...cinematic habit may be added the broader range of emotional expression traditionally allowed women. Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female."(Clover, 82) In his movies, Wes Craven portrays women as the dominant characters. They are shown to be more conscious and aware of the threat than the men and eventually emerge as the survivors as a result of their intellect. Horror as a genre is seen as something in the alley of the men. The final girl theory refutes this completely as the audience, even if the majority is constituted of males, root for the female character. This character is a resourceful female in most of the teen slasher movies. The portrayal of this character is always idealistic. This is what Beauvoir argued for. Her view is considered as Post-Feminist, which means, she didn't want comparison with the other sex. She wanted that attitude to be set aside. In Craven's movies we see that the comparison and competition of sexes is set aside. The victims are selected more randomly. Although, a struggle for existence is evident in both the genders. The men are shown to be an aide instead of being a disposable characters. They are there to highlight the strength of the females at the time of a crisis. Throughout the movies we see the roles of male and females being exchanged. While the men are seeing crying and begging for their lives, the final girl is seen taking up the weapons and fighting for her life.

In (img7), we see a crying Billy Loomis in contrast with (img8) where the final girl Sidney is pointing a gun. These are the final scenes of the movie where the role of the male and the female is totally exchanged. The society looks down on

males expressing base emotions freely. As the openly say "Boys don't cry". Here, the female has the gun, representation of the power she has over all other characters in the movie. This pattern, as shown in popular Teen-Slasher movies, breaks the orthodox convention that the hero will save the heroine as she cries and pleads for her life. Similarly, in *Nightmare* Nancy Thompson refuses any power over her to the killer. Though his death is not explicit on-screen, the reason being that the producers wanted to leave scope for sequels. This in a way gives a fresh approach to the second wave feminism as defined by de Beauvoir. Women do not aspire to be an ideal as men but, become something better, not restricting themselves to the role society has assigned to them. Breaking the expectations of the society and refusing to be the victim of the situation, they pick weapons in their own hands and ensure their existence.



Image 7



Image 8

In both the movies, the final girl's character and appearance is designed in a way so that both the genders can identify with it. Their appearance and behavior is modeled in this way so that the audience can relate to it. Their characters are ideal, so is their conduct. Along with this, we see the other characters in complete contrast of this character. The final girl has her female friends indulging in socially unacceptable behavior. Her male companions seem to be failing at various levels. They try living in denial of the situation and cry and beg when confronted by the crisis. The gender play is subtle but can be noticed easily. This is deliberately done so. It presents to us a new model of Beauvoir's second wave feminism. The characters are simply characters and are portrayed in that way. The final girl can be seen in the light of feminism. She fights on and doesn't give up. She breaks the construct of the society and instead of being the 'damsel in distress' takes the weapons in her own hands.

A further study can be done regarding the final girl and the common grounds shared by her and the killer. The aspects taken up in the paper are limited in the sense that they deal mainly with the way Second Wave feminism takes a new form as displayed in the Slasher genre.

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