

## “Once with a Knitting Needle, Once with a Hanger”: Reckoning with and Reworking Carol J. Clover’s Final Girl in *Halloween* (1978) and *Halloween* (2018)

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In the three decades following the publication of Carol J. Clover’s seminal essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” an entire generation of horror fans, filmmakers, and scholars have entered the world with fresh eyes and ideas about how gender functions in the slasher subgenre. Many of these fans have never known a world without the Final Girl, or, more accurately, without Clover’s conception of the Final Girl. The sole female survivor has long been a staple of the horror genre, but it was not until the 1987 publication of “Her Body, Himself” in *Representations* that this archetype entered public discourse and came to be known by Clover’s term: the Final Girl.

Though most casual horror fans have likely never heard Clover’s name, it is not a stretch to say that it is her definition of the Final Girl that remains at the forefront of every discussion of the figure and her characteristics. To briefly summarize Clover’s Final Girl: she is not sexually active, unlike her friends, though she does not always have to be entirely chaste; she is far more watchful and cautious than the raucous, carefree teens who surround her; and when backed into an often literal corner, she is able to defend herself using whatever is available to her (204). Above all, however, she is “inevitably female” (201), but nevertheless a figure of gender ambivalence and complexity. Despite this, the audience can identify with and cheer for her because her modest femininity conceals the tomboyish tendencies that allow her to survive but never obstructs them.

Still, Clover describes the Final Girl as “boyish [...] not fully feminine” (204) and states that she undergoes a process of “symbolic phallicization” (219) in her defeat of the slasher. She is clear in her assertion that the young woman who is to

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*The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1  
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become the Final Girl is always masculinized, and even clearer in her belief that the Final Girl's survival and eventual defeat of the slasher does not automatically constitute feminist empowerment. Despite this, the Final Girl is both widely celebrated as a feminist figure and widely critiqued for embodying regressive, essentialist gender norms. "Her Body, Himself"—indeed, nearly all of the writing, both academic and popular, about Final Girls—relies on the continued assumption that the Final Girl's source of strength is always the "masculinity" she embodies and therefore perpetuates a certain amount of gender essentialism and binarism that is no longer satisfactory.

Few serious attempts exist to advance an image of what an updated or alternative Final Girl could look like. Though women have ostensibly gained rights and become further empowered in the United States, many representations of women continue to be tainted by hegemonic expectations of womanhood, and representations of non-binary, trans, and gender non-conforming people are all but nonexistent in most mainstream releases. This is not limited to the horror genre. If, as Clover argues, the slasher subgenre is particularly reflective of current attitudes toward sex and gender because it is "[u]nmediated by otherworldly fantasy, cover plot, bestial transformations, or civilized routine" (188), then the scholarship and theory used to analyze the genre must be similarly indicative of current social and cultural understandings of gender. As it stands, slasher scholarship leans heavily on the work done by scholars like Clover who were writing in the 1980s and 1990s, at the height of the genre's popularity. How American society and culture understand and talk about gender has changed in the decades following the publication of "Her Body, Himself" and other seminal texts.

While horror has evolved to include changing conceptions of gender and femininity (see films like *The Final Girls* [2015], *The Witch* [2015], *Raw* [2016], *Suspiria* [2018], and *The Invisible Man* [2020]), the scholarship used to analyze the genre has stagnated. Along these lines, the slasher remains repetitive in its narrative structure and thematic content, even as audiences have come to expect more equitable representations of women; after all, "a particular example [of a slasher] may have original features, but its quality as a horror film lies in the way it delivers the cliché" (Clover 190). In other words, audiences may demand that contemporary slashers portray strong female characters, but the expectation remains that these strong female characters take the shape of a recognizable Final Girl.

The trope, in this case, need not be left behind, but the scholarship about slashers must reckon with the variety and increased complexity of new formations

of the Final Girl that exist alongside the old. Using *Halloween* (2018) and its trio of Final Girls as a case study, this essay aims to address how the conventions of the slasher subgenre can be improved upon by pushing past the limitations of individualistic conceptions of feminist empowerment and binary approaches to cross-identification and gender expression within the Final Girl.

### Clover’s Final Girl, Audience Identification, and Feminist (Mis)Readings

One of the most common critiques of the horror genre is that its gleeful depictions of violence against women prioritize identification with psychopaths, rapists, and murderers over sympathy for their victims. In “Her Body, Himself,” Clover attempts to reconcile with this critique by examining with whom—and through what mechanisms—the presumed young, male audience of the slasher film is asked to identify. Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s assertion that the male gaze in popular cinema conditions audiences to identify against female characters, Clover asks, “how are we then to explain the appeal to a largely male audience of a film genre that features a female victim-hero?” (207). She argues that it is only through the symbolic “manning” of the Final Girl and her adoption of the “active investigating gaze” that is “normally reserved for males” that male spectators can engage sympathetically with her as a female victim-hero (210).

All of the characteristics of the Final Girl that set her apart from the slaughtered teens who do not make it to the end of film—her sexual reluctance, her hypervigilance, her ability to fight for herself—serve to “de-girl” her and transform her into a more accessible figure for male audience members. Still, she is “the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation” (Clover 207). To put it simply, the Final Girl is the only character the audience, regardless of gender, can reasonably identify with because she is aware of the same dangers the audience is aware of. Although the language used here to discuss gender is more rigid and binary than is acceptable today, Clover contends that “masculinity and femininity are more states of mind than body” (188) and insists that it is the “compromised” femininity of the Final Girl that allows spectators to identify across gender lines despite the differences in their subjective, societal positions.

On this level, cross-gender identification within slasher audiences can be read as an indication of an audience's willingness to accept deviance from gender norms. Clover is nevertheless clear in her assertion that the Final Girl and the tangled dynamics of gender in the slasher genre do not constitute an inherent feminist victory or subversive bent. The positioning of the Final Girl as a straightforward feminist figure that some scholars, fans, and critics have been inclined toward is, in Clover's own words, "a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking" (214). If the Final Girl's ambiguous or compromised gender identity accomplishes anything significant, it is in service of non-normative masculinity. She concludes "Her Body, Himself" by stating that

One is deeply reluctant to make progressive claims for a body of cinema as spectacularly nasty toward women as the slasher film is, but the fact is that the slasher does, in its own perverse way and for better or worse, constitute a viable adjustment in the terms of gender representation. That it is an adjustment largely on the male side [...] is of no small interest. (221)

Still, certain scholars have continued to oversimplify Clover's arguments about the Final Girl's adoption of the active/predatory gaze and so-called masculine traits, which are key elements of her ability to triumph over her victimizer.

Kelly Connelly, for instance, misrepresents the Final Girl's assumption of the gaze—which Clover only specifies as the male gaze when introducing Mulvey's theory and quoting others—as a blanket victory, writing that "[i]t is through the adoption of the gaze of the male monster, in addition to his other masculine characteristics, that the female is able to both empower herself and to survive" (14). Conversely, in his comparison of several slashers and their modern remakes, Ryan Lizardi concludes, "all of the horror remakes embody and embellish both physical and psychological elements of misogynistic torture," even when the Final Girls are granted the ability to take brutal revenge on their slashers (120). A particular, enduring impulse occurs in slasher scholarship to cast the Final Girl as either unquestionably feminist or irredeemably misogynistic. "Her Body, Himself" is inherently about ambivalence, difficulty, and the lack of a tangible solution to an already intangible problem; the desire to find an unambivalent and easy solution to the Final Girl's gender troubles is understandable. However, attempts to unearth a definitive categorization for the Final Girl fail to look for answers beyond the basic shape of the trope (solitary, moralistic, and feminine but not too feminine) as it already exists.

Previous endeavors to rethink Clover have offered up the more proactive Final Girls of the 1980s and 1990s as examples of what feminism in the slasher can look like, but they ultimately offer a limited picture of empowerment. In their analyses of Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) of *Scream* (1996), Sarah Trencansky, Kyle Christensen, Valerie Wee, and Alexandra West make a broad argument in favor of a Final Girl who, to put it crudely, pulls herself up by her bootstraps. These Final Girls mirror, in many ways, Anita Harris’s “can-do girl,” the young woman who, she argues, embodies “the idea that good choices, effort, and ambition alone are responsible for success” (16). Although Harris is writing in the context of young women’s integration into contemporary labor and consumer markets in the early 1990s, the can-do girl’s narrative of individualism and personal improvement overlaps with the characteristics of the empowered Final Girl that scholars like Trencansky, Wee, West, and Christensen outline. Harris argues that “the processes of working on the self and competing with others, especially other women, to be perfect in self-presentation have extended so that improving oneself is necessary to success” (19). In her analysis of the Final Girls who appear across the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, Trencansky argues, “These texts [...] are remarkably consistent in characterizing the heroine’s battle as a fight for agency against a monster that inadvertently provokes their independent transformations” (66-7).

Taking his analysis a step further, Christensen draws a direct contrast to Clover’s original Final Girl by arguing that Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) of the *Halloween* franchise, whom Clover identifies as a turning point for Final Girls, is not “pro-woman” but actually antifeminist (27). Instead of accepting Laurie as the Final Girl who has come to define the trope, he advances Nancy of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* as the more radical, active Final Girl who therefore makes for “the first and best model of feminism” for the slasher subgenre (30). He returns repeatedly to the argument that Nancy’s feminist power is located in her ability to think her way out of any predicament, stating, “Nancy uses the powers of her alert, paranoid mind and will (not violence) to defeat Freddy and transcend his domineering masculinity” and “defies stilted constructs of violent heroism by using her mind and willpower [...] instead of a knife, axe, or other standard phallic weapon” (31, 41). By casting Final Girls who take up weapons to defend themselves as masculinized vehicles of patriarchal violence, Christensen narrows the already-restrictive boundaries of acceptable expressions of feminine rage.

West's and Wee's respective examinations of *Scream* come closest to identifying a new model for the Final Girl, arguing that the film's self-conscious engagement with slasher archetypes lead to less punitive expressions of femininity. West argues that the arrival of the 1990s brought with them a new cycle of slashers that attempted—perhaps succeeded—to reignite interest in the slasher by centering the stories of young women. The Final Girls of these slasher films, she writes, “were the products of third wave feminism, 90s alternative culture and the more mainstream ‘Girl Power’ which allowed the focus to shift to the female protagonist, her friends and their survival” (para. 3). Wee, in turn, praises Sidney and her sometimes-foe, the reporter Gale Weathers, for their shared ability to “not only triumph against their persecutors but [to] eventually transcend their terrifying experiences to emerge [...] as independent, (relatively) well-adjusted, functional individuals with a place in society” (59). Because Sidney defies slasher conventions by engaging in sexual activity and living to tell the tale, *Scream* “offers a reprieve from the thinly worn character traits of the slashers of the 1970s and ’80s, allowing a young woman to take control of her narrative, body and effectively dismantle what Laura Mulvey termed the ‘male gaze’ of the camera” (West para. 20). These claims are not entirely convincing, however. Though Sidney does not pay for her sexual activity with her life, she is nevertheless punished for it, just as the helpless teen girls of the maligned slashers of the ‘70s and ‘80s are. Christensen similarly argues that Nancy Thompson’s relationship with Glen (Johnny Depp) progresses “on her own terms” (33), yet she trusts him to aid her in her pursuit of Freddy and is repeatedly let down. In a crucial faceoff with Freddy, Glen fails to rouse Nancy from her slumber because he has selfishly fallen asleep. While Nancy is ultimately able to rescue herself, Christensen’s assertion that she learns from the mistakes she makes in trusting the men in her life is not accurate, given that she relies on her father to play a key role in her escape from the final showdown with Freddy.

If scholars measure feminist value against sexual activity, independence, and subservience to a patriarchal figure, then Nancy is hardly any more liberated than Laurie Strode. In this respect, Sidney Prescott does represent an evolution, an updated version of the Final Girl who is aware that “sex = death” is a misogynistic standard, but she also falls short of revolutionizing Clover’s theory. The issue is not that these texts celebrate the Final Girl as a feminist figure, but that they celebrate the Final Girl as a feminist figure without questioning why her empowerment must be defined by individual responsibility and choice. The cruel irony of these analyses is that though these Final Girls neatly perform can-do girlpower, their slashers do

not care, and continue to victimize the Final Girls and their friends according to the rules of the genre: do not drink, do not do drugs, do not have sex, and do not ever say “I’ll be right back.”

### I’ve Waited for Him: *Halloween* (2018) and Hope for a New Kind of Final Girl

Set in the quiet town of Haddonfield, Illinois, on Halloween night, the original *Halloween* follows Laurie and her friends as they are hunted and killed by escaped mental patient Michael Myers (Nick Castle). As one of the first, if not *the* first, “active” Final Girls, Laurie alone is able to strike back at Michael, “once with a knitting needle, once with a hanger” (Clover 193). In all, the original *Halloween* spawned eleven sequels and remakes, including the 2018 release *Halloween* (David Gordon Green), a direct sequel to the original *Halloween*. In “Her Body, Himself,” Clover names Laurie as the Final Girl who signaled the moment the final girl became the Final Girl, the moment the Final Girl learned to actively defend herself instead of passively fleeing the slasher and waiting for rescue (202).

While certain scholars take issue with the canonization of *Halloween* 1978 as the turning point in Final Girl history (Christensen 29), a marked shift occurred in how Final Girls appeared on-screen following the film’s release. In many ways, the teenage Laurie Strode of the original *Halloween* is the template upon which most—if not all—Final Girls have been modeled. Her aversion to sex and juvenile delinquency is coupled with a sharp sense of self-preservation and self-defense. As Clover describes her, the Final Girl engenders audience identification across gender lines by symbolically “manning” herself and “unmanning” the killer in their final face-off (210). While Clover is sure to note that the Final Girl is not merely a “figurative male” (215), her victory is only possible through the reversal of gender between victim-hero and killer and the triumph of “masculinity” as embodied by the Final Girl.

The notion that strength can only be channeled by “masculine” or “manned” characters is regressive and misogynistic, and the Final Girls presented in *Halloween* (2018) (herein referred to as *Halloween* 2018) confront and correct the wrongs of its predecessor. The sequel returns to the town of Haddonfield and to Laurie Strode herself, forty years after the events of the original film. Unlike previous sequels, *Halloween* 2018 casts aside all previous entries in the franchise and the mythology established within them. The plot is essentially the same as that

of the original *Halloween* (herein referred to as *Halloween* 1978): Michael escapes from his state-mandated confinement and goes after Laurie, slaughtering anyone who stands in his path. This time, however, Laurie is not the only Final Girl he must defeat.

Like the original *Halloween*, *Halloween* 2018 signals a possible shift in the Final Girl trope; its Final Girls do not need to resort to an aping of hegemonic masculinity in their ultimate showdown against Michael Myers, nor are they required to face him individually. While still very much Laurie's story, *Halloween* 2018 is also a story about her estranged daughter Karen (Judy Greer) and her granddaughter Allyson (Andi Matichak). It is a story of shared trauma and shared healing for three women who experience cruelty at the hands of the same man. Laurie no longer has to bear the burden of being the typical Final Girl, the template, by herself. Key to Clover's original configuration of the Final Girl is her isolation. That she alone survives tells the audience that she alone was fit to do so. She alone was virtuous enough, smart enough, tough enough. In other words, those who did not survive deserved to die because they did not act in accordance with an arbitrary set of social standards. *Halloween* 2018 refuses to perpetuate these standards by not requiring Laurie, Karen, or Allyson to stand on their own against Michael and, by extension, refusing to elevate one expression of womanhood or femininity over another. The Strode women's bond as grandmother, mother, and granddaughter is key to their survival, but their reliance on one another does not stem from an individual weakness in any of them. *Halloween* 2018 recognizes Laurie's trauma and allows her to step away from the trappings of both hegemonic femininity and masculinity without sacrificing her strength, and Karen and Allyson learn to take Laurie's failure to "move on" seriously through their own confrontations with Michael.

Despite its adherence to the generic conventions of the slasher, *Halloween* 2018 and its Final Girls stand in direct defiance of both the regressive aspects of the Final Girl archetype and the seemingly benign expressions of misogyny that plague everyday life. The three Final Girls are a reminder that conceptions of gender and sexuality have changed in radical ways in the forty and thirty years, respectively, since the release of *Halloween* 1978 and publication of "Her Body, Himself." Laurie, Karen, and Allyson embody elements of Clover's Final Girl to varying degrees, but ultimately transcend the trope as it has historically been understood. None of the three women can defeat Michael Myers (Nick Castle/James Jude Courtney) on their own—a stark shift away from what has traditionally been

accepted and expected of the Final Girl. This is not because they are too weak, inexperienced, or unintelligent to do so, however. They work together because the film refuses to isolate and Other these women the way victims are so often Othered in everyday life. Throughout the film, Laurie is shown interacting with a number of characters, including law enforcement officials, who repeatedly diminish the trauma she experienced forty years prior. Early in the film, both Karen and Allyson express frustration with Laurie’s not just inability, but outright refusal to let go of, move beyond, and heal from her traumatic past. They express great disdain for the home she has turned into a booby-trapped fortress and affinity for heavy weaponry. In the end, of course, it is Laurie’s intuition, weapons expertise, and preparedness that saves them all; it is clear that *Halloween 2018* wants its audience to take Laurie, her pain, and the pain of women in general seriously. Her suffering is not mere spectacle.

Allyson, too, must learn through trial and error that the world at large does not always take women’s fear and suffering seriously. She is, in many ways, the prototypical Final Girl—an honor student with a handsome boyfriend (with whom she never does anything sexual) and strong will. She is the moral compass of her friend group, and, accordingly, is one of the few prominent teen characters to make it through Halloween night alive. While still an important character, Allyson’s narrative is secondary to Laurie’s ongoing battle with trauma, alcoholism, maternal guilt, and the constant fight to survive. It would have been easy for *Halloween 2018* to abandon the aging Laurie and focus its sights on Allyson as the new star of the franchise. As a partial sequel, partial reboot of the franchise, *Halloween 2018* very well could have introduced this new Strode woman to take Laurie’s place. She possesses all of the traits of the quintessential Final Girl with all of the passion the slasher demands, but an impassioned Final Girl who does nothing to move beyond decades-old archetypes is, apparently, no longer enough.

Much like Nancy Thompson, her relationships are on her terms, but unlike Nancy, she knows when to walk away from men who do not have her best interests in mind. Her boyfriend, Cameron (Dylan Arnold), is very quickly revealed to be a cheater and liar, and her closest male friend, Oscar (Drew Scheid), attempts to kiss her directly after she breaks up with Cameron. Instead of apologizing to her for violating her boundaries, he begs her not to tell Cameron and makes excuses for his behavior (he was drunk, he was horny, etc.). The men of *Halloween 2018* continually prioritize other men’s feelings and opinions over women’s lives, and the film itself condemns this by showing Oscar’s murder directly following this

scene. Ultimately, Allyson can only trust her mother and grandmother to protect her. Even her father endangers the three Final Girls in his last moments, as he leaves the front door of Laurie's home wide open when he goes to investigate a noise outside. Allyson's father is repeatedly shown brushing off Laurie's concerns, and his negligence in this moment is an extension of his flippant attitude toward her trauma. But even when placed in danger, Allyson, Karen, and Laurie can work together to save themselves. Although the three women begin the film in opposition with each other, they realize through their individual confrontations with Michael that their only hope for survival is to work together.

Despite the closeness the Strode women share at the end of *Halloween 2018*, Laurie is portrayed through *Halloween 2018* as a woman who struggles to balance her desire to lethally protect herself and her loved ones with her more maternal duties. She is not powerless in the face of the fear she feels for her family's lives but rather active almost to a fault. She is a divorced alcoholic, estranged from her only daughter, who offers strangers access to her deeply-rooted emotional trauma for money. She is, for much of the film, the kind of woman horror audiences have been conditioned to fear or even villainize. We learn early on that Karen was taken from Laurie by Social Services when she was 12-years-old because Laurie was deemed to be an unfit mother due to her obsession with survival and her insistence that Karen be able to defend herself (with guns and heavy artillery) should the need arise.

In many ways, the Laurie of *Halloween 2018* grapples with the complicated notions of gender Clover's Final Girls are always seen to embody. The centrality of motherhood to her character's survival and Michael's defeat signals a move away from the trope of the masculinized Final Girl/Woman. However, her status as an "unfit mother"—along with all of the more traditionally "masculine" aspects of her character, such as her proficiency with power tools and weaponry—could be read as contradicting that forward progress. But *Halloween 2018* is insistent that Laurie and the other Strode women not be categorized or boxed in because they are someone's mother, someone's girlfriend, someone's wife, and so on. In one of the more lighthearted scenes of the film that takes place before Allyson learns of her boyfriend's infidelity, she and Cameron arrive at the school Halloween dance dressed as Bonnie and Clyde. Allyson, of course, in male drag as Clyde, and Cameron sporting a skirt as Bonnie. These are just costumes, but they also point toward a willingness to play with the materiality of gender. Allyson and her boyfriend need not adhere so strictly to the vestments of their "usual" genders

because this kind of play, transgression, and disregard for hegemonic norms is not just commonplace but also celebrated in this time and place.

Klaus Rieser’s “Masculinity and Monstrosity,” though now nearly two decades old, understands the Final Girl and her victimizer to be linked through their shared gender transgressions. Specifically, he argues that the Final Girl is not so much a figure of appropriated masculinity as she is “lacking in traditional femininity, mostly asexual (with an androgynous name, interstitial (between a girl’s world and heterosexual one), sometimes a tomboy” (377). And while Rieser’s assessment of the Final Girl’s complicated relationship with traditional femininity applies, in some ways, to the adult Laurie, he goes on to argue that slashers rarely show their Final Girls performing tasks outside of their usual gender (Rieser uses the example of jumpstarting a car) and says that phallic weaponry is typically only a last resort for women backed into corners. “Most of all,” Rieser writes, “the final girl lacks the ultimate signifier of masculinity, by holding virtually no institutional or social power” (378). While it is true that none of the three Strode women hold any real institutional or social power, *Halloween 2018* seems to be keenly aware of this. In lieu of institutional power, the Strode women are shown to be physically and emotionally empowered. Adult Laurie Strode is very much a master of those signifiers of masculinity that Rieser insists the Final Girl rarely demonstrates. Clover’s definition of the Final Girl, and Rieser’s expanded definition, once again fall short of adequately describing how a character like the Laurie of 2018 fits into all of the established notions of gender, sexuality, and power in the traditional slasher.

Laurie’s resistance to categorization—a resistance that outdoes even Clover’s resistance to categorizing the original Final Girl—makes her such a dangerous and powerful character. Although she is very much an embodiment of traditional femininity in that she is shown to be a fiercely protective mother and grandmother, her two failed marriages and the lack of emotion she displays when discussing them reveals that she not only does not need men in her life, but she also does not want men in her life. She is portrayed not as a bitter divorcee but a woman who has learned that men won’t protect her the way she can protect herself—and other women. Still, *this* Laurie, riddled with PTSD and alcoholism and haunted forever by Michael Myers, is exemplary of the way in which the Final Girl is always marked as Other by her trauma. Even though Laurie goes on to fulfill what is expected of her as a woman (motherhood, marriage—twice) between the original

*Halloween* and the 2018 sequel, something within her, we find out, remains disconnected. Jack Halberstam writes,

Gender is monstrous in the horror film and it exceeds even the category of human. The genders that emerge triumphant at the gory conclusions of a splatter film are literally posthuman, they punish the limits of the human body and they mark identities as always stitched, sutured, bloody at the seams, and completely beyond the limits and the reaches of an impotent humanism. (Ch. 6, par. 12)

The Laurie that exists in the interim between 1978 and 2018 is the bloody, sutured thing; she is marked by many characters within the film as an inadequate or nontraditional mother and does not express her gender in a way that makes sense to those around her, including, and especially, her family. Others view her as dangerous because she knows how to defend herself and actively seeks revenge for the pain Michael has inflicted upon her.

Still, it seems that no one in her life can sympathize with her until the final confrontation between Michael and the Strode women. The lack of sympathy and understanding for Laurie's character is made clear in a scene between Laurie and two investigative journalists who claim to want to get to know who Michael is as a human being. Laurie, bemused, says, "Michael Myers killed five people. And he's a human being we need to understand? I'm twice divorced and I'm the basket case?" (00:12:55-00:13:09). *Halloween* 2018 wants its audience to be aware of the absurdity of prioritizing a psychopathic serial killer's narrative over that of an articulate, intelligent woman no one has attempted to listen to for several decades. Even as individual characters within the film seem determined to assign a certain amount of monstrosity or psychopathy to Laurie herself, *Halloween* 2018 demands that the audience keep in mind that she is both victim and hero here.

If Clover's Final Girl can only survive and triumph over her slasher by adopting his tools and his investigative, predatory gaze, then the Final Girls that *Halloween* 2018 presents to its audience are something else entirely. Clover writes that the Final Girl "addresses the killer on his own terms" (210), not the other way around. She must assimilate into his traditions and practices to defeat him. At several points throughout *Halloween* 2018, different characters make clear that Laurie is understood by many to be monstrous in her own right. The two investigative journalists who set the story into motion ask themselves, "Could it be that one monster has created another?" (00:09:06-00:09:11). The hostile attitude toward Laurie many characters in the film adopt, including Karen and Allyson, initially,

makes clear that Laurie’s active, involved desire to be able to defend herself and find peace through violent revenge have transformed her, in the eyes of many, into a monster of Michael’s caliber.

Halberstam, however, understands the process of the Final Girl transforming from a passive to an active participant not as an act of last resort but as an act of empowerment. He writes, “[W]e witness the becoming-monstrous of a woman which does not automatically mean that she must compromise herself, sacrifice her voice, or give up her hard-won gains to a man” (Ch. 6, par. 10). “Monstrousness,” perhaps, is not always inherently bad, and Laurie’s rejection of pacifism does not inherently have to be monstrousness. Likewise, Laurie’s defiance of traditional femininity does not have to be automatically understood as an embrace of masculinity. In the final confrontation with Michael, Karen seems to panic and lose the ability to protect herself and her daughter despite the years of training Laurie forced upon her. Sobbing and holding a shotgun in her shaking hands, she cries out to Laurie, “Mom, mom, I can’t do it, I’m sorry, I can’t do it!” (01:37:08-01:37:20). She and Allyson are in the basement of the house, Michael stalks through the kitchen above, and it seems that Laurie is going to, yet again, lose everything. When he steps into frame at the top of the stairs, however, Karen snaps into focus, levels the shotgun, and shoots Michael in the shoulder.

The moment Michael looms over the stairs is a startling one, not only because it so perfectly captures him as The Shape, but because Karen’s crying and shaking ceases immediately. She knew how to play the part of the inept, weak woman perfectly, fooling both Michael and the audience, and knew with even more certainty how to save herself and her daughter. This willingness to embrace the uglier parts of the self—to engage with that monstrous self, perhaps— that the Strode women display in their self-defense sets them apart from previous incarnations of the Final Girl. Furthermore, *Halloween 2018* alleviates the burden of cross-gender identification by offering three Final Girls who navigate gender and empowerment in different, sometimes messy and contradictory, ways.

These new Final Girls that *Halloween 2018* proposes meet their slasher on their grounds, using *their* tools—which are diverse, interdependent, and strengthened through uniting against a common monster. Literally, Michael must navigate the house that Laurie and her daughter (prior to being taken by Social Services) constructed as an elaborate trap for Michael. As Laurie tells Officer Hawkins (Will Patton) and Dr. Sartain (Haluk Bilginer), she has prayed for the night of Michael’s escape because she has prepared to kill him. Although Laurie sometimes uses

Michael's tricks against him, she is not forced to the emotionless, impersonal, and compulsive depths of his monstrosity. She is driven by a desire to protect herself and her loved ones, and every action she has taken in the past forty years has been informed by this desire. She, Karen, and Allyson are, therefore, in ultimate control.

## Conclusion

*Halloween 2018* ends with the three generations of Strode women being driven to safety and away from Laurie's burning house, away from Michael, in the back of a truck. The image of Allyson, blood spattered, traumatized, and clutching a knife recalls the final image of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)*, another slasher Clover writes on extensively. In that final image of *Texas Chainsaw*, the Final Girl, Sally, is rescued by a kind stranger, just as Allyson, her mother, and grandmother are. Allyson is decidedly less ecstatic in her escape, but the image is undoubtedly a nod to the iconic moment from *Texas Chainsaw*. In addition to the plethora of references to the original *Halloween* and its various sequels, *Halloween 2018* is a film deeply invested in the horror genre and its history at large. Because of this, its departure from the Final Girl formula is all the more surprising and radical. Although, like most slashers, it adheres to a familiar narrative structure, its triumvirate of Final Girls and their complicated, sometimes contradictory, sometimes competing gender formations and relationships present audiences with something wholly new and challenging, even as each character still embodies Clover's original Final Girl to some degree. Within the narrative of the film, each Strode woman is situated within a specific history and lineage of trauma; likewise, the Final Girl as Clover conceives of her is situated within a very specific place in horror history.

*Halloween 2018*, as a sequel to one of the most iconic horror films of all time, understands its place within that lineage, but nonetheless uses its Final Girls to push and prod at the limits of tradition and accepted notions of empowerment. This new formulation can be understood not as a rejection of Clover's Final Girl, but a reconfigured and updated figure who more accurately reflects and interacts with contemporary attitudes toward gender and generational trauma. As this figure of sutured, splattered, messy femininity, Laurie is the most challenging of the three Final Girls; however, juxtaposed with Allyson's embodiment of a femininity that most closely resembles Clover's Final Girl's, she emerges as a sensible and sympathetic figure in the film, especially given that the final showdown between

the Strode women and Michael Myers makes clear that no one woman can do it for herself. All three need each other, and this solidarity and community of different femininities is their strength. *Halloween* 2018 presents its audience with the possibility of a Final Girl—or Girls, or Women—who both defy and embrace traditional conceptions of gender and accepted definitions of the Final Girl. That Clover’s definition of the Final Girl does not adequately describe the Final Girls of *Halloween* (2018) does not mean that it is useless or should be rejected, only that room needs to be made in horror scholarship for other, more complex, and fresh readings of female characters. There will never be a single, perfect Final Girl, but the 2018 sequel to the original *Halloween* makes a compelling argument against the assumption that the Final Girl need be “single” or “perfect” at all.

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