

Uncovering the Willful Girl

by

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ABSTRACT

The horror genre contains a broad spectrum of tropes and archetypes surrounding gender. There is an increasing body of films involving the adolescent girl who embodies the monstrous-feminine, and whose will is tied to supernatural and often destructive powers, which has not been thoroughly explored by feminist film theory. Enough recurring themes exist to merit the definition of a trope, the Willful Girl. Framed using the Brothers Grimm fairytale “The Willful Child,” this trope can be seen in films such as *Carrie* (1976) and *The Witch* (2015), among others. Through a close reading of both films, similarities are uncovered. These similarities not only support the trope’s themes, but also provide insight to persistent ideologies, struggles, and prejudices against the adolescent girl throughout the decades. Acknowledging these ongoing issues, and their representation in horror films over the years, challenges the “waves” or “progress” model of feminism and begs the question of how “feminist” films should be defined.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: THE WILLFUL CHILD	1
2 UNCOVERING THE WILLFUL GIRL	5
Inherited Womanhood and Final Girls	5
From Bad Seed to Witch: The History of The Willful Girl	10
3 AN ANALYSIS OF <i>CARRIE</i>	15
Horror and New Conservatism in the 1970s	15
“Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live”: A Close Analysis of the Film	17
4 AN ANALYSIS OF <i>THE WITCH</i>	28
Postfeminism and Empowering Horror	28
“I Am That Very Witch”: A Close Analysis of the Film	29
5 WILLFUL GIRLS, THEN AND NOW	42
6 CONCLUSION: EMPOWERING THE WILLFUL GIRL	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY	56
APPENDIX	
1 FILMOGRAPHY	59
2 RECOMMENDED VIEWING	61

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE WILLFUL CHILD

As a somewhat recent lover of the horror genre, I have already watched and read many stories that continue to keep me up at night, images burned in my brain of bloodied handprints left on windows and bodies charred and blackened from burning to death. Growing up, I didn't see the appeal of scary movies, but I've developed a taste for them as an adult (even if they still leave me wanting to sleep with the lights on). I did not expect a paragraph-long folk tale from the Brothers Grimm to stick with me in this same way, but from the first time I encountered it, it has not left my mind. The story is called "The Willful Child":

"Once upon a time there was a child who was willful, and would not do as her mother wished. For this reason God had no pleasure in her, and let her become very ill, and no doctor could do her any good, and in a short time she lay on her death-bed. When she had been lowered into her grave, and the earth was spread over her, all at once her arm came out again, and stretched upwards, and when they had put it in and spread fresh earth over it, it was all to no purpose, for the arm always came out again. Then the mother herself was obliged to go to the grave, and strike the arm with a rod, and when she had done that, it was drawn in, and then at last the child had rest beneath the ground." (quoted in Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 1).

The morbid imagery of a child's dead arm refusing to be buried has haunted me for some time. While the gender of the child cannot be determined from the original German text, seeing Sara Ahmed use a translation with female pronouns in her book got me thinking about how many aspects of this story are reflected in horror films that have

come out over the past several decades. The adolescent girl is a familiar figure in horror, and she is often frightening in some way or another; whether she is possessed by a demon or transformed into a vampire, she is monstrous, and we watch and wait for her fall from grace and inevitable demise. But what of the teenage girl whose only monstrous act is to defy the womanhood presented to her? Defiance and a strong will are often enough to doom a girl to the same fate as literal monsters.

When I first started becoming interested in horror movies, I was fascinated by the way gender played such a prominent role in so many films, and in particular the roles that women and girls played. A deeper dive into gender in horror introduced me to Carol J. Clover's "Final Girl" trope in slasher movies, a trope that has become so widely acknowledged that it has garnered recognition and conversation outside of academic or film critic circles; there was even a horror-comedy made in 2015 called *The Final Girls*, which in a very meta fashion had the characters be self-aware of their own assigned roles in a slasher film. As much as I enjoyed the analyses and discussions of the Final Girl trope, I couldn't help but wonder why feminist film theory focused so often on the slasher film, particularly when talking about the teenage girl in the horror genre. I was discovering my taste for horror by watching a broad spectrum of films, and I was beginning to see other patterns, other recurring themes that I wanted to discuss in more depth.

After reading the Brothers Grimm story, I want to explore how echoes of that cautionary tale are so pervasive in horror cinema, and how they punish adolescent girls in order to reinforce gender norms. In fact, I posit that this is common enough to merit its definition as a cinematic trope of its own, which I have termed the Willful Girl.

Throughout the decades, the narrative of the Willful Girl has shifted and changed along with the times, as has the horror genre as a whole, but I have wondered if the trope has remained steeped in the need to extinguish the female will, as early iterations of the trope did. In order to find out, I have watched a number of films featuring a Willful Girl from the past sixty years or so, and then analyzed in detail two films made in very different eras: *Carrie* (1976) and *The Witch* (2015). My goal is not only to define and show examples of the Willful Girl trope, but to show the importance of recognizing its persistence in the horror genre; the adolescent girl appears in far more subgenres of horror than just the slasher. Horror films, after all, give us insight to society's anxieties and fears. And what I have found is that we do, as a society, still fear a girl with a mind of her own.

In chapter one of this thesis, "Uncovering the Willful Girl," I discuss the feminist and film theories that guided my research and analysis, and I provide an overview of the Willful Girl trope using examples from various films over the past several decades. In chapter two, an analysis of *Carrie* (1976), I take a deeper dive into one of the most iconic Willful Girl films, and explore both how Carrie White fits the parameters of the trope and how her fate aligns with the original Brothers Grimm narrative of punishing girls who do not conform to their expected role. Chapter three, an analysis of *The Witch* (2015), does much the same with a film that was created far more recently and received much acclaim for its "empowering" message. In chapter four, "Willful Girls, then and now," I compare *Carrie* and *The Witch*, both in terms of popular press reactions and by taking a side-by-side look at their narratives. I also use this comparison of the films to challenge the

“progress model” or “waves model” of feminism. Finally, the conclusion, “Empowering the Willful Girl,” explores how “feminist” horror is defined today, and if it is possible for a feminist or empowering version of the Willful Girl trope to exist.

CHAPTER 2

UNCOVERING THE WILLFUL GIRL

Inherited womanhood and final girls

While delving into what I hoped would be a fresh perspective on a feminist analysis of horror cinema, I was drawn to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, translation referenced 2010). Returning to this text with the horror film in mind, I found it incredibly applicable to the relationships seen between mothers and daughters in horror. In the book's "Formative Years" section, Beauvoir explains that femininity is passed down from mother to daughter; however, even if the daughter were to avoid the typical unlearning of "boyish manners" at home, "the girl's companions, her friends, and her teachers will be shocked" if she were to enact such behaviors in public settings (Beauvoir 295). Femininity is not just enforced by the mother figure, but by society at large. Beauvoir explains the inheritance of femininity thus: "[the mother] imposes her own destiny on her child: it is a way to proudly claim her own femininity and also to take revenge on it" (295).

Beauvoir argues that at every turn, girls are told that this punishment of womanhood is one they must bear in order to ensure their happiness. It is in the fairy tales girls are encouraged to look to for guidance. It is ingrained in nearly every aspect of the girl's upbringing, Beauvoir states: "she is twelve years old, and her story is already written in the heavens" (312). If the fairy tales that breed martyrdom are the stories little girls should aspire to, with the happiest possible ending presented as one of rescuing by men and passivity by women, then what are we to make of stories where the girl is willful and rejects her role? The opposite must befall her.

The works of Sara Ahmed offers a modern perspective on the adolescent girl's will. Ahmed's book *Willful Subjects* opens with "The Willful Child," which has become a central focus of my work. I am drawn to the language that Ahmed uses when describing the willful child: "we might share affection for the many willful girls that haunt literature" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 3). The poignant use of the word "haunt" emphasizes why willfulness is so relevant to girls in horror. They are haunting figures in that we are haunted by the way we see ourselves in them, and in the way they appear, ghost-like, outside the realm of what is socially acceptable for the viewer to identify with.

Ahmed sees the horrific nature of the Brothers Grimm story, and by that she and I both mean that it literally sounds like the premise for a horror story. She explores how willfulness as a narrative tool speaks to the audience, how it touches and affects them. In *Willful Subjects* (2014) and her later book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed compares the willful child to the feminist killjoy — "Any will is a willful will if you are not supposed to have a will of your own" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 78). Is the willful child feminist? Ahmed explores this question by examining what is deemed a "good" will and how it is enforced on individual and societal levels. In *Willful Subjects*, she states that "Happiness follows for those who will right" (4). Those who will "wrong" do not find happiness, however much they may want it.

While Ahmed focused on literature to find the willful child's influence, I moved toward feminist film theory. Therefore, I would be remiss not to mention Carol J. Clover's work on gender and horror. However, I call on Clover to examine the ways in which her analysis may fall short when it comes to adolescent girls in horror outside of slasher films. Clover's iconic analysis of the Final Girl trope in her book *Men, Women,*

and Chain Saws (1992, revised edition 2015) describes the teenage female protagonist as one who defies gendered expectations: “The Final Girl is boyish, in a word” (Clover 40), and while slasher films often fluctuate between the killer’s point of view and the protagonist’s, Clover claims that “we belong in the end to the Final Girl; there is no alternative” (46). While many of Clover’s analyses on how the Final Girl bends traditional femininity (a willful act, one might say) do align with adolescent girls in horror outside of the slasher film, it is when Clover states that the Final Girl triumphs over evil — and that we as the audience root for her, see through her eyes, and identify with her as the hero — that these other protagonists do not make the cut. The Final Girl trope functions as a protagonist the viewers *want* to identify with, and the fluidity of her gender presentation only allows for that to happen more easily. While she might be more tomboyish in nature — her name is often androgynous, as is her appearance — she is still virginal, a trait that is seen as favorable for girls. She actively seeks out the killer, unlike her peers, and she is often set apart from other girls: “She is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic” (Clover 39). These factors may isolate her in order for the thrill of the standoff between the Final Girl and the killer, but she is rewarded for all of the ways in which she deviates from the femininity of her peers, as she is the only one who survives. Indeed, her behaviors separate her from her sexually active, less careful friends, who the films tell us deserve punishment. The willfulness that Ahmed describes and that the Brothers Grimm story portrays, however, is not a trait that is shown as desirable, so Clover’s analysis does not translate to other types of horror in quite the same way. For that reason, I turn to Tania Modleski and her examination of Hitchcock.

Modleski states in her 2016 article *Remastering the Master: Hitchcock and Feminism* her belief that Hitchcock's filmography is populated with "troubling women who refuse to leave the premises even when inhospitality reaches its lethal extreme" (135) — in other words, that the film's (male) protagonists are haunted, often literally, by the wills of the women who wreaked havoc upon them in life. The crucial aspect of these characters and Modleski's argument is that this "fascinating and seemingly limitless" power (Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* 1) is wielded by villainess character types. Modleski's book *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (2005) describes the ways in which Hitchcock's films explore the dynamics of identity and identification, specifically in regards to women. Modleski notes that from *Rebecca* onwards, Hitchcock's films use the mother/daughter relationship to invoke the threat of destabilizing the protagonist's gender identity.

Modleski's analysis challenges the interpretations of feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, who found the power of Hitchcock's female characters much more limited. Modleski states that Mulvey, a founder of feminist psychoanalytic film theory, "focuses on Hitchcock's films to show how women in classic Hollywood cinema are inevitably made into passive objects ... women filmgoers can only have a masochistic relation to this cinema" (Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* 1). In contrast, Modleski finds that these female characters possess more power than Mulvey saw. However, their narrative status as antagonists, threats even from beyond the grave, presents them to the audience as dangers — like the willful child, these characters could easily be read as cautionary tales about the negative repercussions of challenging the gender status quo.

There are some limitations to the application of this analysis; in many of Hitchcock's films, regardless of the complexity of the role of the female character, she is still a secondary character to the male protagonist. Many analyses of horror that features a female as the lead focus almost entirely on the slasher subgenre, disregarding the ever-growing list of films where a female character, almost always an adolescent, is the driving narrative force. Nonetheless, Modleski's work can help to answer the question: How do these female characters challenge not only their in-film counterparts, but also our audience understanding of gender identity and will?

Barbara Creed's discussion of the monstrous-feminine lends itself well to this discussion. Her chapter "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection" in *The Dread of Difference* (2015) delves into "a conception of the monstrous-feminine ... what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (37). A way in which monstrosity is created, Creed argues, is through the crossing of a border of some kind; one example is the border between good and evil, while another is "the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (Creed 42). Creed makes an important point about how the spectator engages with these films: "the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject ... in order, finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman" (48). The viewer confronts what we know to be "wrong," in order to ultimately reject it, reaffirming what we have learned to be morally or socially abhorrent. The relationship between the spectator and the protagonist is a sort of resistant identification; we cannot help but try to identify with her, because that is what we expect to do when watching a film, but her monstrosity and abjection repel us.

Creed's references to abjection refer back to Julia Kristeva's reinterpretation of Lacanian theory and the abject mother. Brandon Grafius explains that "[for] Kristeva, the infant is born into the semiotic stage ... The ruling figure of the semiotic realm is the mother" (3). In order to enter what Lacan calls the symbolic order — the "system of signs, laws and communications that hold society together" (Grafius 3) — the child must separate themselves from the mother. Kristeva calls this "matricide," a process that is violent and imperfect, leaving a traumatic scar that places the mother in the role of the abject — neither fully self nor other. This, Grafius explains, is why the mother figure is often so threatening in horror films. If the child is not able to fully separate themselves from the mother, they risk being "subsumed within" her (Grafius 3).

Both Creed and Modleski reference the mother/daughter relationship as being of particular importance, with Creed specifically nodding to Kristeva's notion of the abject mother. Indeed, I have found that much of the literature on the mother/daughter relationship in horror focuses on the mother as the site of the monstrous-feminine and abject. However, I believe that it is equally important to examine the adolescent girl as the site of that same abjection, as it can be observed time and again in horror films over the years.

From bad seed to witch: The history of the Willful Girl

The adolescent girl turned monstrous is woven throughout the horror genre, especially in the past several decades. The source of her monstrosity changes with the film and the decade; in one of the earliest appearances of the character type, *The Bad Seed* (1956), eight-year-old Rhoda's murderous will is inherited through her mother, simply born evil. Similarly, in 1983's *Firestarter*, Charlie's destructive pyrokinesis is

inherited from her parents. In other cases, such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Ginger Snaps* (2001), the monstrosity is given to the girl from an outside force: possession by the Devil, or a werewolf attack. Despite these variations, there is a consistency in these narratives, enough recurring themes to constitute the definition of a trope, one I would like to call the Willful Girl. I have specifically chosen “girl” instead of “child” for several reasons. Firstly, the gendered nature of this trope is essential, as her narrative arc and the message she sends are geared toward girls in particular. Secondly, it is a nod to Carol J. Clover’s “Final Girl” trope, another prominent and vitally important female lead in the horror genre. Finally, “girl” acknowledges the transitory (pubescent) stage that these characters are in. She is not yet a woman, and indeed rejects the womanhood that is presented to her. Her will is perceived as having no value, of needing to be corrected; this is because, despite enforcing the role of womanhood upon her, the authority figures in the Willful Girl’s life see her as a child in need of reprimanding and direction. I also wish to acknowledge that these characters are *young*, with their ages generally ranging between eight and seventeen years old. Her youth, and her rejection of adult femininity, are pivotal to the perception of her willfulness by the maternal/will of God figure(s) in her life.

With a few exceptions (like *The Bad Seed*’s Rhoda), the Willful Girl often possesses some element of supernatural or otherworldly power. Carrie (of *Carrie*, 1976 and 2013) and Charlie (*Firestarter*) both have some form of psychokinetic powers; Eli of *Let The Right One In* (2008) is a vampire, while Ginger of *Ginger Snaps* (2001) becomes a werewolf. This power is linked to the Willful Girl’s strong-willed personality — and to destruction. In *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda’s maturity for her young age goes hand-in-hand

with her methodical murderous streak; her “aunt” Monica praises her for “knowing what she wants,” while her mother states that she finds her daughter’s maturity “disturbing.” Perpetually twelve-year-old Eli (*Let The Right One In*) urges her new friend Oskar to fight back against his bullies and encourages him to be tougher — but as the audience sees throughout the film, Eli’s toughness transforms her into something animalistic and snarling when the bloodlust overtakes her. In her vampiric state, she can easily snap a grown man’s neck.

The Willful Girl’s supernatural willfulness is often linked in some way to puberty, or to her (in)ability to conform to the expectations of adolescent femininity. In *Firestarter*, Charlie’s powers are predicted to only increase when she hits puberty. “She’s just a little girl,” one character argues, to which another replies, “She’s armageddon.” In *The Exorcist*, the film plays into the fears of what is inappropriate for adolescent girls at the beginning stages of puberty, as the possessed twelve-year-old Regan masturbates with a crucifix, to the absolute horror of her mother. *Carrie*’s titular Carrie White discovers her psychic powers at the moment of her first menstrual period; in both the 1976 and 2013 versions of the film, her abilities only increase as she comes further into her womanhood. *Ginger* (*Ginger Snaps*) starts her period around the same time she is attacked by a werewolf, linking the monstrous transformation into a beast to her transformation into womanhood and sexual maturity.

A more nebulous but nevertheless pervasive aspect of the Willful Girl trope is a tenuous relationship with the maternal. In the Brothers Grimm story, the parental will “is quickly translated ... into God’s command” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 63). For the Willful Girl, this parental/God will can be represented by either a literal mother, or a more

general stand-in authority figure. The mother in the original folk tale is a pivotal character, however briefly she appears in a very brief tale: it is because of disobeying the mother that the child is doomed to die, and only the mother can beat the child into the final submission of death. The story warns against disobeying one's mother, with extreme consequences. When translations mark the willful child as a girl, the gendered aspect of inherited femininity as a part of obedience is easily seen in films that play off of this cautionary tale's themes. In *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda's mother is the only one who can see her true nature, and blames it on herself, believing Rhoda inherited her murderous tendencies through her mother's bloodline. Rhoda's continued bad behavior leads her mother to attempt to kill her with sleeping pills before shooting herself in the head. In *The Exorcist*, Regan's mother is also the only one who seems to understand the truly evil nature of her daughter's affliction, while doctors claim it is a "brain problem" of some kind. The mother in *Carrie* sees her daughter's psychic abilities as the mark of the devil, and attempts to kill her in order to stop it; while she is seen as the antagonist, unlike the mothers in the previously mentioned films, her narrative function is much the same. In films such as *Firestarter* and *Let The Right One In*, there is a paternal figure instead, but playing the same symbolic role.

In all of these examples, and in most iterations of the Willful Girl, there is another defining feature: she is white. This plays off the juxtaposition of what the child represents (innocence, goodness, the future) with the cruelty and destruction the evil child creates. Chuck Jackson explains that *The Bad Seed*, and those films which followed in the decades after, "reverse common-sense assumptions about the connection between innocence, whiteness, and childhood" (66). The image of white girlhood sullied by the

violent actions the girl carries out, plays into the societal fear of the Other hiding in plain sight. The girls in *Carrie*, *Firestarter*, and *The Exorcist* follow Jackson's description of the innocent white girl perfectly: pale, blonde with light blue eyes. She appears gentle and innocent at first, which only makes the moments when she becomes monstrous more startling. The audience witnesses a child who seems to represent the most demure and quiet ideal of the American suburban girl — a picture of the “goodness, purity, and cleanliness” that Jackson (67) cites as being represented by whiteness — transform into someone capable of unfeminine violence, even murder.

While the movies mentioned here are by no means an exhaustive list of the films that feature a Willful Girl, I chose to examine them because of their mainstream acclaim and influence — for better or for worse. The majority of these films received a critic and/or audience score on Rotten Tomatoes of at least 75% or higher (with the notable exceptions of *Firestarter* and the 2013 *Carrie* adaptation, which are still well-known despite their poor reception). The trope has shifted and been altered over time, but the question remains if it has *evolved* over time. Has the trope become empowering, a feminist archetype? Or has the Willful Girl's narrative remained stagnant at its core? By delving into two films separated by nearly 40 years — *Carrie* (1976) and *The Witch* (2015) — I aim to not only show the ways in which Carrie and Thomasin fit the Willful Girl archetype, but also the ways in which their narrative arcs (and their fates) are remarkably similar, despite the decades and societal shifts between them. What makes a character archetype “feminist?” Is it possible for a feminist Willful Girl to exist? Have our horror films become more empowering for women and girls? These are the questions I hope to answer in the analysis that follows.

CHAPTER 3

“IT’S NOTHING TO DO WITH SATAN, IT’S ME”: AN ANALYSIS OF *CARRIE*

Horror and New Conservatism in the 1970s

There are few films in the realm of horror so iconic as Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976). Even those who have never watched the film are familiar with its most shocking moment: Carrie, drenched in pig’s blood at her high school prom, setting the gymnasium ablaze with her mind. While Stephen King’s novel made waves in the horror scene as well, there are enough distinctive differences between the novel and film versions to justify analyzing the film as its own entity. *Carrie* is not the first horror film where the Willful Girl trope can be found, but it is certainly one of the earliest and most well known. Before diving into an in-depth exploration of the plot and how Carrie White is a Willful Girl, it is important to have a sense of the cultural and social climate during the time of the film’s release. While this movie has been enjoyed by horror fans on an international scale, the fears and stigmas it addresses come from a white, suburban American point of view.

In the 1960s and 1970s, during what would be called the second wave of feminism and as a response to the nuclear family ideology of the 1950s, many women “began to find fault with motherhood, apple pie, and even the American flag” (Tong 25). The personal became the political — Deborah Siegel states that it was “an age of unprecedented action,” where women protested marriage, celebrated Mother’s Day by dumping piles of aprons on the White House lawn “to symbolize their rejection of the 1950s housewife role,” and “disrupted a legislative hearing on abortion— then still illegal— overseen by a panel of so-called objective witnesses comprising fourteen men

and one nun” (*Sisterhood, Interrupted* 2-3). Stephanie Coontz explains that Betty Friedan’s statement that “women are people too” in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was eye-opening: “Strange though it may seem today, many women in the 1950s and early 1960s had never heard anyone say that out loud. Women were wives and mothers ... the idea that an ordinary woman could be a person in her own right, in addition to being a wife and mother, seemed completely new to many women” (Coontz xxi). These ideologies from the ’60s carried into the next decade, and a TIME article published in January 1976 stated “[women] have arrived like a new immigrant wave in male America ... not quite the same subordinate creatures they were before” (Women Of The Year).

In response to these years of rebellion came the rise of New Conservatism in the 1970s. Those involved in this movement — mainly working-class and middle-class white people — “celebrated the free market and lamented the decline of ‘traditional’ social values and roles” (History.com). It was this desire to return to the traditional family that set the stage for much of the horror cinema created during the ’70s. Victoria Madden, in her discussion of the suburban gothic that sprang up in the decades following World War II, explains that those who did not conform and whose visibility threatened the “suburban equilibrium” established as normal, were “forcibly extracted in order to maintain cleanliness and sanctity within the community” (10).

In the context of the horror genre, those who did not conform were established as the dangerous “other.” The true focal point of horror during this period “[was] the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization repress[ed] or oppress[ed] ... and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifi[ed] the restoration of repression” (Wood 28). This led to an increase in certain themes: Vivian Sobchack explains that the genre’s

“emphasis was on the child not as terrorized victim, but as cannibalistic, monstrous, murderous, selfish, sexual. The child was an alien force that threatened both its immediate family and all adult authority” (178). This was largely in response to youth movements of the era, which horror films painted as “children not run away but run amok” (Sobchack 178).

With this tension between tradition and rebellion at the forefront of the collective social mind, *Carrie* provided a different angle on the monstrous child character that was becoming so popular. Her plight was sympathetic, and her downfall was tragic, but it was still necessary to maintain the social order. Her strong will was always going to be quashed, and while pop culture and marketing frames her murderous actions as the horror of the film, the inevitability of her fate is a horror of its own.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”: A close analysis of the film

Carrie begins with a girls’ locker room, where Carrie White stands isolated from her classmates in the showers. Her shower is interrupted by the arrival of her first menstrual period. Not knowing what it is, Carrie thinks she’s dying and begs her classmates for help. Instead, the other girls shove her to the ground and pelt her with pads and tampons. Miss Collins, the gym teacher, tries to soothe Carrie, whose panic reaches a breaking point and the light bulb above her shatters. At home, Carrie is confronted by her mother Margaret, who accuses her of sinful thoughts and claims that the “curse of blood” only comes for women who commit sin, and then locks her in her prayer closet as punishment.

Meanwhile, Miss Collins berates the other girls and makes them do a grueling exercise routine for detention. One girl, Chris, refuses to participate and loses permission

to attend prom, which she blames on Carrie. Another classmate, Sue, feels guilty and wants to make it up to Carrie by having her boyfriend Tommy take Carrie to the prom. Meanwhile, Chris and her boyfriend Billy plot revenge, and Carrie explores the fact that she can move things with her mind. After initially believing she's being teased, Carrie eventually agrees to go to prom with Tommy. When she tells her mother, Margaret is enraged and attempts to lecture Carrie about boys, and Carrie psychically slams the windows shut. Her mother then accuses her of witchcraft.

Chris and Billy hang a bucket of pig's blood above the prom stage. They've rigged the prom royalty vote so that Carrie will win queen, and plan to dump the bucket of blood on her when she gets on stage. The night of prom, Carrie's mother again attempts to persuade her not to go, but Carrie uses telekinesis to force Margaret to stay away from her before leaving the house. After a blissful night where Carrie dances with Tommy and even kisses him on the dance floor, she is announced prom queen and stands on the stage, beaming at her classmates. This is when the pig's blood drops, and she is soaked from head to toe. In her shock and fury, Carrie begins a frenzied psychic destruction of the gymnasium, setting it ablaze and trapping everyone inside. On her way home, Chris and Billy attempt to run her over with their car, but she blows them up.

Carrie seeks the comfort of her mother, who hugs her but then stabs her in the back with a knife. The two struggle, and eventually Carrie is able to use her powers to impale Margaret with several kitchen knives and other sharp objects. Carrie then gathers her mother's body in her arms and drags her to the prayer closet as the house begins to sink into the earth as though pulled down by the Devil itself. The film ends with Sue, the

lone survivor of Carrie's rage, dreaming of visiting Carrie's grave only to have the girl's bloody hand burst from the ground.

From the very beginning, the audience sees Carrie as an abject figure — one who is neither fully self nor other (Grafius 3). In the opening scene before the title card, the girls' gym class is playing volleyball and Carrie fumbles when the ball is passed to her. The other girls shove and scowl at her as they pass her on their way to the locker rooms, and Chris hisses, "You eat shit." This isolating and degrading treatment is only intensified in the locker room scene, where Carrie is humiliated as everyone mocks her for thinking she is dying after getting her period. She is clearly othered by her peers, and is not allowed to be a fully realized self. However, we are very close to Carrie, experiencing her fear and anger in extreme close-up and the subsequent trauma that follows. While the opening scene passes over many of the girls' bodies in the slow pan across the locker room, it is in the shower with Carrie that we get up close and personal, as if her body were our own. The moment the blood starts to trickle from between her legs, and when she brings her hand up to her face to examine it, the camera pulls in even closer, so the audience can see the widening of her eyes, the moment the panic sets in. This closeness connects her to audience so that we identify with her, so she cannot be fully othered. According to Barbara Creed, "that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (42). Between the normal and abnormal, the self and other, or the human and inhuman, those who exist in the liminal space between are abject figures. Her abjection feeds a certain discomfort in the audience — we watch her and sympathize with her, but we recognize that which is abnormal in her and we wish to reject it.

Creed also describes the “monstrous-feminine” as a type of abject figure in horror. The symbolic order is threatened by filth and bodily waste; according to Creed, the horror genre “often ‘plays’ with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order” (Creed 46). Women in particular represent this blood and gore, often through menstruation. Carrie’s first period is followed moments later by the first glimpse of her supernatural powers — when Miss Collins fails to immediately calm her down in the showers, Carrie continues to hyperventilate and, with a musical cue of sinister strings, the light bulb overhead explodes. Often in female-centered horror, menstruation is used to “herald the advent of monstrosity” (Briefel 22). Carrie’s abjection, therefore, is not merely because of her inability to fit in, or even because of her supernatural abilities; it is distinctly gendered, which is only enforced by linking her period to the arrival of her telekinetic ability. She is the monstrous-feminine, and this is also what makes Carrie a Willful Girl. Her abilities are a manifestation of her will *and* a manifestation of her female puberty.

At first, Carrie’s powers seem to be somewhat out of her control, as with the light bulb in the locker room and later, in her own bedroom, when she is crying while looking at her reflection in the mirror, and the mirror warps and shatters. However, the pivotal moment in Carrie’s control of her ability — and the moment where she harnesses her will — comes about halfway through the film, when she tells her mother that she has been asked to the prom. Margaret is instantly wary: “Prom?” she repeats. Carrie presses on, saying, “Please see that I’m not like you, mama,” and “I wanna start to try and be a whole person before it’s too late for me —” She is cut off by Margaret throwing a drink at her, dousing Carrie in tea and snuffing out the candles on the table. Undeterred, Carrie

continues to tell her mother about Tommy, saying that he is a nice boy, even as Margaret speaks over her and says she needs to go to her closet and ask for forgiveness. Already, this is the most the audience has seen Carrie stand up for herself when it comes to Margaret. Her determination to attend prom, and to convince her mother that it is a good thing for her to go, is an act of willfulness in itself.

The scene is reminiscent of a memory described by Sara Ahmed; she speaks of her family dinner table, the way only certain things could be brought up — and the consequences of overstepping those boundaries when she disagreed with something being said:

The problem is not simply about the content of what she is saying. She is doing more than saying the wrong thing: she is getting in the way of something ... of the family or of some *we* or another, which is created by what is not said (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 37).

In Carrie's case, she is getting in the way of the power dynamic enforced by her mother. No longer is she willing to sit and meekly accept her mother's reprimands and orders. This willfulness is strengthened by her psychic ability, giving her a newfound courage and sense of power. When Margaret attempts to regain control of the conversation by walking away to shut the windows, Carrie makes all of the windows slam shut with her mind. Margaret stares at her in shock and horror. Carrie, tearful but firm, states, "I'm going, mama. And things are gonna change around here." Margaret whispers, "Witch. That's Satan's power." Carrie responds, "It's nothing to do with Satan, mama, it's me." She is calmer than she has ever been with her mother up to this point in the film. Margaret continues to claim that Satan is working through Carrie, that she must renounce

her powers and never use them, and Carrie merely smiles calmly and says, “I’m going, mama. You can’t stop me. And I don’t wanna talk about it anymore.”

The next time Carrie and her mother interact on screen, it is the night of the prom and Carrie is getting ready. Margaret tries to tear Carrie down, commenting on the low cut of her dress: “I can see your dirty pillows. Everyone will.” But Carrie simply brushes her comments off. She seems confident, and her mother’s domineering presence no longer has the effect it once did, on Carrie or the audience. In Sara Ahmed’s work, she discusses a “poisonous pedagogy,” the idea that obedience is a virtue and willfulness must be eliminated in the child in order to achieve this: “Becoming obedient is learning to act without accordance to one’s own will. If children are to act without self-accordance, their own will must be broken” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 65). Margaret’s attempts at forcing Carrie into obedience, often through emotional or physical violence, are no longer enough to smother Carrie’s own will. As Carrie continues to put on her makeup, Margaret becomes increasingly desperate and starts clawing at her own face and pulling at her own hair, howling in agony. She begs Carrie to stay home, burn the dress and pray for forgiveness. Carrie shrieks “Stop, mama!” and Margaret is thrown backwards, down onto Carrie’s bed. Carrie commands, “Just sit there, mama, and don’t say a word until I’m gone!” She then leaves, with Margaret still pinned to the bed by the telekinetic force. Only after her daughter has left does Margaret sit up slightly, and murmur, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” As Ahmed states in *Willful Subjects*, “The child must be conquered to avoid damnation” (66).

Despite Carrie’s powerful show of will in regards to her mother, when it comes to the prom itself she is very much obedient of the social norms placed upon her by Miss

Collins, as well as Tommy. She reverts to a more meek and shy demeanor when she and Tommy arrive at the prom, at first not wanting to leave the car. Everything she does at the prom is because of Tommy's will, from dancing to kissing him to voting for herself for prom royalty. The moment she fully embodies the Willful Girl, rejecting all other wills placed upon her, is when she unleashes her fury at the pig's blood prank. Carrie stands on the stage, holding flowers and wearing the prom queen crown and sash. In her moment of happiness, she is doused in pig's blood as Chris and Billy release the bucket from the rafters. The music, which has been building in sinister intensity, fades to absolute silence. Everyone in the crowd stops clapping and stares in shock. The only sound is the continued splattering of blood as it pours down Carrie's body and hits the stage floor. Some people's mouths move — Tommy angrily points up at the bucket and seems to yell "What the hell?" — but there is no audio. As far as Carrie is concerned, no one is speaking at all. It is as if all the air has been sucked from the room. And then all at once, Carrie's mother's voice echoes on repeat: "They're all gonna laugh at you!" Carrie looks up at the crowd and imagines them all laughing hysterically, as the audio fades back into roaring laughter. Even Miss Collins, Carrie's confidante and the one who convinced her to come to prom at all, is snickering. All at once, Carrie changes. Her eyes grow wide, her expression drops from one of anguish to one of cold fury. The doors to the building slam shut to prevent anyone from escaping, and the lights go red. Carrie's full psychic potential — the symbol of her willfulness — has never before been so in her control. Every action she takes is calculated, from blasting everyone with a fire hose to electrocuting the principal. The stage sets on fire as Carrie walks through the crowd with a frightening air of calm.

This is the iconic moment of the film, the one that is often used as the selling point. In the trailer for the movie, it ends with the voiceover stating, “If you have a taste for terror, you have a date with Carrie” (*Carrie (1976) - Original Trailer*). The marketing for the film is centered around Carrie’s breaking point, making her out to be violent and terrifying from the beginning; like Hitchcock’s villainous women, “females whose power is both fascinating and seemingly limitless” (Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* 1). But when viewing the film in its entirety, we see Carrie transform from victim to attacker. Indeed, she fits the description of rape-revenge film victims offered by Clover, where “the avenger or self-defender will become as directly or indirectly violent as her assailant” (123). Carrie kills everyone at the prom, indiscriminately. She kills Miss Collins, who defended her time and again from her crueler classmates; she kills Tommy, who showed her genuine compassion and affection during the dance. This violent transformation is a vital piece of the Willful Girl narrative, because the violence symbolizes her will: “willfulness can fall, like a shadow on the fallen” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 3). Carrie is not a villain from the start, but rather made to become violent because of the consequences of her treatment and the strength of her powers.

Carrie returns home, blood-soaked, and calls for her mother only to receive no answer. She goes into the bathroom, unaware that Margaret is standing silently in the hall, watching her. Carrie scrubs herself in the bath until the water is red, and as she does so she breaks down, weeping. When she leaves the bathroom, she calls again for her mother. Margaret comes out from the shadows and Carrie falls into her embrace, crying, “It was bad, mama. They laughed at me.” Margaret drops to her knees, sitting before her daughter and holding her hands. When Carrie asks for her mother to hold her, Margaret

instead looks off to the side, not meeting Carrie's eyes, and says, "I should've killed myself the first time he put it in me, before we were married." She goes on to tell how she and Carrie's father tried to live "sinlessly" before Carrie was conceived, "but sin never dies." One night, Carrie's father got drunk and "took" Margaret; Margaret says, with a smile and tears rolling down her cheeks, "I should've given you to God when you were born, but I was weak and backsliding. And now the Devil has come home."

Margaret believes that her sin lives on in Carrie, that it was inherited. Her words call to mind Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of inherited femininity: "for the mother, the daughter is both her double and an other ... she imposes her own destiny on the child: it is a way to proudly claim her own femininity and also to take revenge on it" (Beauvoir 295). Margaret's love for Carrie at birth is what kept her from killing her infant daughter, and so she projects her own destiny — her own will — onto Carrie, seeing her own "sins" in Carrie regardless of her daughter's true actions. This projected will is what leads Margaret to hold Carrie in her arms and say, "We'll pray, for the last time," before stabbing her in the back with a carving knife. Carrie tumbles down the stairs, gasping, choking up blood that smears across her cheek as her mother descends after her, knife in hand. Margaret smiles all the while as she slowly approaches Carrie, backing her into a corner. Before she can plunge the knife in again, Carrie uses her powers to send another knife into Margaret's hand, pinning it to the doorframe. A myriad of sharp kitchen tools fly into her mother, stabbing her and pinning her up to the doorframe, where she hangs as though crucified. If we understand the mother to be representative of the larger gendered social order that the Willful Girl rejects, this is the moment of violent rejection. Kristeva describes the child's separation from the mother as psychically violent, leaving "a

traumatic scar” (Grafius 3); though Kristeva perceives the mother as the abject figure in this separation, in the case of Carrie (and Willful Girls more broadly), the scar is left on the child. Indeed, we can connect Beauvoir’s definition of the child as the mother’s “double and other” to Kristeva’s explanation of the abject figure as unable to be defined as entirely self or other (Grafius 3). The Willful Girl is inherently abject because of this violent separation from the mother, who is her connection to the gendered social order.

Just as in the original Willful Child story, Carrie must be punished for her willfulness. After her mother finally dies, Carrie goes to her, screaming as she rips one of the knives out of her mother’s hand and holds her limp body close. Then, Carrie looks up at the ceiling in anticipatory fear. Sure enough, the house begins to rumble and crack; to recall the Willful Child, God has no pleasure in Carrie or her transgressions. As Carrie pulls her mother’s body into the prayer closet and locks them both inside, the house catches fire and begins to sink into the earth. Carrie dies, her head lolled back and blood in her mouth, as her house is pulled down, perhaps into Hell. Despite the fact that earlier the narrative framed Margaret as crazy, cruel, and in the wrong, this ending seems to prove her right in one respect: Carrie’s psychic gift, her willful supernatural powers, were evil after all. Though we sympathize with Carrie at first, we must as an audience reject her in the end, so that we may return to the natural order of things. As Barbara Creed explains it, “the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman” (48).

Carrie ends with the lone survivor of Carrie’s massacre, Sue Snell, dreaming of leaving flowers at Carrie’s vandalized gravestone. When she does, Carrie’s bloody hand

bursts from the earth, an uncanny parallel to the Willful Child's hand in the Brothers Grimm tale. Even in death, the Willful Girl is not contained; it calls to mind Modleski's description of Hitchcock's women, so often "the person who exerts an influence from beyond the grave" (*The Women Who Knew Too Much* 1). This transforms Carrie from girl to monster, inhuman and all the more frightening for it. The Willful Girl is, in the end, a monstrous figure. And *Carrie* is as much a cautionary tale as the Brothers Grimm story is; an easy, obvious reading of the film is not to bully the weird kids, because you don't know what they're capable of. This is the moral proclaimed by the marketing for the film: one of the descriptions displayed on Netflix for the movie states: "Mom said they'd all laugh at her. But she never said what Carrie would do to THEM." But what message does Carrie White's fate send, when her act of revenge is met with cosmic punishment and she, too, must die? It tells us that willfulness, no matter the motive, no matter how "earned" it may seem, is still a transgression that will not be forgiven. If the Willful Girl cannot adhere to her place, if she cannot accept the gendered role passed onto her, then there is no room for her in society and she must be driven out.

CHAPTER 4

“ALL THE DESIRES OF MY OWN WILL”: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE WITCH*

Postfeminism and empowering horror

Female-led horror films of the 2000s and 2010s, when the term “postfeminist” is often used to describe the culture, center around narratives which “acknowledge the depressingly limited parameters of young women’s role in popular media representation at the same time as [they] violently reinscribe those parameters” (Fradley 204-5). Instead of challenging traditional gender norms, these films seem to acknowledge feminist critiques while simultaneously sending the message that feminism does not “work” for the women and girls in the films. Indeed, Andi Zeisler describes a recent resurgence of blaming feminism for women’s unhappiness — “these folks suggest that feminism is so pervasive, so successful, that traditional gendered stereotypes will become endangered if they’re not boldly resurrected by a brave few” (Zeisler 166). At the same time, “empowerment” continues to be a popular buzzword in feminist pop media circles. Zeisler sees the term as a facet of what she calls choice feminism: “anything can be a feminist choice if a feminist makes that choice” (171).

In a postfeminist or choice feminist world, the feminist movement of decades past has achieved all that it set out to accomplish. Feminism is no longer needed, because women have everything they need to be equal and empowered, so everything women do is now inherently feminist and empowering. Hollywood and popular media lean into this mindset and tack the term “empowering” onto many female-led films and television shows, with the main stipulation seeming to be that the piece of media includes a woman at all. Films from the 2000s and 2010s, such as *The Babadook* (2014), *Let The Right One*

In (2008), and *Ginger Snaps* (2001), all center on distinctly gendered elements, simultaneously acknowledging and reinforcing the female-specific suffering of their protagonists. Essentially, 2000s and 2010s horror films are able to continue the trend of punishing women and girls because the belief that feminism has achieved its ultimate goal is used as a buffer from critiques of sexism.

This was a perfect cultural cocktail for a film like Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), which garnered praise simultaneously for being an empowerment narrative (Sims) and for *not* being an empowerment narrative (Joho). The ambiguity of what "empowerment" means, as well as a culture that has made feminism an apolitical brand (see Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*), allows for this contradiction of interpretations, both of which commend the film for its commentary on gender and adolescent womanhood. *The Witch*, though it tells the story of a family, truly centers around Thomasin, a teenage girl whose strong will and inability to meet the expectations of her gender lead to a series of supernatural tragedies for herself and her family. Her difficult relationship with her mother, as well as the way she straddles the line between what is expected gendered behavior and what isn't, makes her a prime example of the Willful Girl trope. If this film truly existed in a postfeminist world, one would expect that the Willful Girl of 2015 would have more agency, a better fate, than the Willful Girl of decades past. But as Thomasin's storyline reveals, not much has changed after all.

"I am that very witch": A close analysis of the film

The Witch begins with a trial, a fitting start to a film that will center around the more informal trial against Thomasin later on. A farmer — William — and his family are banished from their Puritan community over a religious dispute. William, his pregnant

wife Katherine, and their children Thomasin, Caleb, and twins Jonas and Mercy, set out to build a life away from the protection of the community's walls. They set up a failing farm in the woods and have another child, a son named Samuel. One day, Thomasin, charged with caring for Sam, plays peek-a-boo with the baby in the yard, and he is stolen from under her nose. In the woods, a haggard old woman sneaks away with the infant to a cave, where she kills the baby and brutally mashes him to a pulp, covering her body in his viscera before standing naked in the moonlight. The family eventually gives up their search for Sam, William insisting that he was stolen by a wolf, though others in the family suspect witchcraft.

Thomasin struggles to play a maternal role for Jonas and Mercy, who do not listen to her and constantly insist that one of the goats, Black Phillip, speaks to them. In a desperate attempt to get Mercy to obey her, Thomasin claims to have been the one who gave Sam to the Devil. The tension only grows when Thomasin and Caleb overhear their parents discussing sending Thomasin away to be a servant. Caleb and Thomasin go to the woods early the following morning, in order to check the wolf trap their father had set. In the woods, they are separated, and Caleb is seduced by the witch. When he returns to the farm, naked and seizing, Mercy and Jonas accuse Thomasin of being a witch, and claim that she is making them forget their prayers. When Caleb dies, William demands that Thomasin admit to her witchcraft. Thomasin denies it, and says that the twins, with their whispering to Black Phillip, must be the true source of evil. William locks all three remaining children in the goat pen overnight.

In the night, the witch enters the goat pen and takes the twins. Thomasin wakes in the wreckage of the pen in time to see her father gored to death by Black Phillip.

Katherine, wrecked with grief and rage, accuses Thomasin of seducing both Caleb and William, turning them to wickedness. She attempts to strangle Thomasin, who in self defense kills her with a knife. After, Thomasin sits in the empty farmhouse until nightfall, when she goes to Black Phillip and asks him to speak to her. He tells her she could “live deliciously” if she would sign her name in his book. He leads her, naked, into the forest, where a coven of witches chants around a fire. They all begin to rise into the air, Thomasin among them, and she laughs as she floats into the night sky.

We are introduced to Thomasin’s willfulness from her first lines of dialogue in the film. After the opening title sequence, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Thomasin, kneeling in prayer. Her eyes are skyward and wide with earnest pleading. “I here confess I’ve lived in sin,” she begins. After listing her sins (playing on the Sabbath, disobeying her parents), she says these actions were “All the desires of my own will, and not the Holy Spirit.” In admitting to her own will as the site of her sin, Thomasin encapsulates an age-old belief that “views the child’s will as that which must be broken” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 63). From her introduction, Thomasin is informing the viewer that she is sinful, a fact which is reiterated by her father William. After all, the will can be “the truest measure of the state of the person” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 61), and throughout the film, William reminds his children that they are inherently sinful; only God’s grace and forgiveness will save them.

Of Thomasin’s willful acts of sin, most relevant — and perhaps most damning — is when she states she has been disobedient of her parents. Returning to the Grimm story, we know that the willful child was struck down by God because she would not do as her mother wished. According to Ahmed, the parental will translates to the will of God.

Thomasin concludes her prayer by asking God for forgiveness: “Show me mercy. Show me thy light.” However, the very next scene informs the viewer that, just as with the Grimm story, God has no pleasure in Thomasin and will not heed her prayer. Thomasin’s mother places her in charge of the baby, Sam, and she takes him to the yard to play peek-a-boo. In less than a minute, Sam is stolen while Thomasin’s eyes are closed. This scene, in succession with Thomasin’s admission of sin, gives the audience immediate insight to her fate: she is failing in her role as the eldest daughter, and there will be no forgiveness.

The eldest daughter has long been perceived as a second mother. Beauvoir explains that “either for convenience or because of hostility and sadism, the mother unloads many of her functions onto [the older sister]” (Beauvoir 300). Hostility can certainly be seen in Thomasin’s tempestuous relationship with her mother. After a brief time jump to a week after Sam’s disappearance, Katherine chastises Thomasin for not watching Jonas and Mercy. “I was and I bade them to help me, and they paid me no mind —” Thomasin begins to protest, but Katherine cuts her off with an angry, disappointed, “What’s the matter with thee, Thomasin? What’s the matter with thee?” Thomasin’s quiet, repeated protests that the twins would not mind her go unheard. The implication that something is inherently the matter with Thomasin, because she cannot keep watch over her siblings or play her role in the family, again foreshadows her inevitable punishment: “The willful child, who will not do as her mother wishes, must be punished, and her punishment is necessary for the preservation of the familial as well as social order” (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 63). This foreshadowing is effective because of how ingrained in our collective social subconscious these roles and expectations are. The role of the woman is passed on from mother to child “with zeal and arrogance mixed with

resentment,” a mixture of pride and humiliation in the same way that a drug addict or gambler shamefully passes on their addiction (Beauvoir 295). What’s more, Ahmed explains that the parental will is symbolic of the will of God; therefore Katherine’s disappointment in Thomasin can be understood as God’s displeasure in her as well.

Although these scenes show how the narrative clues the audience into Thomasin’s fate, they do not represent moments of active defiance; we have yet to see the willfulness she prays forgiveness for in the beginning of the film. The first glimpse of Thomasin’s willfulness is during a quarrel with her younger sister Mercy, laying the foundation for an animosity between them that escalates throughout the film. In the scene directly following the one discussed above, Thomasin is at the brook washing her father’s clothes. Caleb joins her by the water, and their playful sibling banter is interrupted by a rustling in the underbrush. Mercy’s voice calls out, “I be the witch of the wood!” She rises from the tall grass, holding a stick like a witch’s broom. Thomasin questions why she is being forced to wash their father’s clothes like a slave when Mercy is the one who misbehaved, and Mercy stops playing to state soberly, “Because mother hates you.” The two begin to bicker — Mercy says it’s Thomasin’s fault she is no longer allowed to leave the farm alone, because Thomasin let the witch take Sam. When Caleb attempts to protest that it was a wolf, Thomasin interjects: “It was a witch, Mercy. You speak right. It was I.” Slowly, she approaches Mercy, pronouncing, “*I be the witch of the wood.*” Mercy, initially retorting “Liar!,” grows more visibly frightened. “I’ll make any man or thing else vanish that I like,” Thomasin says coldly. She pins Mercy to the ground and snarls that she will “witch” Mercy, their mother, and Jonas too, if Mercy tells on her. Caleb yanks Thomasin off their sister, and Mercy runs away, clearly believing what Thomasin said.

This scene shows more than just an inability to live up to the expectations of the eldest daughter, or even the sins Thomasin confessed to in her prayer — this is an act of will that grants her power, and is in direct defiance of the will of God, and therefore her family. From a narrative standpoint, this is the moment in which Thomasin truly dooms herself: a lie though it may be, Thomasin has confessed to consorting with the Devil. And although Thomasin does not actually possess the witchcraft she claims to have, this moment still connects her willfulness to the supernatural. In the eyes of her family, she is a witch, and this influences the way they perceive her willfulness and how they punish her for it; it is this perceived connection that aligns her with the Willful Girl trope.

The film is a slow burn of increasing horror, particularly with Caleb's subsequent seduction and possession, but one of the most frightening moments comes directly after his death. Katherine, hysterical, sobs over Caleb's body. The twins, moments before, accused Thomasin of witchcraft. Katherine screams at Thomasin to get away from Caleb, and Thomasin runs out of the house in tears. William goes after her and they sit outside as she cries in his arms. It seems, for a moment, that he will defend her from her mother and siblings' accusations. But then he claims he saw with his own eyes how she had "witch'd" the twins, and her protests — "They lie!" — are cut off by his continued insistence that she tell the truth to save her soul. Her denial fades into a somber realization, and she says, "Will you not hear me?" Thomasin understands then that her father will not believe or protect her, and says, "You ask me to speak truth? You and mother planned to rid the farm of me." She brings up all the ways her father has failed her throughout the course of the film, each time spitting, "Is that truth?" William abruptly grabs and shakes her, all tenderness gone, screaming, "Bitch!" She tries to tell him that it

is the goat, Black Phillip, who is Lucifer, and that the twins in their speaking with him are the ones who cursed the family — but William will not listen. His solution is to lock the twins and Thomasin in the goat shed, unable to decide who to believe.

This scene is frightening because it is what we have been anticipating the entire film: Thomasin is accused, and there is nothing she can do to make anyone believe her innocence. The viewer may be unsure if the twins or Black Phillip are involved with the Devil at this point, but we know with certainty, as we have been following Thomasin for the majority of the film, that she speaks the truth. The scene also exemplifies how the Willful Girl is different from the Final Girl model presented by Carol J. Clover. In Clover's definition, the Final Girl's deviation from the girls in her social circle only empowers her to defeat her antagonist, and works to make her more appealing to the audience: "She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way ... the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality" (Clover 51). The viewer wants to identify with the Final Girl, and we root for her actions, as she is the first to see the danger and often the only one to recognize it in time to avoid death. This appeal is not found in Thomasin; we dread her fate, and the way in which she challenges expectations only assures us that things will not end well for her.

In her discussion of the way Hitchcock's narratives treat antagonist women, Modleski states, "In place of the mirror she would hold up to herself, patriarchy holds up a distorting mirror reflecting her as a defiled, mutilated, and guilty creature" — it is "the job of the father and the representatives of the law to teach her" (Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* 118). This is the transaction that occurs between Thomasin and her

father; she attempts to present her innocence to him, and instead he condemns her as a witch. This distorted vision that he projects upon her is one she furiously rejects in the moment, but — as the viewer sees by the end of the film and has, to some extent, been led to expect throughout its entirety — it is an identity she eventually comes to embrace as the truth.

At the center of the rising discontent in the family, deeper than the supernatural torment of the witch, is the conflict between Thomasin and her mother, Katherine. It is the root of Thomasin's anguish, that her mother has no love for her. As Beauvoir explains, "for the mother, the daughter is both her double and an other, the mother cherishes her and at the same time is hostile to her" (295). At the beginning of the film, Thomasin is placed in the role of her mother's double: she is meant to act as a secondary mother to Sam, and later the twins. As Thomasin fails in this role and Katherine's hostility grows, she comes to view Thomasin instead as "other." It should come as no surprise that the climactic moment of the film occurs when Thomasin and her mother are the only two left alive, and Katherine throws herself at Thomasin in a hysterical rage. She accuses Thomasin of killing the twins, sobbing, "It is you!" Thomasin pleads with her, imploring "I am your daughter!" Her mother then accuses her of seducing both Caleb and William, calling her a "proud slut." As often is the case for the Willful Girl, her will is tied to her burgeoning femininity; Caleb seemed oddly fascinated with his sister's breasts in an earlier scene, shamefully attracted to her. Although Thomasin herself did nothing to motivate this behavior and was entirely unaware of it, the mere fact that she is going through puberty and becoming more womanly in appearance is enough for her mother to blame her for Caleb's fall into sin and death. Katherine throws Thomasin to the ground,

screaming, “You killed my children!” This phrasing, as if Thomasin were not one of her own, confirms Thomasin’s status as “other” in Katherine’s eyes. Thomasin’s frantic cries of “I love you, I love you” fall on deaf ears as Katherine begins to strangle her, and it is only when Thomasin grabs a billhook from the ground and hacks at her mother’s head until she is dead that the frenzied war between them finally ends.

While *The Willful Child* story ends with the mother beating down the child’s stubborn arm so that the child may be at rest, the *Willful Girl* departs from this narrative and instead sees the girl becoming monstrous, resorting to violence in order to strike down those who represent that which she is defying, whether that be the maternal or society more broadly. In Thomasin’s case, she is forced to raise the metaphorical rod and kill the last remaining member of her family: her mother. If the film were following Clover’s Final Girl model, Thomasin’s action would be heroic — “When she downs the killer, we are triumphant” (Clover 45). But Katherine, though an undeniable antagonist for Thomasin, is no slasher villain, and there is no triumph in the way Thomasin lays in the dirt, covered in her mother’s blood. Modleski’s words feel more applicable; in an analysis of Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, she states, “Finally, there is nothing left for the heroine but to desire to kill the mother off, a desire which, as we have seen, entails killing part of herself” (Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* 49). The desire to kill the mother, according to Modleski, is representative of the female heroine giving up the desire for the mother’s love and “affirming her primary attachment to the male” (*The Women Who Knew Too Much* 49) — in other words, aligning her loyalty to the patriarchy. However, while Thomasin killing her mother is certainly symbolic of her giving up on earning her mother’s love, the act does not endear her to the patriarchal order; in fact, it does the

opposite, affirming her utter rejection from it. With her mother's blood on her hands, she has no chance of returning to her community and reintegrating into the gendered role she is expected to play. They would likely accuse her of witchcraft and sin, just as her family had.

Where, then, is a Willful Girl meant to go, if not into the earth? Thomasin rises from the ground and out from under her mother's body, and walks back into the house as if dazed, numb; she strips off her bloodied clothes, wraps herself in her mother's shawl, and sits at the kitchen table with her head on her arms until nightfall. She walks to the goat shed by candlelight, where Black Phillip is waiting for her. They stare at each other for a moment, and then Black Phillip trots inside the shed. Thomasin follows. She asks for Black Phillip to speak to her the way he spoke to Jonas and Mercy. At first, there is no response, and she turns to go. Then, in a whispering voice, Black Phillip (unseen to the viewer) speaks: "What dost thou want?" To which Thomasin replies, "What canst thou give?" Black Phillip offers "the taste of butter," "a pretty dress," before asking, "Wouldst thou like to live deliciously? Wouldst thou like to see the world?" Thomasin says yes. He orders she remove her shift, and she does so as a tear trails down her cheek. Thomasin is to sign her name in Black Phillip's book, as he guides her hand (manifested as a man dressed in black, out of focus standing behind her). Then, naked, she enters the woods and comes upon a coven of witches, naked and chanting an unknown tongue around a bonfire. Their guttural cries give way to laughter as the witches rise into the air. The camera cuts to a close-up of Thomasin's face, her chest stained with her mother's dried blood, as she begins to rise into the air as well. All diegetic sound fades and is replaced by a chorus of women's voices, but Thomasin's silent image laughs and cries at

turns as she flies higher, until the camera pulls back to reveal her hovering at the height of a tree, arms raised in an almost crucified pose. The film ends.

The final image of Thomasin rising, exultant, into the air, might appear on the surface to indicate that she has altogether avoided the damned fate of the Willful Girl — she has received the supernatural powers she was accused of having all along, and she is not dead because of it. Does this mean she has won? If that is meant to be the takeaway, I find it unconvincing. Black Phillip promises Thomasin material wealth, a chance to see the world, but there has been no indication that the witches in the woods have access to these things. The witch's home is a cave, dirty and with few belongings. What's more, the items Black Phillip entices Thomasin with seem wholly generic, with no prior implication that these are specific desires of hers. In this way, Thomasin's will is transformed by the narrative; she spoke out against the unjust way she was treated, and wanted respect and love from her family, and now it appears that she desired better and nicer clothes. Ahmed describes a similar phenomenon used to dismiss or harshly judge feminist women for speaking out: "Her willfulness ... is interpreted as a will to power, as if protesting against something masks a desire for that very thing ... The language of injustice is treated as a screen behind which a will lurks: a will that is wanting" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 71). The material items offered to Thomasin are not what she truly desired, but at this point there is not much that would be a more compelling offer. Her family is dead, and if she were to try to return to their old community, they would surely view her as a threat.

Returning to a point of Ahmed's referenced earlier — that the Grimm story reinforces the idea that a child's will must be broken — I argue that the final scene of the

film does not show Thomasin's will as triumphant, but broken; she weeps as she signs Black Phillip's book. In *The Willful Child* story, God turns his back on the girl. In *The Witch*, the Willful Girl turns her back on God. She gives in to the Devil's vague promises, for what else is she to do? To reject the offer would be to resign herself to a slow death by starvation, if the witch or Black Phillip didn't gore her to death first. If she will be seen as a monster regardless of her actions, does she really have an option but to become that monster?

Barbara Creed defines the monstrous-feminine as the figure who crosses the borders "between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil ... those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (Creed 42). The mother, Creed states, is often the site of this monstrosity and abjection: "the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it" (43). In *The Witch*, the monstrous-feminine is instead embodied in Thomasin; Katherine shows no hesitation to release her daughter — she rejects Thomasin as her child, and it is Thomasin who shows reluctance, sobbing "I love you, I love you" until the very moment she must kill her mother to save her own life. Thomasin crosses a physical border into the woods, where she enters the supernatural, the evil, the abandonment of gendered expectations. In short, she becomes the monstrous-feminine. There are few images more iconic to represent the "shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" woman in the patriarchal discourse (Creed 37) than that of the witch. She may not die as retribution for her will, but Thomasin's fate is indeed still one of punishment. The witches are not empowering figures in this film, they are embodiments of evil — willing to mash babies to a pulp and seduce adolescent boys, seemingly for no purpose other than because the family happened to show up in their woods. To become

one of them, Thomasin must sign away her soul, which is arguably a death in itself. Her choices and will stripped from her, with only one wicked option remaining, still ends the film in tragedy.

CHAPTER 5

WILLFUL GIRLS, THEN AND NOW

The “waves” model of discussing the history of the feminist movement — separating it into first, second, and third waves, and so on — creates a narrative of progress. The problems of the second wave are no longer the problems of the third wave, and it is that very distinction that marks the start of a new era. This mindset allows persistent structural issues to be swept under the rug, where they perpetuate and go unacknowledged or unchallenged. As Lisa Maria Hogeland so succinctly explains it, “notions of generational rupture or divides work effectively to prevent us from seeing the powerful persistence of political beliefs, of specific women’s issues, and of strategies for change” (117). This mindset not only turns generations against each other with the belief that we cannot look to our past to understand our present, it also redirects the focus in an individualistic way that prevents the bigger picture from being seen at all; Hogeland explains, “[consciousness raising] as personal transformation necessarily prioritizes those aspects of patriarchy that are attributable to men’s sexism (and women’s internalized sexism), rather than to the structure of institutions” (114). If the institutions themselves are not recognized as the source of issues of sexism throughout the generations, the problems carry on, masked in new lingo or under new guises of progress.

Carrie and *The Witch* exist in two very different eras, according to the “waves” model of looking at feminist history. Some of today’s viewers looking back on *Carrie* see a sexist narrative of decades past; Medium.com’s Sarah Duong finds *Carrie*’s bullying to be “a metaphor of her oppressor’s attempt to ‘plug up’ and suppress her femininity” and sees “the shaming of her first menstruation, the suppression of her sexuality, and *Carrie*’s

embodiment of the monstrous-feminine” as evidence of the fact that female puberty and sexuality are almost always explored through fear (Duong). Others see *Carrie* as empowering for the female viewer: “Think of any James Bond film, with the hero and villain fighting over some semi-anonymous Bond girl. In *Carrie*, by contrast, it’s women who get to act, plot, rescue and, ultimately, kill” (Berlatsky). And Tor.com contributor Leigh Butler believes *Carrie* reflects the fact that second wave feminism was “deeply divided between those who were vehemently against anything that smacked of pornography or exploitation of women’s bodies, and those who endorsed a sex-positive version of feminism,” questioning if De Palma’s cinematic and narrative choices were sexist or intending to reflect a sex-positive stance (Butler).

There are similar mixed responses to *The Witch*; a review in *The Atlantic* describes Thomasin’s submission to Black Phillip as “intentionally muddy,” but states: “there’s a giddy sense nonetheless that she has triumphed” (Sims). Thomasin’s actress, Anya Taylor-Joy, is cited as saying that the film’s ending is ultimately a happy one, because “joining the coven is the first choice Thomasin gets to make on her own” (Sims), and writer/director Robert Eggers states that while he did not initially intend for it to be so in his first draft, he views the film now as one about female empowerment. Beth Younger stated in *The Conversation* that women in horror are experiencing a “renaissance” of sorts, specifically stating that *The Witch* “captured audiences by being a historically accurate tale that included a feminist twist” (Younger). *Kill Screen*’s Jess Joho had a less positive interpretation, even going to far as to compare Thomasin’s fate to *Carrie* and find her worse off:

“If the story had painted her ultimate destiny as a clear decision between the life she lived with her family and dancing naked in the woods around a flame, that would be one thing. But Thomasin is no Carrie (of the Stephen King novel), who, despite ending up worse off in many ways, at least chose to be up there of her own volition” (Joho).

This comparison of the two characters shows an inclination to find similarities in their stories. If the “waves” model is true, *Carrie* and *The Witch* should be sending very different messages, because the sexist struggles that Willful Girls of the 1970s faced are no longer the problems they once were. But as these reviews reflect, audiences and critics have similar reactions to both films. And a comparison of the two reveals a multitude of similarities in their narratives and the specific messaging they send.

Both Carrie and Thomasin are subject to disapproval and mistreatment from their family members, in both cases because of the inability to live up to specific standards — to be like their mothers. Carrie is expected to follow her mother’s religious beliefs and strict standards of purity, while Thomasin is expected to play the role of a second mother to her siblings. They are both held to unrealistic standards: Carrie’s mother sees sin in every action Carrie takes, and Thomasin is used as the scapegoat for her family’s problems, none of which are within her control. Because neither girl is able to adhere to expectations, they are seen as going against God. Carrie is accused by her mother of being a witch; Thomasin is accused of the same by her entire family. The reasoning behind these accusations is slightly different in each story: Carrie displays her telekinetic powers before her mother accuses her of outright witchcraft, but before that Margaret had accused her of sinning and going against God for merely getting her period. Thomasin

genuinely has no supernatural abilities, and the accusations made against her are purely because of her inability to live up to her role in the family, along with her mother claiming she “seduced” her brother and father, blaming her for their deaths. To return to the Willful Child story’s framework, both Carrie and Thomasin go against their mothers, and so they are told that God has no love for them.

Sexuality and puberty also play a poignant role in both films, damning both girls due to things entirely outside of their control and associating female puberty with witchcraft. *Carrie* does this very overtly, combining the arrival of Carrie’s first menstrual period with the first occurrence of her telekinesis. It is also seen in Margaret’s reaction to Carrie’s prom dress: calling Carrie’s breasts “dirty pillows” and accusing her throughout the film of the sin of “lustful thoughts” if not actions. Though less blatantly stated in dialogue, *The Witch* also ties Thomasin’s suspected witchcraft to her sexuality. Her younger brother Caleb has several moments where he seems to be attracted to her; at one point, she is asleep and her shirt is revealing part of her breast. Caleb’s eyes linger there before he leaves the room. The witch punishes Caleb by seducing him; because Thomasin is aligned with the witch (both in the accusations from her family and from her own claim, “I be the witch of the wood,” to Mercy), her budding sexual maturity is presented as seduction. Indeed, her mother blames her for seducing Caleb, and her father as well. Both girls’ mothers try to kill them in response to this perceived sexual deviance.

While neither film presents the mother’s perspective as the “correct” one to sympathize with, it is worth examining how in both cases the accusations against their daughters become true by the end of the films. In Carrie’s case, her mother accuses her of dangerous witchcraft, saying that her powers come from Satan. At the end of the film,

Carrie has violently murdered her entire class and her mother, and her house collapses into hell. Thomasin is accused of being a witch, and by the end of the film she has signed her soul away to Black Phillip and joined the coven. Both girls must kill their mothers in self defense, and it is only after they have done so that they end up fulfilling the very destiny their mothers accused them of. This is consistent with the Willful Girl trope, in which the girl becomes monstrous in large part due to defying the gendered expectations placed upon her, often by a maternal figure.

The greatest deviation between Carrie and Thomasin's stories seems to be their endings: Carrie dies at the end of the film, stabbed in the back by her mother and sinking underground with her home. Thomasin is the sole survivor of her family, and joins the witches in the end. According to director Robert Eggers, this makes Thomasin's story a feminist one. However, regardless of his intentions, I cannot agree that the ending is empowering, or truly much different from Carrie's fate. How much can we value a choice when the only other option is death, and when that choice consigns her to a fate that completely isolates her from society and aligns her with what is shown throughout the film to be evil incarnate? Jess Joho of *Kill Screen* shares the sentiment that Thomasin's story is far from an empowering one: "Rather than tell the easier, more typical modern witch story about female empowerment, it tells the story of female anxiety and dread" (Joho). Frankly, I question terming the empowerment narrative as the "easier" one to tell, considering how many elements Thomasin's story — the accusations, the punishment of her will — are seen in numerous horror films throughout the decades. Joho's article claims that "*The Witch* isn't an empowerment narrative and that's why it's great," a statement which implies that empowerment narratives are no longer needed, and that as a

culture we are oversaturated with them. This perspective calls to mind Deborah Siegel's discussion of modern understandings of feminism as "the story of a product rather than of a process" (*Third Wave Agenda*, 59). Siegel continues:

"Call it 'power feminism,' call it 'babe feminism,' call it 'feminism for the majority,' today's populist feminists are rejecting the 'obsolete' and 'maladaptive,' the 'Victorian' and the 'stock plot fantasies' of their feminist foremothers — and their progeny" (*Third Wave Agenda*, 64).

It seems that as a society, by following the belief that feminist issues are contained to specific eras in the past, we are at a point where a narrative that empowers the Willful Girl is viewed as less valuable than the rehashing of the Willful Girl's narrative as it has always been. Even the use of witchcraft accusations in both films shows a consistent fear of the other, the outsider. Victoria Madden calls witches "the most abject spectre of American history" and explains that they "embody the ultimate male fear: uncontrollable females who, endowed with unholy powers, threaten to break free of the margins to which they must be confined" (15). This fear has not gone away.

Has there been no progress in the decades between *Carrie* and *The Witch*? Although both girls are consigned to tragic fates, it is true that Carrie White's death is remarkably more blatant in its narrative punishment. While Carrie sinks into the earth, Thomasin rises into the air — though both are covered in blood, both being taken in by some representation of the Devil. In the case of *Carrie*, the film's narrative frames her death as a punishment for her actions. Although we have sympathized with her, she is now "scary Carrie," the horror movie monster the audience was promised from the trailers. The ending scene, in which Sue dreams of Carrie's bloodied arm bursting from

the grave to pull her down, leans heavily into this understanding of Carrie's character. The perspective switch to Sue places the audience in her shoes, rather than Carrie's as we have been throughout the rest of the movie. This allows Carrie to become entirely othered and seen as a literal nightmare by the film's end. In *The Witch*, Thomasin is not painted as the villain, narratively. Her choice at the ending of the film, to join the witches, is intended by the director to be a positive one, and as viewers we are never given a moment in which we fear her the way we do Carrie. In some respects, this can be viewed as progress. On the other hand, in many ways *The Witch* is even more frightening because it is framed as a feminist ending. Wearing a mask of female empowerment, it instead reinforces what we have been taught about what happens girls who are willful. Thomasin is left with one option by the end of the film, and joining the witches loses the impact of a willful choice when it is the only one she has left. To return to Clover, she says that horror films share a commonality with fairy tales in that both engage with "repressed fears and desires" that are crucial to pass along, generation to generation (Clover 11). *The Witch*, just like *Carrie*, sustains the message of "The Willful Child" — the mother may not beat the child's will into the submission of death, but the child has nonetheless been stripped of her will. Both Thomasin and Carrie become complete outsiders, unable to rejoin society not by choice, but because all choices have been taken from them.

By separating feminist challenges and issues into certain decades, we run the risk of allowing them to continue, even under the guise of progress. This is not only seen in the academic and activist realms; it is seen in the media we produce, the films that are a reflection of our culture, stigmas, beliefs, and fears. A deeper look at *Carrie* and *The Witch* side-by-side shows just how easily the same stigmas can be reproduced in this

way. So, how do we define what *does* make a horror film feminist, empowering, and progressive? In the conclusion chapter, I will explore what “feminist” horror could look like, and if it is possible for the Willful Girl to exist without a tragic, punishing ending.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: EMPOWERING THE WILLFUL GIRL

Over the course of the last several chapters, there has been much discussion about whether or not the Willful Girl trope, and the two films more closely analyzed, are “feminist.” But what exactly does it mean for a horror film to be a feminist one? How do we define if a trope is empowering or not? To answer this, I need to first take a look at what pop culture websites and articles are deeming “feminist” horror. By searching “feminist horror movies” on Google, I was able to find myriad articles from websites such as *Bustle*, *The Mary Sue*, *Glamour*, and more, with compiled lists of the best horror films with a feminist twist. These lists contained a lot of overlap, with certain films coming up over and over again — including several films that feature a Willful Girl. What follows is an overview of what some of the top results of my search defined as “feminist horror.”

Bustle's “26 Feminist Horror Movies That Will Freak You Out Without Bringing You Down” described horror films by saying that despite numerous sexist tropes, such as the virgin/whore dichotomy seen in the slasher subgenre, “there are so many other horror movies out there that subvert those expectations or ignore that plot device altogether to tell fascinating, original stories about women, using horror as the mechanism” (Hughes). The list includes *Carrie*, which is described as “the ultimate in revenge horror,” and *The Witch*, saying “it's a full-on witch hunt that centers and empathizes with the young woman being accused of evil” (Hughes). The list does not go into detail about what specific aspects of the films make them feminist, as its focus is mainly on the fact that there is a female lead.

The Mary Sue's “6 Feminist Horror Movies to Watch This Halloween Season” gave more detailed reasoning for each pick. Of *Ginger Snaps*, for example, the author says that it fills the void in female-led werewolf stories, “using the werewolf transformation as a deliberately unsubtle metaphor for a girl’s physical and emotional transition into adolescence” (Kane). An exploration of female puberty is not an unusual or inherently feminist narrative for a horror film, but Kane explains that the use of the male-dominated werewolf trope sets *Ginger Snaps* (a Willful Girl story, as mentioned in chapter one) apart from the crowd. Of the other films on the list, Kane focuses on their ability to use the female gaze (in the case of *Revenge*) and their exploration of the dynamic and fraught relationships between mother and child (in *The Monster* and *The Babadook*).

Glamour's “The Most Feminist Horror Movies of All Time” article claims that “not every scary flick treats its female characters like objects for the male gaze. Some are even feminist as hell” (Rosa). *Ginger Snaps* is featured on this list as well; the author says that it “explores sexuality, death, and werewolves in a fiercely female way.” The list also includes *Carrie*: “Carrie is essentially an extended metaphor for becoming a woman. [She] demonstrates ultimate power by burning her high school (and the bullies in it) to the ground.” And of *The Witch*, the author writes that Thomasin “abandons convention and the familiar to go after what she really wants: Satanic witchcraft power” (Rosa).

There are a variety of ways in which feminist horror is defined by these sites: *Girlboss* says they should “represents women as sovereign subjects (even if they’re the villains) rather than objects,” even when the film is still focusing on violence and sexism (Mandybur). *Bitch Media*, when talking about the film *May* (2002), states that what

makes it feminist is that it is “about a woman struggling to exist outside of socially acceptable boundaries, although unfortunately for *May*, that existence is extremely difficult and ultimately impossible” (Baltus). This is just a sampling of the articles uncovered in a brief Google search, but some common themes certainly arose. Women and girls seeking revenge, women and girls (and their relationships to each other) being at the forefront of the story, explorations of female puberty and sexuality. These are all topics that viewers are drawn to again and again, which is why the catalog of female-led horror continues to expand. But at the core of all these articles, what seems to mark a film as feminist is very simple: a woman is in the lead role. Andi Zeisler calls out the problem with this definition, saying, “The rush to laud the movie for simply not being the usual woman-sidelining fare dished up by Hollywood ... is far less rewarding — because, ultimately, it presses the conclusion that it’s the most we should hope for” (58).

It is not enough to look only at the surface. Women being in the writer’s room or in the director’s chair, or front and center on the poster — while important and necessary to the diversity of the stories that our movies tell — is not the finish line. Frankly, I would call it a bare minimum. (It is worth noting that of the thirteen films listed in the “Filmography and Recommended Viewing” section at the end of this thesis, all but one of the films are directed by men.) We must look deeper, pulling apart the narratives to see the underlying message. What happens to the Willful Girl, even as she takes center stage in her own story? Time and time again, she falls. The danger of defining these stories as feminist is that it allows us to ignore systemic problems that create inescapable fates for these girls. Zeisler says, “Marketplace feminism presumes that we can be clean, blank slates with no residue at all of the sexism or racism that defined the lives of those who

came before us” (255). The focus is on the individual — a woman’s problems and the limitations she comes up against are said to be because of her, not sexist social structures that are deeply embedded into our collective social consciousness. We must recognize that the Willful Girl’s fate is a result of misogyny, and no matter how gratifying it may be to see Carrie White unleash a hellish revenge on her tormentors, it is not empowering to watch her die because of it, nor see the Willful Girls who come after her fall as well.

I believe it is possible, and crucial, to do better. Returning to Sara Ahmed, she says that we must keep the charge of willfulness alive. “The arm that keeps coming out of the grave can signify persistence and protest, or perhaps even more importantly, persistence *as* protest. We need to give the arm something to reach for” (*Willful Subjects*, 203-4). This, I argue, is the crux of a more responsible use of the word “feminist” when looking at media more generally, and horror films specifically. Ahmed is of course referencing the Brothers Grimm’s Willful Child, the precursor to the Willful Girl. What does her arm have to reach for? The solution is two-fold: the narrative should acknowledge that the Willful Girl’s will is being suppressed because of a sexist system in place, and her ending should not condemn her for daring to push back against that system. Many Willful Girl stories are halfway there; *Carrie* and *The Witch* both make very clear that the accusations and cruel treatment endured by Carrie and Thomasin are due largely to misogyny. But their fates do not challenge the system, and instead the films dispose of these girls whose existence is a rebellion. I do not believe that this can be written off as merely an inevitability of the horror genre, either. Plenty of horror films allow their protagonists to survive, to defeat the evil that pursued them in the end. It is

time to revise the “face” of the evil in the Willful Girl’s story: it is not the girl who should be feared and punished.

In order to create feminist retellings of *Carrie* and *The Witch*, some fundamental elements of their stories would need to change. Showing Carrie’s powers (which symbolize her will) as more than just destructive — having a moment in which she uses her powers in a positive manner, or finds some joy in them. Interestingly, the 2013 *Carrie* remake attempted to include a scene like this. However, Carrie’s punishment of death still portrays her as the monster in the end, whether her powers are wholly destructive or not. *Carrie* would have to change on a large scale, either removing the entire moment where she loses control of her powers, or somehow having her escape town entirely, as it is unlikely she would find acceptance after murdering her entire class. *The Witch* requires more subtle changes. Thomasin is left with no choice at the end of the film, and to give her more would be challenging while remaining historically accurate. However, including an indication that Thomasin was unhappy in the village before they left, and that she does not long to return to that society, would make her choice to join the witches feel more like one she is actively making in order to leave a repressive society behind. Changes such as these do not necessarily mean that there is less horror or tragedy in these films; they would merely allow for the narrative to frame the true villain as those who would suppress the protagonist’s will.

In the end, whether or not the Willful Girl is feminist is not all that is important. Her story is worth knowing and receiving a closer look because of what it can teach us. Acknowledging the Willful Girl as a repeated trope within the horror genre allows us to follow her pattern. Tracking the evolution of the trope, and seeing what remains the same

(despite what some internet listicles might say), can give valuable insight to the ideologies, struggles, and prejudices that are still pervasive today. The Willful Girl is a reflection of the feminist work we still have to do, and pushes back against the idea that certain problems have been left in decades past. Whether or not it is possible for the Willful Girl's story to be told in a feminist manner remains to be seen. But if the past several decades — and the past two centuries since the Brothers Grimm story in the 1800s — are anything to go by, she is not going away any time soon. She is, after all, persistent by definition. And it is worth considering what could happen, what it would *mean*, if her persistence was allowed to pay off.

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APPENDIX 1
FILMOGRAPHY

FILMOGRAPHY

The Bad Seed. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Warner Bros., 1956.

Carrie. Dir. Brian De Palma. Red Bank Films, 1976.

Carrie. Dir. Kimberly Peirce. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, 2013.

The Exorcist. Dir. William Friedkin. Warner Bros., 1973.

Firestarter. Dir. Mark L. Lester. Dino De Laurentiis, 1984.

Ginger Snaps. Dir. John Fawcett. Copperheart Entertainment, 2000.

Let The Right One In. Dir. Tomas Alfredson. EFTI, 2008.

The Witch. Dir. Robert Eggers. Parts and Labor, 2015.

APPENDIX 2
RECOMMENDED VIEWING

RECOMMENDED VIEWING

The Final Girls. Dir. Todd Strauss-Schulson. Groundswell Productions, 2015.

June. Dir. L. Gustavo Cooper. De Angeles Films, 2015.

The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane. Dir. Nicholas Gessner. Zev Braun Productions, 1976.

Pyewacket. Dir. Adam MacDonald. JoBro Productions & Film Finance, 2017.

The Ring. Dir. Gore Verbinski. DreamWorks, 2002.