Dissecting Girls: Exploring Feminine Identification in Contemporary Horror Television

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Abstract:

This research considers how a recent cycle of contemporary serialised horror television narratives have positioned themselves to deliberately explore women's representation and experiences on screen and appeal to women as audiences in terms of pleasure, appeal, and identification. A substantial percentage of the influential, scholarly work undertaken on women in horror and identification was mostly examined through film theory and assumptions of their cinematic representations (Clover, 1992; Cherry, 1999; Short, 2006; Giles, 2004; Grant, 1996; Halberstam, 1995; Hanke, 2002; Heit, 2011; Skal, 1993). While there is scholarship on horror television (Abbott and Jowett, 2013), interest in genre television, and fandom (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 2004; Abbott, 2010); there is space for women's representations in contemporary horror television to be developed further. Through considering the medium changes from film to television, it was acknowledged that the central aspects in terms of examining gendered identification included: the 'intensity' of identification (Cohen, 2001), the intertextual familiarity and subversion of horror's treatment of women, and the wide range of representations of femininity that television series facilitated. A central finding was the concept that women's identification which originated from potential spaces of emotionality and passiveness (Clover, 1987; 1992; Ellen Brown, 1993) had been restructured in terms of using this emotionality from an empowering stance. Due to the increased emotional immersion that the medium of television's platform provides, there is far more depth to the characters that moves beyond their previous basic function to serve as active aggressor or passive, emotional victim.

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Preface

I, Charlotte Jayne Ruth Baker, can confirm that the undertaking of this research and the writing of this thesis has been completed by myself and has been ethically approved.

Acknowledgements

'I'm gonna' get my fucking PhD.'

- Theodora Crain, *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018)

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To 'bump', you certainly sped those last few months up, but I hope I make you proud. Maybe I can be cool (for once in my life) by showing you horror television that you probably shouldn't be watching!

Lastly, to all those who don't get the grades they desire, have a chronic illness, or are home schooled: have faith in yourself and live life at your own pace…it hasn't worked out too badly for me!

Introduction

This research considers how a recent cycle of contemporary serialised horror television narratives have positioned themselves to intentionally explore women's representation and experiences on screen and appeal to women as audiences in terms of pleasure, appeal, and identification. Horror has always had a relationship with American television since the 1950s packaging of horror films with *The Vampira Show* (1954-1955) which broadcast vintage horror films. However, the emergence of horror television texts is far more recent. It is only from the success of texts, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in 1997, that there has been a gradual increase in horror television texts. As Gaynor notes:

> On US television in 2005, there were two dramas airing that could be considered horror: Supernatural (The WB/The CW, 2005-) and Masters of Horror (Showtime, 2005 –2007). In 2015 there were twenty horror dramas on air. In the decade between 2005 and 2015, twenty-five horror series launched on US television, with twenty still on air in 2015… This increase from two to twenty in only ten years, is a steep growth for horror on US television, a growth never seen before. (2019:1)

From this 'never seen before' growth in horror television, I argue there stems a concomitant increase of women's experiences explored within horror television narratives. Therefore, it is the increase of women's experiences explored on screen and the subsequent patterns of identification which remains an unexplored area that this thesis intends to examine. This thesis explores these television narratives and the strategies deployed to nurture identification in the audience. Particular attention will be paid to the role of character as central to assessing how these representations work in eliciting this identification. In explaining the basic functions, identification relates to the processes involved in audiences identifying with particular characters, whereas the use of representations refers to the ideologies embedded within those characters. With this 'never seen before' growth, there ultimately appears connections, which this thesis will examine, between the contemporary horror television narratives, their

representation of women's experiences and, consequently, the processes of identification of women audiences.

Gender and the Psychoanalytical Approaches of Feminist Film Theory

This intentional exploration of women's experiences within these horror television narratives has engaged and challenged women's historic representation within horror film (Clover, 1992; Cherry, 1999). There is a body of scholarship on research which examines horror and representation (Cherry, 1999; Short, 2006; Giles, 2004; Grant, 1996; Halberstam, 1995; Hanke, 2002; Heit, 2011; Skal, 1993). All of whom have considered the role of gender and representation in the horror film. Of particular significance are Carol Clover (1987;1992) and Barbara Creed (1993) whose work on women, representation, symbolism, and ideology in the genre forms an important basis for this thesis, given their acknowledgment of representations of women in horror. Although their methods differ in that their research is predominantly rooted in psychoanalytical theory, their application focuses solely on film and much scholarship has critiqued these earlier psychoanalytical approaches (Latia, 2019; McAndrews, 2019; Hills, 2005), Clover (1987;1992) and Creed's (1993) influence remains valuable for thinking about these dynamics of gender representation in horror. These psychoanalytical models present and differentiate representation through gendered terms and experience.

Clover (1987;1992) and Creed's (1993) psychoanalytical theory in their examination of representations in horror becomes pertinent to this thesis as both deal with aspects of symbolism in horror. This use of symbolism becomes important in this thesis when addressing the way in which symbolism is used as a position to understand meaning. This meaning then becomes helpful in establishing how identification occurs. Many of the feminist film theorists that have been discussed are interested in cinema as a mechanism of meaning and ideology, as per the popular approaches in screen studies at the time.

Scholars have recognised the problematic use of gender in Clover (1987;1992) and Creed's (1993) psychoanalytical approaches to gendered identification (Latia, 2019; McAndrews, 2019). The issue with the way in which gendered identification is articulated in these instances

is subsequently connected to the problematic representation that many of the ideologies about gender that emerge in the characters under Clover's (1987;1992) and Creed's (1993) discussion. Dominant discourses regarding gender representation reside within Western culture that scholars like Butler (1990;1999) point out to be constructed through the linguistic binary of masculinity and femininity. Butler (ibid) believes that sex is not the same as gender; sex being the biological feature of the body, while gender is a self-expression of identity. Therefore, the attributes of masculinity and femininity are fluid and can be explored by all identities, rather than fixed behaviours tied to the person's sex. The binary model of gender identification is limited and restrictive as they perceive gender through particular social constructions of gender attributed behaviour. Therefore, contemporary feminist scholarship has sought to provide more discussion of inclusive and/or fluid gender and gender representations. Furthermore, the way in which historical scholarship has discussed women's identification and experiences on screen, within the scope of film theory, regularly connects this behaviour to their femininity.

Mulvey (1989) and Clover (1987; 1992) impose binary understandings of feminine passivity in the construction of women's viewing experiences, meaning making, and processes of identification. Mulvey (1989) utilises the Freudian psychoanalytic concepts of femininity and sexuality to argue that women spectators receive pleasure from identifying with a film's hero. Yet this is only possible through their regression to a childhood development phase labelled the pre-Oedipal/ phallic phase. This is where both girls and boys are understood as active and masculine. Mulvey's underpinning point regarding women's identification is that it is not fixed in femininity, rather it can fluidly move to a masculine process of identification with ease. She terms this a "trans-sex" or "transvestite" identification. However, for Mulvey (1989) this adoption of a masculine identification process can only be experienced temporarily for women as they, ultimately, are feminine. Mulvey's work is restricted to a binary understanding of gender even with the concept of trans-fluidity as there is no space for acknowledgement of non-binary perspectives.

A similar approach is taken in Clover's (1987;1992) work, who utilises some of Mulvey's (1989) ideas on restricted binary understandings of gender as an approach to understand processes of identification. Although Clover (1987;1992) approaches women's identification,

specifically in horror film, through the Final Girl and the one sex model of identification. Clover (ibid) recognises the Final Girl as a genre character type which reoccurred through the slasher cycle of the 1980s. She is the remaining survivor of the slasher, normally presented as virginal with a unisex name. The one sex model of identification is where the Final Girl can evoke identificatory processes with both men and women audiences; men identify with the Final Girl's violence and women identify with the Final Girl's emotionality. Through this, the Final Girl is, at different times, both the hero (masculine) and the victim (feminine); she is what Clover calls the female victim-hero. Clover argues that the Final Girl is understood as the hero through her violence, while perceived as the victim through her emotionality. This model causes great instability in an already fragile fictional world, where there is now: "slippage and fungibility, in which maleness and femaleness are always tentative and hence only apparent" (Clover, 1992:14). Thus, it is the Final Girl's femininity that becomes problematic. As such, the way in which Clover (ibid) and Mulvey (1989) articulate women's identification, in their understanding of on-screen representations of femininity, remarks to an implied passive construction of identification.

The psychoanalytical theories of feminist film studies underpinned by the work of Mulvey (1989) and Clover (1987;1992) positioned women's femininity, particularly their emotion, sexuality, and lack of agency, via binary psycholinguistic models of gender. Such work has been significantly critiqued since. Specifically in the field of horror film scholarship, the work of Cherry (1999:1) evidences how scholarship has moved on from these theorists and acknowledges their potentially, reductive approaches. Cherry (ibid) sought to study horror film's women audiences and address the ways in which they 'do not refuse to look but actively enjoy horror films and read films in feminine ways.' (Cherry, 1999:1) Therefore, she assessed the complexity of such binary gendered psychoanalytical models imposed by Clover (1987;1992), Creed (1993) and Mulvey (1989). Cherry's (1999) ethnographic work within this area proved that women found pleasure within horror and, although not challenging the potentially masculinised and misogynistic ideological tropes of much of the genre, she does acknowledge and differentiate women's patterns of identification with these texts. For example, Cherry (ibid) noted specific textual features that women audiences enjoyed, with the strong female lead being one of these feminine pleasures; a fact that will become important in the exploration of contemporary horror television that follows through the rest of this thesis.

This acknowledgement meant that women's identification was read as active, rather than passive, and prioritised their feminine pleasures and interests that emerged when viewing horror.

Feminist Television Studies, Identification and Women as Audience

The binary psychoanalytical conceptualisation of gender and identification as explored in psychoanalytical film theory is less present in television studies as a field, which has, historically, taken a broader understanding to textual meaning. Television studies has often examined the structure of the television industry and the targeting of differentiated demographics in the content and output of television production. Feminist television scholars, such as Brunsdon (1981), have examined the way that particular genres and formats are targeted at/written for gendered audiences as well as the ideological dimensions of representation and narrative. Television studies has a preoccupation with identification and representation as there is an established scholarly understanding of how meaning is created by the audience from an active standpoint. A central idea in understanding how meaning is created is through Fiske's (1987) understanding of audience's gathering of meaning in television. Fiske (ibid) argued that television is a provoker and the bearer of pleasure and meaning, suggesting that the society in which the television text is consumed helps to generate and circulate a variety of meanings and pleasures.

Feminist television scholars focused specifically on women's on-screen representation and how various meanings and pleasures were created through the text. There is a historical discourse of the gendered terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' interests, which the television industry itself has recognised in terms of their representation and audience demographics (Wheatley, 2002). The television industry have utilised this to their own advantage in attempts to draw such audiences to a text and therefore, increase the text's commerciality. This is common in many of the soap opera television shows as discussed by feminist television scholars. They have argued that certain formats of television genre have been made specifically for women and their interests (Brunsdon, 1981; Modleski, 1982; Morely, 1992; Ang, 1985; Radway, 1987), particularly the soap opera, romantic, and melodrama genres.

Women's socio-historically perceived role within the domestic setting is an aspect which Wheatley (2007) acknowledges as important in the role of Gothic Television. Wheatley (2007:154) recognises that the 'avid readership…' of the Gothic novel, has resulted in an '…equally avid viewership of television' and the consumption of such female-instigated narratives from book to television attracts their audience in the domestic space. Wheatley recognises the connection between the television and women audience's stating that "Gothic television is understood as a domestic form of a genre which is deeply concerned with the domestic, writing stories of unspeakable family secrets and homely trauma large across a television screen" (ibid). Here, Wheatley acknowledges how the Gothic genre's tone is ultimately feminine, with ties to both the location and domestic medium of television as well as the thematic tone of the texts themselves, which often centre around family dynamics.

Radway (1984), Ang (1982), and Ellen Brown (1994) have all examined women's identification with genre characters. Ang (1982) focuses on the use of ethnographic work to establish how such identificatory patterns occurred and cautions against the theoretical "dangers of an over-politicising of [female] pleasure." (p132). Thus, acknowledging the risk of attempting to over-politicise women's pleasure in television. As pleasure is not just achieved through political meaning or intention; pleasure is more complex than politics. Ang's (ibid) work does highlight the context for these initial feminists' scholarly interest regarding television, an interest "... growing out of a deep conviction that women's oppression was very much related to mass media representations and that change was not only urgent, but possible." (Brunsdon et al, 1997:5). This concern about how representations of women on screen, and across media more broadly, feed into and are recycled into the social and cultural issues which McCabe and Akass (2007) acknowledge as being pivotal in Butler's (1990;1999) understanding of gender and sex as cultural constructions. McCabe and Akass would later go on to address how this understanding of gender and sex as cultural constructions, "impact tremendously on thinking about how gender gets produced and circulated on television." (McCabe and Akass, 2007). Through such arguments, the issues regarding gender representation on television were becoming more nuanced and the implications of such research becoming quickly apparent.

Television's history with its women audiences is also connected to television's ease of accessibility and women's socio-historical perceived role within the domestic setting (Spigel and Mann, 1992; Wheatley, 2002). Spigel and Mann (1992) recognise the historical trajectory that places women as audience as important to television:

> Television has always had its eye on women. Since its arrival in the late 1940s, it has particularly tried to attract female viewers, who, the industry assumes, are the primary consumers for their households. In this regard, television has much in common with other mass media (film, radio, magazines, romance fiction), which have also historically targeted women as their key source of revenue. But television's pervasiveness as a domestic medium, a medium that is literally a piece of furniture in our homes, makes it a particularly important site for feminist analysis. (Spigel and Mann, 1992:2).

Here, television's 'pervasiveness' becomes emphasised as 'an important site for feminist analysis' when the concepts of representation and identification are considered. While on the one hand, this statement appears outdated and focused on the more commercial aspects of television, apparently irrelevant to the horror television series investigated in this thesis; the television industry's assumption of women audiences as primary consumers is prevalent. This assumption is important in the contemporary horror television texts being discussed here as these texts do not just assume this audience, rather they engage in a dialogue that is specifically aimed at women and their experiences. Furthermore, the television industry are aware of how texts become a site for meaning making and pleasure (Fiske, 1987). With this knowledge, the creators then tailor these horror texts to directly address television's historically recognised women audiences. They directly address them through the diverse range of televisual representation and the challenges these representations pose to women's socio-historically perceived role within the domestic setting.

Horror on Television and the Emergence of Diverse Women Characters

Historically, there are many scholars of both film criticism and television studies who broadly acknowledge the importance and appeal of genre with regards to gendered audiences (Brunsdon, 1981; Modleski, 1982; Morely, 1992; Ang, 1985; Radway, 1987; Hutching, 2004; Jancovich, 2001; Langford, 2005; Wells, 2002; Worland, 2006; Neale, 2005). While significant scholarship (Hutching, 2004; Jancovich, 2001; Langford, 2005; Wells, 2002; Worland, 2006; Neale, 2005) recognises the use of the horror genre in cinematic terms, both its textual attributes and in terms of marketing; it is important to acknowledge that horror on television also has a traceable history. However, the changes to the contemporary horror television text, specifically the emergence of diverse women leads, critique these historically inscribed representations of women in horror as vulnerable, passive, or monstruous (Clover, 1987;1992; Creed, 1993).

The horror genre is engaging to audiences, in great part, due to their knowledge of the "horror formula" (Martin, 2019; Cherry, 2009; Newman, 2011). Horror, like any other genre, is based on repetition and genre character types which relies on predictability to boost the text's commerciality. Many have acknowledged the use of genre as a marketing tool and method of engaging the audience (Hutching, 2004; Jancovich, 2001; Langford, 2005; Wells, 2002; Worland, 2006; Neale, 2005). In terms of addressing the audiences' expectation of horror film, a useful definition is:

> …frighten, shock, horrify, and disgust using a variety of visual and auditory leitmotifs and devices including reference to the supernatural, the abnormal, mutilation, blood, gore, the infliction of pain, death, deformity, putrefaction, darkness, invasion, mutation, extreme instability, and the unknown. (Martin, 2019).

This means that audiences share an understanding of what horror looks like for them and are able to identify and recognise the genre. With such repetition, this pattern developed into Tudor's understanding of genre as being 'what we collectively believe it to be' (1973), reasserting the audience's recognition of that genre through witnessing such repetition. Horror genre analysis has differed from other genres in that it has engaged an audience in terms of emotional affect (Reyes, 2016), in a way that other genre analysis, such as science fiction or

the western did not. Essentially, this builds a 'contract' (Altman, 1999) between audience and text which plays within certain expectations of that genre. As with all genre categorisation, the term horror television is difficult to define as it suffers from the same empirical issues as genre theory (Neale, 2005; Tudor, 1973); most prominent is the fluidity of such terms which make genre hybridity as problematic in definition as application. Equally, there have been various historic difficulties in recognising television as a valuable area of study (Wheatley, 2002). Many of the horror texts being discussed in this thesis (*The Haunting...series* (2018-), *Stranger Things (*2016), *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-), *Hannibal* (2013-2015), *Supernatural (*2005-2020), *Slasher* (2016-) utilise horror's cinematic "horror formula" (Martin, 2019; Cherry, 2009; Newman, 2011) to engage with a particular horror (sub)genre or a retelling of a previous text. In relation to the quote above, their relevance in terms of the text's intentionality and recognising them as fitting within the horror genre becomes prominent, either by name, *Supernatural* or *The Haunting...* which directly 'reference to the supernatural' (ibid), or by association, which "...frighten, shock, horrify, and disgust using a variety of visual and auditory leitmotifs..." (ibid) such as *Scream* or *Stranger Things.* Therefore, these texts engage with the audiences' expectations of this established contract of the horror genre, most clearly through the elements of reflexivity and intertextuality that they present.

Jowett and Abbott's (2013) influential work provides a platform for horror television's value to be documented and for the medium to be actively researched. Jowett and Abbott (2013) note that: "Through television, horror begins at home," (2013, p XV). Of particular importance, what the medium of television and its 'inherently hybrid nature' (Jowett and Abbott, 2013: xiii) allowed horror to do was, at times, to bypass more extreme censorship issues to promote its access to more mainstream television, particularly through pushing those genre boundaries of horror into areas which spoke to television far more acutely, such as melodrama, crime, and drama. However, Jowett and Abbott (2013) contend that this hybridity has not 'diluted' the way horror is understood, instead it has forced audiences and critics alike to reconsider what horror is and can be within a "televisual context" (xiii). As such, highlighting that horror is not 'diluted' through genre hybridity, rather, the hybridity provides space for other genres to begin to establish horrific elements.

Alongside this increase in genre hybridity in television, there has also been a reframing of genre characters to address women audiences through 'strong' women leads that featured in fantasy, horror, and sci-fi genres. These genres and the inclusion of 'strong' women leads ultimately began to infiltrate through to mainstream television. I argue that this inclusion of genre hybridity, and subsequently, horror's infiltration into mainstream television, has enabled a specific change in women's representation over this period. This change emerged in the 1990s and stemmed from an increasingly aware dialogue between creators and their fans which arose from the debates regarding women character's treatment in the horror genre as positioned as either the victim or overly sexualised (Clover, 1987; 1992; Cherry, 1999). Alongside the popularity of genre texts with women audience, the change of character led to wider conversations regarding the role of these 'strong' leading women and the subsequent complex issues that arose from these on-screen representations (Wayne, 2018; Cuccinelli, 2019). While this movement increased women's representation, both in terms of narrative inclusion and a diversified nature of character, their 'strong' nature served to enforce further problematic understandings of women's experience. The problem being with the power these women characters held within the texts which was primarily established through the binary constructs of performed gender behaviour. This pattern can be seen in the cases of Dana Scully from *The X Files* (1993-2018) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). For example, Dana has scientific capabilities, yet falls into the damaging representation of intimidating, but 'emotionally blank, strong' women (Kang, 2018; Robinson, 2014). Similarly, Buffy has incredible physical strength and enacts violence beating the villains, but literally has to sacrifice herself to save the world and those she loves. This implies that regardless of their innovative context, these representations of women and their strength, is understood in masculinised terms and the diversity of the women's experience remains mostly unexplored.

Horror Television Audiences and Identification

The function of identification in the assemblance and affirmation of identity is a pivotal point of interest with regards to how televisual spaces amplify and explore the representation of women and their experiences. Yet, it is important to be aware that while such developments in the texts are occurring and there has been some expansion in assessing identification in a variety of media; there is limited research into serialised television and, particularly adaptations to the models of identification away from their cinematic, psychoanalytical frameworks. While

Cohen (2001) formulated a more widely agreed understanding of identification, which covers not just film, but media more broadly; he does not fully differentiate between the different forms of media, nor is his work concerned with gendered experiences.

Cohen (ibid) provides a rigorous examination of identification as a concept and process, attempting to fully bridge the gap between its varying meanings, from psychoanalysis to media studies. Cohen (ibid) acknowledges that identification is different from spectatorship, in that:

> Unlike the more distanced mode of reception — that of spectatorship — identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them (2001: 250).

Cohen recognises that identification is experienced as a complex and active process which informs and creates accessible space for audience interpretation and ultimately, meaning making. Similarly, Cohen (2001) acknowledges that identification can be elicited and created, or 'provoked' by creators who can manipulate the ways in which identification occurs. This is important as it has shown that identification is not as simple as passive or active as feminist film scholars have implied (Cherry, 1999; Clover, 1987;1992), but in fact, a combination of the viewer actively seeking points for identification within characters and creators actively creating characters to elicit such a response.

Equally, when acknowledging processes of identification within this study; both the audiences' own creation of identification and of the creator's ability to 'provoke' identification must be acknowledged to draw some conclusions regarding gendered identificatory processes. Cohen (ibid) argues for a media inclusive identification with characters:

> This definition of identification as adopting the identity and perspective of a character helps clarify several attributes of identification. First, identification is defined not as an

attitude, an emotion, or perception but, rather, as a process that consists of increasing loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character. Second, unlike a purely psychological theory of identification or a conception linked to sociological notions of identifying with social groups or leaders, identification is defined here as a response to textual features that are intended to provoke identification. (Cohen, 2001: 250).

Here, identification focuses on the processes of closeness between character and viewer, the resemblance between them and their exploration of that identity from another's perspective. Thus, identification reaffirms one's own identity and place within the world. At odds with Cohen's (2001) previous claims about the implied closeness between viewer and text, where it was 'as if the events were happening to them,' and 'experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside', Cohen argues that:

The varying intensity of identification reflects the extent to which one exchanges his or her own perspective for that of another and is able to forget him — or herself. (ibid)

Here, Cohen argues for a sense of emotional distance in the process of exchanging perspectives to with that of another or through the process of forgetting themselves. I argue that identification, through the exchange of perspective between media character to audience is based on the *similarity* between them, rather than their difference, as Cohen implies through the act of forgetting. When an attribute or experience is similar between character and audience then there is an implied closeness which allow identificatory processes to be established for the audience already has some familiarity of this attribute or experience. Whereas when the focus is on forgetting themselves, this creates distance between character and audience and therefore is likely to impede any identificatory processes. The recognition of this similarity will occur differently for each individual as it is an emotional and personal experience. Furthermore, his use – and lack of definition or explanation — of 'the varying intensity of identification' can be utilised to explore such dynamics of identification across different mediums.

I argue that, for television, this 'varying intensity' of identification emerges partly through the medium which changes the way in which the characters and narrative world are experienced by those watching. In the case of television, people are not experiencing identification with the characters in a 90-120-minute film screening; rather they spend eight to twelve hours with those characters which ultimately impacts the overall 'intensity' of that viewing experience. When the length of time spent with a character and their world is extended, this develops a more intense form of identification: one of emotional immersion. Similarly, changing viewing habits, from the one episode 'monster of the week' framework of traditional scheduling of television to the binge watching of streaming services, must impact this intensity of immersion which occurs over a short and concentrated period.

The important role that emotion plays in the concept of identification was more recently acknowledged by Gorton (2009:151). She calls this an emotional attachment which:

> … is not simply that a viewer sees a character and identifies with them, rather it is a more complex process in which the emotional situation the character is in elicits a response while, at the same time, technical devices such as a close-up shot or music aids and develops this connection (2009:151).

This highlights the various influences which enhance identification, including the manipulation of 'technical devices' to elicit an emotional response. This mirrors Cohen's (2001) argument regarding the influence that creators have in the formation of identification. Gorton (2009) also addresses the manipulation of the character's emotions on screen to further the level of identification and connection with the viewer and character. Yet, to call this level of identification 'an attachment' seems to prioritise the industrial role in forming identification and ignores the audiences' role in building this connection themselves. We have already established that identification is active on both parts, of the creators and of the audience. Audiences and fans spend time building, exploring and understanding their own connection to the text/characters which consequently influences their identification with those characters.

The term 'identification' is widely used across media and cultural studies, but has minimal understanding in its specific usage, being broadly applied across discipline, media and audience interaction. These commonly recognised aspects of identification make it a justified term to use, yet the difficulties to its application must be acknowledged and boundaries put in place to ensure it is not too broadly used. A key aspect in many scholars' work is the relationship between identification and audience emotion; something that is central to investigating feminine identification. Barker (2005) has also contributed to the understanding of the term 'identification', similarly acknowledging the challenges to its usage and contentiousness across varying academic disciplines, such as feminist film theory, psychoanalysis, and media studies, in which the term is applied. He specifically recognises the term's rhetorical power and its 'persistence' in media, noting its 'hardly been questioned. It is just too convenient' (Barker, 2005:358). Barker (2005) argues that the term identification is commonly used in considering how media audiences are influenced into taking cultural and moral positions. His desire was to critically address the lack of empirical evidence in the final *Lord of The Rings* trilogy and captured 25,000 responses with regards to identification. In addressing identification's common, but often complicated usage, Barker (2005) acknowledged Cohen's (2001) interest in clarifying the term further and distinguishing it from its 'neighbours' and the parasocial interaction that frequently occurs. Barker (2005) later expanded on this parasocial role in acknowledging that audiences' do share the information they have about a film, even if that is their knowledge is from the paratextual materials associated with the film (film poster, film trailer, for example). Barker (2005) argued that when audiences identify with characters, they engage with the narrative in depth and therefore become open to the messages embedded within the text.

Interestingly, Barker (2005) examines the design of the cinema and the freedom of choice in the challenges that face the identificatory process, specifically the idea that it is impossible to see how and where audiences are identifying. He notes, 'we choose where we sit…I move my body while watching' (p.357). This is a useful starting point to then consider the role of television in audiences' home where the specific sofa can be chosen, loungewear, slippers, drink, as well as the viewing experience more broadly, such as pausing the film or television series for a break. Of particular interest to this thesis and the feminine processes of identification, part of Barker's (2005) understanding of identification is concerned with

audiences' vulnerability. This vulnerability is aligned, and often a result of emotional exposure that the text will elicit. It is the emotional aspects that this thesis is investigated, but the vulnerability which Barker (2005) discusses only heightens the identificatory experience.

Regarding this feminine identification and the emotionality and vulnerability attached to the process, Stacey (1994) investigated women's evocation of their 'devotion' and 'worship' of 1950's film actors which led to the imitation of their behaviour or changes to mirror their appearance. Stacey claimed that these were different ways of relating to the actors. However, she does continue to umbrella all these different relations under the term 'identification'; this implies not only that the term has various nuances and applications, but contains an array of parasocial behaviours which may classify as forming identificatory processes. While the context differs dramatically, the concept that fans or audiences' have a role to play in their own identificatory processes is also examined in this thesis, specifically in the final chapter regarding fan art and fan fiction.

On the other hand, Smith (1995), whose work is rooted in cognitive theory and analytic philosophy, is partly concerned with the 'emotional engagements' of the film and takes the perspective which assumes that audiences' attend the screening 'without knowledge or preconceptions' (Barker, 2005:360). While this may allow for specifying down the functions involved in identification; it is highly unrealistic of an approach to understanding identification; as this thesis argues part of the emotional investment comes with the audiences' engagement of paratextual or architextual material. For example, they are a horror film fan and understand the tropes of the genre or, as Barker (2005:360) acknowledges the film trailer or poster provide such additional material which interest the audience to view the film in the first place.

Barker (2005) goes on to argue that Carroll (1990) has a similar issue when attempting to use 'thought-experiments' (Barker, 2005:360) to articulate an alternative to identification. Carroll (1990:95-96) notes that: "we do this readily when monsters appear since, insofar as we share the same culture as the protagonist, we can easily catch on as to why the protagonist finds the monster unnatural." In this 'same culture', Carroll is attributing a vagueness to the experience of identification which is only experienced by a particular group of people within society those

who do share the 'same culture'. Therefore, he ignores how other groups, of differing genders, ability, ages, and class respond to this. Yet in addressing this thesis, it must be made clear that this research only addresses feminine identification, and while aspects such as class, gender, and sexuality, are addressed, identification is an experience which differs between individuals who share the 'same culture', never mind those ones who are on the periphery or of different cultures.

Changes to Audiences' Viewing Experiences

To fully comprehend and adapt the meaning of this 'varying intensity of identification' and the emotional immersion in its application to television, it is essential to acknowledge the changes that have occurred within this medium, specifically correlated to developing technologies. The development of streaming services provides the opportunity for series to be binge watched and such services' emergence appear to coincide with the developed inclusion and representation of women on screen. Binge watching reallocates the emphasis on the experience of the intensity of identification due to the emotional immersion involved in this process of viewing which is isolated to the medium of television alone. Sharma (2016) notes that Netflix creates an intentional 'strategy' which encourages binge watching, which is explained as the need to watch episode after episode of a television series:

> Enter: Netflix. The streaming service releases entire seasons of its shows all at once, a strategy that arguably encourages creators to reconsider or reallocate emphasis within this viewing relationship. If a show fails to woo us on episode one, the next episode is a mere 15 seconds away from starting. Why not give it the benefit of the doubt? Without a week in between each installment, the Netflix model potentially extends the courtship period. (Sharma, 2016).

The term 'binge' has many negative connotations, primarily with forms of addiction, yet as McCracken (as cited Belau and Jackson, 2017: 2-3) states, binge culture enables television to '…craft time and space…We enter a world that is for all its narrative complexity, a place of sudden continuity...' Thus, streaming services which utilise binge

watching as a strategy allows and keeps audiences drawn into a series, which ultimately produces an intense emotional immersion in a television world in which time and space is crafted in accordance with audience desire or demand.

With regards to this desire and demand, and in consideration of this work's interest with the dynamics of identification, occurring both by the creators of the text (Cohen, 2001; Gorton, 2009) and also by active audiences; Herbers (2017) makes an effective point regarding this active audience – or performers — and their own 'followers' that go beyond the text:

> As television's position in society alters, audience members in some way become the new bards. Using their smartphones as an instrument, they become performers on the stages of Twitter and YouTube, gathering followers as an audience (2017).

Herbers (ibid) is suggesting here that rather than the creative roots remaining within television, they are 'altered' and now end with audience who are gathering their own 'followers' through their performance online. Through active creativity and desire to engage with the text through their 'instruments', it seems plausible that their participation or performance online is evidence of a change to their intensity of identification and response to the text. Thus, to acknowledge the various roles that such audiences have in the creation of their own identification, it is important to use these 'instruments' as tools that potentially develop insight into identificatory processes. Therefore, the use of publicly shared social media comments, that Herbers (2017) alludes to, as well as publicly accessible fan works within that are discussed in the final chapter of the thesis, will help establish some understanding of how audiences' 'performances' potentially evidence their processes of identification regarding contemporary horror television texts.

When looking at such intense identificatory processes and participatory practices with regards to audiences, it is necessary to acknowledge their potential fan identity. This acknowledgement

is important because of the role of the fan who has specialised knowledge on the text and often seeks out other fans to share their enjoyment. This knowledge and desire to connect with other fans is not something a more generalised audience would necessarily desire. This increase in knowledge and interest aligns with a heightened emotional investment in the text which ultimately impacts their closeness to the characters within that text and subsequent patterns of identification. Hill's (2002: ix) builds on Jenkins' groundbreaking work on fans in *Textual Poachers* (1992) which established the notion that fans are the most active, imaginative, critically engaged, and socially connected consumers of popular culture. Hills' definition of a fan states:

> Everybody knows what a 'fan' is. It's somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse. Fans are often highly articulate. Fans interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways. And fans participate in communal activities – they are not 'socially atomised' or isolated viewers/readers. (Hills, 2002: ix)

To understand the complexities of a fan and the various interests that may emerge from this, Hills (ibid) acknowledges that the fans are not 'isolated' and their exploration of communal activities, asserts that fans are *aware* they are connected to other fans, as well as the creators. As such, during their 'performances' (Herbers, 2017) online or fan works, it must be recognised that they are attempting to seek out and engage other fans who perhaps perceive and gain pleasure from the text in similar ways.

There has been an association of such fan identities with particular formulations of genre and style (Sconce, 1995) which has aligned historical fan studies with various other privileged markers of identity, in particular masculinity and whiteness. This shift in the focus of fan studies has been driven by the issue of intersectionality (Morimoto, 2019; Wanzo, 2015; Stanfill, 2011; Booth, 2018). The absence of more marginal identities in fan studies has been critiqued, in terms of varied gender and sexual identities (Hollows, 2001; Stanfill, 2011) as well as their varied ethnic and racial identities also (Wanzo, 2015;

Morimoto, 2019). There are scholars who have addressed women's contributions in fan communities, including Penley (1997) and Wardlow (2017), both of whom have recognised their role in fan fiction and slash practices. Yet Wanzo (2015), Stanfill (2011), and Morimoto (2017) all highlight that the normative figure of the fan should be challenged and that further investigation as to what traits can be considered (non)normative or majority/minority within different fan communities is necessary. Most importantly, these recent studies have concluded that the idea that fans who produce and consume fan fiction are mostly 'ciswomen, white, straight, English-speaking and living in Anglophone-majority countries, middle-class, and higher educated should be questioned' (Duggan, 2020). As such, implying that even when discussing women fans, there are problematic understandings of the identities of these fans and their involvement in participatory culture.

There are contemporary scholars within horror studies that are focusing on issues of representation in horror. In recognising the placement of this thesis in relation to the following research, it too connects aspects of intersectionality (women) and their role in contemporary horror television, frequently through their engagement with the horror genre's history. In a similar way to Peirse (2020) in *Women Make Horror* who connects various women's occupations together (writer, academic, festival programmer, filmmaker) to present a broader narrative of women's experiences in horror, as Paszkiewicz and Rusnak (2020) investigates the Final Girls' trajectory, I too engage with paratextual material in order to connect the representation of women in horror, acknowledging the role of actors, showrunners, and fans, in the identification of their audiences. This research also includes a focus, in part on women's sexuality, which Elliott-Smith's (2020) *Queer Horror Film and Television,* also investigates from a broader perspective in the horror genre, acknowledging representations from film and television. This perspective to traces LGBTQ+ identities throughout contemporary horror, or 'New Queer Horror', and where the constraints of this figurative understanding of queerness exist in a culture where its presence is unambiguous.

Yet the complexities surrounding the issues of intersectionality in within studies regarding fan are becoming increasing points of interest as Duggan (2020) and Morimoto's (2019) research implies. This thesis aims to address some of the degrees of

marginality that have been acknowledged by scholars with regards to gender and sexuality (Hollows, 2001; Stanfill, 2011) and as such provide some inclusion to this academic understanding regarding women's experiences and sexuality. While this thesis focuses on representation, particularly that of women and their sexuality, there is an acknowledgement that this research could be made more inclusive and address other marginal identities. Yet as this thesis focuses on representation, those of wider, more marginal identities need to be first explored on screen in contemporary horror television in order for such analysis to take place. Therefore, this research can only address the representations that exist on screen at the time this research was undertaken. I actively recognise, however, that there are also significant absences of other identities and ethnicities, which require further inclusion in terms of representations on screen and academic acknowledgment. Scholars such as Means Coleman (2011) have covered issues of ethnicity within horror from a historical perspective in significantly greater depth. This leads to a further recognition that originates from the critiques made by Hollows (2001), Stanfill, (2011), Wanzo (2015) and Morimoto (2019); in that while addressing the issues of intersectionality in relation to fan studies, there is also the need to address the lack of representation of marginal identities on screen also.

Quality Television, the Showrunner, and Intertextuality

While acknowledging the audiences' own role in the creation of identification, the same examination must occur with regards to the creators' – or showrunner's – role in eliciting identification. While both Cohen (2001) and Gorton (2009) note the creator's role in eliciting this identification, they do not actively examine its application. While they use the term 'creator' (Cohen, 2001) or the use of 'technical devices' (Gorton, 2009), which are ultimately implemented and manipulated by those creatives; a key term has emerged in more recent years, within the television and film industry, that encapsulates a far broader creative imprint on the text and therefore, holds far more influence over its creation and development. The term 'showrunner' is recognised as being a source of significant influence over a text; from the creation of ideas, writing, production, casting, production, and postproduction. The term 'showrunner' is used as part of the industry discourse strategy and promotion as these people have a reputation that is often

synonymous with a genre and a certain quality. Bedard (2020) situates the role of a showrunner as "…a position more like the conductor of an orchestra." As such, everything runs under their creative vision. Newman and Levine's (2011:37) definition of the television auteur works to encapsulate the showrunner title:

> The showrunner is potentially an auteur: an artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft, and whose presence in cultural discourses functions to produce authority for the forms with which he is identified. The rise to prominence of television auteurs and of authorship discourses surrounding them functions to distinguish certain kinds of television from others, and, as in cinema, to promote auteur productions as culturally legitimate. (2011:37)

Therefore, the work of a television auteur functions to adopt the cinematic associations of quality within a televisual context, that ensure a particularly strong vision and influence over the series. There are conflicting ways to define what is meant by quality television, depending on different histories and prioritising different characteristics. This definition can include discussions on production methods, viewing and distribution practices, as well as genre hybridity.

This thesis combines aspects of the production, in the way that characters are framed on screen, for example, alongside the use of the horror genre and its intertextual histories in creating commentaries on the current representations of women. In doing so, the concept of the quality television series helps to articulate the relationship between these aspects. Fuller's (2013) statement provides an insightful understanding into the many influences which create quality television:

> Quality television tends to foreground genre hybridity, genre self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, and its viewers have become associated with dedicated fandom and new viewing practices such as "binge viewing", the increasing frequency of watching "off-air", and torrent culture. The quality television viewer is appealed to by, and not in spite

of, their status as a niche audience, and the cultural value accruing to their niche status has transformed investment in casting, scripting, acting directing, producing and critically evaluating television. Quality television has not only become a dominant television format but the benchmark against which "mainstream" television is measured. (Fuller, 2013:10).

There is a recognition of how these different elements combine in creating an understanding of quality television. The recognition of quality television is present in the text itself, through the 'genre hybridity, genre self-reflexivity, and intertextuality'; through the deliberate decisions made by the creator and showrunners, in the 'casting, scripting, acting directing, producing' as well as the impact this has on the response of such television, in the 'associated dedicated fandom'. This thesis examines these aspects of the quality television series in order to investigate the manner in which feminine identification occurs in contemporary horror television.

In relation to the showrunner, who is the one in charge of making many of these decisions, is important to recognise their influence in how meaning and understanding is established in the text. As Fuller (2013) touches on, part of the acknowledgement of quality television can also emerge from the 'dedicated fandom' and while this appears to be an aspect that remains outside of the showrunner's control, there is a clear and deliberate way in which the showrunners engage in a dialogue with these 'niche audiences'. For example, *Chapter Four: 'Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in Hannibal and Supernatural: This is the fans' design'* addresses the way in which Bryan Fuller blurs the boundaries of his own fan and showrunner status to directly acknowledge women audiences and subsequently encourage that dedicated fandom.

Part of the appeal of the showrunner is the thematic familiarity or various repetitive signatures occurring in each series or episode with a reception which echoes the value of the work (Halfyard, 2016; Short, 2011; Akass and McCabe, 2007, Fricker, 2002; Barker, 2017) and are ultimately received as culturally legitimate. There are dual processes that occur here in terms of the television auteur's legitimacy in which the political economy is entwined with the

cultural economy; the cultural legitimacy means that the once downplayed experiences of television become distinguished with significant importance to its predecessors as well as being underpinned by commercial imperatives, such as the financial potential such a label holds. Similarly, there is a history of the influential television auteur whose work focused on genre practices. This includes Joss Whedon who is most known for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Twin Peaks'* (1990-1991/ revival 2017) David Lynch, *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009) and *American Gods'* (2017-2021) Bryan Fuller, and *The X-Files's* (1993-2003) Chris Carter. All of these are auteurs whose work is associated with quality television.

In all the examples of showrunners' work as noted above and in Fuller's (2013) acknowledgement, the attribute of genre as being an important part in the construction of quality television is prevalent; the showrunner uses their knowledge on genre to deliberately address that niche audience who are also familiar with that genre. Specifically, there is a shared understanding between showrunner and the audience about the 'formula' (Clover, 1987; 1992) or 'contract' (Altman, 1999), how genre works and the pleasures it holds for the audience. Fuller (2013) notes the use of 'genre self-reflexivity, and intertextuality' as a central feature of quality television. The showrunner's engagement with this self-reflexivity and intertextuality is used to circulate and critique the historical representations embedded in genre's history. An example of this can be seen in *Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl and 'Bad Ass Lesbians'*. Here, Clover's (1987;1992) articulation of the cinematic Final Girl which has a recognised history within the subgenre of the slasher for reflecting sexual politics and is examined in relation to the televisual Final Girl's evolutions in order to address the contemporary changes to the issues surrounding these sexual politics. Therefore, one way in which such circulated knowledge can be explained, regarding genre, is through intertextuality.

Kristeva (1980:66), who was the first to use the term, 'intertextualité' (intertextuality), and states that the "… text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts." Kristeva (ibid) notes that the merging of those threads of understanding that are pulled from other texts are absorbed and transformed through the new ones. Also, Kristeva (ibid) recognises the 'construction' of the text in that there is a conscious effort to mould together these texts to transform them into something new. Genette (1997) took Kristeva's concept of intertextuality and created a broader and more systematic

understanding of the theory. Genette (as cited in Minrenayat and Soofastaei, 2015:534) explains that intertextuality involves the 'rich mosaic of echoes of, quotations from, allusions to and parallelisms with other texts'. Again, understanding the function of intertextual 'echoes' ensures it is possible to see how audience knowledge and engagement is historically recognised, adapted, and used in these more contemporary texts as an additional method of speaking to that particular audience who are already engaged in this area. Genette's (ibid) approach is important to this research due to his fascination with 'the fringes and borderlands between regimes that these explorations open up' (Minrenayat and Soofastaei, 2015:534). He created four categories of intertextuality: Paratextuality (thresholds between the text and its paratext - that which is beside the text), Architextuality (the position of a text as part of the genre or other genres' framework), Metatextuality (explicit or implicit critical observation of one text to another) and Hypertextuality/ Hypotextuality ('any relationship uniting text B (hypertext) to an earlier text A (hypotext)…' (Genette, 1997:5). The hypertext '...transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends' (Simandan as cited in Minrenayat and Soofastaei, 2015:536).

Importantly, the inclusion of these televisual texts under analysis centralises women's narratives and experiences. These texts include: *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019), *Slasher* (2016-), *Stranger Things* (2016-), *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018*), The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), *American Horror Story: Murder House (2011) The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018).* In particular, the corpus of texts have been chosen based on the fan reaction to these television series which have been documented online, through social media posts and popular journalistic sources. These journalistic sources, such as Wardlow's (2017) work on women fans and Ivie's (2019) piece interviewing Sadie Sink, provide further understanding to the context of the fan reaction to the series and specific points of pleasure, such as the 'power' Max holds in *Stranger Things*. The two exceptions to this are the two televisions series, as *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020) which requires significant use of paratextual material, such as fan fiction and fan texts, in order to investigating feminine identification. While the other chapters textually analyse the lead character roles that women have taken in the contemporary horror television series, *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020) do not follow this pattern. As such, the use of paratextual material becomes important in analysing how and where women's pleasure and identification occur in such series where there are no women leads.

With this in mind, the texts that have been excluded from this analysis are either less situated within the horror genre or do not prioritise women's narratives and experiences. Given this prioritisation of women in these narratives, the assumed audiences for these texts is primarily understood as women. These texts address women audiences through their implementation of similar themes, narratives, and characters that serve to explore women's experiences and challenge the historic ideologies that are implicitly correlated to representation of genre character types. By this, I mean that there are intertextual histories to such ideology; particularly with regards to ideology on women's experiences, sexuality, and identity, which are embedded in the horror genre. As outlined so far, many of the texts under discussion utilise this historical representation to critique and challenge many of the ideologies that were embedded in these genre character types. As such, leading to changes in these representations, which reflect, more accurately, contemporary women audiences. For example, the Final Girl, an established character type that emerges from the slasher subgenre, has been acknowledged within contemporary horror studies (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak, 2020) as being reflective of gender politics, Therefore, the changes that have been made to this character ultimately challenge and influence the ideologies that surround these sexual politics.

Methodological Reflection

In drawing on the conceptual parameters detailed above, this thesis maps the various spaces that allow for this 'varying intensity of identification' to occur in contemporary horror television. Each chapter focuses on characters, within horror subgenres, and engages in a particular intertextual history that produces commentaries on gender and identity. The changes to these characters reveal and address women's experiences on screen as well as becoming sources of appeal to women audiences in terms of pleasure and identification.

As established in the introduction, there is a 'never seen before' (Gaynor, 2019) increase in horror television, that has emerged in a relatively short time. The explosion of these texts and many of the streaming services in which the texts are located are based in the United States (US). I argue that this relatively short time, covers the years 2011-2022, which partly explains

the inclusion for these texts. Importantly, the inclusion of these texts under analysis centralises women's narratives and experiences. With this in mind, the texts that have been excluded from this analysis are either less situated within the horror genre or do not prioritise women's narratives and experiences. Given this prioritisation of women in these narratives, the assumed audiences for these texts is primarily understood as women. These texts address women audiences through their implementation of similar themes, narratives, and characters that serve to explore women's experiences and challenge the historic ideologies that are implicitly correlated to representation of genre character types. By this, I mean that there are intertextual histories to such ideology; particularly with regards to ideology on women's experiences, sexuality, and identity, which are embedded in the horror genre. As outlined so far, many of the texts under discussion utilise this historical representation to critique and challenge many of the ideologies that were embedded in these genre character types. As such, leading to changes in these representations, which reflect, more accurately, contemporary women audiences. For example, the Final Girl, an established character type that emerges from the slasher subgenre, has been acknowledged as being reflective of gender politics. Therefore, the changes that have been made to this character ultimately challenge and influence the ideologies that surround these sexual politics.

The thesis deals with identification, which has already been established as a contentious issue and one which is difficult to pinpoint in terms of experience. The use of paratext has been a helpful tool in addressing the ways in which audiences are finding points of identification and exploring this off screen (such as in the case of fan fiction or fan art) or taking to social media or internet (such as popular journalistic articles) in their desire to consume further ways of connecting with characters. Gray (2010:1) discusses the importance of paratexts in the construction of the media world in which they stem from:

> They tell us about the media world around us, prepare us for that world, and guide us between its structures, but they also fill it with meaning, take up much of our viewing and thinking time, and give us the resources with which we will both interpret and discuss that world (2010:1).

Here, Gray indicates that the paratext helps in the construction and interpretation of the media world that is built. Furthermore, this 'guide' through its 'structure' in paratext's role suggest that such texts knowingly become supportive to the audience.

The majority of the investigations within the chapters is focused on textual analysis in reading the television texts as cultural materials. In reading these texts, it becomes important to recognise that textual meaning exists within a web of meaningful texts and the discourses that surround them. All textual or intertextual materials have been used to explore the construction and reception of meaning. The value in textual analysis is that it enables the text to be read symbolically and ideologically. The use of symbolism becomes coded in meaning which connects to the text's ideological messages. Such symbolism and ideological meaning then helps in establishing how identification occurs. This symbolic and ideological meaning is extrapolated through the use of the text's narrative, genre, themes, and character to explore the representations of women in the contemporary horror text. As defined earlier in the introduction, the use of intertextuality and the history embedded within the horror genre, its commonly used narratives, and previous representations of women enable meanings to be historically outlined in order to assess how these contemporary representations emerge.

This thesis also includes intertextual and paratextual materials. In establishing how these texts are being used, it is important to acknowledge that there is no separation in recognising that all these materials are cultural texts which create meaning and ultimately inform and connect to the rest of the analysis. These intertextual materials are a central aspect of the ways in which meaning is extrapolated from many of these texts, audiences, and their context. The particular focus is on how these intertextual materials have been used to explore the construction and reception of meaning. There is a range of paratextual sources that are used, including interviews, publicly shared social media comments, popular journalism pieces, and fan fiction/fan art.

The popular journalistic sources that have been used in this thesis engage with the texts in a critical manner, engaging specifically with the text's themes and representations as a serious form of meaning making. These sources indicate a serious understanding of media and their

role in creating meaning around these texts for media-aware and interested audiences, as such reflecting their work as being popular and widely used. Furthermore, all of these sources demonstrate a complex understanding of politics, gender, and meaning within media and specifically, many of the texts or issues being discussed. There are a small range of popular journalism sources that have been utilised in this thesis. The following publications are illustrative of the sample of publications that are under examination: an online article at the Horror Home Room by Wilson (2019), who teaches Literature and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at California State University, was selected based on the exploration of the representation of women and use of gore in *Stranger Things* (2016-). The Horror Homeroom as an online space for popular journalism, as the title implies, acknowledges the writers' expertise in horror as well as the interest of their readership. While Dockertman's (2017) piece on Winona Ryder in TIME takes an equally serious approach to media journalism, analysing her role in *Stranger Things* with specific regards to Ryder's acting history. TIME, as a brand, positions itself in terms of its relevancy, addressing those issues which are culturally significant. The publications used in this thesis share the same progressive and liberal political positions on gender, as well as recognising the role of meaning making in media. These publications assume an audience who have similar interests, as well as directly speaking to their established audiences who are already invested in the discourses under discussion. These audiences are assumed to be invested in these discourses under discussion due to the framing of meaning around these discourses, which emerges in the source television texts being analysed and are subsequently the focus of the publication's article also.

I have conducted interviews with *Slasher* (2016-) showrunners and writers Aaron Martin, Lucie Page, and Ian Carpenter. These interviews have been conducted as they evidence the creator's awareness of the deliberate construction of meaning in their connection to the text and the audience. The interviews help to explore the deliberate ways in which the showrunners have privileged the awareness of audiences who share an intertextual knowledge of the horror genre and its representation of women in the text. This also recognises the influence of the showrunner in the formation and creation of the texts' themes and position overall in the quality television landscape. These interviews are essential in addressing the role of the showrunner in recognising their influence in eliciting character/audience identification on screen, which is fundamental to this thesis. I am also examining fan practices through interviews with fans, as

well as analysing their fan fiction or fan art. The use of these interviews has enabled me to examine the ways in which these particular fans are finding spaces for identification in the texts. Furthermore, these interviews have provided further first-hand insight as to where the pleasure emerges in creating such fan works and how these have been inspired by the source text.

At times, this thesis uses Twitter to evidence fan interaction and/or fan discourse to demonstrate fans' responses and readings of these texts that are specifically connected to women's representation in contemporary horror television. While it is impossible to cover all forms of social media and read every single interaction about the texts under discussion, Twitter has been helpful in being able to ascertain the comments pertinent to women's representations as per the focus of this research. Twitter is also an important performative space for fans and fan communities, as Herbers (2017) acknowledges. Muntean et al. (2012) supports the idea that, "Twitter has been a prolific environment for analysis allowing research to dive into real worldwide large-scale phenomena." As such, when these conversations are being shared publicly on social media, utilising the hashtag which groups certain topics together, it is normally with the intention to instigate a conversation with other people who share similar and 'real worldwide' interests or create debates. Ultimately, the individualistic nature of such readings can show other interpretations and how the process of meaning making in these representations occurs for these audiences. Twitter is not being used in an empirical fashion and thus, there is a recognition that not all these samples are generalisable. However, the platform's promotion of connection between audiences through the use of 'hashtags' and the 'trending' function has been helpful in identifying patterns of audience interest, engagement, and the circulation of discourses specific to the themes, characters, and representations this thesis is examining. The hashtags that have been used have evidenced particular responses to the issues pertinent to this thesis. The online, publicly shared tweets have been used as they help to explore the personal expression of engagement with meaning.

With regards to audience production, fan works which evidences what Jenkins (1992) calls participatory culture have been utilised in the thesis. Through fans' creativity and work, this enables space for discussion regarding the audiences' engagement with circulation of discourse and meaning. Like with the use of Twitter, these are publicly shared pieces of work which puts

their readings and interpretations of these discourses into the public domain. Through fan works, it is possible to address how fans use/amplify the ideology and meaning within the text and the use/subvert this in their own work. Through such work, it is possible to investigate what patterns of pleasure and identification fans are utilising from the text and the ways in which they are using this. It is essential to address that these understandings and constructions of meanings are not necessarily representative of all audiences who are watching. The processes of identification and the creation of meaning in representations are experienced differently by each individual. These fan works help establish patterns of discourse – such as a focus on character development, emotionality, or femininity – that emerge in the text and in fan practice. For example, the positioning of Hannibal and Will in Fuller's *Hannibal* (2013-2015) in an amorous embrace in a piece of fan art implies that audience member's interest is in these characters' subtextual romance as well as evidencing their perception of this representation from the source text.

Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl and 'Bad Ass Lesbians' argues that there are specific changes from the cinematic to televisual Final Girl, particularly with regards to their femininity, specifically, their agency, and sexuality. In order to achieve this, the chapter reconsiders Clover's (1987;1992) concept of the Final Girl, as a valuable framework for thinking about identification with this character within a televisual space. Clover's (ibid) argument of structured gendered identification dynamics produces a formula for the cinematic Final Girl character which deviates from the Final Girl that is occurring in contemporary horror television. While her structured gendered identification dynamics are problematic, her understanding of the Final Girl as being a vehicle of the horror genre's ability to express ideologies about gender is effective. This becomes useful in this chapter, where the Final's Girl's evolution in horror television reflects historically changing and culturally shifting representations regarding women. Part of this shift is the increase of inclusivity and presence of diverse identities and representations which is manifested in the texts.

This chapter will briefly explain the problematic historical representation of women and those in the LGBTQ+ communities in the horror and slasher sub-genre (Jones, 2015) in order to set up an exploration of how these representations have evolved into empowered characters. This empowerment emerges from inclusive narratives that prioritise women's experiences,

particularly in relation to how their gender identity and sexuality is constructed as characters who offer spaces for identification over exploitation. The chapter also uses interviews with *Slasher's* (2016-) writers and showrunners to explore their deliberate reflexive engagement with the slasher sub-genre and the Final Girl. These texts include: *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019), *Slasher* (2016-) and *Stranger Things* (2016-). The chapter argues that these texts present an evolved Final Girl in these series which plays far more with the sub-genre narrative expectations as the televisual landscape and increased time spent with these characters allow for a variety of Final Girls to emerge. For example, *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019), *Slasher: The Guilty Party* (2016-), *Slasher: Solstice* (2016-) and *Stranger Things* (2016-) offer a range of characters who are reflexively engaged with the Final Girl and provide a variety of identities, including gender, age, sexuality, femininity, race, and culture.

Chapter Two: Rewriting the Gothic Woman will investigate how inflections of the Gothic Woman appear within contemporary horror television to address their historic and problematic representation of women with regards to their emotionality, femininity, and attempts to undermine the patriarchy. The Gothic has a historical significance in terms of its connection to femininity. As Becker (1992:2) posits, "one of the secrets of the gothic's persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine (1992:2)." The Gothic Woman is 'characterized by scrutiny of the plights of vulnerable protagonists struggling against the male authority's deleterious interventions' (Murphy, 2017). Murphy (ibid) acknowledges the Gothic Woman's institutional, emotional, physical, and psychological struggles against the patriarchy, which have impacted their narratives and enhanced their vulnerability.

In these television texts, the Gothic genre's historic and oppressive treatment of women and their battles with the patriarchy are rewritten to explore the contemporary women's experiences. This chapter examines how the self-reflexive contemporary horror television series, in particular, *The Haunting...Series* by Mike Flanagan, explores the thematic preoccupations of the Gothic, in particular challenging the genre's problematic representation of women, as noted by Benson James (2016) and Little (2015), opening up spaces for women as a source of feminine power and identification. These texts utilise the domestic, gothic treatment of femininity and broaden that understanding to ensure a more encapsulating representation of women. The discussion of *The Haunting...Series* focuses on the adaptation

from book to television, demonstrating the significant changes made from the original text which prioritise feminine-centric narratives and varying representations. This includes an analysis of experiences of balancing professional working life and motherhood, sexuality, emotional coldness/emotional sensitivity, and femininity. Overall, these representations are connected through their rewriting of the historic weakness of the Gothic Woman's into a source of feminine power and strength.

Chapter Three: Bonds of Blood; Women and Community in the Contemporary Horror Television Series focuses on the exploration of thematic community with regards to women's bonding, marginalisation, and motherhood. Ellen Brown's (1994) research into the soap opera highlights the significance of community both between the audience and narratively. Through her application of the uses and gratification model, she argues that social bonding is key in the engagement of women with media. In particular, this sense of community became important both in terms of thematics and representation. The importance of thematic community on women's experience remains present in contemporary texts, like *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2016) and *Sex and The City* (1998-).

Chapter one's focus on the Final Girl is inevitably engaging with the primarily teenage character and by extension, explores representations emphasising teenage experiences and identity. The Final Girl was also tied to the slasher subgenre and the second chapter similarly uses a genre character of the Gothic Woman. In this second chapter, the Gothic Woman is older than the teenager and as such, her experiences differ but are ultimately connected through their experiences of marginality. Yet the Gothic Woman's narratives are centralised to her domesticity and the familial challenges she faces here. This third chapter will also investigate women's experience, ranging from the teenager to the older woman, with a particular focus on these characters' involvement with their community. This is examined through the contemporary horror television series through the exploration of women characters' dismissal and marginality; intergenerational friendships; the older woman and the challenges to the constructions of femininity. These themes are present in *Stranger Things'* (2016-), Eleven, Max, Joyce and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina's* (2018-2021) Nancy, Zelda, Sabrina and Theo, and *American Horror Story: Coven*'s (2011-) Fiona and Cordelia. The chapter also explores the witch and covens of witches as they operate as communities of women as their

power, danger to masculinity and sense of feminine bonding which is created within their covens.

Chapter Four: 'Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in *Hannibal* and *Supernatural*: This is the fans' design' has a central argument that slash fiction no longer requires transgressive or graphic components that function to challenge or oppose the political or ideological messages embedded in the text, as previous slash scholars have acknowledged (Penley, 1997; Jenkins, 1992). These transgressive or graphic elements are not utilised in slash fiction by fans anymore in order to create these political and ideological debates regarding representation; for that representation is already present within the text itself. Therefore, this new wave of slash fiction upholds the same erotic or romantic sub/text the source television series acknowledges, whilst providing some insight into how these fans are reprioritising women's voices or interests within their own fan works.

Hannibal and *Supernatural* fan works uncover the creation of a new wave of slash which is less politicised than Jenkins' (1992) and Penley's (1997) original definition. Busse and Hellekson (2014) similarly argue that the appeal of fan fiction, as a broader category, is its function to critique the social and political climate, such as the treatment of women. For example, this chapter analyses *Beasts of Prey* by Elizabeth B and her re-prioritisation of Fuller's character, Chiyoh, as a lead character and Jenny's *Illustration* of Hannibal and Will, or Jackie Dee's art of Cas and Dean in exploring their own understanding of the romantic relationships between lead characters. Many of the fan works under examination are reoriented to focus on the perspective or prioritise the women characters in the texts that explores or uphold the leads' romantic relationship. This use of perspective indicates the patterns of identification with the character and ultimately some of the pleasures within the text. Therefore, this new wave of slash means that fans no longer need to write slash fiction in order to gain some pleasure from the text or establish an identificatory position, as it is already within the text. In fact, this new wave of slash addresses particular fan interest and opens further spaces for women's narrative to be developed away from the source text.

This chapter will utilise fan texts in order to investigate how women audiences negotiate space for identification in male-driven narratives. While the other chapters examine women on screen, the texts under discussion here contain narratives that primarily focus on male characters/protagonists. Therefore, considering the male-driven narratives, such as *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020), they require a greater use of paratextual material in order to investigating feminine identification. While the previous chapters have textually analysed the lead roles that women have taken in the contemporary horror television series, *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020) do not follow this pattern. As such, the use of paratextual material, particularly the use of fan fiction and art, becomes important in analysing how and where women's pleasure and identification occur in such series.

In Chapter Five: The Conclusion, I use an event that took place on International Men's Day 2021 just prior to the writing up of the conclusion. I argue that the speech led by Conservative Member of Parliament Nick Fletcher helps to emphasise the justification for such research into women's representation on screen. In his speech, Fletcher argued that there were connections between young men turning to crime and women actors playing traditionally male roles in television and film. 'Female Doctor Who Robs Boys of Role Models, MP claims' (BBC, 2021) the heading read. This recent speech mirrors some of the academic narratives that this thesis will explore regarding women's on-screen representation which situates them as to blame for the violence, even if they have not committed the acts themselves (Creed, 1993; Hernandez-Santaolalla, 2019:84). However, with Fletcher (BBC, 2021), he makes quite the transition from women being blamed for the violence on screen, to articulating that through women replacing these roles that are historically occupied by men, it becomes a contributing factor which is reinforcing young men's real-life violence. A key issue that I derived from this speech is the fact that many of the roles that women were occupying evidenced no – or little – on screen violence. Therefore, how was Fletcher making this connection from women's representation on screen to real life enactments of violence from young men. Furthermore, and more relevant to this thesis, it is necessary to address the issues that arise when women's representation in the contemporary horror television series – where they frequently perform acts of abject violence – is analysed in more detail; particularly, the consequences this would have on the audience's understanding of this on-screen enacting of violence.

From this, the conclusion restates the overall intention and aim of the thesis to explore women's representation in the contemporary horror television series, particularly with regards to their femininity, and the ways in which audience's identification is established. Then the conclusions of each chapter of the thesis are presented in order to provide a broad picture of women's representation in horror television. These broad conclusions are then acknowledged. This includes a central finding that became increasingly prominent across all the chapters: the concept that women's identification which originated from potential spaces of emotionality and passiveness (Clover, 1987; 1992; Ellen Brown, 1994) had been restructured in terms of using this emotionality from an empowering stance. Due to the increased emotional immersion that the medium of television's series platform provides, there is far more depth to the characters that moves beyond their previous basic function to serves as active aggressor or passive, emotional victim. In many of the examples of contemporary horror television that have been discussed, the power in the narrative comes from the character's ability to gage, manage, understand, and/or manipulate the emotional landscape of the scene. This suggests that there is a significant development in the way that women's experiences are explored on screen.

Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television

"The whore, she's corrupted, she dies first. The athlete. The scholar. The fool. All suffer and die at the hands of whatever horror they have raised, leaving the last to live or die, as fate decides… The virgin."

The Director (Sigourney Weaver) – *The Cabin In The Woods* (2011).

This quote from one of the final scenes in *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011) self-reflexively examines various slasher subgenre character types. In particular, addressing the Final Girl, Dana, as the virginal survivor. In this film, Dana's increasing awareness of her Final Girl status comes under criticism as she attempts to negotiate the passivity imposed on her as she watches all of her best friends die brutal deaths, unable to do little about it. This self-reflexivity, which speaks to audiences' familiarity with these characters are equally embedded in many of the texts examined within this thesis. This chapter reconsiders Clover's (1987;1992) concept of the Final Girl, which is a valuable framework for thinking about identification with this character within a televisual space. Clover's (ibid) argument of structured gendered identification dynamics produces a formula for the cinematic Final Girl character which is unrepresentative of the representation of the Final Girl that is occurring in the contemporary horror television. In particular, Clover (1989) articulates that the Final Girl is not a product of the genre, but the way that the genre has expressed ideologies about gender. Similarly, there is a cinematic history of problematic representation and treatment of the Final Girl and the LGBTQ+ communities within the horror and slasher sub-genre (Jones, 2015). Whereas in the current television series being discussed, such as *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019), *Slasher* (2016-) and *Stranger Things* (2016-); the texts and women character are far more inclusive about gender, sexuality, and femininity.

This chapter argues that there are specific changes from the cinematic to televisual Final Girl, particularly with regards to their femininity, specifically, their agency and sexuality.

Hernandez-Santaolalla (2019) claims that there has been little change with regards to the role of the woman in the slasher subgenre, which has a history of sexualising women, enacting violence upon women, or making women appear monstrous (Creed, 1993; Clover, 1992; Dika, 1990; Briefel, 2005; Conrich 2010). The texts that are analysed in this chapter are far more inclusive and supportive of these characters who emerge as more than a token character, or the monster, as previous representations allude to (Jones, 2015). The tendency to marginalise these characters, thematically and narratively, is then subverted so these characters become champions of acceptance of their identity, which along with the change in medium, ultimately provides space for increased emotional immersion.

This chapter also utilises paratextual material, specifically the interview that I have conducted with *Slasher* showrunner and writers, Arron Martin, Lucie Page and Ian Carpenter. The use of these interviews helps to establish their intended meanings for the construction of *Slasher's* women characters. Through understanding this construction of representation, it ultimately enables a more developed insight into the way in which meaning of gender through the slasher is framed and created.

The contemporary texts, under investigation in this chapter, include *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019), *Slasher* (2016-) and *Stranger Things* (2016-). While a brief summary of these series will ensue, it is important to establish the connection between these texts in their use of genre as contract as the promise of particular pleasures and patterns (Altman, 1999). The use of genre, specifically the slasher in this chapter, essentially creates an established intertextual expectation, only to be subverted and challenged, particularly with regards to how women's experiences are examined on screen. *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019) follows a teenage friendship group (known as the Lakewood Six) who are stalked and murdered by a masked serial killer. While *Slasher* (2016-) is an anthology series with four seasons: *The Executioner* centres around a 3–4-month period in which a masked killer terrorises a small town in Canada after a woman returns to the house her parents were killed in when she was a baby. *Slasher: The Guilty Party* follows summer camp counsellors who return to their old campground for a long weekend to retrieve the body of a fellow campmate they murdered and are killed off one-

by-one. The third series, *Slasher: Solstice* examines a twenty-hour period where a block, during a summer solstice, is targeted due to the occupants' complicity in failing to help a murder victim the year before. While *Stranger Things* (2016-) is a genre hybrid Netflix original series which features heavy intertextual use of the sci-fi and horror genres, it similarly features characters who are stalked and subjected to watching their friends die.

The Final Girl

In her seminal work, '*Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film'*, Carol Clover (1987;1992) provided a detailed analysis of the slasher subgenre, outlining the slasher's key characteristics, as well as the sole survivor of the film, the Final Girl. The slasher as a subgenre has been investigated, but far less in terms of its more recent emergence on television. Vera Dika's (1990) '*Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle*', and Richard Nowell's '*Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle*' (2011) are influential texts in mapping some of the common expectations from the audience. Dika's (1990) aim was to establish the sub-genre as a cohesive work, with distinctive narrative and cinematic characteristics. She argued that the slasher could be understood through two parts: the first part is focused on an earlier event, the 'Past Event'. The second part is the 'Present Event'. The Past Event is usually about a killer's extreme trauma. The Present Event involves the killer taking revenge, either literally or symbolically. Nowell (2011) examined the industrial construction of the slasher, in how the marketers and filmmakers went to great lengths to ensure the early teen slashers were attractive to female youth, through minimising the displays of violence, gore and suffering. In a similar manner to Clover (1987; 1992), Nowell (2011) seems to examine how filmmakers' removal of such violence – and as such, more passive stance – would equal a more inclusive audience. Yet, all of these scholarly works focus on the slasher film; not the slasher television series as this thesis examines. Therefore, there needs to be some consideration for this medium change in the application of such ideas.

The Final Girl is, as Clover (1987; 1992) implies, the only model of identification that aligns closely with the function of horror genre and character, that includes women audience's perspectives, albeit through the cinematic experience. Clover's (ibid) ideas on gendered identification in the horror genre is an important starting point in understanding the relationship between women as audience, women as characters in contemporary horror texts and subsequently, the processes of identification. Her position explicitly engaged with psychoanalysis, similar to many of the feminist film theorists (Mulvey, 1975; Creed, 1993; Williams, 1991) at the time who attempted to disassemble the intrinsic patriarchal ideology that has historically defined the psychoanalytical methodology as fixed, such as the concepts of men and women and masculine and feminine.

Clover's (1987;1992) influential work on the Final Girl established that the character was a commonly used trope, virginal, intelligent, resourceful, and watchful; almost to the point of paranoia (Clover 1992: 39). She is smaller and weaker than the killer but will find the strength to delay the killer long enough to be rescued or she will kill him herself (Clover 1992: 35). Clover (1992:84) notes that it is the Final Girl:

> ...is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again (1992:84).

Therefore, one of the most central attributes of the Final Girl is that she is 'stalked' to use Dika's (1990) term in categorising the genre. A template Clover (1987;1992) examines is Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) and her interactions with killer, Michael Myers as he stalks his prey in Haddonfield. Her paranoia, as well as her unisex name, are already two categories in which Clover's (ibid) definition applies. She survives to the end, overpowers Michael (always left narratively open ended, however) and does witness the death of her friends, while under threat herself.

Clover (1987;1992) explains how this pattern of identification for the Final Girl works. She notes:

> …however, it (the one-gender model) is also echoed in its (the horror film) representation of gender as the definitive category from which sex proceeds as an effect – and in its deep interest in precisely such proceedings. (Clover, 1992:15)

Here, she states that horror films are informed by two models of viewing; sex and gender: the "two-sex" or "two-flesh" model (that male and female bodies are inherently different and thereby inform the gender of the person inhabiting the body) and the "one-sex" model in which "the 'one sex' in question was essentially male, women being 'inverted, and less perfect' men" (ibid:13-14). As noted earlier in the introduction, this one sex model adds a further instability to an already unstable universe: now there is "slippage, in which maleness and femaleness are always tentative and hence only apparent" (ibid:14). This instability comes from the 'slippage' of the maleness and femaleness and what emerges most prominently, is how many of the slasher films manage to reaffirm this clear 'femaleness'. This 'femaleness' is reaffirmed through the framing of passivity and heightened emotions in their women characters. As already acknowledged, Clover (1987;1992) and Butler (1990; 1999) see gender as a social construct which is performed based on expectations of that gender.

With this in mind, Clover (1987; 1992) recognises that women identify with the Final Girl based on her emotionality. This historical performance of gender (Butler, 1990;1999), particularly regarding women on screen and their emotionality, is presented through the characters and the showrunner's setting, tone, and overall presentation of the characters' experience. For example, femininity can be represented as subtle as is the case of *Scream: The TV Series'* where Audrey's emerging emotional intelligence is more pronounced after she keeps an incriminating clip of her aggression in order to remind herself to be a better person. Equally, this femininity can be represented as more explicit, as is evidenced in the influx of designer items and pastel pink mise-en-scene of the Kappa Kappa Tau sorority house in *Scream*

Queens (2015-2016). Both presentations work to tie their femininity to Clover (1987;1992) and Butler's (1990;1999) understanding of its representation; women as feminine, either through their emotions or through their setting. Yet, in these cases, this femininity is sharply contrasted by the level of violence enacted by the (women) residents. What the television series manages to do is to work to challenge these representations of 'femaleness' and femininity rather than reaffirm them. As the *Scream Queens* example evidences, Kappa Kappa Tau is home to women, as coded by the prominent and excessive pink setting, but it is also a breeding ground of brutal violence. These aspects of femininity and violence exist simultaneously, rather than explored separately.

The complexity of this femininity emerges from the oppressive elements that create the Final Girl character, which Clover (1987;1992) herself criticised. Yet she also recognised this character as providing screen time for the women hero to emerge, when most feminist film theory predominately (at the time her book was written) focused on promoting the male gaze. The use of the female hero – or Final Girl – means that male audiences are forced to identify with these women based on their masculinity, and their enactment of violence, rather than the traditional male hero, who is presented as more competent that the other male characters in the film. But these masculine characteristics ultimately separate the Final Girl from her friends and connect her more closely to the killer. Women identify with the Final Girl based on her emotionality, which positions women's processes of identification from a passive stance. Thus, the Final Girl only survives because of their maleness; as such diminishing any space for the feminine, as a socially understood construct, to be challenged on screen. At the conclusion of the film, they can take a phallic object and penetrate the killer with it, therefore unmanning him. It is through the "…scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again" (Clover, 1992:15) that the Final Girl is allowed to become manned; she must transgress from victim to hero.

The Evolution of the Final Girl

There is currently a scholarly movement, most notably instigated by AClayton and Daniel Sheppard, who held the first slasher-specific academic conference with continuing efforts to create 'Slasher Studies' (on Twitter as @SlasherStudies) as a discipline in its own right. Yet, even within the conference itself, there was little acknowledgment by the presenting scholars of the slasher television series and as such, it remains a severely underexamined in comparison to its cinematic counterparts. While many have established the changing representation of the cinematic Final Girl such as post-*Scream's* Sidney Prescott who became infamous for breaking the Final Girl mould, this development has rarely been examined with the Final Girls on television. Similarly, while Clover's (1987;1992) formulation of Final Girl as a character type has been modernised in scholarship (Lattila, 2019), the same cannot be said for her positioning of the attached identificatory processes.

Similar to Wood's (1986; Tudor, 1989) concept of the return of the repressed, the 'monster' has status and meaning beyond the text itself that impacts cultural understanding. Clover (1987; 1992) acknowledges the Final Girl as one of those figures with cultural meaning beyond the text (Lattila, 2019), particularly with regards to gender. With the Final Girl, these representations correlate to upholding conservative ideologies. For example, the Final Girl historically does not have sex outside marriage and follows authority's orders, whether that be police or parents. Yet McAndrews (2019) and Lattila (2019) state that the changing Final Girl goes beyond their virginity and male identification with the character in order to comment on traditional gender representation in horror; from exploring their sexuality, exacting a form of revenge for problematic treatment, and general exploration of women's narratives. Therefore, beyond Dika (1990), Clover (1987; 1992) and Nowell (2011), there has been further analysis of the Final Girl and explanations of how these representations have developed.

Although such development of genre character types is not unexpected, given the 'contract' (Altman, 1999) between genre and audience and the cycle of 'repetition and difference' (Tudor, 1974) which is central to the broad patterns of genre. The need for 'difference' means that any

trope is subject to change, evolution, and adaptation. Regardless of the persuasiveness of Clover's (1987;1992) explanation, genre patterns change, and the Final Girl is no exception. McAndrew's (2019) acknowledges that:

> The Final Girl also has grown into a figure of many subgenres. No longer is she confined to the slasher but can be seen in supernatural films, possession films, and more.

As such, the Final Girl is not only a product of the subgenre, but the way that the genre more broadly has expressed ideologies about gender. Importantly, these changes allow for the Final Girl to "…take centre stage and kick butt, something that a lot of other genres are lacking." (Lattila, 2019). Therefore, the utilisation of the Final Girl and the associated lead women take in this role results in further explorations of women's narratives on screen. Yet again, the televisual Final Girls get ignored in McAndrew's (2019) comment regarding Final Girl being used in other subgenres to explore such gender representations. An interesting exploration of the Final Girl, away from the slasher subgenre, is Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) in *Stranger Things,* which is the focus of the latter section of this chapter. Here, Nancy is created both as an intertextual play with the subgenre, but primarily to explore the slasher's ability to examine and showcase the maturation from teenager to adulthood as a woman in the 1980s.

Hernandez-Santaolalla's (2019) work directly acknowledges the slasher in the television series format, the changing Final Girl, and the gender perspective. They argue, as earlier outlined in the chapter, that there has been little progress with regards to women's representation in the slasher television series. Hernandez-Santaolalla (2019:84) identifies the current need for 'longer lasting plotlines to meet the demands of several seasons of television…'. The intricate and longer plotlines do prove a useful starting point in explaining one change in the format of the cinematic slasher and its transference to television. However, in order for this 'demand' to

be met and in relation to the character-focused interest of this research, the changes to the Final Girl and women characters throughout, must be more complex, multifunctional, and insightful than their cinematic counterparts in order to retain audiences' interest for such extended periods of time.

Final Girls' Agency

For a subgenre which has frequently positioned their women characters as problematic, the changes to their agency in the slasher becomes increasingly important in assessing how the Final Girl has evolved. In addressing the meaning of agency, which is commonly a point of contention that is explored in feminist discourse (Dedebas, 2013; Sezen et al, 2020), it describes a person's capacity to take independent action and to assert control over their own circumstances. The conceptual basis for this argument is that more marginalized people in positions of creative and critical influence makes for more progressive representation.

From Hernandez-Santaolalla's (2019) perspective, women in the slasher remain as tools for violence, yet I argue that these new texts create a space by which the modern woman's narrative is a focal point and their struggles to gain equality are, albeit excessively, documented on screen. In concluding his analysis of *Scream*: *The TV Series*, *Scream Queens* and *Slasher*, Hernandez-Santaolalla's (2019:92) claims:

> Even though an argument could be made that there has been some progress in the portrayal of the roles developed by masculine and feminine characters, in general, the ideas persist that even if the monster is a man, it is somehow the woman's fault that these killing sprees occur. (2019:92)

To recognise the affirmation of the monster as man and women as to blame for the violence committed, is too simplistic of an observation. This is not to dismiss this reading, but to suggest that, rather than ignoring women's agency and attributing blame, the processes of responsibility, guilt, fear and the subsequent violence become far more complex. Particularly in regards to women's agency; at what point are connections created or isolated for who is responsible for another's violence. Hernandez-Santaolalla's (2019:92) comment implies that the television series still frames women as the ones to blame for the violence and ignores their agency as individual people or characters. Furthermore, the above quote suggests that women characters' behaviours is only read for meaning and understood in relation to the male characters' narrative, rather than in their own right. This places the responsibility for other's violence on the women characters. In this chapter, this includes the Final Girls' poor choices, vanity, or the poor in/action of a parent. The women within this chapter do not comply with society's expectations of their femininities as socially constructed, but are not always violent themselves. Violence occurs *around* them. With Hernandez-Santaolalla's (2019:92) concept in mind, it feels important to reallocate women's agency and their connection to the violence that occurs in order to examine how this influences identification.

Similarly, women's agency within the horror genre has its own set of discourses. This desire for agency becomes an exaggerated experience for those in teenage drama (Davis and Dickinson, 2000), which *Slasher: Solstice* and *Scream: The TV Series* certainly utilise, particularly when set within the high school narrative that is most synonymous with that genre (Wood, 1986). As Butler (2018:73) notes, the 80s high school cycle occurred in parallel with the slasher cycle which narratively functions in a similar manner, both are 'inextricable from the conservatism of the era' and ultimately focused on developing identity. Furthermore, Butler (ibid) argues that these genres are used in order to confront 'the stifling social conservatism and reinforcement of archaic domestic values that rested at the heart of Reagan's policies.' As such, texts which combine both elements of the slasher and the high school narrative are likely to produce an exaggerated focus on the emergence of identity and the barriers which occur in that construction.

In the case of Saadia Jalalzai (Baraka Rahmani), the Final Girl from the third series, *Slasher: Solstice*, her notable agency as an individual is explicitly expressed in numerous incidents; through her religion, her experiences of racism, her romantic relationships, and even her decisions about what to post to social media. Saadia aligns with Clover's (1992;1987) Final Girl as she is being stalked, her friends are being targeted, and she is ultimately attacked and has to defend herself. Interestingly, the text works to emphasise Saadia's innocence, virginity, and frames her as a victim in terms of her familial and historical background, as it is revealed she is an immigrant from Afghanistan and lost the majority of her extended family in a military attack. While this character trajectory seems to differ from Clover's (ibid) original understanding of the Final Girl; essentially Saadia aligns with this understanding through her victimhood and historical trauma which are key makers of the Final Girl. However, the cinematic history of these issues in relation to the Final Girl has been approached differently. For example, the death of Sidney Prescott's mother in *Scream* (1996) or the kidnapping and experiences of witnessing cannibalism as with Sally from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). In these instances, with the historical Final Girl's victimhood and trauma, it is located in the same country with events that appear unusual in Western society; whereas Saadia's experience as an immigrant and the subsequent racism and abuse she faces is commonly encountered by many people in contemporary culture that often remain unexplored on screen. Similarly, Saadia provides a more inclusive representation of the Final Girl's historic, cinematic identity from the white, middle-class teenager to an Afghan, United States immigrant, Muslim teenager whose family is struggling financially. Saadia's victimisation continues in her current school life where schoolgirl Cassidy racially attacks Saadia and, later, Cassidy's dad, Dan Olenski, also begins a racist campaign targeting Saadia and her family.

Through these experiences, there are many conversations which arise about racism, identity, and the power of her own agency. Cassidy's attempted removal of Saadia's hijab is a pivotal and emotional moment, as the hijab for Saadia, is a symbol of her religious identity, but also of self-empowerment; in particular, empowerment over her own body, as Aya Mohamed (Belotti, N.D) notes: "When you decide to cover your body, you prevent society from sexualising it. In this way, you gain so much power. Your body won't be judged and criticized by society anymore." Equally, there is a complex ideological understanding of the hijab in that much feminist scholarship has criticised the patriarchal structures of the Abrahamic religion

and the representation of control and ownership over women (Emil, 2021). The liberal emphasis on the freedom of belief in the United States sits uncomfortably and potentially in internal contradiction with structural inequalities of religious practices. Therefore, Saadia's expression of agency is not only about her choice in the wearing of her hijab, but the political and ideological dimensions that are attached to that in the ownership of her choice.

This power dynamic between a person's body and society's instructing or judgment of that body is particularly interesting when framed within a slasher context; while starkly different, in the slasher, there is still a power struggle over one's own body and ultimate survival. Saadia articulates her decision to follow her religion as being pivotal to what she believes to be a 'better' version of herself; rather than anything that is imposed or impressed upon her by society, her family, or friends. Cassidy's removal of the hijab, as such, becomes a violent act to Saadia's person. The narrative challenge in the slasher is about whether a person's agency and power over their own body will be taken away by the killer. Therefore, through Saadia's attack and the attempted removal of her hijab by Cassidy, there is a more relevant, nuanced debate about agency and power over the body, presented on screen, that is rooted more closely in reality, than the need for a masked serial killer. Equally, Cassidy becomes the first victim of The Druid, and as such, receives a comeuppance for her racist behaviour and her imposing of violence on to another body. Equally, Cassidy's death scene becomes a pivotal moment in the narrative in which the liberal and inclusive ideologies of the text are outlined. Essentially, this attack on Saadia's identity functions to highlight the modern applications of the rhetoric of physical and political autonomy that has always been apparent in the slasher.

Saadia's agency is also explored in a pivotal scene in the final episode *'3am-6am'* where the killers are revealed to be Saadia's best friend, Jen Rijker (Mercedes Morris) and love interest, Connor Rijker (Gabriel Darku). Jen and Connor become killers after their mum, Justine, died by suicide after posting a picture of Kit's (the original Druid victim) body online with a tag 'you reap what you sow'. This led to the Rijker family suffering a torrent of abuse, eventually leading to Justine's very public suicide where the residents of the block filmed the incident, but otherwise watched on. Vicariously, Saadia has experienced the tragic impact of the

cyberbullying which ultimately led to Justine's death and the devastation this caused the Rijkers. Saadia is empathetic to their experiences as she, too, has similarly undergone such victimisation through her experiences of racism. In the final scenes, as Jen is killed, it is revealed by Saadia's tearful admittance that she was the one who retweeted the (originally private) message made by Jen's mother regarding Kit's death and it was Saadia's tweet which caused it to go public, thus viral and instigated the harassment. Therefore, the victimised Final Girl becomes the *origin* of so many deaths; for Saadia's actions resulted in Justine's death and Jen and Connor's Druid mission for vengeance. Therefore, the images of innocence and morality that were created through this current view of Saadia's should become fractured and yet, they do not. Showrunner, Ian Carpenter related that for Saadia, it was important to have a 'to-her-core' good person who could also, by a very casual tweet, set into motion a terrible sequence of events. Therefore, there is a critical and deliberate intention of creating Saadia as a good person. Ian notes:

> It was very much a "there but for the grace of God, go I" kind of moment. In that moment, [he hopes] audiences feel how easily they could have been Saadia and recognize that even in her one tiny flaw she is still good.
>
> (Interview with Ian Carpenter, by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

While Saadia's apparent innocence and clear victimisation, appears to align closely to the Final Girl characteristics, Saadia's past behaviour and decision to retweet a damning statement has lethal consequences that mean Clover's (ibid) ideas do not apply so neatly. Saadia clearly regrets her actions, in particular the retweet, and unlike Dawn in *The Guilty Party*, had no physical contribution to anyone's death. Saadia made a public judgment of someone – as many people do thousands of times a day on the internet – which resulted in tragic consequences. This incident means that Saadia deviates from Clover's (1987; 1992) original Final Girl; from one who is an abused and virginal, the victim-hero, to a young woman who is far more complex, more dynamic. Saadia has learned to hold herself accountable for her own morality and social responsibility, learned from the mistakes she has made and intends to empower herself and those around her to ensure all voices are heard, however marginal they may be. This exploration of complex characters with multi-faceted intentions and behaviours creates

space for further identification. As such, Saadia's actions here serve to create her as a human; not perfect, untouchable, or fully compliant to her religion. This flaw, this mistake, while its consequences are tragic, functions to remind the audience of how similar they might be to Saadia or aspire to be – as one ill-willed tweet away from tragedy.

As Saadia develops independence and agency in her own right, other characters have to negotiate their agency, through other characters, which is impeded by the pressures of their families. In terms of agency, this is further complicated by the challenges of school and parents as per the traditions of the teenage drama (Davis and Dickinson, 2000). In the case of Jen (Mercedes Morris), from *Slasher: Solstice*, she is unable to live a fully autonomous and carefree life because of the pressures of caring for her mother, Justine, during her cyber bulling tirade, and then later, Amber's (Justine's girlfriend's) mental health after Justine's death. Jen's own identity is hindered because she has to negotiate her own exploration of identity, that is synonymous with the teenager years, with managing her parents' trauma and their over-reliance on her. She only understands who she is in relation to their trauma; she is a carer, a loyal daughter. This emphasis on the social expectations of her being this loyal daughter remain even after her mother's death and as such, instigate that she becomes (alongside her brother, Connor) the killer in order to seek revenge for those hurting Justine, through which she loses her own identity in the need to live – or die – to continue in gathering her justice for her mother, rather than developing her own life choices like Saadia.

In a similar manner, Brooke (Carlson Young) and Emma (Willa Fitzgerald) in *Scream: The TV Series* have their agency equally impeded by the actions of their parents. Brooke's father is soon-to-be mayor and has to hide various family scandals, including faking a suicide of a friend after an accidental drug overdose, various affairs, and involvement in blackmail. He also pays one of Brooke's boyfriends to leave the area and heavily monitors Brooke's social and romantic interactions. This culminates in extreme rebellion from Brooke in terms of her behaviour; she has parties outside of police curfew after a spate of murders, begins an affair with her teacher, and engages in other risky behaviours. With her mother at an emotional rehabilitation centre and her father rarely home, whilst hyper critical of her behaviour, Brooke's reactions are pleas for attention in whatever form that attention takes. As an interaction with the killer, highlights:

Brooke: What do you want?

The Lakewood Slasher: Mm, if it isn't daddy's little girl.

(*Scream: The TV Series*, 2015 Season 1, Episode 4.)

For a while, Brooke only exists either as her father's daughter and as such an extension of him or as an opposing threat to the nuclear family norm in which her family seem so keen to preserve, something that Butler (2018) echoed in her understanding of the conservative alignment between the slasher and teen high school narrative. Therefore, as the series progresses and after the murder of her father, the legacy of him becomes the reason for Brooke's determination to remove herself from the family's history of coercive control and lies. Her blunt and steely manner is used less as a defensive mechanism to emphases her difference and more as a weapon of protection which aligns her with the other survivors of the Lakewood Six.

While Emma, in *Scream: The TV Series,* has to uncover the truth about her mother's secret teenage romance (Brandon James) and subsequent child (Piper, killer of series one), in order to save herself and her friends from a brutal death. Emma's lack of agency, at times, makes for an unremarkable character whose desire to listen to her mother becomes oppressive. In refusing to inform Emma of her true familial identity, her mother, Maggie (Tracy Middendorf), forces Emma into investigating the truth of her mother's connection to killer Brandon James. Similarly, Maggie uses this history to cryptically control Emma's behaviour; through limiting who she sees and where she goes; providing little rationale for her reasoning. This emotional

manipulation, while framed as parental concern adds conflict to the narrative, it does not allow Emma to become fully independent or aid her safety. For if she had been aware of Piper's existence, then it is unlikely the murder spree in Lakewood would have occurred.

The motivator for Emma's agency comes from her friends (Brooke and Audrey) and their absence for parental approval means that they support her independence in discovering the truth about her identity. As her agency is undermined by the concept of parental authority; an authority which is prioritised in the slasher subgenre as discussed by Clover (ibid) and Butler (2018) as a method of enforcing conservative ideologies. For example, if you listen to your parents, you will be safe. Through Emma's friends encouraging her to not listen to her mother's wishes, it is in these moments that Emma's awareness of her history and agency in the choices she makes regarding her own life decisions increases. Although, it should be acknowledged that, part of the reason that Emma appears unremarkable is due to the way in which she engages with Final Girl status in a more modern approach, one which audiences are already accustomed too (see *Scream's* (1996) Sidney Prescott). Emma and Brooke's departure from Clover's (ibid) original character descriptor includes their exploration of their sexuality and her disobedience from authority, particularly their parents. There are also other characters who provide significant diversity and deviation from the Final Girls' cinematic origins, including changes to their age and non-heterosexuality as the next sections will explore.

Age and Sexuality in the Slasher

The way in which the Final Girl engages or not in sexual activity is far more nuanced within televisual spaces. In Clover's (1987;1992) original articulation of the Final Girl; a key attribute was her virginal nature, and this became synonymous with a 'rule' on how to survive the slasher subgenre. As Randy (Jamie Kennedy), in *Scream* (1996) acknowledges:

There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie. For instance, Number 1: You can never have sex. Big NO NO. Big No No. Sex equals death, ok? (*Randy*, Scream 1996).

Here, Randy acknowledges the connections to horror and sex; and while young men can be the target of such attacks, it is the young women whose bodies are lingered on by the camera. Sex, and the Final Girl's refusal to engage in sex, became a contentious topic which again historically reflects the conservativism that was ingrained in the 1980s slasher (Butler, 2018). By extension, it is women's sexuality that is perceived to be the principal concern of such narratives. Rockoff summarises:

Those who find the morality of slasher films distasteful generally hold as evidence what they take to be these films' prevailing mantra: good girls don't die, but loose ones do. To simplify it further, the girls who refrain from having sex survive, the ones who indulge in their passions die. (2002:14)

Rockoff (ibid) reiterates the moral messages which are embedded within these texts and the 'prevailing mantra' and general attitude given to women based upon their decision, or not, to have sex. 'Good' girls don't have sex and deserve to live, while bad 'loose' girls who choose to have sex deserve to die. However, *Scream* (1996) helped to start the change in representations and ways of thinking about behaviours of women and critiquing the text's political undertones. In the case of *Scream* (1996), Sidney does have sex with her boyfriend, and he is ultimately revealed to be one half of the killing duo. Such iterations of the Final Girl challenge the implicit ideologies of women's punishment for having sex or women who are safe based on their virginity, as is the case of Erin (2011) in *You're Next* and Grace Le Domas (2019) in *Ready or Not*.

These films evidence a change in the way the Final Girl's agency regarding sex is explored, alongside their survival; the texts discussed here highlight the Final Girl's more nuanced way of dealing with their romantic relationships. These relationships are explored in terms of their

ideology that goes beyond the culturally prescribed and restrictive, morally loaded terms of good and bad. A similar debate emerges regarding good and bad mothers with their subsequent marginality or inclusion is discussed later in *Chapter Three: Bonds of Blood*. Such simplistic judgements regarding women's behaviour appears recurrent throughout their various representations, regardless of age or sensibility.

In an interview with *Slasher* creator Aaron Martin, co-writer Lucie Page, and showrunner Ian Carpenter, they discuss the deliberate formation of their women characters as complex and imperfect as important to the series:

> The women of *Slasher* are not solely in the show for titillation or to show intense fear. First and foremost, the women in *Slasher* are created as human beings, from various backgrounds, having had experiences that shaped them and advantages or disadvantages that gave them particular points of view. Sexuality is certainly a part of every woman's character, but it is not the only part. Audiences can love the show's women for their brattiness or hate them for failing to help themselves but they are complex humans.

> (Interview with Lucie Page and Ian Carpenter, by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

What *Slasher* prioritises is the reflecting of women's experiences in their relationships to others in the narrative world, as imperfect and flawed like any other human being and in their connections to others. With Saadia (Season 3) and Renee (Season 2), audiences will find themselves experiencing the character's growth or develop insight which ultimately influences and changes their emotional engagement as the series progresses.

In the case of Saadia, her decision to withhold from sex does not correlate to her entire innocence, as with Clover's (1987;1992) original coinage. Instead, it reveals a complex moral exploration of desire, willpower, and religious belief and as such, a more mature manner of

addressing sexuality. Saadia's love interest and best friend Jen's brother, Connor is informed of her uncompromising belief in her religion which makes her refrain from taking their budding romance any further. This is constantly juxtaposed with her strong moral code, particularly with regards to listening to her parents and abiding by their wishes. Saadia's lack of rebellious streak is a source of conflict as she is pulled in two different directions by her parent's and her friends. While both Saadia's parents and friends (specifically, Jen and Connor) spend time attempting to align Saadia with their views, essentially *Solstice* focuses on Saadia's discovery of her own identity, such as the importance of her religion, but also how the Westernised expectation of independence now functions in her life. Therefore, the text engages in broader cultural representations of youth. This is most effective in Saadia's building trust within herself, that when posed with certain situations, (leaving her parents, partying, drugs, and sex) she is able to negotiate those situations alone. By which, I mean that Saadia chooses to go to a party because she trusts herself to uphold the standards of care and control she wishes to hold herself accountable too. Therefore, Saadia evidences part of this pattern to explore he diverse experiences of women through contemporary horror television. It is not a matter of Saadia being forced out of or into situations because of her religion, parents, or peer pressure, nor is it society's weight of judgement as per historically conservative messages ingrained in slasher texts. Saadia chooses which situations she becomes involved in because of increased confidence in her own identity and the person she wants to be/become.

While Saadia's increased agency in her refusal to engage in romantic relationships and sex provides a new perspective; the character Sarah (Katie McGrath), from the first season *Slasher: The Executioner* provides an entirely different perspective. The text explores Sarah's life as an artist who is coming to terms with her family trauma. Sarah is married and in her mid-thirties, therefore a clear deviation from the high school narrative as acknowledged as being a staple of the subgenre. Unlike many of the teenager Final Girls, whose experiences force them to mature at a rapid rate, Sarah is an adult with a wealth of experience and as such, is harder to intimidate, influence, or scare. Furthermore, the use of an older protagonist provides space from which to challenge the more puritanical and conservative ideologies that are still attached to the teen experience. Thus, meaning that her engaging in sex on screen is less of an issue and her expected punishment does not function in the same way. Her punishment is more aligned with her mother's sexual discretions rather than Sarah's own sexual history. Similarly, as a married

adult, the expectation and understanding of her sexuality are also different from that of the teenage narrative. While Sarah's mother left a series of sex tapes which left her an outcast of her community before her murder thirty years ago, Sarah's experience rewrites the messages about sex and death in contemporary culture. In moving beyond Rockoff's (2002:14) acknowledgement of 'good' and 'bad' young women based on their sexual behaviours, the sex scenes with Sarah and her husband do not allow those historical beliefs to apply as she is not a teenager, and her decisions are made with maturity and clarity. Therefore, sex does not predicate morality or personality, it is an act that all humans experience and should be treated without judgement.

LQBTQ+ in the Slasher

So far, the chapter has addressed the ways in which the Final Girl's sexuality has been explored in terms of heterosexuality. This next section will address how sexuality is explored in terms of non-heterosexuality, moving away from the Final Girl to the wider ideological structures of character that emerge in the slasher subgenre.

Historically, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual) characters have had little, problematic, or even offensive representations, in horror texts. In terms of understanding the slasher's inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters, Wendy Wagner, featured in Jones' (2015) article, notes that:

> There's this idea that serial killers have to have these twisted, sexual motivations. That they have this confused relationship with their gender and their body.

Similarly, the psychosexual dimensions of the slasher have been well established. As Clover describes:

> …an immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who survives (Clover, 1992:20).

As such, there seems to be a focus on the killer's gender and the gender of their victims which correlates through this 'twisted, sexual…confused relationship' and the consequent labelling of men as perpetrator and women as victim. There have been developments since this definition, including women psychokillers, as is the case of *Scream: The TV Series*. Nowell's (2011: 20) describes the killer in the slasher as:

> …a shadowy blade-wielding killer responding to an event by stalking and murdering members of a youth group before the threat s/he poses is neutrailised. (Nowell, 2011:20).

This is important in recognising how perceptions of the 'psychokiller' have changed in terms of the assumptions of the killer's gender. The idea of 'confused' relationships between gender, sexuality, and the body can be seen in horror films, including *Psycho* (1960) and *Basic Instinct* (1992). If not the focus of the deviant killer, the LGBTQ+ community have been victims of such deviants, as is the case of *Blacula* (1972), where a gay couple are the first victims in the film (Jones, 2015). A similar pattern occurs in *IT: Part Two* (2019), where a gay couple are also the first victims in this film. Reilly (2019) and Lipsett (2019) both acknowledge the meanings and reception of these text within popular discourse. While this scene did cause some outrage (Reilly, 2019), there has also been praise for this scene which demonstrates so brutally the process, effect, and consequence of hate crimes (Lipsett, 2019).

Furthermore, the point of this scene in *IT: Part Two* is that it also examines wider ideological treatment of the LGBTQ+ communities as punishable alongside the sexual woman. This targeting of ostracised communities in horror includes women and those of the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, if women belong to this community, their experience is arguably going to be further marginalised. Craig Gidney, in Jones' article, highlights the ways in which gay horror fans have identified with the genre in the past:

I think there is a connection with gays and horror. In fact, most of the people that I know who are gay all love horror movies. … If you go on Ok Cupid, half the things are like, 'Oh, I love horror movies!' And I think it's partially because, as Clive [Barker] says, is that with a lot of the horror, you feel like you're the freak in many ways. Particularly in the 80s, there were all these characters, in movies at least, like Freddy Kreuger, Jason, and all that, where they were characters on their own, and in a way you identified more with the murderers than you did with their victims… There's this subtext in all of those slasher films where it's rampant heterosexual teenage promiscuity, and so you get to vicariously get rid of the jocks that were usually the biggest [queer]-bashers. (Jones, 2015).

The LGBTQ+ community's audiences within horror are historically established (Jones, 2015) as the marginalisation of many of the characters or monsters are aligned to the marginal experiences of those in the LGBTQ+ communities. Despite the problematic representation of these characters, there have been points of identification and enjoyment for the audience. This process connects to women audiences as they too were ignored and dismissed (Wardlow, 2017) from the genre. Therefore, the women fans (not of the LGBTQ+ communities) are aligned with those from the LGBTQ+ communities as experiencing identification and pleasure of horror texts in similar ways.

The manner in which these LGBTQ+ representations have evolved within the televisual context include developments of character which go beyond the inclusion of a character in terms of tokenism to explore the more intricate emotions and experiences to provide improved representation. Specifically, this character complexity is constructed in the character who have greater depth and therefore offer scope for the more intense and emotional engagement and identification that is being investigated in this thesis. Audrey Jensen (Bex Taylor-Klaus) in *Scream: The TV Series* is a useful example of how once marginalised communities come to the forefront of the series, becoming one of many who embody the elements of the Final Girl. Audrey is a high-school goth and former best friend of protagonist, Emma, who now belongs

to the popular clique. It is this conflict which the narrative opens with; Emma and Audrey are reunited through the leaked video of Audrey kissing her girlfriend and the death of fellow high school student, Nina. From the outset, through the release of this video, Audrey is 'outed', and her sexuality makes her marginal. The emotional distress the video causes to Audrey is evident. She is a teenager, (later in the episode understood as) bi-curious and experimenting with her sexuality. This intimate, personal process that has been exposed to the world via social media is only further problematised by her girlfriend attending a private catholic school and Audrey's father being a pastor.

It would be easy to outline how Audrey's victimisation is problematic to the representation of LGBTQ+ communities in horror, as noted earlier. Her difference and treatment could be explained through her sexuality, particularly with regards to the position she occupies of monster and hero. As Jones (2015) states, LGBTQ+ fans in the 1980s identified as much with the monster as they did with the hero, because of that alignment to the community's marginalisation and that of the monster. Kyle Christensen (2017), in his chapter, *Slashing through the Bonds of Blood*, argues that by making Audrey complicit in murders makes her a villain and aligns her with the monster. Furthermore, he ties this villainy to her sexuality, which only emphasises her difference. Ultimately, Christensen believes that Audrey's representation is a damaging portrayal of those in the LGBTQ+ community and therefore *Scream: The TV Series* provides a representation that is no more advanced than those previous and problematic horror texts that come before it.

Yet, I argue that Audrey's liminality serves to intertextually critique horror and society, more broadly, as well as their treatment and representation of LGBTQ+ communities on screen. While Audrey can be read as problematic, the text does so deliberately to remind audiences about this treatment, its abhorrent nature, and the need for change. Furthermore, the text is deliberately working with the knowledge of the LGBTQ+ audiences' queering of the text and the monster: Audrey's complex character development means that she becomes both the monster and the hero simultaneously. Before modernising and prioritising Audrey's experience, she transforms through the acceptance of her own identity and her eventual arrival as the Final Girl positions her voice as one of the most important in the series. However, and

perhaps where this argument and Christensen most prominently disagree, is the way in which Audrey's monstrous acts are read. I assert that Audrey's sexuality has little to do with the monstrous acts she commits and when bluntly expressed – for example, she writes to a podcaster who later becomes a murderer, loses her temper, and behaves irresponsibly through period of extortion and harassment – these acts are far from monstrous. They are behaviours of a teenager trying to comprehend complex behaviour in an adult world. In Christensen's application of the monstrous acts being related to her sexuality, I argue that these acts are not there to dismiss/expose/highlight her sexuality, rather be read as a simple message that everyone makes mistakes, and everyone can overcome these; in this sense no different to *Slasher: Solstice's* Saadia's experiences with her ill-decision regarding the tweet she decides to reshare. Audrey's position is not that dissimilar to Saadia's flawed character as Audrey too, makes mistakes. As acknowledged, as part of the slasher cycle, suspicion and paranoia are rife and the majority of teenagers make questionable choices, particularly through the lens of adulthood, maturity, and experience. Thus, Audrey's sexuality and these acts are entirely disconnected. Audiences are invested in watching her overcome the challenges she faces and exploring her more fluid sexual identity. This provides further diversity in terms of women's representations and their exploration of sexuality, particularly given the context of the slasher and the teen drama. Especially, the historic ways in which these texts traditionally deal with sexuality. For example, the teen drama seems to be accepting of gay characters but have a tendency to erase bi or fluid identities (Davis and Dickinson, 2000).

Similarly, Noah (John Karna) functions to amplify and guide the audience through Audrey's experience and expose the narrative and ideological limitations of the horror film and Final Girl character function. He utilises the intertextuality between Audrey's difference to the Final Girl, and the horror genre's overall problematic historic treatment of women and the LGBTQ+ community. In the sense that Audrey is changing the way in which LGBTQ+ characters function in the horror genre. Noah occupies a similar narrative space to Randy, as discussed earlier from the *Scream* (1996) film franchise, who serves as a voice of horror discourse and fan pleasures through his use of intertextual references to other horror texts. This helps to further build the audiences' identification with Audrey as Noah highlights how both horror's treatment needs to and is changing in relation to its LGBTQ+ representation.

Noah Foster:

You know, maybe if I'd punched my v-card, the rules of horror would've kicked in. Maybe I'd be the one who died.

Audrey Jensen:

I don't think that's how it works. [pauses] I would offer to deflower you, but I'd just be taking advantage of your heightened emotional state and we can't have that.

Noah Foster:

[chuckles] Oh, thank you. That's very kind of you. No, I'd rather channel my anguish into something productive. [eyeing his video games] Maybe vigilante justice?

Audrey Jensen:

Hey, we could team up: Bi-curious and the Virgin.

Noah Foster:

That's the world's saddest crime-fighting duo.

(Season, 1, Episode 4. Aftermath. 2015).

In the extract above, Noah and Audrey's exchange evidences how humour, by evoking the intertextual traditions of horror, and commentary on gender and sexuality in dominant ideology is being critiqued. Noah acknowledges that if he had had sex, he would most likely have died; this is said to specifically highlight and reference the correlation between the Final Girl's virginity and tendency to survive. Here, he is purposefully arguing how ridiculous the idea of correlating sex and death is which is only reinforced by him being male. The self-reflexivity here, being that while conversations about women and their sexuality are common – and are often played out on screen via the Final Girl tradition; the same can rarely be said about men. Similarly, Audrey's response, refers to the treatment of vulnerable women who are taken

advantage of – yet again, through the change in gender, the critique is clear: the idea of women being taken advantage of places the responsibility back onto women, rather than challenging men on their behaviour. While this interaction, and many involving these two characters, are approached with humour; their commentary on the treatment of women, particularly in horror and in society, challenges the understanding of how women are represented in such texts, particularly through Audrey's character who diversifies this Final Girl experience.

In returning to the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in the slasher, Antione (Christopher Jacot) and Renee (Joanne Vannicola) in *Slasher*: *The Guilty Party* provide an interesting example of a gay relationship which is rarely explored on screen. Antione (Christopher Jacot) and Renee (Joanne Vannicola) are the cofounders of the spiritual commune that the children's camp once occupied. Antione hides Talvinder's bones as he comes across them on a hike in order to save the commune from controversy and Renee, after Antoine's death, kills the man she believes to have murdered him. Antoine is gay, Renee is a lesbian, and they are married to each other. This exploration of their relationship is explained by creator Martin as a "...different ways of being authentic" (Heather, 2017.) It is the representation of authenticity that is presented in this relationship that is clear through their love for each other and desire for spiritual growth.

This exploration of Antoine and Renee's loving relationships dissolves any preconceived idea of what it means to love, to be loved, be in a relationship, be gay or heterosexual. *Slasher* creator, Martin, in an interview, states:

> I've done a lot of gay stories throughout my career and I really wanted to show another version of what it's like to be gay. Sometimes when you're a gay person, your chosen family is who you spend more time with. The concept and idea of love isn't two kids in the suburbs with a car in a driveway. There are different ways of being authentic. (Heather, 2017).

The discursive relationship, alongside the legal aspect of their marriage, demonstrates how the relationship between Antione and Renee is just as important as any other meaningful connection between people.

In a similar manner to the appeal of Dawn, there is an overt self-acceptance between Antione and Renee which is admirable to audiences. Martin mentions this in his interview:

> Why is it wrong that two people who love each other find each other even if they don't have sex with each other? Neither of them is pretending to be straight. They're very out and open with who they are. [They even say in the show], 'We love each other and wish it was like this with each other in every way possible.' The only way it wasn't correct was physically (Heather, 2017).

Utilising a key quote from the series, Martin does explicitly inform the audience about their relationship. There is not space for audiences to assume their sexual identity, they are both clear about who they are. They are not bi-sexual, this is not a traditionally understood romantic or sexual relationship, yet the love between Antione and Renee is clear to see and ultimately, becomes symbolic for the various ways in which love functions in society.

In an interview that I conducted with *Slasher* creator Aaron Martin, co-writer, Lucie Page and showrunner, Ian Carpenter, it was noted that Martin indicated that he wanted a torture scene which Renee would lead. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how the character's own past experiences are built upon in order to express her love – and eventual grief – for Antione. Page notes:

> I used Renee's (Joanne Vannicola's) trauma, grief and anger to transform her into a murderer. Renee had a co-dependent relationship with her life-partner Antoine and was left deeply unsteadied by his death and convinced that Glenn (Ty Olsen) was responsible.

Glenn's death had to be close and personal. And her murder weapon had to be convenient. At one point, we discussed using an apple peeler but setting the torture in the kitchen was too unbelievable (noise, other characters etc). Renée is not a serial killer -- she just wants Glenn to admit what he did to put her mind at rest. As Renée torments Glenn, she starts to dissociate from her own actions. In a way she is too numb with grief to feel Glenn's pain or hear his cries. Glenn's torture becomes the way Renée grieves Antoine's loss. We were fortunate to have an actress like Joanne who made a woman's descent into madness as real as it could be.

(Interview with Lucie Page, by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

It is almost as if only in Antione's death and Renee's consequential response, will audiences be able to see the true impact and importance of their relationship and also how vital Antione becomes in helping maintain a sense of purpose and normality for all characters in the commune, particularly Renee.

Interestingly, Renee does comply to many of the historically established traits of the Final Girl, and while similar to Sarah in *The Executioner*, she is an adult, Renee differs in the sense that the emotional loss and incident of Antione's death triggers a breakdown resulting into her 'descent into madness'. This begins to explain the relationship between the evolution of the Final Girl as a method to articulate changing cultural ideas about gender via reflexive writing. In the interview, I asked about the correlations between Renee and the Final Girl. Page notes:

I think Renee definitely has some of the traits of a Final Girl. She doesn't have vices the others have (vegan, does yoga), she's not sexually promiscuous, has a unisex name, saves Judith and ultimately murders the person whom she is convinced is the murderer. But… Renee is wrong in her assumptions and her motivation is revenge rather than self-preservation. I'm not clear how Renee was received by viewers. While I was writing, I imagined there would be shock at the change in her character. And discomfort

because she didn't seem moved by Glenn's pain… She exploited it without any reserve. And in the end, she helped him purge his sins (albeit through forced confession) and released him through death. It was almost killer-like.

(Interview with Lucie Page, by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

So, while Renee does echo some traits of the Final Girl, specifically her unisex name and saves some of her friends, she does evolve from Clover's (1987;1992) original understanding. Renee faces various narrative challenges which are a detriment to her own sanity, leading her to commit murder. While the Final Girl does participate in violence, Page acknowledges that the distinguishing difference between a Final Girl and Renee is the concept of violence in relation to self-preservation, which justifies the violence for the Final Girl and Renee's revenge, as more closely aligned to the behaviour of the murderer.

Final Girl and the 'Pretechnological'

So far in this chapter, the connection between sex, sexuality, and women characters in the slasher have been analysed. The following section will examine the use of weapons and their role in the symbolism of sexual politics in the texts. In terms of the cinematic history of the slasher, there was a clear focus on the weapons of intimidation and violence. The weapons that penetrated, particularly in the context of the function of the Final Girl, were as much symbolic within sexual politics as they were weapons of attack. Yet, there has been a significant increase in the prominence of technology which has made for a more insidious and unknown space, than the weapons Clover (1987;1992) identifies. Clover outlined that:

> …the emotional terrain of the slasher film is pretechnological. The preferred weapons of the killer are knives, hammers, axes, ice picks, hypodermic needles, red hot pokers, pitchforks, and the like. (1987:198)

Here, Clover (ibid) discusses the various weapons which frequent the slasher and her acknowledgement of the 'emotional terrain' provides context for the fear and intimidation they cause. Furthermore, Clover's (ibid) discusses the use of these weapons in terms of psychosexual fears; in particular, the violence of penetration enacted through these weapons. Yet in the modern slashers, the technology is certainly integrated to a far higher degree and even the displays of death differ from the penetrative weapon.

Scream (1996) brought the slasher to a modern audience by integrating the use of technology, specifically, phones. The experiences of the Lakewood Six in *Scream: The TV Series* seem to echo audiences' experience with technology in an even more nuanced manner. The use of true crime podcasts is used as voice over to provide context to the events, but also to engage an audience who are likely to listen to such media. Similarly, the aspect of phone cloning and use of the internet is prevalent throughout.

In fact, it is within the supposedly private space of the internet where Audrey's first challenge emerges. This virtual space that the characters are so familiar with becomes predatory and lethal, as seen through the case of Nina, who is murdered after uploading the video of Audrey and her girlfriend. This directly comments on the way that technology is used in controlling and monitoring women through stalking and digital crime, such as the hacking/leaking of personal images and the controlling functions of shaming and humiliation. Audrey's outing and subsequent victimisation clearly frames her as the victim. Thus, this mirrors the function of the cinematic slasher, as a commentary of a young woman's sexual experience. Dictating the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not, according to someone other than the women themselves.

Cyberbullying and stalking through technology are on the rise; with 1 in 5 young teenagers (amounting to 764,000) in the UK experiencing online bullying (National Office for Statistics, 2020) and up to 40% of adults in the United States experiencing similar (Johnson, 2021). As such, this on-screen narrative of cyberbullying and stalking reflects the social experiences for women, which the statistics above indicate are on the increase. Therefore, Audrey's experience of cyberbullying is likely to evoke empathy, providing space for the audience to identify with her. Yet while these connections with the slasher characters are being built, it actually opposes Clover's original argument that the slasher film has an 'emotional terrain of …the pretechnological' (Clover, 1987; 1992:31) and as such is preoccupied with 'close' killings, mostly involving a knife or similar weapon. It is this use of technology which helps engage modern audiences. Audrey's experience highlights the high school mentality and 'infection of bitches' (Audrey, S1, Ep1) alongside the bullying. Similarly, the killer calls and texts their victims which intertextually reflects the technology used in *Scream* (1996) which used cell phones and 'creepy voice' as vital to narrative. Although the killer does use a knife for physical violence, as per Clover's (1987; 1992) original argument, the cell phone used in the series becomes as much of a weapon as the knife itself; both become objects which produce fear for the characters and the audience alike.

While slasher tradition indicates the protagonist, Emma, is our Final Girl because she is stalked, paranoid and has to watch all of her friends die, Audrey experiences this as well. As such, the text utilises the serialised format for multiple points of identification that many teen dramas offer. Therefore, Audrey can also be understood as meeting the criteria for Clover's (1987;1992) Final Girl. For while Emma faces the truth of having a murderer stepsister, Audrey's challenges of cyberbullying and marginalisation are far more commonly experienced, as the statistics above indicate, and therefore more relatable to the audience. This evolved Final Girl then, who has far more depth of character than just her sacrifices and survivor status, such as Audrey, experiences character growth as dramatic, realistic, and achievable.

In *Slasher: Solstice (2016-),* the conflicts are essentially predicated on social media (Saadia's retweet) and the entire narrative critiques the warping of humanity in the desire to document and create a persona online. While Jen and Connor begin their killing spree on the block of

flats where people filmed their mother setting fire to herself, Violet (Paula Brancati) provides a more intimate perspective on the treatment of those online creators. Violet is a full-time, unsuccessful vlogger who desperately seeks fame and uses the element of 'true crime' to her advantage; spinning rumours and inside gossip in order to bolster her online viewing. Ultimately, her character is presented as sympathetic by the end, after experiencing infidelity. Yet, it is her death that connects the element of technology with the cultural commentary that is invoked in these texts (Wood, 1974; McAndrews, 2019; Lattila, 2019). In her death scene, Violet is forced to live stream her torture and eventual death (knife through her skull), serving as a commentary on the gratuitous lengths she was willing to go to (and many who use social media) in order to gain an online audience. This echoes similar uses of technology and death within the narrative as Violet was one of many on lookers, who were filming and live streaming, Justine's (Jen and Connor's mother) death earlier in the series where she sets herself alight.

Unlikable Final Girls

As established, Final Girls as per Clover's (1987;1992) understanding have a cinematic history of encouraging women's identification through their emotion or passivity. Part of this, as has been evidenced throughout the discussions in this chapter, is their admirable qualities, such as Saadia's (Season 3) agency, Audrey's self-acceptance, and Renee's loyalty (Season 2). Yet, there are Final Girls who emerge as unlikable, a trait which should hinder identification, but ultimately proves how diverse the televisual Final Girl is in these series and horror television more broadly. This unlikableness is effective in building further emotional intensity as the characters' growth is far more significant that those characters who have less development. As such, the character's emotional journey becomes more intense. Furthermore, their unlikableness is not that dissimilar to the flawed and imperfect character that have been investigated so far.

In *Slasher: The Guilty Party,* Dawn, from the outset, is loud-mouthed and cold-hearted, understood as the "same bitch you always were" (Susan to Dawn, S2, Ep1) and a "Force to be reckoned with (Andi to Talvinder, on Dawn, S2, Ep1). Her development throughout the series

works to progress audience's identification with Dawn as our Final Girl even though she deviates from audiences' understanding or familiarity with Final Girl up to this point. While audience's expectation of the Final Girl trope has changed in relation to sex, drugs, or becoming matriarchs, they are frequently presented as introverted (Saadia in *Slasher: Solstice* or Emma, *Scream: The TV Series*). In the opening episodes of *The Guilty Party*, the text works to create Dawn as entirely unlikable and abhorrent; she frames an innocent man for murder, thrives on gossip, and will kill anyone in her quest for survival. For this reason, Dawn is not framed as the Final Girl for she bares – in the early stages of the series – little resemblance to Final Girls from recent history.

In fact, the opening scene positions Andi as the Final Girl of the series. Andi is a modest woman, with a unisex name, and a character whose background is most clearly revealed with a youthful innocence underpinning many of her questionable behaviours, both in the past, ensuring Talvinder makes friends on the camp and in the present, with wanting to 'come clean' on their involvement in Talvinder's death. Thus, the way in which Andi is presented on screen frames her as the Final Girl, as the text works to skewer the narrative to focus mostly on her perspective. However, towards the end of the first episode, a personality trait appears in Andi which reveals her lack of control over her emotions and heightened desire for self-preservation. Her ex-boyfriend, after sleeping with her, addresses what he thinks is their shared desire to go to the police and Andi reveals she has changed her mind:

> You're a victim. That's how you define yourself. Way before Talvinder. And you're not gonna' get any more ammo from me.

> (Peter tells Andi, *Slasher: The Guilty Party*, Season 2, Episode 1, Six Feet Under, 2017).

While this aligns Andi with the Final Girl as a hero-victim, the way in which the audience are informed of this cements suspicions of her façade. Finally, in the ending of episode one, Andi is shown to have made the fatal blow to Talvinder, ultimately killing her. Andi herself, in the

present day, is murdered; asserting that Andi with her lack of control, lack of empathy, and intent to murder was never framed as the Final Girl, as much as the audience believed she was in those opening few scenes. The audience are led to believe Andi was their Final Girl because of her various characteristics which align with Clover's (1987; 1992) original understanding as well as the way in which the showrunner frames Andi's experiences on screen. The framing of Andi and her positioning in these opening scenes evidence how Gorton (2009) and Cohen's (2001) understanding of how 'technical devices' influence the patterns of identification; in the case of *Slasher: The Guilty Party*, the showrunners are actively encouraging audiences to use their intertextual knowledge of the subgenre tropes and to identify with Andi, presenting her as the Final Girl, in various ways. Therefore, this increases their engagement on the text a little more as they are aware that they are encouraged not only to figure out the truth of the events that are unfolding, but who the killer is, and importantly who their Final Girl – and point of identification – is in this series. With Andi's death at the end of the first episode, it is clear that any intertextual familiarity with the Final Girl will not be helpful in piecing together the past events or predicting the future events of this narrative. However, this genre manipulation of these roles is incredibly engaging for audiences who are being told and shown conflicting aspects of these people's lives (for example, Andi's kind and vicious nature versus Dawn's cold-hearted and damaged appearance). This questions audiences' intertextual expectation of the Final Girl and their societal expectation of women, more broadly.

Dawn becomes a Final Girl through her survival and being stalked. Through this, she aligns with the cinematic Final Girl, yet the most interesting aspect of her character is how she deviates from that trope; in particular, her lack of innocence. Whereas this previous iteration presents the Final Girl as romantically innocent, Dawn's representation is far more complex, in that she has made mistakes and is able to learn from them in order to move forward. Dawn serves as a Final Girl in the sense that she is stalked, watches her friends be killed around her, and is ultimately attacked herself. Yet, Dawn is also complicit in the murder of Talvinder, the most complicit in framing Owen (an innocent man) who later dies by suicide, and then brings the gun to the (guilty) party while they are away attempting to retrieve Talvinder's bones. This is particularly interesting in mapping the evolution of the Final Girl. She is vindictive at worst and manipulative at best. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Dawn is constantly learning, has an innate and fearless desire to survive and will do whatever it takes

to be at the top of the power hierarchy. In the final episode, Dawn hands herself in to the police, ready to confess her actions in Talvinder's death. The calmness of this scene echoes the self-reflection and acceptance that Dawn has undertaken in the series. Creator, Aaron Martin said:

> I always wanted Dawn to survive because she's such a mean character that I loved the idea that she gets to live through this," he says. "She also goes through a huge arc and becomes a different person." (Heather, 2017).

Ultimately, the significant time that audiences spend with Dawn in the televisual space and 'huge arc' she undergoes increases audiences' emotional investment with her, resulting in her becoming a point of admiration for the viewers. She has changed, is holding herself accountable, and therefore deserves a second chance.

Nancy Wheeler in *Stranger Things*: The Final Girl Beyond the Slasher

Unlike the examples given so far which situate themselves firmly within the realms of the slasher subgenre through name or content, the case of *Stranger Thing's* (2016-) Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) echoes McAndrew's (2019) acknowledgement that the Final Girl has "grown into a figure of many subgenres…" as outlined earlier, with the intention of allowing such narratives to "…take centre stage and kick butt, something that a lot of other genres are lacking." (Lattila, 2019). *Stranger Things* (2016-) is a horror/sci-fi genre-hybrid Netflix Original Series, set in 1980s Indiana, in which a group of young friends have to fight with supernatural forces. As they do, they begin to uncover secret government exploits in order to find and protect those they love. Nancy is a key character in evidencing how audiences' intertextual knowledge of the Final Girl is used to examine the changing representation of women, similar to those discussed so far.

A significant influence in the text, alongside the horror and sci-fi elements, is the teen film and Nancy seems to encapsulate that 1980s stereotype of many female leads (Molly Ringwald in *The Breakfast Club*, would be an effective comparison as Kempton (2017) and Butler (2018)

acknowledge). Nancy's character begins as naïve, but beautiful (ibid). The creators use that stereotype to enable the audience to understand her character's role, before subverting this teen film stereotype entirely in order to increase that identification by adding depth and complexity to her character. In season one, her screen time is spent dealing with many of the typical challenges posed in high school; issues with parents, boyfriend, friends. In many ways, she begins as an unremarkable character who lives a typically normal life, which is contrasted to the women around her – such as Joyce whose son is missing, Eleven with her superpowers and her friend, Barb, who is taken by the Demogorgon.

It is the latter event that sparks Nancy's development into a character of remarkable qualities, as she is thrown into the world of the Upside Down in investigating Barb's disappearance. It is also worthwhile noting that *Stranger Things*, season one in particular, has experienced critiques of its women characters: that there are not enough women characters (Joseph, 2018; Boudreau, 2018) and that these women characters are only there for the male lead or that their depth is not on a par with their male counterparts. Yet, this treatment is arguably deliberate in order to reflect the challenges that women experienced during this period of the 1908s, both on and off screen. The decision to change the treatment of these women allows the narrative journey for those viewers who may have struggled with marginalisation themselves to vicariously experience that process of gaining a platform, voice, and ultimately power in the *Stranger Thing's* narrative.

However, the text does engage with Nancy's development more implicitly, from her name alone; an aspect that encouraged audience's intertextual familiarity with the horror genre. In particular, the reference to Nancy from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) who was deemed one of the most heroic Final Girls. Yet, unlike her predecessor, Nancy does have sex early on in *Stranger Things,* so the audience are aware she is not going to be the imaged, virginal Final Girl that was most prominent in the 1980's slasher film. By using such an iconic name within the horror genre, it implies Nancy's heroic development which is explored through the narrative.

Nancy's increasingly important role in the text and her attachment to the slasher is not just implied through her name. In many ways, the Duffer Brothers work to create Nancy as a Final Girl through Barb's disappearance. She and Barb go to a party that involves sex and under-age drinking, both prominent features of the slasher. Nancy is also presented as the object of voyeurism, both through Steve's gaze and Jonathan's pictures which he takes of the party, evoking the stalking killer's point of view. In the image below (figure 1), Nancy is dressed plainly, with her school bag, in an isolated wood as she tries to find Barb. The Demogorgon is still there and chases her away. The self-referentiality of positioning Nancy within this sphere of the slasher and the role of the Final Girl helps establish familiar intertextual patterns of pleasure and identification for the audience.

Fig 1 removed copyright

It is partly through Nancy's subjection to the Final Girl's paranoid narrative and dismissal that adds to her heroic status. While Clover (1987; 1992) documents paranoia as being a key feature of the Final Girl's experience, the audience are aware from the outset that Nancy is not paranoid and is attentive of the events around her. Steve is angry and dismissive of Nancy when she tells him about her going to the police about Barb, Steve says:

> Why not just talk to me? That's crazy… You seriously think you saw a guy in a mask

Figure 1 – Nancy Wheeler in the Woods

> just hanging out in my back yard?

> (*Stranger Things*, Season 1, Chapter 4, The Body, 2016).

This asserts the dismissal of her experience and while Steve's comment reflects Nancy's poor treatment, it also serves as an intertextual reference to the slasher directly through the reference

to the 'a guy in a mask', which again engages with the cinematic history and expectation of slasher killers.

Yet while *Stranger Things* falls broadly under the category of horror television, there is no human killer stalking teenagers nor high body count in terms of murders. Instead, *Stranger Things* uses various intertextual references within the horror/sci-fi genres to speak to the audience who are fans of such texts. Through Final Girl Nancy, audiences use their intertextual knowledge to gather an increased understanding of her character and her narrative function early on. Yet, within the first few episodes, it soon becomes apparent that while a Final Girl by name, Nancy is not a Final Girl by nature as she refuses to feel any paranoia regarding others' disbelief about what happened to Barb and actively takes matters into her own hands.

This paranoia of the Final Girl is used as a point of intertextuality with the slasher's relationship to the undermining of the government and legislative institution control in these situations. Furthermore, the relevance to the slasher is simultaneously presented not through "its "killer" as a punisher of teenage evil, but as a complex metaphor for the oppressive world of adult conformity." (Butler, 2018: 74) and the series larger ties to the discovery of identity. Growing in confidence and determination, Nancy decides to go to the police with her mother. The two male police officers challenge her reasoning for going to Steve's house and again, it is implied that she engaged in underage drinking and sex with Steve and therefore, her experiences are marginalised as this behaviour does not mirror the conversative ideologies that are embedded in 1980's American society. As such, Nancy's behaviour and the police's response reflects the 'inextricable…conservatism of the era' that Butler (2018:73) discusses as being prominent to the slasher and 80s high school films. The oppressive judgement imposed on Nancy encourages the audience to see her vulnerability, as even when in danger and asking for police help (and any adult help, really), she is easily dismissed.

Boudreau (2018:175) notes that *Stranger Things*, while ensuring the relevancy of social attitudes towards sexual orientation and race adheres to 'twenty-first century attitudes', 'this is far less true to gender.' Audiences empathise with Nancy partly because of her developing sexuality. As such, the Final Girl as virginal is not necessarily a relatable character in changing

and contemporary culture. The notion of virginal characters and constantly delayed sex is difficult to maintain in a serial narrative without becoming absurd. Yet, with Nancy, her experience of sex is not particularly dwelled upon. There is no nudity and no real discussion on screen about her experience. The aspect of sex is not gratuitously presented as has been a criticism of the slasher subgenre. It is treated as part of normal life and as such provides another point of identification, while also critiquing the slasher's relationship between morality, sex, and women.

While cinematically, the slasher's use of sex serves as a commentary on the woman's engagement in sex; for example, the opening quote evidence this association: "The whore, she's corrupted, she dies first..." In *Stranger Things*, which deviates from the traditional slasher narrative that is seen in the other comparable television texts that are discussed in this chapter, it chooses to highlight the man's role in this critique of sex, particularly through the incidence of slut shaming. Nancy has sex with Steve and then, soon after forms a close bond to Jonathan. While she does not sleep with Jonathan; Steve sees him in her room and jumps to conclusions. Steve's entirely dislikeable and easily forgettable friends spray on the cinema board 'Showing: 'Nancy 'THE SLUT' Wheeler'. In the 1980s, social media did not exist but there are certainly efforts made by the Duffer Brothers to parallel contemporary women's experiences with leaked pictures, videos and judgmental comments experienced in social spaces which are reflective of Nancy's slut shaming here. This broadens the dialogue regarding Nancy's experience and the relevance of this to women's lives in contemporary culture. This is similar to Audrey's cyberbullying and public outing become matters of social concerns due to others' lack of respect for these characters. This experience, as humiliating as it is, makes Nancy a more sympathetic character whose treatment adds to her marginalisation of those around her. Equally, her response is dignified – she does not argue or defend herself as she becomes increasingly confident in her recollection and investigation of Barb's disappearance. Her developing agency and self-belief is supported by Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder) who mirrors Nancy's marginal experiences and exploration of identity and agency. This cross generational bonding is explored in more detail in *Chapter Three: The Bonds of Blood,* particularly with regards to Joyce and Nancy's shared experiences of marginality.

Conclusion

Overall, the Final Girl plays an essential role in the horror television series. However, due to the extended amount of time audiences spend with the characters, there is more emotional depth and complexity to these Final Girls in comparison to their cinematic counterparts. This complexity is examined through features, such as the physical enactment of violence or the decision to do/not do something, confidence in their identity or taking responsibility for a past event. These issues tap into the more realistic presentation of women on screen and the issues they may face in the real world (for example, Audrey and her identity, Saadia and her trauma, and Dawn with acknowledging responsibility). The Final Girls examined here are not presented as entirely innocent or 'perfect' members of society that Clover's (1987;1992) original label had associations with. In fact, the evolved, televisual Final Girls embrace and accept their flawed identity and from this become empowered in order to address any remaining narrative issues they must face. Similarly, in terms of LGBTQ+ representations, there is a significant increase in such narratives, which enable a platform from which to empower such voices. These representations do not follow cinematic horror history's mistreatment of these narratives, but in the case of Audrey, Brooke, Emma, Saadia, Dawn and Nancy, connect and modernise parts of that history (such as the use of the Final Girl) to negotiate further space for such these stories to be explored. While it is relevant and important to examine how identification works with the Final Girl, moving on from Clover (1987;1992) to television, with the 'varying intensity' Cohen (2001) discusses, there are a range of other tropes occupied by women which require investigation, as the following chapters will explore. In particular, just as the slasher presents the teenage experience in a specific manner in order to engage and/or rewrite particular representations, the Gothic also reconstructs and recycles similar patterns within its genre in order to provide a commentary on the Gothic Woman, as the next chapter will explore.

Chapter Two: Rewriting the Gothic Woman

"And it is my conviction that one of the secrets of the gothic's persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine."

(Becker, 1999:2)

While the previous chapter examined women's representation through the Final Girl, a particular trope of the slasher subgenre; the Gothic Woman is also a component of the Gothic

genre. Here, the representations of the Gothic Woman emerge as a consequence of the genre's ideological pattern, similar to the Final Girl's connection to the slasher. In this chapter, the histories and genre also become important in how contemporary horror television draws on the Gothic Woman to provide a more modern and developed understanding of femininity and feminine power. The Gothic is steeped in literary tradition with regards to concepts of femininity as Becker posits: 'And it is my conviction that one of the secrets of the gothic's persistent success is gender-related: it is so powerful because it is so feminine.' (Becker, 1999:2). Twenty years have passed since Becker (ibid) made this claim with regards to Gothic literature and while the principle of the women's importance in the Gothic are historically established, both in terms of writers and readers, it is important to assess how this feminine power is rearticulated across contemporary horror television with regards to women's experiences and representation. With this in mind, the trope of the Gothic Woman becomes particularly important for assessing how women audiences and their patterns of identification occurs on the small screen.

This chapter examines how contemporary horror television, in particular, *The Haunting...Series* by Mike Flanagan, updates Gothic horror and reframes the Gothic woman as a source of feminine power and identification. Specifically, this character complexity that is established through the Gothic Woman provides greater depth and offers scope for the more intense and emotional engagement and identification that is being investigated in this thesis. The Gothic woman will be explored through Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and *American Horror Story: Murder House* (2011).

The intertextual familiarity of the Gothic Woman's hysteria and its associations with patriarchal control is certainly rewritten from an empowering perspective in *The Haunting...Series* (2018-) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). The Gothic Woman is 'characterized by scrutiny of the plights of vulnerable protagonists struggling against the male authority deleterious interventions' (Murphy, 2017). Murphy (ibid) acknowledges that the Gothic Woman's institutional, emotional, physical, and psychological struggles against the patriarchy have ultimately impacted their narratives and enhanced their vulnerability. As an

attached characteristic of the Gothic Woman, her hysteria becomes a focal point and one that is embedded in her feminine nature (Freud, 1905; Freud, 2020).

An attributed cause of the Gothic Woman's hysteria is the experience of menstruation and its association with the womb itself. The womb is a visceral attachment to the female form and the Gothic Woman resists that emotional characterisation. This emotional control evidenced by the Gothic Woman then becomes something that is unsettling for patriarchal consumption. Benson James (2016) outlines the common trope of the hysterical woman, noting that the (Gothic) woman's body has been inscribed by society or "by discourses such as those of science and medicine, but also resisting that inscription." Little (2015) similarly acknowledges, primarily through Freud's (1905) psychosexual analysis that hysteria was mostly associated as a 'woman's disease'. Indeed, the concept of hysteria has a historical connection to the marginalisation of women as being irrational and emotional, with the latter aspect being positioned as negative in traditional gendered discourse.

Wheatley (2017:1) acknowledges how such experiences that are presented in the Gothic text must be read within the context of the domestic medium on which these texts are shown and in a genre that lends itself to women as a key demographic. She notes that: "Gothic television is understood as a domestic form of a genre which is deeply concerned with the domestic, writing stories of unspeakable family secrets and homely trauma large across a television screen" (ibid). Here, Wheatley recognises the Gothic's undertones of femininity with regards to the domestic medium of television, the nature of the subject matter being addressed in terms of the family dynamics, as well as the familial trauma that is witnessed on screen and also experienced in contemporary culture.

Gothic Horror and Women Audiences

Becker (1999) investigates the power of the Gothic in late twentieth-century fiction and film and argues that the Gothic exhibits renewed vitality with a focus on the excess which is reflected in the emotional trajectory of Gothic's violence, eroticism, and sentimental excess. Although Becker's (1999:1) *Gothic Forms of Feminist Fiction* is over twenty years old, she

recognises the resurgence of Gothic fiction and argues that this is a result of political movements including, feminism which specifically highlights the Gothic's emotionality, sentimentality, narrative focus on women, and excessiveness. These 'politically and aesthetically powerful movements' (ibid) while being assessed from a now-historic position, are now certainly applicable to the contemporary social women's movement of #MeToo which is focused on validating women's stories and experiences, particularly within the film and television industry. Obviously, this political relevancy and impact of #MeToo are far wider reaching than the textual thematics of a television series and to reduce the ongoing changes wrought by the battles of contemporary feminism to a particular digital movement would be highly inappropriate. However, such a powerful movement becomes a catalyst in which prioritising women's voices within the television texts becomes important. These features, such as the prioritising of women's voices, also forms part of the ongoing visibility of feminist discourse and feminism in popular culture. As such, it is logical to address the issues arising from such movements – that empower and encourage women's voices to be heard – on television; a platform and industry that this movement is partly criticising.

Similarly, it is in these television series where the narrative concern is to prioritise women's voices. Other academics, like Green (2019) have noted how such feminist discourses and the #MeToo movement are being actively addressed in television more broadly. With Green (2019), she specifically acknowledges how *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) serves to provide the change that is so desired after the MeToo movement. In this, Green (ibid) notes the use of the fantasy genre as allowing a blending of mundane life with elements of fantasy as a useful tool to help manage complex and often, traumatic elements of coercion, alongside carefully made decisions by Netflix to employ as many women as possible both in front of and behind the camera. Of particular importance, is the manner in which Green (2019) articulates specific, thematic ideas to address the MeToo movement. In the case of *Jessica Jones*, this included the way the text prioritised Jessica's own voice in the present, but showed the way that her voice had been diminished in the past, through the gaslighting of Kilgrave.

Theses 'politically and aesthetically powerful movements' (ibid) of #MeToo help to explain the increase of such thematics which focus on prioritising women's voices and experiences across television series broadly. However, when examining the contemporary cycle of horror

television in particular – a genre which have historically marginalised women audiences – the message seems even more potent. By prioritising women's voices in horror television is also enabled through horror's 'inherently hybrid nature' (Jowett and Abbott, 2013: xiii). In this instance, horror's occupation with the Gothic. The Gothic has an established pattern of speaking and addressing women, particularly through the Gothic Woman and her plight against the patriarchy. Therefore, the manner in which the contemporary horror television series addresses its women audiences, given the context of #MeToo becomes acutely specific in engaging their interests and their needs, is likely to result in increased identification due to the closeness of experiences that are mirrored between character, narrative, and audience.

This chapter will examine the ways in which these commentaries within the Gothic genre are made regarding women's representation surrounding their femininity. Becker (1999), as noted above in her articulation of the 'power of the gothic', establishes the femininity of the Gothic as being a positive aspect to the genre. In this chapter, these commentaries on femininity and the Gothic Woman will be examined in relation to how they address a contemporary audience. There is a historically established understanding of the subversive nature of Gothic literature, but the manner in which these characters are positioned in a contemporary context means that they diversify greatly from previous Gothic Women. As Becker (1999:3) examines that Gothic literature:

> …evokes and reveals established images of femininity, but does not propose new role models; it evokes and rewrites familiar narrative forms, but undermines their established effects; it evokes and repeats ideological constructions of established power structures, but defamiliarizes their 'natural' existence. (Becker, 1999:3)

Becker (ibid) notes how such literature plays into those representations of femininity, particularly as established within Gothic discourse which are rampant with gender commentaries, in order to 'defamiliarize' them from the expectation that exists. Therefore, the examples explored in this chapter are rewriting previous iterations of the Gothic Woman as they situate them within the established power structure, which is defamiliarized from the original context and culture in which they were meant to be read. As such, this 'undermining'

becomes a pleasurable experience, particularly for women, who can witness and appreciate the implications of such 'established images of femininity' and expose the damaging effects that this evokes. While Becker (ibid) is talking about literature, it is interesting to note this application of femininity to the televisual Gothic horror text, such as *The Haunting…series* in which there are elements of undermining, defamiliarising, and creating space in which they *do* 'propose new role models' as this chapter will later begin to assess. This is most prominent in the case of the two leading women from *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley and Theo and from *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, Dani and Jamie. All of these characters often share the same scene and yet their presentation and engagement with femininity dramatically differs. These will all be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, but to evidence this: Theo, for example, shows an emotional coldness which is at odds with the powerful, empathic sensitivity which she uses to support children in her therapy. This emotional power 'reveals established images of femininity', but her coldness 'defamiliarizes' historic understandings of femininity, in particular, the Gothic Woman's femininity.

While the Gothic's origins are located in literature, its move to the domestic televisual medium becomes important in addressing the difference in the representation of women who prominently feature in these texts. This recognition of gender commentaries in a genre, such as the Gothic, is not unlike the some of the scholars' who have examined the gender politics of the slasher, for example (Clover, 1987). Wheatley (2017) examines the connection between genre and gender, noting that there is a 'wealth of critical literature' on women's film that assesses the connections between gender and genre. Wheatley (2017:154) also recognises that the 'avid readership…' of the Gothic novel, has resulted in an '…equally avid viewership of television' and the consumption of such female-instigated narratives from book to television has found a new way of finding their audience in the domestic space. Furthermore, some of these Gothic texts, such as *The Haunting…Series*, challenge this domestic space to free it of its gendered norms, creating more flexible and fluid understandings of women within the domestic setting. This not only implies that there is a target audience for the texts, but that the Gothic television series has been as popular as its literary counterparts in challenging gender norms and, in particular, representations of women. The appeal of Gothic television continues to speak to the contemporary audience whose interests also include dramatic soap operas, reality television, and 'confession' shows (Becker, 1999). The notions of Gothic excess, violence, and

emotional exposure seem to replicate the current entertainment process (ibid; Becker, 1999). As Wheatley (2017:151) discusses, 'it is the case that television takes on traditions of distributing and consuming the female Gothic text which predate the last century, and which include a clear characterization of a certain kind of female reader.' Thus, within current and historical discourses surrounding Gothic scholarship, the representation of women and the changes that are occurring ensures such depictions are challenged.

When the Gothic's historical understanding of women's treatment (Becker, 1999; Benson James, 2016; Murphy, 2017) is read alongside horror's treatment of women as sexualised or as the victim (Cherry, 1999; Clover, 1992), these new texts provide a process of rewriting women's narratives and reprioritising their voice within the televisual space. By this, I mean that women's representation is more inclusive than just the audiences' expectation of that character's narrative role in the genre in which the texts are located nor are women's voices presented as inferior to men's. The cycle of contemporary horror television under discussion, throughout this thesis, evidences the various ways, narratively or thematically, in which women's voices are prioritised.

Reflecting on television's ability to provide a visual excess that literature as a medium does not allow for, it seems to connect closely to the messages regarding women's treatment, their femininity, and experience which are tied to the Gothic's preoccupation with excess. In other words, the Gothic's preoccupation with excess and the visual manner in which this is presented on television, ensures that the messages regarding gender, in particular women's representation, become far more explicit than their historical counterparts. Becker (ibid) addresses the many ways in which this excess is explored in the Gothic: '...excess in moral terms, excess of realism into the supernatural, but also formal excess.' A clear difference between Gothic literature and a television series is the visuality of the excessive present within the text. Becker (1999:1) defines Gothic's excess as '...excessive emotional experiences of desire, terror and pleasure.' This textual terror, which encourages specific emotionally excessive experiences, also influences the trajectory of viewers' 'desire' and 'pleasure' experienced in Gothic horror fiction. The visual aspect of excess can also include abjection (Kristeva, 1982) which is associated with the horror genre (Magistrale, 2005; Mendik and

Mathijs, 2008) and emotional excessiveness which aligns with the Gothic (Becker, 1999; Murphy, 2017; Punter and Byron, 2005).

Becker (1999:25) later goes on to define excess as '...a pleasurable but also subversive Gothic strategy, the emotionalising centre of the Gothic's provocation as well as its ongoing intertextualisation.' The potency of excess in the Gothic is a central component of the genre, one that is, as Becker (ibid) recognises, entwined with heightened emotional states. Fleenor (1983:8 as cited in Becker, 1999:23) notes that women are associated with the Gothic genre as well as excessive emotion which is '...frequently characterised as feminine...'. Yet, many of the representations discussed in this chapter, are connected through their rewriting of the historic weakness and excessive emotionality of the Gothic Woman into a source of feminine power and strength. This, then, serves as a point of pleasure which encourages exploration of identity, real and projected, to emerge. This can be seen in *The Haunting of Hill House's* Shirley (Elizabeth Reaser) when she performs an autopsy on her sister (later analysed in detail); the visual abjection and emotional excess that Shirley experiences are prominent in this scene. Returning to Becker's (ibid) argument, the Gothic's use of intertextuality with regards to historical expectations of the Gothic woman is removed literally, organ by organ, in this scene. While Shirley's sister Nell, who once echoed the hysteria of the historic and problematic Gothic Woman, now lies dead on the mortuary table; Shirley's identity is far more nuanced and complex. Shirley's excessive emotion and abjection is present as she cuts her sister open, but she is also a capable and professional undertaker. Therefore, she occupies various identities within this one scene and rewrites the expectation of her character, by diversifying the representation of the Gothic Woman.

Television's visuality and relationship to the domestication of the Gothic's narrative alongside horror's tendency to lean towards genre hybridity, ultimately influences this excessiveness (Wheatley, 2007; Abbott and Jowett, 2013) that is presented in contemporary horror television. This genre hybridity then helps to bolster the text's commerciality and allows the broadcasters to negotiate censorship issues as well as the impact this has on representations. The changes to the way in which television is watched, as outlined in the *Introduction*, when aligned with this

negotiation of censorship issues, means that the increase in such texts is far more prominent than ever before, as Gaynor (2019) claims.

This concept of feminine excessiveness and the process of intertextual familiarity is connected through character in other Gothic texts, too. In the case of *Penny Dreadful*, an intertextual assumption concerns how Frankenstein's Bride as a Gothic trope explores the concept of objectifying women as men's possession. By the use of Frankenstein's Bride as a Gothic trope, I mean as a mere body that is reanimated and used for the sole purposes of providing companionship to Frankenstein. Yet in the case of Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), she transforms from a submissive reincarnation of her creator's desires of what a woman 'should be' to a revolutionary force whose voice will not be ignored. She is excessive both before her death (as Brona Croft) as a passive, abused woman to a radical activist who demands women take revenge against their abusers and later serves a platter of severed hands at a dinner party. The manner in which excessiveness ties together the intertextual use of the Bride of Frankenstein, the commentary and treatment of women both in fiction and real life, as well as the emotional relevance becomes potent, progressive and *does* 'propose new role models' differently to the Gothic literature emerging in the late nineties (Becker, 1999).

The Gothic's constant engagement with intertextuality has, on occasion, failed to provide audiences with these 'new role models' (Becker, 1999) that they so desire. A particular example is the first season of *American Horror Story: Murder House* (2011-) which engages not only with the Gothic Woman, the domestic space/haunted house, but various many other intertextual elements, including: various true crime events (such as The Black Dahlia Murder and Columbine Massacre), demonic children, urban legends of 'the piggy man' and even the start of the Apocalypse. The rampant use of intertextuality was criticised by James Donaghy (2011) who reviewed *American Horror Story: Murder House,* in *The Guardian.* He reflected upon the series, noting: "It fails miserably to differentiate between paying homage to horror and throwing every single horror trope into a blender and pouring the results over our heads." So far, this thesis has established how intertextuality can be used to create and critique certain representations and meanings for audiences; yet Donaghy's quote, which has been utilised by other academics (Hanson, 2015) in their argument regarding the negative aspects of the show.

Therefore, indicating that without careful construction, these intertextual meanings dissolve and become ineffective for audiences.

The critique that these intertextual meanings provide, as argued, becomes lost. Of specific importance in this thesis, is the function of that critique with regards to women's representation. In the moments where this critique is ineffective, *American Horror Story: Murder House's* (2011) overuse of intertextual references means that such contemporary representations of women become problematic. This problematic representation is most prominent in the two lead women: mother, Vivien Harmon (Connie Britton) and daughter, Violet Harmon (Taissa Farmiga) whose narratives appear only as part of the leading men's overall story arch and experience; most specifically in their wife/mother and daughter/girlfriend roles. The women's experiences, throughout the *Murder House* narrative, include: their dismissal, gaslighting, sexual assault, rape, and eventually their deaths. For example, the crux of Vivien's narrative is her avoidance of the truth regarding her adulterous husband. Her death, through childbirth with twins, only serves to encompass the problematic rape scene where she believed to be having consensual sex with her husband, only for it to actually be her teenage daughter Violet's spectral boyfriend, Tate (Evan Peters) who impregnates her. Similarly, Violet ends up overdosing on sleeping pills following the revelation that her first love, Tate was a ghost and a mass murderer. When Violet comes to the realisation that there has been some change to her life (unknowingly that she is a ghost), Tate tells her that she has "evolved" rather than died. As such, both women's fate and agency are manipulated and coerced by the men around them which eventually leads to their death. Even through their deaths, they are not given any agency or freedom for their ghosts are locked into the domestic space of Murder House for eternity.

Televisual Gothic Horror and Creating Spaces for Women Audiences

The contemporary horror television series draws on the trope of the Gothic Woman to create connections between the landscapes and familial or romantic relationships. This connection is due to a narrative's preoccupation with 'a heroine caught between a pastoral haven and a threatening castle, sometimes in flight from a sinister patriarchal figure, sometimes in search of an absent mother, and both' (Miles, 1994:1 as cited in Wheatley, 2007:151). The Gothic ties

to the domestic difficulties that the heroine must face are supported by Walker (1990:18 as cited in Wheatley, 2007:151) who acknowledges the landscape of 'a family mansion' and notes the use of subjective narration which can manipulate the narrative perspective.

The use of subjective narration – where the narration is left open to reader/audience interpretation – is a frequently utilised tool in the Gothic. This narration is used with the Gothic as it lends itself to the themes of the supernatural as it is an unknown and requires belief from the reader/audience in order for them to become fully immersed in that element of the text (Wallace, 2013). Similarly, the use of women's hysteria, another key theme in the Gothic, and as such their accuracy was often under scrutiny in the Victorian context (Clery, 2004). Therefore, the use of subjective narration works to emphasise the difficulties that women faced during this period. In the rewriting of the Gothic Woman, given the context of MeToo in which many women's claims were unheard or dismissed, it becomes apparent that there is still a need to attempt to address the same ideological challenges in prioritising women's voices.

The Gothic woman and her subjective narration are subverted through the opening episode of *The Haunting of Hill House.* From a narrative perspective, the audience are witnessing everything from Steve's viewpoint in the first episode. Steve (Michiel Huisman) is representative of the patriarchy in the sense that he is the oldest sibling, is male, and uses his family's trauma for financial success. It is the *only* voice that the viewers have initial access to, to begin piecing together the events that have occurred so far. Thus, at this moment, Steve possesses power and authority as he appears to be the protagonist as per the traditional viewing patterns that tend to introduce the protagonist first, before any other character. This approach is not dissimilar to that expected of the Final Girl, Andi, in *Slasher: The Guilty Party*, as discussed in *Chapter One: 'The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television*'. In this case, Andi is framed as our Final Girl, only to die in the first episode. Here, there is the same technical framing of the opening episode as an effort to build identification (Gorton, 2009; Cohen, 2001) with a character who is murdered at the end, meaning that such subgenre expectations are challenged. In returning to *The Haunting of Hill House*, with his mother's suicide, and his father's breakdown, Steve attempts to take on the dominant patriarchal role in the family. Yet, as each episode passes, it becomes apparent that the 'truth'

laid out in Steve's opening episode, is entirely incorrect. For example, his absolute and certain disbelief in the paranormal is proved entirely incorrect as he enters his flat and engages in a conversation with his sister, only in the final seconds of the episode to receive a phone call informing him of her death by suicide.

Similarly, the texts under discussion in this chapter begin to reframe the fear of the domestic space which is a common trope in the Gothic genre. Wheatley (2017:152) argues, 'it is the significance of the domestic space in these narratives...' that become a sight of dread, violence and fear. The use of this domestic space is rendered as a place where anxieties associated with gender arise, particularly by the homemaker, a role most associated with the mother or wife (Doane, 1987 as cited in Wheatley, 2007). Therefore, the domestic landscape in which these narratives take place are immediately identifiable to women audiences based on acknowledged cultural and historical understandings of domesticity and femininity. Yet, these spaces are not always safe for the homemaker; they are places of conflict, where issues of exploring one's identity (mother, wife, person, professional) can become overwhelming, as well as places of isolation or imprisonment as they are forced into these roles and these locations, often by men, as *American Horror Story: Murder House* (2011-) indicates. Modleski (1982) acknowledges the Gothic's association with hauntings and supernatural elements is closely aligned with the horror genre (Cherry, 2009). Additionally, these supposed safe spaces becoming sites of dread, fear, extreme isolation, and loneliness is a common trope in horror (films: *Babadook (2014), Halloween (1978), Psycho (1960)*; television: *Bates' Motel (2013-2017), Scream: The TV Series (2015-), Slasher (2016-), American Horror Story: Murder House (2011)*).

The fear of the domestic space is also examined in *The Haunting of Hill House's* 'past' narrative when the family move away from their home for their father's work, an upscaling of the most haunted house in the country. By contrast, in the present narrative, Shirley utilises her domestic space to balance her identity as wife, mother, and business owner as well as allowing her sister, Theo, to rent a small annex on her land. Thus, the domestic space becomes far more complex in how it explores and supports women's identity. *The Haunting of Bly Manor* also follows a comparable narrative where the Manor's history haunts the present. This is particularly evident when a new, and already traumatised nanny, turns up to care for equally

traumatised orphaned children. While the mansion remains haunted, it also becomes a site of love, acceptance, and dedication. For example, Dani accepts her sexuality, falls in love with Jamie and sacrifices herself to the ghosts of the Manor in order to protect the children she greatly cares for.

The use of the domestic space and its ability to help negotiate femininity also comes to a point of emotional intensity in *The Haunting of Hill House.* For Olivia (Carla Gugino) is framed as a feminine, domestic goddess, loving wife and mother. After experiencing lucid dreams and painful migraines she begins to have concerns about her sanity and holds a midnight tea party, which is symptomatic of her delusions. This tea party ultimately ends with lethal consequences. Upholding the feminine air of domestic goddess, Olivia dutifully entertains and hosts a tea party for her children (her twin son and daughter, Nell and Luke) and the neighbour's little girl (Abigail), whose tea is laced with rat poison. Olivia believes she is helping the children, ensuring their innocence and youthfulness remains forever. Sadly, Abigail dies. Hugh, her husband, finds the other children and removes them from the house before Olivia can do any more harm. Olivia, stumbling through the house, being constantly reprimanded for her parenting, throws herself off a balcony, cracking her skull.

The notion of the feminine, the Gothic, and the hysterical woman all collide in Olivia's desire to live up to the roles imposed on her: to fix the house (both metaphorically by appeasing the ghosts that live there and also literally in her structural designs for the house), to host the parties, and care for her children. Similarly, in the present day, when Nell (Victoria Pedretti) struggles with her mental health, her therapist directs her back to her childhood home, the domestic space of her childhood, consequently infantilising her female form. He argues she needs to face her fear, which closely resembles her mother's: her fear is that she is unable to fill all the roles society has imposed upon her. Here, while recognising the Gothic Woman's historic hysteria, *The Haunting of Hill House* offers its audience hope for change and for Nell's narrative to not end in her death. Nell's character symbolises and critiques that while society believes it is progressive, such ideologies regarding women's oppression and domestication are still ingrained and impacting their mental health. Therefore, acknowledging that while such representations are greatly improved – as Nell's sisters go on to evidence – there is still the

possibility to advance this, particularly with regards to the representation of women's experiences with mental health difficulties.

Mike Flanagan and Women's Representation in Gothic Horror and *The Haunting of…Series*.

Mike Flanagan, the showrunner of *The Haunting… Series*, has a history of working within the horror genre (*Absentina* (2011), *Oculus (2013), Hush, (2016), Before I Wake (2016), Ouija: Origin of Evil (2016), Gerald's Game (2017*)) and Stephen King, considered a forefather of horror, claimed that *The Haunting of Hill House* was 'close to a work of genius' (Loughrey, 2018), evidencing a positive critical response. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the text's narrative deviates from Shirley Jackson's original work on three strangers being drawn to a haunted house, by changing the dynamics from strangers to siblings and the haunted house becoming the family home. As such, this amplifies the domesticity of the situation, and the elements of the feminine, as the haunted home and haunted family become loaded with intense emotion and memories. This is emphasised through the use of a regular cast, many of whom appear in both season one and two of *The Haunting*…series. As such, in a similar way to *Slasher (2016-)*, *Scream: The TV Series (2015-)*, and *American Horror Story* (2011-), there is a further engagement of the audience's intertextual familiarity both in terms of genre, past incarnations of the text, as well as the repetitive use of cast.

There is an explicit examination of the intertextual range of representations of the Gothic feminine identity. In *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), Olivia Crain is constructed as a historic Gothic Woman, while her children are used to critique that stereotype. *The Haunting of Hill House* is spilt into two different narratives which collide; the 'past' and 'now'. In the past, the audience are shown that Olivia works with her husband in upscaling houses and eventually spirals into madness, resulting in her suicide. As evident in the image below (Figure 2), the use of lighting in this particular scene does cause the room and wallpaper to appear yellow in colour, a reference to its Gothic predecessor, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a story about a woman's journey into madness or freedom, depending on the reader's interpretation, which echoes Olivia's experience. The mildew and vines are also representative of Olivia's mind

which is now overrun and manipulated by the ghosts that reside in the house, invading her self-worth and parenting ability. The Gothic Woman is problematic as Little (2015) and Benson James (2016) recognise as their lack of agency and implied hysteria, often originate from menstruation and as such becomes a 'woman's problem'. The character function does, however, enable a metaphorical understanding of the real-world pressures on women to conform. In order to function in a patriarchal society, women needed to encompass varying different roles – as mother, social hostess, wife – and have their feminine aspects oppressed and repressed, including their menstruation and sexuality. The Gothic Woman's hysteria is used to engage that genre archetype and its Victorian history; whilst juxtaposing this reading with a variety of modern reinterpretations of the Gothic woman through the representation of Olivia's adult daughters.

Flanagan rewrites the Gothic Woman, with regards to their femininity and/or sexuality to provide more inclusive representations of women in Gothic Horror television. In *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, Dani (Victoria Pedretti), is a US school teacher who comes to England in search of an au pair position. She works for Mr Wingrave, caring for his niece and nephew after they lose their parents. They live in the very haunted Bly Manor and Dani is made aware that the children's dead ex-governess killed herself on the grounds. Dani's past trauma is revealed: literally seconds after ending her engagement with her high school sweetheart (it is implied that, up until the moment, she was refusing to acknowledge her true sexuality), he was killed by a lorry. Along the way, Dani meets caretaker Jamie (Amelia Eve) whom she falls in love

Figure 2 – Gathered in a Dark Dining Room – removed copy right

with. What is particularly pertinent is that Dani sacrifices herself to the Lady in the Lake's (Viola, played by Kate Siegel) ghost to save the children, differing from Henry James' original story. Some scholars, such as Keating (2020), position this as a negative experience of a queer love story that would be 'transgressive' in better hands, leaving:

> …Dani, the surrogate mother, the martyr and the saint, saved the Wingrave children —
> who'd grow up without the faintest memory of that sacrifice — and is still haunted and
> killed, in the end, by some other mother's selfishness and rage (Keating, 2020).

Such a reading of the text is valid and echoes the problematic sacrifices of the 'strong' women in previous horror television texts, as mentioned in the *Introduction*. This included Buffy, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Dana from *The X-Files*. These characters' 'strong' nature serves to enforce further problematic understandings of women's experience. The problem being with the power these women characters held within the texts which was primarily constructed through masculinised behaviour or women's sacrifice for others (Wayne, 2018; Cuccinelli, 2019), as is the case here, with Dani. Therefore, there is the implication that televisual space for feminine empowerment is limited. In Dani's case, however, there is also something far more complex about the correlation between love and the core of where that love stems from, in that it does not have to be heteronormative or biological, as is apparent in the previous iterations. This representation of what love or family should appear to be has been criticised in many of the text examined throughout this thesis. For example, similar arguments regarding the diverse manner in which these relationships are represented can be found in *Chapter One* in the cases of *Slasher's* Renee and Antione and will also be discussed in *Chapter Three* in the example of *Stranger Things'* Joyce who becomes a surrogate mother for Nancy.

In opposition to Keating (2020), I argue that Dani's sacrifice is *not* preoccupied with her sexual agency – or her gender, as per previous 'self-sacrificing women' – at all. Instead, I argue that Dani's sacrifice must be read in relation to all the women's sacrifices at Bly Manor. Specifically, that combined, the women's sacrifice at Bly Manor has a much larger collective meaning in that sacrifice translates to emotional burdens and challenges that *everyone* experiences, regardless of sexuality or gender.

Keating (2020) seems to ignore the fact that *The Haunting of Bly Manor* is a women-led series and it actually the women's voices that take priority over the men's narratives (Hannah Gros,

Dani Clayton, Flora, Jamie, Rebecca Jessel, and Viola the Lady in the Lake in comparison to Owen, Miles, Peter, and Henry Wingrave). All women sacrifice something; Hannah, Dani, Rebecca and Viola all lose their lives. Yet, it is not just the women who sacrifice something. All the men also lose something, too. For example, Owen loses Hannah and Henry has already lost his love (Flora and Miles's mother).

Alongside the sacrifice of the *Bly* women, there is a need to consider the context in which these sacrifices are experienced. The *Bly* women embrace those emotional challenges and face the consequences without defensiveness, malice, or ignorance. This is in absolute opposition to Peter Quinn or even Henry Wingrave's reaction to their poor management of such emotions; here, the men appear hysterical, *not* the women. This can be seen in Peter's lack of emotional control in contrast to Hannah's emotional intelligence or Henry's delusions with his shadowed self in comparisons to Dani's active awareness of her own issues. In addition to this, there is this an intertextual familiarity of Gothic's treatment of women which is self reflexively engaged and which highlights the injustice of their sacrifice: "I don't know why brilliant, young women are always punished?" (Episode 4 *The Way It Came*) Hannah states, upon ex-governess Rebecca Jessell's suicide. Interestingly, Hannah is also dead and a ghost when she makes this claim, so there is a further message embedded here: that all women can become women who are punished, no matter what age or social status they may appear to have. Therefore, the text addresses that while the expectations of women in contemporary culture have changed; the same historic threat of the patriarchy looms over them. This can be viewed through the context of the MeToo movement, as discussed earlier, which brought to light the predatory space that surrounds women who believe they are safe. As such, the characters create further space for identification not only through their exploration of identity, but also by addressing the challenges that women face in the wider context in which they live.

The Haunting of Hill House and Rewriting The Gothic Woman

Eleanor Crain or 'Nell' and her death is the starting point in the present day 'now' narrative in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Nell is the twin of Luke who struggles with drug addiction. Both Nell and Luke were present at the midnight tea party as children, alongside Abigail. In the

flashbacks to Nell's childhood, she is terrified of the 'bent neck lady' and this continues to haunt her in the present day, leading her to accidently kill her husband during a nightmare. Although his death is ruled as natural causes due to an aneurysm, this causes her trauma to resurface and she returns to therapy in seek of help. There are times at which Nell appears hysterical on screen and clearly spirals into mania. With the therapist advising her to return home, it implies a connection of the domestic space to women's mental health. Specifically, that the domestic space can pose a threat to women and can be a trigger for a decline in their mental health. Nell does return to the house and dies by suicide; a hanging that mirrors her own mother's death. In this sense, Nell becomes the modern *and* historic Gothic Woman. This is because she aligns with the many established, problematic, historical representations of the Gothic Woman which highlighted the plight of women in the Victorian Era (Little, 2015; Benson James, 2016). However, her experiences are explicitly rooted within the present day and therefore, beyond the scope of women's difficulties in the Victorian Era. It is here, through the representation of Nell, where the Gothic Woman's most vital lesson emerges; while society believes that the historic and problematic treatment of women is long forgotten, Nell's experience and death in the modern day alerts audiences to the fact that there is still a lot of progress to be made. This message regarding women's experience is echoed in the discovery that the 'bent neck lady' who has haunted Nell throughout her life, is in fact, *herself.* This metaphorically reads that the restrictive and cruel treatment that women have historically experienced and the fear they felt – and continue to feel – influences their mindset within society currently. Equally, with Nell's death so early in the narrative, it signifies the start of a change for the text: the death of the hysterical Gothic Woman and demand the need for change in women's treatment.

As briefly acknowledged earlier in this chapter, another particularly effective and powerful way of rewriting the Gothic Woman's voice in *The Haunting of Hill House* is through undermining the patriarch, which is a prominent challenge to women in Gothic literature (Becker, 1999; Modleski, 1982). This undermining provides spaces for the women characters to begin to explore new feminine identities that the previous iterations of the Gothic Woman had not had. Shirley (Elizabeth Reaser), Nell (Victoria Pedretti), and Theo (Kate Siegel) all undermine the patriarch who is most clearly symbolised in Steve. Here, Steve's belief regarding the certainties of his masculine competence and supposed wealth due to his series of

books regarding his family's paranormal past are challenged. The competitive desire for wealth and masculine success tied to the exploitative dimensions of entrepreneurial capitalism, come at the cost of exploiting his own family's grief. Steve's authority is, at first, narratively established through his success as a paranormal investigator and author – or so it appears. It is only as the series continues that it becomes apparent how incorrect Steve's assumptions are about the events unfolding. Through this, it exposes not only the power of the Gothic Woman, but also questions the audiences' own ideologies which may be littered with patriarchal ways of thinking. For example, *The Haunting of Hill House* situates Steve's reliability as a narrator, from the opening episode onwards, as clearly in need of being questioned.

The use of narrative structure underpins the first attempt at undermining the patriarch, but the audience are unaware of this at the time. There are Gothic traditions of narrative manipulation, such as the unreliable narrator, that most frequently occur through the women protagonist (Becker, 1999; Little, 2015; Benson James, 2016). In *The Haunting of Hill House,* each member of the family has an assigned episode in which they tell their side of the story. It begins with Steve. In the opening episode, however, the audience are not aware of this character-assigned episode narrative pattern. Therefore, due to the framing of this episode, which is mostly focused on Steve's narrative, the text implies that he is the protagonist. As such, power and influence are attached to his version of events. Therefore, audiences are led to believe that Steve's perspective is the most truthful, until they are exposed to the points of view of his siblings. As the episode and series progresses, it becomes evident that Steve is the unreliable narrator and therefore is not the intended perspective to take on the authority within the narrative.

Steve's character is undermined in other ways, particularly with regards to his associated power and influence in the text. In Episode One, Steve uses an investigative and interrogative approach as a paranormal author to supposedly support a lady living in a potentially haunted house. In terms of meeting intertextual expectations, Steve's actions are understood in relation to the Gothic ideologies of the Victorian context in which Gothic literary traditions were set; the man dictating to the woman the facts of the world and informing her of her hysteria. He sits on a couch in a therapist/client scenario in which he begins to analyse her situation. After

spending a night at the lady's house with no ghostly activity, he tells her the truth that he believes she is unaware of; that she is experiencing the various stages of grief and that there are no ghosts present in her house. Steve explains that he does not believe in ghosts, as he sets up his equipment and settles in for the night; he discovers a rational explanation for the details of her haunting. "A ghost can be a lot of things," he tells her. "A memory, a daydream, a secret. Grief, anger, guilt. But in my experience, most times they're just what we want to see." (*The Haunting of Hill House*, Season 1, Episode One, 2018). Essentially, through the trivialising of this lady's experiences, he is diagnosing her grief and hysteria, whilst enacting upon his authority within the situation. This act alone serves as a clear reflection of the traditional Gothic patriarch which is emphasised through his behaviour towards women.

Steve also holds a stereotypical view of women and their management of money, which is immediately challenged by his sister, Theo. As Steve is symbolic for the patriarchy, the following scene serves to undermine his authority and ultimately this view on women. While most of the family reject Steve's money from his 'sell out the family' book, Theo decides to accept his offer. When asked by Steve if she will spend it on 'purses or travel', materialistic objects loaded with stereotypically feminine meaning, Theo replies, offended, "I'm gonna' get my fucking PhD." This is a symbolic moment where Steve's fragile masculinity is exposed by his own need to impose his beliefs about women onto Theo, specifically regarding his providing her with the money and then assuming how she will spend it. She rejects Steve's presumption regarding how she will spend the money to gain academic superiority over him, using his own financial gift. Theo's act of defiance to Steve's beliefs regarding women/men's power, particularly in academic and financial terms, shows how she manipulates his patriarchal beliefs to benefit her.

However, Shirley – an obvious paratextual reference to the author of the novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Jackson – critiques those masculinised understandings of money and power further undermining Steve's authority. Shirley, the second eldest, takes financial responsibility for the Crain family that, in the patriarchal society in which the Gothic predominantly exists, would be the man's role. Shirley is in partnership with her husband in their undertaking business and her profession as a morgue technician contrasts the traditionally

written concepts of femininity embedded within Gothic sentiment regarding what women 'should' do. Due to Steve's pay-out to his family, his significant financial gains are established, and yet it is Shirley who pays for Luke's rehab as Steve, who is also present, cannot afford it. Here, it becomes apparent that the truth of Steve's financial superiority in business as laid out in the first episode, is mainly bravado, with little monetary substance to support this claim.

Shirley does not fit the characteristics of the obedient, excessively emotional, or hysterical Gothic woman. She is practical and scientific in her approach to life and makes the difficult decision to prepare Nell's body. The pressure is obvious through Shirley's body language and, although her siblings advise her against it, due to it "being too much" for her – a statement which is loaded with historically understood sense of feminine emotional instability – Shirley remains adamant that she wants to do it. Her steely determination and emotional strength in taking out Nell's organs and preparing her body shows the extreme responsibility Shirley manages whilst still supporting the other members of her family. Shirley's complex role in the series is understood as the source of strength in her own family (husband and two children), with her siblings (the Crains) and her own business at the funeral home. Although not overly emotional, she is not cold to her children or those she loves either, as evident when she hugs her children, in her emotional intelligence, and wish to prepare Nell's body. Therefore, retaining the historically written characteristic of femininity but rewriting it alongside her practical ability and sound interest in making family decisions. Nor does she hold back her opinions; for example, when she is multitasking, on the phone's speaker to Steve and up to her elbows in Nell's chest cavity: "I'm elbow deep in our sister's chest cavity, pulling out a bag of internal organs....You have to get two grown men, to the goddamned airport! Get it done." (*The Haunting of Hill House*, Episode 2, Open Casket, 2018). This evidences that Shirley is a capable, practical, and determine woman who can move beyond the Gothic tradition; she is actively speaking out against Steve's behaviour. She undermines Steve's lack of emotional intelligence in reading the situation; he is moaning about something trivial in comparison to the traumatising experience she is currently undertaking.

This emotional intelligence is an attribute that the rest of the family respond to in creating her position as matriarch. During Episode 5 (The Bent Neck Lady), Theo and Nell are talking about

Nell's difficulties in grieving for her husband. Theo tells Nell, "You can't live like this," and implicitly questions if Shirley know about the state in which she is living. In response, and possibly Nell's most assertive appearance on screen, she asks Theo: "You really want to talk about what Shirley knows and doesn't know?" (*The Haunting of Hill House*, Season 1, Episode 5, The Bent Neck Lady, 2018). While Theo is referring to the drugs which Nell has helped Luke obtain, Nell is referencing Steve's 'blood money' that Theo has accepted. Thus, reiterating Shirley's power in the family; she is one who they seek approval from and answer too. Rather than Steve becoming the patriarch after the collapse of their family structure, it is evident that Shirley is the matriarch and succeeds within that role, without becoming controlling or compromising her femininity.

In opposition to this, with Mrs Dudley's uncompromising control as well as her character so closely echoing Shirley Jackson's original character, it seems obvious that she would reflect most of those Gothic values imprinted in the novel too. Mrs Dudley is presented as most rigid in her religious beliefs and chastises the Crain children (in the 'past' narrative) for their general behaviour/playing. However, upon discovering young Nell has taken a 'cup of stars' from the Red Room, she tells Nell, "Use your cup of stars, insist on your cup of stars, once they've trapped you here like everyone else, you'll never see your cup of stars again" (Episode 5, The Bent Neck Lady). At least, superficially, Mrs Dudley is speaking both metaphorically with regards to the patriarchy's force upon woman within that society; she is also speaking practically – as Hill House traps people there, and ultimately, does end up trapping Nell. Mrs Dudley is acknowledging that Nell must take the cup of stars to be free. This 'insist[ance]' insinuates a change in the understanding of the Gothic Woman; no longer will women be 'trapped' as they will 'insist' on their own ways of living and their independent freedom. However, Mrs Dudley's comment also reiterates the threat of the patriarchy that still remains; if Nell does not 'insist' she will 'never see your cup of stars again' as that freedom will be taken away unless she forcefully defends her place.

Figure 3 – Drinking from a Mug – removed copy right

Interestingly, *The Haunting of Hill House's* 'past' and 'now' narratives collide through this cup of stars (see Figure 3). Essentially, reiterating the issue that women, even 'now', *still* need to defend their right for independence and freedom. It is a subtle textual reference to the 'cup of stars' that Mrs Dudley told Nell in her childhood she must 'insist' upon, that is also visible in Nell's adult life. Therefore, allowing the viewers insight into Nell's current state of power in society: she is *still* fighting for her own cup of stars. Ultimately, Nell eventually suffers and becomes 'trapped' both physically and mentally, which leads to her death within the same house upon which Mrs Dudley warned her about.

Further to these changes in the representation of women, the text presents a heightened level of abjection. With regards to *The Haunting of Hill House*, the level of abjection far exceeds the traditional supernatural atmosphere as expected in the Gothic. There are numerous ways in which this is presented: through the Bent Neck Lady, scenes of corpse preparation, and general eeriness which is underpinned by the many hidden ghosts which appear on screen without any specific framing. A similar level of abjection can be seen in *Chapter Three: 'The Bonds of Blood; Women and their Community'* where women's connection with blood and the abject is more implicit to their femininity, as is the case with *Stranger Things'* Eleven who suffers recurrent nose bleeds which linger on screen for a significant period without being wiped away. Thus, the audience is reminded that she is a girl who bleeds as such, framing her within the trajectory of common horror expectations, but not in the way the audience expect. For her bleeding is not excessive in the amount of blood being shown as per many previous horror texts (Cherry, 1999), but for the length of time the blood is shown on screen without being removed. However, a difference in *The Haunting of Hill House*, is that the majority of these scenes that feature abjection are centred around the theme of the supernatural; a concept which is strongly aligned with the Gothic (Becker, 1999; Modelski, 1982). In the images below, the decaying Bent Neck Lady (ghost) with her broken neck is stood next to the 'prepped' body of Nell. The colour palette of greens and blues signifies her death and the decaying process, while her body lies in orange, visually differentiating the ghost and that of the physical body of Nell. The use

of the ghost so closely juxtaposed to the physical body of Nell evokes the eeriness and unease through the supernatural uncanniness, which is in line with Gothic tradition.

Figure 4 – Bent Neck Lady – removed copy right

Figure 5 – Bent Neck Lady in Background – removed copy right

Figure 6 – Nell's Body Preparation – removed copy right

In Nell's body preparation scene, abjection is seen through the disruption of borders, both inside/outside and the living/dead, that is notably common within the horror text (Botting, 2013). The extreme gore of Shirley "elbow deep", as she claims, in Nell's chest cavity, pulling out her organs in a plastic bag, also develops an emotional excessiveness of the scene. The emotionality, particularly the grief, experienced through the sibling relationship between Nell and Shirley and the frustration Shirley has with Steve lingers on screen, for audiences to view. Furthermore, while the autopsy is abject, as outlined above, its use of blood is not excessive in the sense of a slasher subgenre, for example, where blood is used on screen gratuitously. In this scene, the blood is used in a more realistic manner and the camera pauses on these moments for longer, as such, echoing Eleven's nose bleeds that are presented in a similar manner, as will be discussed in *Chapter Three: The Bonds of Blood*. In this case, also, this scene serves to remind the audience of these characters' femininities: they are women who bleed.

While Shirley's femininities through abjection are amplified for audiences, this assumption of femininity is challenged through her experiences of grief. The abject presentation of this scene appears far more clinical, realistic, and as such, affective. It also serves as a stark reminder to

the audience of the reality of death and losing a loved one. The way in which Shirley explores and manages her grief, in preparing Nell's body, is starkly different to that of her siblings. She does not become hysterical with emotion or lose her ability to function autonomously as the historical Gothic Woman might; Shirley finds a practical alternative to help her process the death of Nell. Therefore, this evidences how *The Haunting of Hill House* rewrites characters, like Shirley, to oppose the historic weakness of the Gothic Woman and transform this emotionality into a source of feminine power and strength.

Sexuality, Emotionality and Femininity: The Case of Theo Crain

Theodora 'Theo' Crain from *The Haunting of Hill House* wearing gloves to lessen her 'power'.

Theodora 'Theo' Crain is the middle daughter of Olivia and Hugh Crain, and sister to Steve, Shirley, Luke, and Nell Crain. Theo's character utilises many of the traditional understandings

Figure 7 – Theo Wearing Gloves – removed copy right

of the Gothic Woman and the associated sensibilities, whilst also dramatically expanding the understanding of femininity. Her relationship to some of her siblings is presented as fractured, providing familial conflict throughout the narrative. She works as a child psychologist, which implies the maternal instinct, and is able to identify other people's feelings through touching them. While this empathetic power is never fully detailed, it is evident that it comes from her grandmother who had the same power. As a child, her mother advises her to wears gloves to reduce the impact of this power and as an adult, uses the cover of her being "a germaphobe" to explain the use of these. Theo is emotionally sensitive and intuitive which allows her to note how 'loud' Hill House is for her. Her sensitivity is not too dissimilar to Will Graham's character in *Hannibal* (2013-2015), as mentioned in *Chapter Four: 'Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in Hannibal and Supernatural: This is the fans' design'.* In this instance,

Will Graham's increased empathy is a central issue of conflict within the narrative as he recognises his own patterns of thinking that reflect an understanding of the serial murderer's thoughts and behaviours.

This power results in emotional difficulties for Theo which leaves her appearing sharp and cold in her manner. However, during the course of the season, Theo establishes a relationship with Trish (Levy Tran). Trish seemingly will not give up on Theo and challenges this coldness, which enables Theo to open up about her feelings in a way that she is unable to do so with her family. Through a series of flashbacks, the audience understand that Theo is a lesbian. Her siblings are accepting and supportive of her sexuality, with two of her siblings discovering this when they walk in on her and a guest at Nell's wedding (within the first half hour of the first episode). Thus, indicating that Theo may have been reluctant to tell them openly and indicating some hesitancy. Theo may still be in the process of discovering her own identity. The need to openly communicate a person's sexuality is an intimate and personal experience, to have this exposed does produce challenges for Theo. Therefore, while the issue of sexuality does not encompass Theo's character as Foreman (2018) recognises, it does acknowledge how those who deviate from heterosexual relationships still face some – internal as much as external – challenges in terms of social acceptance. The traditional Gothic Woman was oppressed and her hysteria metaphorically serving for as a consequence of her repressed sexuality. In the rewriting of the Gothic Woman, the issue regarding her sexuality is not a source of madness or trauma in the contemporary Gothic text. In terms of the ideologies in *The Haunting...Series*, sexual identity is not an issue at all, even if it might provide some challenges to the character's experience overall. As such, the use of LGBTQ+ characters offer far wider points of identification for audiences as well as reflecting the changing cultural acceptance of sexual identities.

A character's sexuality is frequently used as a marker of marginality as can be seen in the case of Audrey, from *Scream: The TV Series*, to return to *Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television*. Both Audrey and Theo are presented, at times, as marginalised, but through their acceptance and development become empowered voices within the narratives. The dynamics in which Theo is marginalised and becomes empowered is an

entirely different process to Audrey's development. Theo is marginalised through her sexuality, her defiance against the heteronormativity imposed upon the Gothic Woman and by regularly disobeying of her family's requests, but this is countered with her increased emotionality and the sensitive power she holds. In some ways, this supernatural power aligns her far more with the Gothic Woman, than any other character in the series, as it is her supposedly feminine trait which provides her with powerful insight. Unlike Audrey, Theo's outing of her sexuality is socially awkward, rather than hateful, as per Audrey's experiences with cyberbullying. This awkwardness originates not from Theo's sexuality, necessarily, but from the fact that her siblings have just walked in on Theo's sexual encounter.

Theo's alignment with the Gothic Woman does not position her within the history of that tradition; rather, she begins to modernise the Gothic Woman by reflecting and addressing women's issues within a contemporary context. Theo's experiences are representative of other women's similar experiences in modern society. Foreman's (2018) article entitled '*The Haunting of Hill House is an overdue victory for badass lesbians everywhere*', in which they suggest the horror landscape can be degrading or provide harmful depictions of minority groups in society. This echoes similar understandings of the research into LGBTQ+ communities and horror as outlined in *Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television*. In the article, Foreman notes:

> As a result, plenty of minority groups struggle to find themselves properly represented within the genre—and queer people are no exception. In particular, harmful depictions of "predatory gays" and presentations of lesbian relationships intended to pander to the male gaze permeate scary content to a laughable extent. Not to mention, the "first to die" phenomenon regularly claims queer victims as well as people of color. (Foreman, 2018).

Therefore, reiterating the issues of intersectionality which the thesis outlined in the *Introduction* are recognised as problematic in the circulation of the meaning in these texts. Specifically, this piece acknowledges the pattern of prejudicial portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in horror as problematic and offensive. Yet *The Haunting of Hill House*'s Theodora

Crain is an important addition to the horror landscape, described by Foreman as 'the glove-adorned, kickass lesbian hero who stole scene after scene and finally brought Hill House into the 21st century.' Foreman (ibid) also identifies that her sexuality and its prominence within the narrative does not pose a risk to her character development, as such sexual identity has in previous horror texts. They note that Theo champions LGBTQ+ representation without sacrificing any character complexity. For example, Theo's grief is expressed as rage which, again, can appear unforgiving in its manner.

Theo's intense emotions that are explored on screen also serve to develop her characters complexity as she is both emotionally intuitive, responsive, and cold all at the same the time. Gardner (2018) states that, "Her grief isn't pretty," and echoes Foreman's (2018) claim that "Theo's grief and trauma are not centred around her sexuality, as most queer stories are, but rather around her family and her own experience outside of her dating life." The narrative closeness of such warmth/coldness in her emotional experiences is clear. Theo's anger is easily recognised as grief, particularly when read in conjunction to her other siblings' responses to grief. Yet Foreman (ibid) notes all of this trauma as being vital to creating such an affective character:

> Theo is a layered, nuanced, and damaged adult, still haunted by the events of her childhood. Her terrifying experiences with the supernatural—as well as the death of her mother—combined with her status as a middle child to force her into a position of self-imposed isolation. Focused mainly on self-preservation, Theo keeps her adult romantic relationships firmly at arm's length, a behavior that gets her compared to a frat boy at one point and reflects the markedly lasting effects of her trauma. (Foreman, 2018).

Foreman notes that Theo's marginalisation, or 'self-imposed isolation' as being an important contributing factor to her character development. Theo's emotional experiences as a character are relatable; her sexuality and childhood trauma have at times, made life challenging for Theo. Through the use of flashbacks, the series is able to capture Theo's growth and reasoning for her behaviour from early childhood through to the current day. Theo is able to rationalise her

behaviour – her coldness is understood as a defence mechanism and not as a true 'coldness' of character.

While this emotional coldness marginalises Theo, it serves as a useful way to encourage audiences' understanding of her psychological state. While Foreman (2018) points out that Theo "is not relegated to stereotypes like "angry lesbian" and her story arc does not focus centrally on her sexual encounters". Her sexual experiences highlight her emotional 'coldness' which is also intrinsically linked to her intense emotionality and empathy. Theo met Trish at the bar one night. They sleep together and Trish seems eager to meet again, but Theo dismisses

Figure 8 - Theo and Trish – removed copy right

her quite abruptly. Trish is polite, caring, thoughtful and it is clear that Theo's abruptness stems from her fear of such emotional closeness. In the image above, the shadows are tinted blue and the positioning of the two characters indicates Theo's attempt at distance and Trish's attempt at intimacy. *The Haunting of Hill House* works hard to establish Theo as an emotionally sensitive character who also exudes emotional coldness; ideas which are seemingly contradictory. This helps to extend the meanings of emotional femininity as well as ensuring the audiences recognise Theo's own desire for emotional 'self-preservation' as Foreman (ibid) acknowledges. Symbolically, the gloves that Theo wears are representative of her distance and lack of intimacy. In the final episode, Theo bins the gloves as she decides to attempt a proper relationship with Trish. This act stands as a significant marker in Theo's life as she takes charge of her happiness and begins to realise the power of her own emotions. The character development from Theo who remains in her 'self-imposed' isolation to her desire for intimacy is a powerful statement regarding the presentation of femininity. Theo allows audiences to see that engagement and vulnerability with her emotions, rather than ignoring them. This is powerful message that hope is still possible, even after such grief and trauma.

Sexuality is explored differently and with significantly greater hesitation in *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, yet Dani's growth develops in a way which mirror's Theo's experiences with

regards to her emotional power. Both Dani and Theo must accept their true identity (Dani's sexuality and Theo's power) in order to become their most powerful selves. Towards the final scenes in episode one of *Bly Manor,* 'The Great Good Place', Miles and Flora lock Dani in a closet to keep her safe from Viola, the Lady of the Lake. The closet as a location is associated with sexuality, particularly when describing people who acknowledge their own sexuality, as 'coming out of the closet'. This phrase, commonly used amongst the LGBTQ+ communities, implies that people were in the dark regarding their sexuality and by 'coming out' they are accepting the light and consequently, their sexuality. This act by Miles and Flora of locking her in the closet was clearly not received by Dani as a move of care and kindness, but a foolish and dangerous prank as she screams 'let me out'. Dani's claustrophobic distress is only amplified through her literal haunting by a figure with shiny glasses. This figure is later revealed to be her fiancé who was killed just after Dani broke off their engagement, most likely because of her newly realised sexuality. Therefore, by locking Dani in the closet, while it protects her from the ghosts in the rest of the house, it encloses the ghosts she carries with her and the emotional burden of what happened to her fiancé and the reality of her sexuality.

Arguably, although the challenges of accepting her sexuality are not explicitly acknowledged in the text, given the circumstances around Dani's supposed moment of freedom, she may well have attempted to repress her sexuality, ignore it or feel as if she is unworthy of such a relationship/happiness again. During a phone call, earlier in the episode, to someone in the United States (US), Dani berates the caller for insinuating that she is 'running away' from something. So, in that closet, from which Dani eventually emerges the following morning, only when the children deem it safe from the Lady in the Lake, there is a new found acceptance and embrace of her sexuality which ultimately allows her relationship with Jamie to flourish.

Conclusion

Interestingly, these messages regarding women's treatment in *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* are perhaps far more effective than in *Penny Dreadful*, which is set in the Victorian Period or *American Horror Story: Murder House*, which borders on ridiculousness given its over use of its many intertextual references and problematic

representations of women. This is not to say that *Penny Dreadful* does not share the same messages or rewrite its women characters in alignment with the need to change real life experiences for women, as it does. The series uses characters like Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) and in particular Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), as has been documented, to echo the power of women, their oppression and the negotiation of power within these televisual spaces (Boon, 2019; Fuchs, 2017). Similarly, perhaps the reason that *The Haunting series* seem to have more resonance is arguably the more modern context in which the messages' relevancy increases and the representation of femininity is far more inclusive of broader experiences. This can be seen in Shirley's dual maternal and scientific instinct or Theo's significantly heightened emotionality and coldness, for example. Overall, these representations are connected through their rewriting of the use the historic weakness of the Gothic Woman into a source of feminine power and strength.

The oppression of women in the Victorian Era has been frequently explored on screen and its contextual removal from contemporary audiences' experiences allows for a narrative distance from that significant historical past. This distance is only reinforced by the "Victorian stereotypes and Gothic cliches… with the spectacular visuals" (Fuchs, 2017: 149). This ability to distance oneself from the underlying message, therefore reduces the closeness between characters that enables identification to be built. I argued in the *Introduction* that this 'forgetting' (Cohen, 2001) of oneself hinders the process of identification and as such, dilutes the messages regarding women's problematic treatment. However, this message is still prevalent today, as Nell's narrative explores. Therefore, the use of *The Hauntings … Series* more modern history (late 1980s/early 1990s in Bly and current day in Hill House) realigns this closeness and, as such, ensures the relevancy is emphasised as these times are far more relatable to a contemporary audience.

There is further diversification of experiences with these Gothic Women that signal a difference from their historical iterations; mainly because they address a contemporary culture which holds different standards and expectations than that of Victorian times. As such, the characters become far more complex and nuanced. Various aspects of the Gothic Woman's marginality have been outlined here, including their motherhood, dismissal, and diverse representations of emotionality. These are similarly explored in the following chapter, '*The*

Bonds of Blood; Women and their Community in Horror Television', only without the Gothic Woman's traceable history. In particular, the challenge of the domestic space is prominent in the Gothic text as is the Gothic Woman's experiences of isolation within their immediate family. In this next chapter, women's similar marginal experiences will be investigated; the difference being that this will be examined with regards to the broader community in which they live.

Chapter Three: Bonds of Blood: Women and their Community in Horror Television

"If Fiona (Goode) deserves to go to hell, many of us do too."

(Schubart, 2018).

The previous chapter examined the Gothic Woman's experiences of isolation within their immediate family. This chapter builds upon this by examining women's shared experience of marginalisation within the broader community in the narrative. Ellen Brown's (1994) ethnographic research focused on the ways in which women audiences engaged with the soap opera, in spite of its apparently excessive, exploitative, and even given trivial cultural status. Her interest was on how women audiences used the soap operas to create a space to challenge the dominant culture, particularly through the hegemonic notions of femininity and womanhood are established and opposed both on and off screen. Through the uses and gratifications model, Ellen Brown (ibid) notes the implications of the sense of community between soap operas' women audiences in their shared pleasure of the series and how the same sense of community occurs regularly between the women characters on screen. Other scholars have used similar ethnographic methods in order to investigate this same sense of community between women who share the same enjoyment of a television series (Moore, 2015; Schiller, 2008; Boursier et al, 2021). Yet there are few who seem to explore the textual component regarding this representation of the thematic sense of community that this chapter will investigate.

Ellen Brown (1994) prioritised women's readings of the text and recognised that the soap opera and melodrama, as a genre, were understood as exploitative and excessive. The same has been said for the horror genre, using very similar vocabulary, including its excessive, exploitative, and its trivial nature. Such vocabulary was acutely prevalent when the topic and representations of women as problematic and exploitative were under discussion (Clover, 1987; Cherry, 2009; Newman, 2011; Williams, 1986; Wayne, 2018; Cuccinelli, 2019). As this thesis has already established, the contemporary horror television series is presenting diverse representations of women on screen. The horror genre's historical treatment of women is also discussed as exploitative and often dismissive (as per the traditions of the Final Girl, for example), and these

contemporary horror television series engage within this history in order to provide an intertextual commentary on women's marginalisation, cross generational bonding, and motherhood. Many of these representations challenge horror's historic treatment of women, but also focus on the sense of community between the women characters on screen and how their shared experiences ultimately bring them closer to provide support within the narrative. Thus, creating narrative space for women's voices to become empowered through the aspect of community.

The use of paratextual material in this chapter helps to establish the various ways in which the meanings and understandings regarding how women and their communities' representation on screen are circulated in a broader American culture. The particular engagement with popular journalistic sources, such as Rivera's (2017) article on *Stranger Things'* Joyce, Karen and Nancy as being 'one note women' and McAndrew's (2019) recognition of the Final Girl emerging in texts outside the slasher subgenre. These sources allow for an insight into how these representations are landing with journalists who approach meaning making in media seriously and broadly recognise the audiences in which they are writing for; those with interests in analysing the series. The journalistic interview with Sadie Sink, who plays Max in *Stranger Things*, provides an insight into Sink's own beliefs about Max and how she encouraged such meanings to be portrayed through her performance. The use of social media, including tweets from fans, helps to establish how individual audience members are receiving the text and the meaning they are gathering from these representations. Through these various primary and paratextual material, it is possible to establish the different ways in which meanings are constructed, framed, and understood for their audience.

Cross Generational Bonding

In '*Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television,*' I argued that *Stranger Things'* Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) becomes one of the Final Girls who deviate from the slasher subgenre in order to showcase a range of experiences. In Nancy's case this includes her emerging career and her bond with Joyce who becomes a surrogate mother to her. As such, Nancy echoes McAndrew's (2019) acknowledgement that the Final Girl has

"grown into a figure of many subgenres…" in order to "…take centre stage and kick butt, something that a lot of other genres are lacking." With this in mind, I argue that Nancy is used as an example to evidence how audiences' intertextual knowledge of the Final Girl, and her move away from the slasher subgenre, is used to examine the changing representation of women. Her experiences situate her within the horror genre and a particular attribute of the Final Girls' experience is her supposed paranoia and ultimate dismissal by those around her, particularly those of the police and her boyfriend at the time (Steve) as mentioned in that earlier chapter. Furthermore, similar hysteria and marginal experiences have connections to the Gothic Woman also, as outlined in *Chapter Two: Rewriting the Gothic Woman*. Yet, the relevance of Nancy's involvement in this chapter is that her experiences regarding this dismissal is mirrored in the character of Joyce Byers' (Winona Ryder), who is significantly older than Nancy, as she searches for a son no one believes to be missing as per Hopper, Chief of Police's, belief that the young boy is a runaway or has been taken by a member of his family.

I argue that Nancy and Joyce's bond is established through their shared experiences of this dismissal which creates a connection between the two. The use of paratextual material helps to articulate the reception of these representations. For example, Josh Rivera notes Joyce and Nancy in season two as 'one-note women' who just 'mostly just go through the same motions they did last year' (2017) (meaning in *Stanger Things* season one). However, my argument is that what Rivera (ibid) notes as going 'through the same motions' is actually a reflection of their marginal experiences and significant character growth throughout. Nancy is dismissed by the police over the disappearance of Barb and Joyce is dismissed by the police over the disappearance of her son. It is important to note that the representation of the police in these instances is that of the middle-aged, white, male authority figures who do not expect to be challenged. There are other, differing factors within each of Nancy and Joyce's own narratives that work to emphasise the bond and support they find within each other's company. In particular, Joyce's experience of motherhood is compared to that of Nancy's mother, Karen in order to highlight the marginalisation that Joyce experiences as a lower class, single mother. This runs alongside Nancy's experiences of marginalisation when entering a supposedly professional vocation at the local newspaper, with mostly white, middle-aged men, who regularly dismiss and belittle her opinions.

Nancy's bond with Joyce is formed based on their similar experiences through their missing loved ones in the Upside Down (Barb and Will) as well as their experiences of marginality in that they are women in the 1980s. The 1980s offers a problematic context for women's experiences and the challenges they ultimately had to face given the extreme conservatism present (Butler, 2019). However, this period did allow for increased progress for women than the decades before it. Nancy begins as naïve, but beautiful; a role that eventually subverts this high school drama stereotype (Kempton, 2017; Butler, 2018) in which the text is self-reflexively addressing. In season one, her screen time is spent dealing with many of the typical challenges posed in high school: issues with parents, boyfriend, and friends. She is likeable, studious, and clearly unaware of her beauty which attracts Steve and other classmates' attention. In many ways, she begins as an unremarkable character who lives a typically normal life, in contrast to the women around her – such as Joyce whose son is missing, Eleven with her superpowers, and her friend, Barb, who is taken by the Demogorgon. It is this sense of normality which allows space for an emerging, empowering representation of womanhood.

During the second season, Nancy's identity becomes more nuanced as she develops an investigative approach in ensuring justice for Barb's death. Nancy stops asking people to help her get justice for Barb and begins actively searching out methods herself to prove what happened the night Barb was killed. Her curiosity and subsequent actions get her and Jonathan 'escorted' to the laboratory, the lead scientist states: "she's tough this one." (*Stanger Things,* Season 2, Episode 4, 2017). Finally released, Nancy reveals she has taped their entire conversation and contacts Murray, the private investigator employed by Barbara's parents. This eventually results in some justice for Barb by the end of season two. Nancy's new role echoes the crusading journalist narrative whose determination as a lone woman in her attempts to out the patriarchal authority to uncover the truth. Here, she outwits the masculine authority figure that attempts to gaslight her. But her age and gender make this difficult for her; Murray highlights, "You're being naïve, Nancy," (*Stranger Things*, Season 2, Episode 5, 2017), acknowledging that even the best intentions remain restricted by the society in which they are met. Here, Murray is addressing the issues that Nancy faces and will continue to face throughout her life, specifically because of her gender. Nancy is a young woman and the challenges she hopes to pose to those in authorial positions will be a difficult undertaking for her as the constructed patriarchy will mean her voice is only going to be dismissed.

Nancy continues to defy the established gender norms for women and teenagers in the 1980s and proceeds to gain a position at the local newspaper, 'The Hawkins Post'. Even as a young woman, Nancy begins to quickly realise the difference between the treatment of men and women in broader society:

Nancy: I can't be late.

Jonathan: You mean *we* can't be late.

Nancy: No, I mean *I* can't be late…They like you no matter what. They like that I am a coffee delivery machine. They don't actually like me or respect me as a living breathing human with a brain.

(*Stranger Things*, Season 3, episode 1, 2018).

This interaction works as evidence of Nancy's awareness of the gender differences and treatment in her work, regardless of their age. Jonathan attempts to justify the newspaper's actions – which only further amplifies the challenges of womanhood ahead of Nancy, but she clearly grasps and explains exactly why they like her, for her ability to cater to their needs, rather than for her capabilities as a professional woman and potential to add to the industry.

Her experiences at the newspaper are epitomised in a scene (*Stranger Things*, Season 3, Episode 1, 2019) where the camera tracks a fast-paced, Nancy walking down an empty street and into the building. It evidences Nancy's vulnerability and that she has been expected to start at the bottom of the professional ladder. Similarly, the tracking camera angle echoes the stalking point of view shots that are common with the Final Girl role (Clover, 1987: 1992; Nowell, 2011) that Nancy occupied in the two seasons previous to this, implying her the threat that follows her. Only this time, the threat is posed by the patriarchal system that surrounds

her, rather than the Demogorgon who killed Barb. This scene serves as a reminder that no matter how many social stigmas she attempts to break, the world will always be more difficult for women. She then walks into a board room of white, middle-aged men who are joking about a woman's bra size, whilst discussing the necessity of a new story. Nancy, after handing their sandwiches to them, one-by-one, says that the impact on small businesses with the new mall 'Starcourt' being built might be an interesting piece for the locals. The main editor responds: "I like it. I like it. But I've got something spicier – it's about the missing mustard on my hamburger." He later asks her if she could piece those clues together to get that fixed, 'Nancy Drew?'. While this term is used derogatively, it actually references her tenacity. As such, the man making this comment is attempting to insult Nancy, when there is actually a contextual recognition that this is a good comparison to Drew as she is the hero of her own stories; as *Stranger Things'* Nancy will also replicate. Nancy apologises and takes the sandwich off him for her to correct the mistake as she leaves the men laughing loudly at her expense. Therefore, the men working at the newspaper are dismissing a woman as a heroic investigator because they are misogynistic and are not privy to audiences' understandings about Nancy's capability and skill.

As outlined in relation to Nancy's construction as the Final Girl, her relationship with Steve also works to present her as an empowering force and the epitome of 'female fierceness' (Wilson, 2019) and not as a 'one note' woman (Rivera, 2017). In this relationship, she prioritises her own agency and respect above that of any relationship. Nancy's relationship with Steve, in which she has been mistreated at times, is something that is echoed in Joyce Byers' narrative; this shared experience between the two women will be explored shortly. It is first necessary to explore Steve and Nancy's relationship in order to outline the similarities between Nancy and Joyce's experiences. In a similar manner to the analysis of Steve Crain from *The Haunting of Hill House*, which is present in '*Chapter Two: Rewriting the Gothic Woman',* there are attempts by the Duffer Brother to undermine and evolve their women characters within a patriarchal world. What makes *Stranger Things* interesting is that it too uses their male characters to challenge the patriarchal structures themselves; "the show's powerful deconstruction of toxic notions of masculinity makes it a decidedly feminist—though still arguably imperfect — piece of television." (Skoryk, 2017). Skoryk (ibid) acknowledges that season two of *Stranger Things*, uses its, "source material to deconstruct traditional ideas

of masculinity and to push for a more emotionally deep and ultimately less patriarchal world. And for that, it deserves a major round of applause." (Skoryk, ibid). Thus, here there is a return to the emotional intensity and depth that television allows as well as their character's attempts at deconstructing masculinity that provide space for women's identification to occur, through the empowerment of women's voices.

However, unlike Steve Crain in *The Haunting of Hill House, Strange Things'* Steve is not depicted as wrong, immoral, and with problematic opinions regarding women. Steve in *Stranger Things*, is recognised as immature, but with an encompassing personal growth which stems from his overall respect for women's opinion, and in this instance, for Nancy's perspective. Furthermore, the audience's intertextual expectation of how a teenage romance is normally presented across the narrative (for example, boy dumps girl and becomes aggressive/angry towards girl) is subverted; Steve does not feel threatened and uses various narrative incidents, such as his friendships and breakup with Nancy, to negotiate his position in life and to reflect on his connection to others. Nancy is able to recognise that, even though Steve regrets his behaviour, ultimately their trust has been broken through his dismissal regarding Barb's disappearance, the slut-shaming incident (both outlined in, *Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television*) and her subsequent marginality. Her final comments on their relationship is that it is, "All bullshit." (*Stanger Things,* Season 2, Episode 3, 2017) as she states: "You're pretending like everything's okay, you know, like, like we didn't kill Barb. Like it's great, like we're in love and we're partying, yeah let's party, party, we're partying. This, this bullshit."

Throughout the first half of season one, Steve is presented as the attractive, popular jock. This representation formulates the intertextual meaning that emerges in the 1980s high school narrative in which *Stranger Things'* is set. Steve's jock role is amplified in those opening episodes and it is expected that he would break Nancy's heart. As the series progresses, it is revealed that Steve is sensitive, caring, but is also easily (mis)led by his friends. However, he sacrifices the peer power he has here and dissolves these friendships after an explosive fight regarding Nancy's slut-shaming incident. Yet, it is Nancy who breaks Steve's heart, in season two, admitting that their relationship is "All bullshit." (Season 2, Episode 3). Steve and Nancy's relationship begins to falter very quickly after the disappearance of Barb. The undermining of

Steve in these instances stems from a personal growth that leads him into a state of acceptance of Nancy's opinion which serves to empower her narrative position. Steve becomes mature enough to recognise that their trust has been broken, that his behaviour was unacceptable, and that this has ultimately led to the demise of a relationship he valued – and continues to value, enough so to allow Nancy the agency she deserves.

It is through Steve's own recognition of his unacceptable behaviour that a further message of empowerment for women is understood. *Stranger Things* self-reflexively engages in the commentaries regarding changing masculinity and women's treatment. Such as critiquing the previously once acceptable representations of men and women in the 1980s high school narrative through the ideological standards and issues that are held now, for example the 'slut shaming' incident. While the context between the 1980s and contemporary experiences differ (for example, slut shaming is frequently associated with social media, which did not exist in the 1980s), the impact and meaning of this on women's experience is still explored. Through Nancy's relationship with Steve where *Stranger Things* begins "...to deconstruct traditional ideas of masculinity and to push for a more emotionally deep..." (Skoryk, 2017). Steve actively works to correct his mistakes, even if there is no one there to congratulate him on such self-reflection. He understands Nancy's slut-shaming was wrong, degrading, and hurtful and in his attempt to correct this, he goes back to the cinema that evening to scrub the message off himself. This is an effective piece of televisual drama that resonates with a modern audience; while social media did not exist in the 1980s, and as such, nor did revenge porn in the way it is commonly experienced now, Steve's friends' slut-shaming Nancy can be read to align with other cyberbullying as outlined in the case of *Scream: The TV Series'* Audrey. Only in this instance, there is a reflexive change from someone who is involved in the violating incident, to Steve's passivity as he watches as his friends write the graffiti. Steve still recognises this as an abusive act and takes it upon himself to clean this off, without the need for praise (Nancy happens to pass as he is cleaning it off).

As noted earlier, Nancy's relationship with Steve, and her subsequent mistreatment, is something that is echoed in Joyce Byers' narrative too. She lives as a single mother to her two boys, Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) and Will (Noah Schnapp). None of them have any interaction or relationship with the boys' father, Lonnie, due to his abusive behaviour. Both women seek

independence and agency that is not readily provided, particularly given the 1980s conservative era in which their narratives are set; marriage and obedience to (mostly male) authority was still an expectation within that society. Yet both women are connected by their shared trauma of being dismissed with regards to their experience of the Upside Down and having their friend (Barb) or son (Will) taken and/or killed by the Demogorgon. While Nancy's dismissal is constructed through the gender politics that lend themselves to her reading as a teenage Final Girl, Joyce's dismissal is constructed through a sense of hysterical, single mother whose expected passivity and conformity to male authority is also actively opposed. Their dismissal ultimately leads both women to have to the shared experience of accepting a traumatic and horrifying truth: the existence of the Upside Down and the monsters that live there.

The previous dismissal that they have experienced ultimately means that both Joyce and Nancy find solace and community in the support of each other through their construction of the surrogate family. Nancy becomes a surrogate daughter to Joyce, as Nancy begins to date Jonathan. There is no sense of threat from Joyce in terms of the mother/girlfriend dynamic. Nor does Nancy appear fearful of Joyce or appear to dampen her personality to appease her. There is a shared recognition of strength and their shared experiences in which they empower each other's voice and belief in the other.

Joyce and Nancy's experience as women is also amplified through their connection to Jonathan. Nancy's budding relationship with Jonathan serves to challenge the expectations of Nancy's femininity. In particular, there is a scene in season one, episode five, 'The Flea and The Acrobat', where Jonathan is practising his gun shooting practice. Here, the gun is symbolic of masculinity and violence. In this scene, after missing many of the targets, Nancy states: "You're supposed to actually hit the cans, right?" Jonathan responds well to this joking criticism, stating he was, in fact, aiming for the spaces in between the cans. This leads Jonathan to ask Nancy if she has used a gun before, in which she implies that she has not shot a gun before. Jonathan then, as he holds the gun in line with the target, goes on to recall his last use of a gun at the age of ten when his father forced him to kill a rabbit on his birthday, noting, "He cried for a week. I'm a fan of Thumper". Here the gun becomes the instigator of conversations of emotion, trauma, and the lack of romantic connection between their parents for both Nancy and Jonathan, over the violence mostly commonly associated with a gun.

Nancy takes the gun and hits the can straight away; this abdicates the masculine symbolism of the weapon to her. A similar reappropriation of the weapon in terms of sexual politics is also explored in *Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television*.

Through Joyce's fight to find her missing son, she discovers her own voice and her marginalisation becomes thematically representative of many of the other women's experiences in the series, too. It is also no surprise that the casting decision for Joyce arrived at Winona Ryder. For while Ryder featured, originally as a significantly established name, in relation to the teenagers (Millie Bobby Brown, Noah Schnapp, Finn Wolfhard, and Caleb McLaughlin) who would later find fame from the series, Ryder also offered an intertextual point of reference for her portrayal of defying conventional women characters.

I argue that Ryder's historical performances mostly explore issues of femininity and emotionality with significant thematic connections to marginality, individualism, and dismissal which are echoed through to her role as Joyce Byers and her connection to the horror genre. This ultimately ties through to Joyce's portrayal and her relationship with Nancy who is a reflection of Joyce (and other characters that Ryder has historically portrayed) at a younger age. Dyer (1998) provides consideration as to why a star's acting history and paratextual construction is important in understanding an actor's specific reception. Dyer's (1998) 'Star Theory' recognises that celebrities, in this case actors, are commodities who are manufactured by the institutions for whom they work. He analysed the spectacle surrounding influential film stars and their unmitigated power to compel and amaze those who are not within this world. Therefore, such stars create a public persona which is constructed to be believed as being themselves, with real emotions and behaviours, in order to relate more closely to the audiences and bolster sales. Her role as Joyce led such journalists to claim that this was Ryder's "best performance in decades" (Dockterman, 2016) which highlighted her feminine vulnerability and emotionality in as 'mood as much as a memory' of her previous roles (ibid).

The historical meaning and current relevance of Ryder's status as an actor was circulated through contemporary journalism in that she is known for portraying "…unconventional women in the late '80s and '90s—think *Beetlejuice*, *Heathers* and

Dracula—that her doe-eyed gaze conjures a mood as much as a memory." (Dockterman, 2016). Dockterman (ibid) also claims that in films, "Her look defied stereotypes — a producer notoriously told her when she was a teen that she wasn't pretty enough for Hollywood." Implying the absurdity of Hollywood producers as well as the marginal experience in Ryder's own personal life, which she ultimately used to her advantage in that her historic performances are known for making "….dark swagger cool." (ibid). This same essence is utilised again in *Stranger Things* in which there is a palpable rawness, hysteria, and difference which permeates the entire first season that stems from Joyce's panic and her dismissal which is only amplified through Will's supernatural communication.

However, Morton (2018) found Ryder's portrayal as 'an impoverished single mother' had little connection to her previous roles which were mostly 'defined in part by their privilege'. Morton (ibid) has a point here in that Joyce is far from the privileged iterations that can be seen Ryder's historic performances. This can be seen in her need to leave her younger son, Will, under the care of her older son, Jonathan, in order to work late and take extra shifts on in order to pay the rent. The associated privilege that is seen in Ryder's previous roles, however, can also be seen in Nancy. I have argued that Nancy is a younger version of Joyce in their shared experiences as well as her paratextual relevance to Ryder's own acting history. Therefore, this connects Joyce and Nancy's narrative trajectory even further.

Alongside this, Joyce's character emerges as an 'emotional anchor' (Morton, 2018; Dockterman, 2016), who eventually gains significant respect from her immediate community in which she has created in order to save her son and the other children at risk of harm from the Upside Down. From this perspective, Morton (2018:100) uses Noel Murray's argument that casting Ryder was more than an 'exercise in self-conscious', similar to Hill's (2002) comments on the cult text's self-conscious nature, in that her character is 'like every Eighties Ryder heroine rolled into one, then aged a few decades'. This is evidenced in 'scrappy underdog like...in Lucas; a quirky free spirit like Lydia from Beetlejuice; and a smart and determined individualist like Heathers' Veronica.' Morton (ibid) questions this analogy in that Joyce is a desperate woman whose 'financial and personal resources have already been stretched thin' and if Joyce's 'progress to a serious panic disorder' can be aligned to Lydia's 'quirky free spirit' in quite the same manner. The exact textual history of each character that

Ryder has portrayed is different and therefore such elements are irrelevant for this current analysis; yet this thematic connection provides an insight into what might be expected from Ryder's performance (or Ryder as a commodity) as Joyce Byers, who is significantly older than the other character portrayals. Equally, Ryder's earlier performances and concerned narratives are align more closely with that of Nancy who is privileged, as per Morton's (2018) comment on the disconnect between Ryder's historic portrayals and Joyce. As such, solidifying a significant connection between the experiences of Joyce and Nancy, resulting in their collaborative stance against the Upside Down.

Nancy and Joyce's bond also involves the construction of the mother and the surrogate family. The two most prominent mothers of the series are Joyce and Karen (Cara Buono), Nancy and Mike's mother. Their experiences of motherhood differ greatly, partly based on the class of both families and the bond that is built through Nancy's relationship with them, as previously discussed. Boudreau acknowledges that Karen and Joyce's scenes have been interpreted in very different ways: "Audiences saw these two characters as either the worst of mothers or the best – the exact same scenes were frequently read in completely opposite ways" (2018:176). This argument focused in particular on the construction of class around the mother's capabilities and the difference between Joyce Byers and Mrs Karen Wheeler. Joyce is a single mother who works so much that she relies on her eldest child to keep an eye on her youngest. While Karen is a married, stay-at-home mother whose focus is meal times, keeping the house clean, and knowing where her children are at all times. While the comparison serves to present Karen as the idealised mother and Joyce appears downtrodden; what becomes apparent throughout the series is the comparative scrutiny between their mothering ability, that is rooted in the concept of class. This is established in the professions and homes of both women; Joyce's retail job and run-down bungalow and Karen's status as a stay-at-home mother with her four bedroomed house and a white picket fence. This issue of class also establishes a further dialogue to the teen genre which places the importance of identity exploration over class aspirations. This is prominently seen as a central theme to the 1980s teen movie, in particular *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and *Sixteen Candles* (1984). While Karen is presented to appear as the mother who has it all; her children are far more aware of her situation. As Nancy notes, in the gun shooting scene outlined earlier (Season 1, Episode 5), she criticises and actively states she wants to avoid a marriage like her parents:

I don't think my parents have ever loved each other. My mom was young. My dad was older, but he had a cushy job, money, came from a good family. So they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac, and started their nuclear family. Screw that.

(*Stranger Things,* Season 1, Episode 5, 2016).

Therefore, demonstrating that Nancy recognises Karen's financial security, and their marriage is one of convivence more than anything else. This is also indicated in the running joke throughout *Stanger Things* which acknowledges how disconnected Karen and her husband are as well as how oblivious he is to her needs, as her continuous flirtation with Billy in season three evidences. There is also the intertextual referentiality of the parents' mundane lives as a trope of the rebellious 1980s teen movie. An example of this rebellion from their parents' mundane life is seen in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) - which *Stranger Things* is clearly playing with that help emphasise Nancy's understanding with regards to the importance of relationships. Nancy recognises from a young age, through her relationship breakup with Steve, that she would rather be alone than end up in a loveless marriage. Furthermore, Nancy does not judge, marginalise, or dismiss Joyce as many other characters in the series do based on her decisions to deviate from the traditional nuclear family. In fact, Joyce's independence and courage is something that Nancy admires; she immediately believes Joyce's concerns without any required justification and vice versa.

Boudreau (2018) ignores the self-reflexive engagement of Joyce and Karen by arguing that the Duffer Brothers have done a 'disappointing job' in their formation of women and the mothers' identity. Others have also recognised the particular correlation between Joyce and Nancy's experience of gaslighting (Joseph Jackson, 2018). Here, Joseph Jackson (ibid) is missing the narrative context in which these self-reflexive characters are created as well ignoring that the same gaslighting is experienced by Hopper and Jonathan. While Joyce and Nancy's gaslighting is apparent: Joyce and Nancy's experiences are validated through each other and, as such, are recreated into spaces of empowerment which stems from their bond that has already been validated between them. Both women have total belief in what each other are claiming and

have witnessed the evidence of this: the flickering lights through which Will communicates to his mother and the picture Nancy finds of Barb with a Demogorgon standing behind her. In further criticism to Joseph Jackson's (ibid) claim, it is not only the lead women who experience gaslighting, Jonathan (Joyce's oldest son) and the Police Chief Hopper have to endure this too. Gaslighting is commonly used to explain abusive behaviour where a person is left questioning their own reality. The men's experience of gaslighting is not fully considered by Joseph Jackson (2018) and seems to diminish their argument about gaslighting and the 'disappointing' portrayal of *women*. Yet it must be acknowledged, as this point was examined in *Chapter Two: Rewriting the Gothic Woman*, the politics of the text are not the same as the narrative events. In particular, the dismissal of women in the narrative does not mean that the text approves and may be using this example to draw attention to it as a societal issue. It is through Nancy and Joyce's shared experience that they become empowered and even more determined. Joesph Jackson (ibid) gendered analysis of these women being 'disappointing', partly due to their gas lighting, ignores the similar framing of gaslighting that the male characters experience. Hopper, upon trespassing on the laboratory and discovering the experiments, is drugged and taken back home as if the whole event was a dream. When Hopper's colleagues go to check in on him, as they leave his door, assuming he is hungover, they say: 'Is he off his meds again?' implying that Hopper's leads are not genuine nor believed by his colleagues. While Jonathan is told repeatedly by his father and peers that he is wrong about the 'monster with no face' and that he is doing Joyce more harm than good by engaging in such conversations with her.

Eleven and Barb: Women's (Un)Abject Nature

Stranger Things (2016-) provides an exploration of diverse women characters who occupy various representations of femininity. These representations are frequently challenged through the text's engagement of common features of the horror genre in which historical understandings of femininity and women are criticised. This has included Nancy's role as the Final Girl, the use of a monster as a metaphor (the Demogorgon, as well as Ryder's previous acting roles within in the horror genre. Both Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and Barb (Shannon Purser) present femininity through the use of blood which makes their immediate peer groups uncomfortable. While the two characters do not cross narrative paths, their individual stories

are mirrored as two young women who are marginalised for their apparent abject nature. Eleven and Barb's blood, in *Stranger Things*, evokes abjection as it would in any other horror text as the genre's history dictates; however, the approach in which the abjection occurs is rewritten, away from horror's historic use of blood. Abjection is *Stranger Things* occurs through seeing bleeding women on screen. In particular, Barb and Eleven serve to present the way in which monstrous, menstruating women, with their bodies and blood, are being rewritten to become spaces of creation, of life, and safety, whilst challenging readings regarding this use of blood and their femininity.

From the audience's first interaction with Eleven, her gender is important; there is a literal spotlight used to highlight her difference; a torch is shined upon her, from head to toe while the boys stare in disbelief at the androgenous girl before them. Eleven, is a pre-teen girl with supernatural abilities who has spent her life being experimented on by Dr Brenner, who has kept her captive, only to test her capabilities. She manages to escape the compound and falls into the company of the boys, Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) and ultimately sacrifices herself to the Upside Down in order to save their missing friend, Will (Noah Schnapp). Joseph (2018) argues that her femininity and associated vulnerability serve as a problematic presentation. Yet I argue that *Stranger Things* achieves a developed representation of Eleven by presenting her to be both vulnerable and strong, implying that both of these characteristics can exist concurrently in a girl character.

Barb is an unassuming character which is only emphasised through the contrast to her best friend, Nancy. Barb defies any teenage girl stereotype in that she was not particularly interested in romance, nor overly vain, but she was concerned with her studies and has a whole-heartedly good natured. She 'does not fit in' (Kempton, 2017) with the rest of the teenagers presented on screen. Barb 'does not fit in' as she is "…curvy, nerdy, and skeptical about boys." (ibid) and refusal to conform to expectations of teenage femininity and acceptance of her own self as a teenager is admirable to others. As best friend to popular Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer), a typical 80s female lead with both naivety and beauty, Barb functions as the 'quintessential

sidekick' (ibid). As her function as a sidekick, Barb remains significantly quieter and in the background as many of the scenes focus on Nancy's dialogue and action. Barb narratively functions as a sounding board for Nancy, who begins to challenge some of her behaviour. It is only as Barb establishes her own character development, in warning Nancy against some of her spontaneous behaviour, that she is killed by the Demongorgon. Her awareness of other's potentially dangerous behaviour is what makes her death significantly more tragic.

There has been an established scholarly understanding of blood and gore as a feature of excess and transgression that has become a staple of the horror genre (Abbott, 2010; Sconce, 1994). There have also been psychoanalytical readings of this use of blood in the horror film that have connected its use to ideas of the abject, the body, and gender which are visible and heightened by the genre of horror. A prominent feminist film scholar, Creed (1993) acknowledged through Freudian psychoanalysis and the threat of the woman to men through castration claims that: "All human societies have a concept of the monstrous feminine of what it is about a woman that is shocking, terrifying, abject." (Creed, 1993:44). While Creed here is talking about the monstrous feminine and use of the abject (most commonly associated with blood) through particular examples, such as Medusa, the 'Mother' computer system and the alien in *Alien* and King's telekinetic *Carrie*, this understanding provides an abject perspective on how women, and specifically, their menstrual cycle, ability to give birth (or not), are thought about in wider society, as "…shocking, terrifying, abject."

In *Stranger Things*, Barb and Eleven both partly establish their abject nature but reject the associated understanding of women — and subsequently, themselves — as "…shocking, terrifying, abject." For they are not women who are exploited or used for the voyeuristic gaze as the psychoanalytical models frequently suggest (Creed, 1994; Clover, 1987). Both Barb and Eleven as women who bleed, through this horror context, allow for a more nuanced understandings regarding the use of blood and emerging womanhood as stark reminders of women's abject nature. *Stranger Things* does engage with the woman as monstrous feminine, but focuses in particular on the use of menstruation as a space for growth and life, rather than being entirely abhorrent.

Barb is marginalised as she sits alone, while at a party, she did not wish to attend, but was dragged along by Nancy. She is left alone outside while Nancy and Steve go inside the house to have sex. Her disappearance occurs while she tends to a bleeding cut from opening a beer can – a reminder of her inability to fit in with the 'cool kids', and a prominent indictor of her feminine nature: Barb is a woman who bleeds and as such becomes a significant moment for the understanding of her character as this blood ultimately leads to her death. The blood drops into the swimming pool and its scent attracts the Demogorgon. Barb and her abrupt departure in the series resonated with audiences and resulted in a campaign for her return, including the trending hashtag on Twitter, including #JusticeForBarb and #WeAreAllBarb (Kempton, 2017). The hashtags were in reference to the disappearance of Barb whom the Duffer Brothers had not anticipated to evoke such iconic stature, featuring in only three episodes and being given limited screen time (ibid) as per the function of the quintessential sidekick. Fans have later created dedicated "Barb merchandise, costumes, and fan art, and showed them off on social media. Hardcore fans even got tattoos of Barb!" (ibid).

After the predominantly male-led opening, Eleven's involvement in the boys' friendship dynamics is disruptive which is only amplified through their missing friend, Will. Eleven becomes a vehicle to explore the male expectations of the feminine appearance. In their first meeting with Eleven, the camera pans up Eleven's body in a way which echoes that of the reveal of the killer or victim in the slasher. As such, manipulating the audiences' response to frame Eleven as either a victim or as a monster. Yet, rather than some monstrous being, the audience see a young girl in a battered hospital gown, with bloodied feet, shaven head as well as her young age. All of which indicate her escape from danger and victimisation, rather than her *being* the danger. Upon her escape, she enters a café and steals some food. The owner, who is later killed for calling in a suspected case of child abuse due to her intense hunger and appearance, shouts, "think you can steal from me, boy?" which is quickly followed by, "what the hell?" as he realises Eleven is a girl and her attire implies that something is very wrong.

Eleven's superpower status directly acknowledges her femininity, strength, and vulnerability all through the textual element of nosebleeds which are brought on by her powers. It is the use of these nose bleeds that force audiences to engage with elements of womanhood they might find uncomfortable. Particularly the idea of a girl who bleeds. While Wilson (2019) notes the increasing amounts of violence and 'more gore' (Wilson, 2019), Eleven's nose bleeds undermines the excessive masculine presentation of gore in the cult horror film, as identified by Sconce (1994) and Mathijis and Mendik (2007). This is because there is a clear connection between Eleven, her strength of her superpowers, but also her femininity through her menstruation; when she uses her power, she bleeds. Therefore, her bleeding symbolises the cost of her powers, but also becomes an indicator of her true strength and power. When she bleeds, she is most powerful in that she is using her supernatural ability. By removing that abjection and attached horror of menstruation (blood), it begins to normalise the process of menstruation and the beginning of womanhood and consequently, provides a more representative role of girls/women on screen. The boys – and the audience – are faced with a literal bleeding girl; a stark reminder of the character's pre/pubescent identity and the next part of their lives. As noted, Eleven's nose bleeds are excessive, not in the sense that there is a large amount of blood as per cult film traditional understanding of excessive gore (Sconce, 1991; Mathijis and Mendik, 2007), but in the fact that the blood remains on screen for an extended amount of time. It is rarely removed or wiped away immediately. By extending the amount of time on screen with notions of menstruation and puberty, which many horror texts explore (*Carrie* (1976), *Ginger Snaps* (2000) as examples), it forces the audience to engage with the more uncomfortable aspects of being a woman.

Eleven (in season two) has to close the fleshy, bloody, womb-like membrane gate of the Upside Down with her mind. This can be read through Creed's (1993) work on the monstrous feminine and the perceptions of abject women and their relationship to blood here; yet these ideas are not framed within such understanding. The focus in these scenes is not on Eleven's monstrous nature, but how her powers and identity are progressive. In order to get the strength to do this, she relies on upsetting and anger-inducing memories. Here, there is a flashback of Eleven and Dr Brenner, who claims: "You have a wound, Eleven. A terrible wound…and eventually, it will kill you." Brenner is positioning Eleven's power as her 'wound' - a 'terrible' abnormality which will eventually kill her. Equally, this wound, spoken in psychoanalytical terms (Creed,

1993) to be representative of the vagina, and the threat her emerging womanhood poses to the patriarchal institution. Eleven fights to close the gate, and to live her life in the way she chooses, as a normal girl and "not as a lab rat" (Hopper, Season 2, Episode 9). Eleven's closing of the gate and the creation of the fleshy, bloody membrane, is symbolic of her developing identity as she moves from child to adolescent. Eleven's experiences regarding the negotiation and exploration of her own identity in a place of monsters – both literal (Dr Brenner/Demogorgon) and ideological (patriarchy/toxic masculinity, as noted by Butler, 2018) – alongside the physical changes which are depicted on screen, provides space for specific exploration of pubescent youth to question their perception of their own femininity and empower them to accept and achieve what they want, which is echoed through the superhero narrative that runs parallel to this.

To cement this rewriting of the abject woman, particularly through the use of blood, in '*Chapter 8: The Upside Down*', cornered by Dr Brenner's women companions, Eleven uses her powers to kill them, letting blood drain from their eyes. The camera's extended focus on the visible bleeding seems to echo the comments made above about the exposure of bleeding women on screen. Soon after this, Eleven and the boys are cornered by Dr Brenner. Mike says, "Blood. Blood," as he realises that the blood will attract the monster and therefore, seems to plays into this relationship established by Creed (1993) regarding blood, women, and the monstrous. Yet, the use of blood and entrance of the monster ensures the safety of Eleven and the boys who avoid immediate capture and death. The blood is what *saves* them. At the same time, Joyce and Hopper follow drops of blood to find and then save Will. So, rather than being an experience of abjection, blood is used as a tool in which to save, create, and preserve life.

The boys' acceptance of Eleven as a bleeding girl becomes part of their character growth and maturity. As after originally found, Eleven is hidden in Mike's house where she is outcast and Othered by the boys because of her gender and inability to conform to their expectations of what a girl should be/look like. The boys comment include: 'She's freaking me out!' 'Something is seriously wrong with her.' 'She's so crazy' and 'She's a psycho.' This reaction

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to Eleven's difference is in reference to her appearance and her being non-verbal; both of which do not fit with the boys' expectations of girls, thus leading them to become fearful. There are elements of humour used to emphasise how uncomfortable the boys feel in the presence of a girl; in a scene where Mike gets Eleven some new clothes, unaware of social etiquette, Eleven begins to take her clothes off in front of the boys. Appalled, Mike insists she uses a room for 'privacy'. They are shocked because they assume that girls of Eleven's age should not undress around boys, a social expectation that Eleven will not be familiar with due to her isolated captivity. There are implicit meanings here about the voyeuristic nature of the scene. This aspect is examined more directly later on in the series when Nancy and Jonathan examine photographs of other people – and Barb – and explicitly recognise this as an intrusion of privacy. This voyeuristic gaze, and the play with it both implicitly and explicitly, also forms part of the backdrop of the slasher genre, which *Stranger Things* alludes too, also, as outlined in '*Chapter One: The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television*'.

The boys' desire for clear classification of Eleven and her femininity is through their request for her to wear a blonde wig and a dress to 'fit in'. This feeds into these problematic aspects of femininity and vulnerability, in the fact that the boys become more comfortable with Eleven when she is feminised through her outfit. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the boys are pre-pubescent, and the text uses the ridiculousness of this attempt to impose femininity and the binaristic images of gender by drawing attention to the boys' naivety. Either way, it is during these performances of femininity in that she uses her powers to commit the most violent of acts. She throws Lucas into a van in order to break up a physical fight between him and Mike, then later she breaks the arm of the school bully who holds a knife to Dustin's neck, forces Mike over the cliff, and later kills the colleagues of Dr Brenner. While all the characters on screen appear shocked at Eleven's strength in the scene with Lucas, her response evidences her disappointment at her own actions. Therefore, the need to 'feminise' Eleven opposes this problematic presentation as rather than attempting to masculinise the violence, the text uses these excessive visual cues of femininity, vulnerability and strength to co-exist at the same time in her enacting of such violence.

Joseph (2018:169) outlines the boys' rejection of Eleven, noting she "is allowed to be a part of the boys' group on the condition that she be the weird damsel in distress who might be able to help them find their real friend. She never fully infiltrates their group." While Eleven is, at times, certainly distressed, to label Eleven 'a weird damsel in distress' is simplistic and ignores the 'self-conscious' messages that Hills (2002) notes are embedded in the cult text's attempt to engage audiences. Firstly, the boys are on the cusp on puberty and building romantic connections, but this interest is conflicted in their own age and maturity as any relationship with a girl is considered 'gross' (Mike, Season 1, Episode 8). This becomes further problematised through Eleven's near-muteness, hospital gown, and hunger which all indicate trauma and difference. A matter that anyone of that age would struggle to comprehend and respond to accordingly. Secondly, they do take her to a safe environment and attempt to resolve the situation in the way they know how; to take Eleven home, a place synonymous with safety. To reposition their response to Eleven's abuse as deflecting her from the friendship group ignores vital factors within the text, such as their age and the teen 'coming-of-age' emotional developments in the characters that are expected of that genre's narrative and are part of the pleasure for audiences.

Negotiating Teenage Friendships with *Stranger Things'* Max and Eleven and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina's* Theo and Sabrina.

The use of blood, as presented on screen, that moves away from the monstrous feminine and women as "…shocking, terrifying, abject." (Creed, 1993: 44) helps to reflect the changing attitudes towards bleeding women. In Eleven's case, the use of blood became synonymous with power, life, and safety. The character development of those around Eleven went from seeing her as monstrous and dangerous to wanting to protect and support her in her fight against the Demogorgon of the Upside Down. There are cases, however, in which close friendships need negotiating in a different way in order for those characters to explore their own identities.

Maurer (2018) investigated how the televisual lexicon helps preteen girls to negotiate friendship in informal settings in an effort to establish their own status within their peer group,

'through intimate conversations about television'. She argues that tweens' engagement with media is ultimately used as a social tool in order to help establish an understanding of how friendships work in real life settings. While Maurer (2018) establishes ethnographic evidence, similar to Ellen Brown (1994) to support these claims, there is little exploration of the theme of teenage friendship in these texts, as is the focus of this chapter. *Stranger Things'* (Sadie Sink) Max and Eleven *and The Chilling Tales of Sabrina's* Theo (Lachlan Watson) and Sabrina (Kiernan Shipka) offer ways in which friendship and peer support is offered to aid in the development of those characters.

The 'female fierceness' that Wilson (2019) discusses as prominent in *Stranger Things* season three, particularly with regards to Max and Eleven's friendship is actually noticeable from season one*,* as my argument about Nancy and Joyce's bond has evidenced so far in this chapter. But what Wilson (ibid) refers to as this 'female fierceness' and yet fails to fully examine is the way in which season three manages to achieve a far more explicit unity in the emergence of womanhood and the varying depictions of femininity. Part of that fierceness stems from the challenges posed to those women's experience by the boys and men surrounding them, that Joyce, Nancy, Eleven and Max are all working (together) to overcome.

Max and Eleven's friendship supports Eleven's venture into understanding and constructing her own femininity. But as Max represents, that femininity must be chosen by the individual and can challenge what their peers believe to be feminine. Unlike the boys' original attempts to categorise Eleven as 'a girl', Max's entrance in season two provides an immediate challenge to the masculinised presentation of the boys' hobbies and behaviours, through her high score as 'MADMAX' as well as her broader interest in games at the arcade, and her ability to skateboard. Max works to remind Eleven, who only has the boys' perception of femininity, that 'being a girl' is empowering and supports Eleven through her developing identity. Max actively challenges the boys' behaviour around her, whether that be through sticking her middle finger up at her brother at any chance she gets or writing the boys "notes reminding them of their creeper status." (Ivie, 2019). Max's assertiveness and invasion of the youth gamer masculinity, provides a different understanding to femininity in comparison to the boys' first meeting with mute, timid Eleven. Max's gaming and skateboarding ability are traditionally understood as masculine activities; Max's skill surpasses the boys' ability and talent on both

accounts. This aligns her, immediately, as admirable to the boys who then attempt to invite her trick or treating:

Max: "I didn't realise it was such an honour to come trick or treating with you. ….That's presumptuous of you."

Dustin (confused): "Yeah, totally! So uh, you wanna' come?"

Max rolls her eyes and walks off.

Dustin to Lucas: "Presumptuous… It's a good thing, right?"

(*Stranger Things,* Season 2, Episode 2, 2017).

The boys are presented as curious and logical, if sometimes socially awkward. From this humorous exchange, it becomes apparent that Max is also confident, well-educated, subsequently tipping the social power balance in her favour. As an exchange with her two love interests (Lucas and Dustin), it also produces some conflict between the boys, that simultaneously feeds into the common narratives which emerges from the high school teen drama (Davis and Dickinson, 2000).

Eleven is jealous of Max, who she is seen with Mike, even though Mike has been actively working to push Max out of 'the party', noting that Eleven will be the only girl in the group. After previous criticisms, from Rivera (2017) about their portrayal of 'one note women' and Eleven's inclusion (or lack of) in the group, the Duffer Brother 'self-consciously' (Hill,

2004:509) highlight the notion that anyone's (female or male) inclusion into the group, at this point in time, stems from their safety and *not* their gender:

Max (to Lucas): "You guys act like you want me to be your friend…then treat me like garbage. You go hide in the AV Club, keeping secrets like we're in second grade or something. I thought you guys wanted me in your party.

Lucas: "We do, but—"

Max: "But what?"

Lucas: "There are just things...Things we can't tell you for our own safety..."

Max: "Because I'm a girl?"

Lucas: "No!"

(*Stranger Things,* Season 2, Episode 4, 2017).

Here, Max addresses the nature of their exclusive club and as such provides a broader commentary on this behaviour, and women's choice and agency. This scene also provides a reading regarding the prominent challenge to the masculinised nature of cult and fan

communities; a community which *Stranger Things'* certainly engages with through the various intertextual references that are littered throughout the series. This includes even small references, like MADMAX, which itself is littered with intertextual meanings of toxic masculinity due to its associations with the film. Although the text is addressing a particular pattern of character behaviour, this interaction is also an explicit commentary on the nature of cult reception in *Stranger Things*. The text addresses the clear exclusion of women, openly and directly – "You go hide in the AV Club, keeping secrets". This is a criticism that does not work to promote women's involvement which echoes Wardlow (2017) and Hollows' (2003:36) claim that cult viewings, 'can also work structurally to exclude women'. While these scholars are talking about patterns of cult fan communities and reception, it is clear how Max's exclusion in this scene works to critique women's treatment in historically masculinised spaces. Here, this interaction serves as the counter argument of such cult communities in that there are no issues with women being involved: "I thought you guys wanted me in your party…" "We do, but—". "*But* —" they clearly do not. Similarly, the ties to Max's 'safety' are particularly prominent given that women's welfare in such masculinised spaces becomes questionable and are used as an excuse for their exclusion. While Lucas's point is that it is too dangerous for a girl and Eleven is only allowed because of her superpowers, the text ensures it is clear that the decision about her involvement is not for Lucas, or anyone else, to decide.

Stranger Things engages in the teen drama narrative as well as the slasher subgenre in order to comment on these genre's historic presentation of emerging womanhood. Similarly, the context in which these genres were most popular have inscribed understandings of gender and identity which Max and Eleven, through their eventual friendship go on to defy. The teen drama narrative is then used reflexively in season two where Max is positioned in competition with Eleven regarding their interest over Mike. This high school cycle narrative serves to underpin the exploration of identity in the development from teenager to adult; one which developed in the 1980s and beyond to self-reflexively pit one girl against the other. In this cycle, the girls who were originally pitted against each other are reconciliated and this works to serve a feminist message of empowerment, as is the case with *Clueless* (1995) (Khona, 2019). This becomes the case with Eleven and Max, who eventually become closer. Through their friendship and with each other's guidance they become significantly more empowered.

Butler (2018:73) notes that the 1980s high school cycle occurred in parallel the slasher cycle which narratively functions in a similar manner, both are 'inextricable from the conservatism of the era' and ultimately focused on developing identity. This conservatism existed generally around attitudes towards sex and alcohol, but of particular interest to *Stranger Things* is that construction of girlhood and the behaviour, restricted life choices and attitudes expected of girls at the time. Furthermore, Butler (ibid) argues that these genres are used in order to confront 'the stifling social conservatism and reinforcement of archaic domestic values that rested at the heart of Reagan's policies.' The political context in which *Stranger Things* is situated permeates the narrative, leaving conversations about class, gender, and identity to organically emerge through the text.

While originally 'pitted against each other' (Sinks' interview with Ivie, 2019) in the final episode of season two, moving forward Eleven and Max are both depicted as resilient characters, but with different strengths. Using the paratextual material of an interview with Sink, she discusses how she perceives Eleven and Max's relationship. Sink describes this relationship:

> Eleven is such a powerful character, but not in the way that Max is. El is powerful in the sense of the supernatural and the superhero, but when it comes to communication and confidence skills, it's not there for her yet. But with Max, she's unapologetically herself and she's so comfortable with who she is. (Ivie, 2019)

While providing various depictions of strong female characters, Sink underpins some of the meanings in which Eleven and Max are created, with an intention that both can be powerful in different ways that do not diminish from the other. There is no desire to change or develop as Max is 'unapologetically comfortable with who she is.' As such, this essentially works as a model to other women in accepting themselves for who they are, without the pressure to change.

Unlike Joyce, Nancy, and Eleven, what is particularly interesting about Max is that the boys have to convince *her* of the Upside Down, rather than having the girl/woman convince the boys. When Lucas eventually explains what has happened to Max (based on advice on his father to 'give them (women) what they want'), she responds: "I felt it was a little derivative in parts…wish you had more originality." Max does not believe the story, critiquing its originality. Again, the Duffer Brothers are subverting the expectations; they have played out the dismissed and hysterical woman trope with Nancy, Joyce, and Eleven and are now applying this to the boys who are forced to defend their actions here; making this more pleasurable to witness as the hypocrisy is clear for audiences to see. This increases Max's integrity and self-assured character. Equally, when she eventually uncovers the truth, her lack of understanding of the Upside Down is not dwelled upon, nor is she depicted as 'stupid'; for her immediate response regarding the horror monsters of the Upside Down are logical for someone who has no proof of its existence.

In season three, Max's friendship with Eleven is solidified as they are unified quickly through their experiences with their boyfriends, Mike and Lucas. This is apparent in Max's sentiment which she repeats twice in this episode: "There's more to life than boys." (Max, Season 3, Episode 2). This strength reverberates throughout the season and the male-driven opening seems far removed from the messages being created here. However, the series from the pilot, sets up the subversion of these 1980s conservative ideologies which the text originally alludes too. The Duffer Brothers work to acknowledge the challenges to women, by indicating how male-heavy such texts once were (as the earlier episodes reflected) and then recreate this with a clear space in which women's identification can occur; one point of this is through Max and Eleven's friendship. A key theme in the opening episode the series was male bonding and friendship with the four boys in the 'party', so it makes logical sense for this to be explored in regards to Eleven and Max.

Sink notes the 'direction' and trajectory of this relationship. She states how Max and Eleven's friendship was constructed into creating them as an "iconic, powerful duo":

> At the end of season two, you see the one interaction El and Max had, and it was set up in a way where they were being pitted against each other — which is a direction too many TV shows and films go in. Like, they always want to put two girls against each other and have a lot of jealousy between them. I'm so glad the Duffers did the opposite and had us become this iconic, powerful duo. Millie and I are such good friends and hang out so much off set, we figured, why not spend more time with each other on set, too? Because we have that genuine bond, it helps with the chemistry in the show. (Sink cited in Ivie, 2019)

This evidences an intention to continue models of thinking, with two girls being 'pitted against each other' and then to rewrite that narrative in order to produce a more positive dialogue for women and their relationship to each other. Furthermore, Sink references her personal friendship with Brown (who plays Eleven). Through Dyer's (1998) 'Star Theory' and the actor as a commodity with a persona, through Sink's admission that her and Millie "…are such good friends and hang out so much off set…" as such implying their closeness; their 'chemistry' on screen becomes far more believable and appealing to audiences. This is because audiences will sense the authenticity to this relationship that moves beyond the fictional narrative to Sink and Brown's own lives and friendship.

In examining some of the fan responses to how Max and Eleven's friendship was understood and received by audiences, it became apparent in those audiences' responses that were examined, that they seemed to enjoy Max's negotiation of Eleven's own identity, providing Eleven with a voice she was unable to use effectively. For example: Peyton Reads @peyton_reads 13 July "Max and Eleven's friendship was one of the best things about season 3 hands down". Equally, Isabella @hemmos_laughter 13th July "SAY IT LOUDER!! Max was there for eleven after her breakup with mike, despite knowing that eleven wasn't really fond of her in the past. She put that aside and showed eleven how kind and loving she really is & max is SUCH an underrated character." Both tweets evidence their fondness of Max, but Isabella's

tweet in particular, highlights the positive role model that Max sets in relation to girls' friendships, at this age, which can become competitive and hostile.

Returning to Maurer's (2018) acknowledgement of how media, including television, supports teenagers in their negotiation of friendship in informal settings, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina's* (2018), Theo and Sabrina explore an interesting friendship dynamic which is rarely pursued on screen: a friend's trans identity being revealed and the aftermath of this on their friendship. *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is a dark, coming-of-age story that revolves round a coven and the occult. Sabrina Spellman grapples to reconcile her dual nature as a half-human, half-witch, while standing with her coven to face the evil forces that threaten them. While the use of the coven in terms of women's community and its connections to the horror genre will be discussed at a later point in this chapter, it is important to recognise Sabrina's dual nature; she is neither full human nor full witch. As such, this does impact her experiences within both these communities. Through the articulation of Sabrina as half-human and half-witch, that she is referred too at various points in the first season by both her aunts (who are witches) and her friends (who are human) works to imply the problematic complexities of binary identities and the exclusionary treatment that comes associated with this. While this is a narrative feature, these complexities also serve as symbolic for the difficulties teenagers face in their own negotiation and exploration of their identity. Her friends recognise her difference in that she is a witch and therefore not fully human; while her coven is aware she is not 'full' witch and this increases the marginality she experiences in both communities.

Even though Sabrina's experience is different to that of her friend, Theo, previously known as Susie, who is transitioning, both of them share the experience of marginalisation and exclusion that comes with negotiating the problematic complexities of binary identities. Through sharing this experience and fully comprehending their own identities, it ultimately works to bring Theo and Sabrina closer as friends as they share a developed understanding of this marginality and as such, each other's situation.

Theo is one of Sabrina's human friends and part of the narrative explores their gender identity and their eventual transition from Susie to Theo. Originally, this all occurred in the first few

episodes of the script, and actor Lachlan Watson, who is non-binary, requested a meeting with the creators to discuss the depiction of this trans journey more closely. Watson stated that they felt the series presented this process as occurring far too quickly. As a transgender actor themselves, ensuring that Theo's transition was fairly and effectively represented was an important aspect for them personally (Carlin, 2018). Furthermore, Watson wanted to ensure that Theo was embedded clearly in the narrative, rather than being a token character was used solely for inclusivity purposes. Instead, Watson believed it was important to reflect Theo's exploration as a mirroring of Sabrina's "Just like Sabrina choosing her own path of light and dark, you are allowed to forge your own path and you can do it brilliantly and independently." (Carlin, 2018) The representation of the transitioning of Theo allows those who are non-binary or trans, who are uncomfortable with their own gender, to be able to vicariously acknowledge the same feelings that Theo experiences in their daily lives which is documented and explored in the narrative. Equally, it offers knowledge and understanding for those audiences outside of the trans community as an opportunity to gain insight into the challenges trans people face.

In examining the social media interaction that came from the depiction of this trans journey, which had been documented as per the paratextual material above, as being adapted by Watson who is trans, it shows that some audiences clearly resonated with the authenticity and inclusion of Theo's journey. In the instances below, it is clear that audiences commend the creator's presentation of the trans journey as well as the text's ability to highlight the problematic treatment of that specific and often unrepresented on-screen community. For example, Symon @yaysymon on Apr 6, 2019 tweets: "y'all should watch chilling adventures of sabrina and focus on susie/theo's character,,, it speaks of the needs and the lack of rights of trans people it might be enough but it is a good start on speaking up for our trans people." Similarly, Plant DaddyHerb @GabbiiNicole Apr 8, 2019 "We stan the Trans-inclusion in the Chilling Adventures of Sabrina. Susie -> Theo. we love him." Equally, EmmaSunflower @emma_chaballin Apr 8, 2019 "I'm here for #TheChillingAdventuresofSabrina weaving in the Susie—>Theo storyline in and normalizing his transition but also creating a conversation about transphobia." The tweets evidence how Theo and their narrative is received in a mostly positive manner, whilst also highlighting the desire for broader society to help change the transphobic attitudes that still remain. In returning again to Maurer's (2018) acknowledgement of how television can support teenagers in their negotiation of friendship in informal settings;

Theo's transition helps audiences recognise some of the issues the trans community face for those who are outside of that community and depict, through Sabrina, a way of showing support and solidarity to those experiencing similar experiences.

While, Eleven and Max, and Sabrina and Theo, have provided support to each other in their development and exploration of their identity, *Stranger Things'* Steve and Robin also create a similar friendship based on their shared marginalisation, but this works to support Dustin as well, creating a surrogate-like family. While once-popular Steve finds himself with poor grades and unable to move to college, disappointing his parents and leaving him with few friends; Robin is quieter and has seemingly remained unnoticed during high school. *Stranger Things* sets up Robin (Maya Hawke) as a potential love interest for Steve (Joe Keery), who begins to become rather taken with her, only for it to be later revealed that she is a lesbian; specifically in an emotionally intense and highly vulnerable moment for them both. Steve remembers Robin looking at him in class, only for Robin to disclose that it was the girl he sat next to that she was admiring.

The unconventional framing of Steve, Robin, and Dustin as a family unit continues the messages about seeking support from peer communities as well as the continuing theme that families can be created. This is also evident in the relationships between Joyce and Nancy, the boys' 'party' and Max and Eleven that have been discussed throughout this chapter. This family unit, however, does imply a traditional gender dynamic of mother, father, child. Although, this is soon undermined when Robin takes on a more practical role of translating the Russian transmission; while Steve continues to 'mother' and uphold the group's safety. Robin enters *Stranger Things* in season three, as a staff member, at Scoops Ahoy, working closely with Steve. She is soon brought into the Upside Down escapades through her help translating the Russian code with Dustin. She is quick-witted, sharp, intelligent and feisty. The fans have taken pleasure in Robin's accepted identity, but also a reading as her, Steve and Dustin as a heteronormative family unit. This reading has been seen in social media interactions: For example: Pau @thorlovethunder 4th July 2019 'steve and robin are dustin's parents now. They're officially a family. Stranger Things.' Also, missing catra @gayybirb said on 8th July 2019, its official Robin is the smartest and Robin/Steve/Dustin is a wholeass family.' What is interesting here is the reading of the supposedly nuclear family. There is a woman, man, and

child. But none of these characters are biologically related and there is no romance between Robin and Steve. Steve is working at Scoops Ahoy as punishment for not getting into college, while Dustin is struggling to readjust to the new group dynamics, now they all (mostly) have girlfriends; therefore, they are all somewhat marginal characters who have found solace in each other's company. This concept is certainly extended from Steve's 'The Babysitter' role in season one and two, in which he cared in a paternal manner for the 'kids' (Dustin, Mike, Eleven, Will, Lucas). Here, he is presented as "…more than just a secret softie, but a protector, playing both heroic fighter and mother hen to Dustin and the gang" (Kennedy, 2019). In his role, now affectionately known as 'The Babysitter,' which encapsulate both the emotional support, social mentorship, and physical strength, Steve plays a pivotal role in eventually supporting Eleven and the boys' maturity. This allows Steve to, "become sincere allies," with women audiences through his "complex male character with complicated feeling." (Storyk, 2017). The idea that support can be received and families can be created from other people, aside from blood relatives, provides a reading in which acceptance of identity and a sense of community support that is always there, it just needs to be looked for in other places.

Witches, Covens, and Sisterhood

This chapter has so far sought to trace some of the spaces in which the horror television series thematically supports or challenges women within their community, through their supposed abject nature, motherhood, or exploration of identity. These have all been tied to the horror narrative in which they are involved, Eleven and Barb as bleeding women tormented by the Upside Down; Joyce's negotiation of motherhood and Nancy's desire for independence whilst being stalked by the Demogorgon's or Sabrina and Theo's own exploration of identity whilst trying to comprehend or battle those who wish to oppress them. This latter section of the chapter explores the same issues of how the horror television series thematically supports or challenge women within their community, yet there is a particular horror tradition of the use of the witch that engages further dynamics to the broader issues of this thesis regarding the representation of women in the contemporary horror television series. In particular, the use of the witch is a historically, culturally loaded term which has explicit meanings and understandings for audiences with regards to women's experiences (Short, 2006). Coleman

(2015) notes how the role of the witch has been regularly aligned with women's daily lives in media, too, stating:

> These women harness their supernatural powers to achieve a sort of balance of apparent 'normalcy' in their lives – using it to complete household tasks, resolve familial issues or to make them fit in at school. (Coleman, 2015)

This harnessing of power to help them fit in can be seen in many of the cases under discussion and addresses how some of these modern representations of the witch mirror current ideology. Equally, many of the instances under discussion in this chapter show how the witches' supernatural powers are used to complete these roles, such as '…household tasks, resolve familial issues…' that are inscribed with historically feminine meanings which are then juxtaposed with a level of violence that contradicts this understanding. Such juxtapositions lead to the challenging or broadening of the meaning of femininity and the way it is inscribed onto behaviour or action. In the case of *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (2018)*, the witches use their power to help with 'household tasks' such as Hilda's baking or 'familial issues' when Zelda kills Hilda, who is an annoyance to her, only for her to be resurrected a short time later. Thus, this latter section intends to underpin how such understanding of women, femininity, and their communities work in order to investigate how the texts attempt to thematically challenge these ideas for contemporary women audiences.

In order to address the thematics of women's experiences in the horror television series, specifically those that engage with the horror genre character of the witch, it is necessary to recognise the historical importance and understanding of these figures which then essentially enables the text to become a point of reference for this historical moment. In terms of understanding the role of the witch, the infamous Salem witch trials are most prevalent within cultural consciousness and popular media. But this is not where the witch's story starts; witches began as powerful, appreciated women who were admired for their power, age, and ability to heal (Quaglia, 2019; Martin, 2010). Quaglia (2019) notes that the concept of witches appears to surface independently in various cultures across the centuries. She notes, "In Greek mythology, the first witch was Hecate, the Goddess of magic and astrology; in Yoruba

tradition, the witch was a wise woman invested with the power of the trickster." (Quaglia, 2019). The witch and trickster have complex and shifting status in mythologies, but overall were perceived as wise goddesses and welcomed by society.

However, the historical trajectory of the witch has not always been so progressive. By the 1400s, society no longer deemed these women as protective and wise forces. Silvia Federici (2004) notes: "The rise of male-centric Christianity in Europe in the Middle Ages, along with the growth of early Capitalism meant that powerful women were demonized." Therefore, meaning that these women experienced oppression as they were 'demonized' in 'male-centric' spaces. This becomes a prominent function of the witch in terms of their media representations: they function as powerful women who challenge oppressive, patriarchal society. Around Europe, it is estimated that local governments murdered 80,000 women, whom they believed to be witches. The most common methods of death for the witches included hanging, stoning, burning, and drowning (Quaglia, 2019). While a heart-breaking reality of these brutal deaths must be acknowledged, the violence and specificity in targeting witches (women only) formed part of a movement which preserved the pressing patriarchy (Short, 2006). The society at the time reinforced patriarchal beliefs which labelled these women as witches – limiting their own autonomy – that eventually resulted in a horrendous death.

There is a historic tracing in a number of media texts where the witch character is used to provide commentary on the treatment of women within that current society. For example, Miller's (1976) play *The Crucible* engages with the historic event of the Salem Witch Trials in his fictional narrative of Massachusetts Bay colonists who were accused of witchcraft in 1692. In this, he uses this history as a metaphor for government persecution of suspected communists during the mid-20th century. As such, the use of the witches' persecution served as a tool to engage in Miller's criticism of a significantly more contemporary event. A more recent and arguably relevant example, given that the representation was explored on television, would be Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In this instance, her witch identity is used to empower her teenage experience. Willow's exploration of witchcraft helps her to reflect upon her feelings of social isolations, sexuality, and romantic rejection, alongside providing her with a gaining sense of purpose and empowerment. As such, the witch becomes a key figure that facilitates the exploration of women's narratives that are so closely

founded in contemporary culture. Their representation on screen can have major implications for the dynamic ways in which this character role is engaged with. Their abject and monstrous nature, which specifically revolved around their perceived difference to the patriarchal or religious context in which these women lived at the time, meant that they become a focal point in horror fiction (Short, 2006). The horror context and tradition of this character type of the witch grants audiences with these historical underpinnings which ultimately means that some understandings of these characters' experiences are already established.

The marginal, lethal, or exclusionary experience of these women mostly began before the label of 'witch' was even assigned to them (Short, 2006; Martin, 2010); they may have been single and aging, or widowed, unable/unwilling to attend church regularly, own too much money/land or were involved in the emergence of medical science. These women either had too much power for the patriarchal society in which they lived, or not enough in order to ensure their survival. This historical reading of the witch echoes Wardlow's (2017) modern acknowledgment of contemporary women audiences' experiences as being 'too much' and 'not enough' for the communities in which they are involved in. Therefore, implying that the need to empower women's voices is still important, even in the current society. Through this recognition, the witch becomes a vehicle through which to challenge such exclusionary experiences of women and empower their voices.

Along with the audiences' established intertextual and historical knowledge of the witch, it is common for horror texts to incorporate the coven within the narrative. The use of the coven within the narrative helps to clarify the boundaries of these witches' community and also to establish those who are positioned outside of this community. When consideration is given to the exclusion that many of these women face, the coven emerges as a safe space where women can begin to explore their identity and supernatural ability, with support, and without the threat of men who seek to harness their power or kill them. Coleman notes that:

> The closeness of the coven acts as a metaphor for burgeoning womanhood, young women discovering the power (and perils) of their femininity, coming of age and learning to cope with the hostility of the world outside. Many of these young witches

are ill at ease with their powers, uncertain how to control and utilise their powers in a modern world, where there are rules of 'normalcy' to play by. (Coleman, 2015)

A common narrative that is explored is a witch's personal power being connected to the coven's power as a metaphor regarding women's relationships and treatment towards each other. This is an important message regarding the solidarity in communities of women when contemporary society encourages such competitiveness between women and texts often present them as being 'pitted against each other' (Sinks' interview with Ivie, 2019). This competitiveness expected amongst women is something that has already been discussed in this chapter – albeit through a different approach – as is the case with Max and Eleven and Karen and Joyce. The marginality the witches' experience from the world outside, as Coleman (ibid) underpins, becomes imperative to their narrative struggle to survive as well as reinforcing their need for the coven community of acceptance and freedom.

The coven's associations of acceptance and freedom are a new development, Coleman argues:

> Much of twentieth-century pop culture has romanticised the coven for generations of young women and teenage girls, which is no bad thing, as they are a positive affirmation of how female friendships should be – mutually supportive, (mostly) non-judgmental, and the freedom to be yourself. (Coleman, 2015)

Even with this 'romanticised' approach, the positive affirmations of how women's friendship 'should be', when read in line with Maurer's (2018) understanding of how media texts can support teenagers, and arguably older women too, with their own negotiation of their personal relationships. The use of the coven promotes agency, support, as well as acceptance of individuals who do not conform to the societal expectations imposed upon them. As such, the coven gives particular prominence to addressing women's needs and desires, becomes a powerful space in which to situate commentary and challenge women's identity within their community.

From Hags to Heroes: The Older Woman Witch and Mother in Horror Television

While the issue of age and motherhood has been addressed in the earlier argument regarding the paratextual relevance of Ryder's previous performances to her portrayal of Joyce Byers in *Stranger Things*, a similar analysis will emerge in this section. However, there is a vital difference in that the context of this discussion is focused only on the witch. This slight change of focus to the age of the witch character becomes particularly relevant upon considering the horror-specific nature of the witches' treatment and its connections to age. There has long been an association with witches, their aging process, and physical abjection, also known as 'hagsploitation', which can be traced back through cinematic and literary history, from texts such Hans Christen Anderson's fairy adventures and work by The Brother Grimm (Short, 2006). The function of this representation was to align the physical abjection (Creed, 1993) alongside the abhorrent acts which the witch commits. Crawford (2018) examines the hags':

> …ability to kill, maim, curse, control, and hide in plain sight were all traits not commonly given to female characters. And yet once they were stripped of their youth they were awarded them. (Crawford, 2018).

Here, the negative attributes of the witch are directly correlated to the aging woman. There is a fast connection between the understanding of the hag and the aging process that is broader than the witch character. This connection helps to examine the implications of the cultural construction of current ideologies regarding women and aging. The ideologies regarding women and aging are exemplified in older women's treatment (in comparison to men's treatment) within the acting industry. As Billson's (2018) article evidences, in her examination of 'hagsploitation' and aging women, director and co-creator of the *Insidious* franchise, Leigh Whannell, who features the older actress, Lin Shaye in many of his films, notes that:

> An unfortunate reality of Hollywood is that women, once they reach a certain age, start to lose out on roles. And the same thing just doesn't happen to men. You see actors working well into their 50s and 60s, still getting the girl (Billson, 2018).

Here, Whannell's first-hand experience shows the broader patterns of Hollywood's treatment of women and the difference with respect to men and how this difference then plays out on screen. In particular focus on the use of the hag role, it is often positioned as a threat to the male hero and in opposition to the potential of the 'princess' as prize and wife/mother to continue the patriarchal order of that narrative society.

Interestingly, there has been a significant shift in the last decade or so regarding the inclusion of older women taking the lead roles within the horror television series. An example of this includes *American Horror Story* (2011-) which is an anthology format horror television series that utilises the same actors in each series who perform different roles/characters. Throughout these eleven seasons, the majority of leading actors have all been over the age of 60 as if attempting to revise some of these understandings, both of older women who have 'complex constructions of character' (Parcei, 2019) and, in particular season three, *Coven*, the older women playing witches. *Coven*'s narrative focuses on a coven of witches who have descended from Salem, as they fight for survival. By employing such well-established older women actors, *American Horror Story's* ethos queries the current treatment of these women in such inclusive roles. This reflects the critique of women's representation on screen more broadly. Susan Sontag (1972) examines this pressure in relation to gender and notes the double standards that are experienced between older women and older men. Of this she says:

> …the poisonous nexus of sexism and ageism that disempowers women as they age. We are most desirable as lovers, partners and mothers in our youth, and as that youth fades so too does our sexual value. (Sontag, 1972:73)

Here, Sontag argues that aging is constructed through gender, as a social construct (Butler, 1990), to be less disadvantageous to men, than it is to women. Sontag argues that this is because men's social value is not predicated on their youth as biological, little changes for men as they age. Whereas women's value is equated with their ability to reproduce (Twigg, 2004) which

becomes compromised as they become older. Oro-Piqueras (2014) examines how, with aged femininity:

> …the body starts showing signs of aging maybe perceived as 'the other' since there is a mismatch between what women feel and the role she is expected to perform in society (Oro-Piqueras, 2014:142).

Crawford (2018) recognises similar ideas and examines aging from the specific treatment of women within media. She cites a study from the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, where women represent only 24% of lead roles in Hollywood film, with less than 50% of those women being over the age of 40. Similarly, Parcei (2019) recognised that:

> Historically, older women have been underrepresented in media, often appearing in films and television programs as peripheral characters based on stereotypes. (Parcei, 2019)

Thus, placing the older women actors as marginal characters, using outdated stereotypes – such as the hag – to reinforce archaic ways of thinking about femininity, age, and gender. Jowett (2016) agrees and implies that the film and television industry limits roles for older women, causing them to be 'stereotyped or comedic'. While Jowett acknowledges that *American Horror Story* does present 'grotesque and the abject' through some of the older women characters, she also states that this could occur because there is just so many of them. I add to this that this 'grotesque and abject' nature that some of the older women characters present is dealt with through their femininity and therefore, tied closely to their representation, as will be explored in the character analysis shortly.

The three central figures in *American Horror Story* include Jessica Lange and Kathy Bates (both actors over 60 when cast and began filming *Coven*) and Angela Bassett (who was in her mid-fifties). Fiona Goode (Lange), the current Supreme (most powerful witch), whose

advancing age and waning powers are a focal narrative point constantly balances her struggle for health, youth, and desire for power. This aligns with the construction of how aging and femininity is understood in contemporary culture. The notion of age as socially constructed and loaded with meaning (Gullette, 2004 as cited in Parcei, 2019), therefore is closely connected to Butler's ideas of the construction of gender as performative based on societal demands (Butler, 1990). Parcei says that 'cultural understanding of the older woman exists from the intersectional social construction of an aged femininity'. (Parcei, 2019:46). In Fiona's (Jessica Lange) case, 'aged femininity' is oxymoronic in terms of contemporary western societal construction; she is striving for youth rather than embracing her age, and while this does result in abject brutality, her character is framed from an empathetic stance that recognised the increasing and mounting societal pressure that she is under.

Earlier in this chapter, Ryder's acting history was recognised as a paratextual feature which was used to establish some audience expectation as her role as Joyce Byers in *Stranger Things*; as a similar pattern emerges in the case of Jessica Lange and her role in *Coven*. There is an intertextual history to Lange's previous performances, both in terms of her own career and within the *American Horror Story* (2011-) anthology format given the frequent and repetitive use of casting. In particular, there is an emphasis on Lange's portrayal of sexuality within her roles and how this has been utilised in regards to her star status. This star status echoes Dyer's (1997) claim that the actor also functions as a commodity who carries a specific set of meanings. Schubart (2018) notes that within Lange's acting history, 'Sex is a key part in Lange's early star persona in Hollywood' from her role as 'blonde damsel-in-distress' in *King Kong* (1976), to the femme fatale in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) and Lange's romantic lead in *Tootsie* (1982).

Fiona, Lange's character in *American Horror Story: Coven,* is the Supreme witch of her generation. This means that she has limitless power and strength during her reign. However, eventually, another Supreme will surface from their coven and take control of the coven. She lives a stylish life of luxury in Los Angeles and only returns to the coven's academy after the murder of Misty Day, with the intention of teaching the young witches to fight, whilst attempting to reconcile with her estranged daughter, Cordelia (Sarah Paulson). Fiona's waning powers are tied to her age, ill health, and the emergence of a new, youthful Supreme. Fiona

desire for youth, eternal life, and power mean she kills, maims, and tortures various others – both outside and inside of her coven – in the aim of this goal.

Alongside the current discrimination embedded within the cultural ideology with regards to aging women, it becomes even more potent when this experience is compared to that of the aging man. Such commentaries regarding gender and age are challenged in 'Death', (Season 3, Episode 7) where Fiona and The Axeman (a murderer) meet, and she goes back to his house with the intention of having sex. In alignment with Butler's (1990) notion of performativity and echoed in Whanell's (Billson, 2018) sentiments earlier, the Axeman's advancing age is presented as liberating, as he is able to commit murder and sparsely tries to hide it. Whereas Fiona barely manages to hide her deteriorating health, never mind her crimes, although she attempts to embed herself within society's construction of femininity; she dresses 'more sexy and classy' with 'elegant dresses, high heels, gloves, sunglasses, and looks as if she stepped from the pages of a fashion magazine' (Schubart, 2018). As she goes to the bathroom and runs her hands through her hair, a clump falls out. This is due to the side effects of her cancer treatment that she is secretly undergoing. As such, her hair loss serves as a stark reminder of her age and waning health. While emotionally thrown for a minute, Fiona leaves the bathroom with her head literally held high. After a moment of defensiveness, 'You don't want anything to do with me ... I've destroyed every relationship I've ever had.' Fiona and the Axeman have sex. The cultural dismissal of older women and sexuality is inscribed in the economics of the media in that younger women are allowed sexuality as it is the commodification of the female body. The older woman is not as valuable of a commodity, in accordance to their culture, and therefore their sexuality is dismissed. Although this scene begins to challenge those behaviours and ideologies regarding older women, illness, and their sexuality.

Fiona's age and preoccupation with youth and superficial beauty is only emphasised through her chemotherapy treatment for cancer; an additional way in which she, and the audience, are reminded about her lack of agency and her declining powers. Fiona's cancer does not serve to produce the melodramatic responses in the audience or the narrative. It certainly is not a focal point and is, at times, forgotten about, until small reminders alert the audience to her treatment. Cancer, in *Coven*, is treated as part of life and Fiona's fierce independence and refusal to ask

for help arguably feeds into the discourse on her declining age, but also other cancer patients' desire to uphold autonomy wherever possible.

The connections to Lange's acting history and her performance of Fiona Goode explore similar issues, particularly the element of women's sexuality. Given her age, there is a clear commentary on the older woman's experience in terms of age, sex, and illness. This role led to Lange's third Emmy, which was surprising to her. In a tweet released by *American Horror Story's* Twitter page, Lange claimed: 'I was stunned that year to get the Emmy for that part. The part was very well written. I didn't particularly like the whole set up and season and story we were telling. It was not my favourite.' (Tweeted by @_AHSCentral on 7th August, 2019). This was interesting as it resulted in debates regarding Lange's role from audiences in response to the thread, for example: 'KillerBee! @qkillerbeeb 17 Aug 2019 Replying to @_AHSCentral: na, #AHSCoven is my favorite season & Fiona Goode is my favorite Jessica Lange character! got to love the supreme! lol!' and 'Junie! @earthysmells 17 Aug 2019 Replying to @_AHSCentral 'Nah ima have to disagree. Asylum was good but Jessica Lange played the fuck out of Fiona Goode. As well as Angela Basset w Marie Lavoue'. Those character's dynamics are undefeated.' Therefore, even after six years and six other seasons, *Coven*, and in particular, Fiona Goode (Lange) are still classed as favourites by fans and producing such discussions.

Witches' Maternal Instincts

Earlier in the chapter, there was an examination of Joyce Byers and Karen Wheeler in relation to their maternal nature and/or ability, alongside their communities and families' response to this. The maternal identity is part of women's identity overall, both metaphorically speaking or literally. The metaphorical maternal instinct is explored in Chiyoh's 'gamekeeper' narrative and protective nature towards Hannibal and Will in Elizabeth B's *Beast of Prey* fan fiction that is analysed in *Chapter Four: Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in Hannibal and Supernatural: This is the fans' design.* Yet there is a particular manner in the witches' maternal instinct that is juxtaposed with their often abject behaviour. Furthermore, through the coven community that is created, there is a hierarchy of power and as such, care and mentorship from

older women to the younger generation. The witches' enactment of maternal instincts frequently deviates and differs from the expected traditions of the maternal instincts for human women. This poses some interesting challenges to the concept of motherhood and those who hold that maternal identity. As these varied, complex representation of women and their motherhood are explored, it enables wider society to become more accepting of how different the experience of being a parent and of being a woman can be – and to accept and empower that difference, rather than criticise it. The function of this exploration of this relationship echoes the implementation of family dynamics within the melodrama, which is situated within the contemporary horror television series, as is apparent in *The Haunting…Series,* which was discussed in '*Chapter Two: Rewriting The Gothic Woman'*, only the relationship is starkly different.

American Horror Story: Coven's (2011-) Fiona's stance as a mother works to critique both general society and her own daughter's expectation of being a mother as per the socially constructed roles (Butler, 1990;1999). Her role as monstrous feminine and mother – something which Creed (1993) recognises as a common combination – occupies archaic and contradictory spaces. In *Coven*, Fiona Good, is the Witch Supreme. This status is retained for the most powerful witch in their coven. She experiences her increasing age and fading glamour and power. Fiona's need to be revitalised and her obsession with appearing young echoes the previous iterations of witches within the horror film traditional. For example, the witches in *The Witches* take the power from the youth of children and Helena Markos (and the three mothers) in *Suspiria,* take their power from killing other women and sucking their life forces dry. In the opening scene of *American Horror Story:* Coven, Fiona harasses a scientist to develop a cure for the effects of aging. The scientist, unable to achieve this, is killed by Fiona who steals his life force, making her youthful appearance temporarily return. In this instance, Fiona and Zelda, who is the maternal figure and guardian of Sabrina in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, admit their desire to be young also echoes the current cultural demands for youthful appearance and attitudes, with the wealth of cosmetics and medical enhancements on the rise. However, in Zelda's case, while she maintains a cold exterior, she is incredibly protective and maternal over those she cares for, particularly Sabrina. Her maternal decisions and instinct with regards to Sabrina as well as a baby whom she secretly keeps are in opposition with her faith and subsequently, disobeying those higher up in the hierarchy, such as Father Faustus

Blackwood (Richard Coyle) who orders the baby be killed. Although, this hierarchy appears to present Blackwood as the one in power as per the patriarchal structure of religion as witches' history has shown; the true power lies within the coven in which their sense of support and community is what is needed to secure and influence said power.

Whereas in *American Horror Story: Coven*, the community around Fiona Goode poses a threat to her power. While she is a mother to Cordelia and supposedly a maternal role within the coven of young girls she claims to be mentoring to be able to defend themselves, Fiona, who is ill, aging, with declining powers, continues to commit monstrous acts. Fiona kills Madison, and later, Nan as Fiona believes them to be the new supreme and therefore is absorbing all her powers. Fiona openly threatens her coven saying, 'In this whole wide wicked world, the only thing you have to be afraid of, is me.' The directness of this threat indicates Fiona's opposition to the coven's broader ideology which actively preaches what it practices, via Cordelia's belief of women's solidarity. As such, this threat also implies the danger that Fiona poses to the coven if they disobey her. This ultimately leads to a narrative turn in which the coven is threatened both from outside forces and from within the walls that surround them. Audiences become aware that in ensuring the cohesive women empowered unit that Cordelia has developed, Fiona will not be able to remain in power. Yet all through her abhorrent behaviour, there is an admirable, primitive instinct to survive, through her cancer, through her aging, through her waning power, that explores a woman's resilience.

During the management of the coven, there is a constant, competitive power balance between Cordelia and Fiona which echoes the idea of women being 'pitted against each other' (Sinks' interview with Ivie, 2019). While this 'pitted against each other' is starkly different to that of the Max and Eleven as friends or Karen and Joyce as contrasting mothers in *Stranger Things*, this element of competition is read within the context of familial power. Fiona claims Cordelia has never 'fulfilled her potential', while Cordelia expresses her disappointment and resentment of Fiona abandoning her motherly duties; Parcei (2019) labelled Fiona's take on motherhood as a more 'selfishly decadent lifestyle'. Yet, in one particularly poignant scene, Fiona leaves Cordelia in her bedroom to adjust to being blind. While this may have been read as an emotionally cold and uncaring response from Fiona; the time alone enables Cordelia to become independent in a distressing circumstance. By not relying too much on her mother and

discovering how to explore a world without sight (although she gains a further sight through touch), she becomes more competent in her new surroundings and more able, more quickly. Therefore, Fiona's initial abandonment becomes of benefit to Cordelia and could therefore imply some success in her mothering role.

Fiona's maternal instinct and experiences of motherhood works to symbolically challenge the cultural ideologies that are established of this title. She defies the understanding of maternal and does show love to Cordelia in her own way. Furthermore, Fiona is confident in her approach to motherhood. While Schubart (2018) recognises that Fiona is not the best mother, they also perceive the audience to 'believe her when she says she loved Cordelia'. When Fiona is in the hospital to visit Cordelia, she also resurrects a dead infant to a grieving mother, establishing that 'She has a heart' (Schubart, 2018). By creating a multifaceted representation of motherhood, in the sense that audiences recognise kindness and see justification for some of Fiona's actions (such as the case above), they recognise that she is not inherently evil or a 'bad' mother. As Cordelia states her disappointment in Fiona's mothering ability, Fiona disputes that she was ever a bad mother. She states she has always loved her daughter and associates Cordelia's disappointment with her 'looking for another version of motherhood' that Fiona was not able to provide; one that showed love in a more tactile manner, perhaps. Women are expected to be nurturing and 'maternal instinct as an intrinsic facet of female nature' (Parcei, 2019:54), implying that motherhood and the meaning of being a mother is a social construction. While she provides a different representation of motherhood and challenges particular aspects of this; for the majority of the series, Fiona is marginalised as Cordelia becomes more scathing towards her mother's attempts at becoming more involved in her daughter's life.

Similarly, Hilda (Lucy Davis) and Zelda's (Miranda Otto) maternal instincts in *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* operate in entirely opposite approaches; Hilda is warm and emotionally open, whereas Zelda is cold and emotionally closed. They provide a faceted understandings of the concept of being maternal. While neither are Sabrina's biological mother, they have both had an important guardian role in her up bringing. They are not as monstrous in their portrayal, unlike *Coven's* Fiona, as there is a use of humour which underpins much of the supposedly monstrous acts, Zelda kills Hilda (not for the first time) and while immediately shocking to witness, it becomes apparent that Hilda is easily resurrected. This exploration of maternality,

alongside Fiona's portrayal allows, for a varied representation of different mothers and women on screen. Fiona manages to 'realign' 'the maternal instinct as an intrinsic facet of female nature.' (Parcei, 2019:54). She separates her identity as a woman to her identity as a mother, rather than one being reliant on the other. Parcei (2019:54) acknowledges all Fiona's complicated actions, whilst also identifying the positive role she portrays:

> Fiona presents an image of womanhood that is fulfilled from sources other than motherhood…a selfishly decadent lifestyle, but it is refreshing it the display of an older woman whose life fulfilment is not dependent on motherhood. (Parcei, 2019:54)

Fiona provides space and representation for older women, women without children, and women with children who also desire to have self-fulfilment outside of the construction and reliance on motherhood. These are important and forgotten identities which remain on the margins of women's experiences which *American Horror Story: Coven* and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* bring to the spotlight.

While Fiona's death was certainly foreshadowed throughout the series, when it eventually arrives, there is a harsh contrast of emotions. Fiona's abject nature in her pursuit of power is clear; yet she encapsulates a rebelliousness to conform and shows an acceptance of her flaws that becomes admirable to audiences. She personifies the concept that at some point we have to truly accept ourselves for who and what we are. Schubart (2018) notes:

> Fiona did after all accept death, and whether we sympathize or not with her desire to look young, have sex, do coke, be in power and be independent, those are common desires in the West. If Fiona deserves to go to hell, many of us do too. (Schubart, 2018)

Schubart's (ibid) articulates the normalisation of different understandings of femininity 'whether we sympathize or not'. They connect Fiona's flaws as part responsibility of the society in which she lived and mirror this commentary to audiences regarding their own

thoughts and desires for youth, sex, power and independence as these are all commonly sought after features in Western contemporary culture. Schubart's (ibid) recognition that, 'If Fiona deserves to go to hell, many of us do too', engages with the inherent conservatism of the horror text; that many people – particular women, given the established use of the coven – choose to live a life that opposes the historic norm and traditions established strict governmental laws, religious instructions, or cultural ideologies. Therefore, if Fiona does deserve punishment for her passionately independent lifestyle, then so do most of the current population. Essentially, this desire for autonomy, freedom and difference should be acceptable, perhaps encouraged, even though the manner in which Fiona went about attempting to achieve this, is not. For Cordelia, however, it is only through Fiona's death and her as such, removing her constant undermining of women's solidarity, that there is space for the coven to reunite, wholly, and fully. This rise of women's empowerment within the coven then becomes a point of identification for audiences who seek similar patterns of solidarity within their lives.

Conclusion

This chapter has continued to explore the ways in which the contemporary horror television is presenting diverse representations of women on screen. Through the horror genre's historical treatment of women, as exploitative and often dismissive, these contemporary horror television series engage in an intertextual commentary on women's marginalisation, cross generational bonding, and motherhood. Many of these representations challenge horror's historic treatment of women, but also focus on the sense of community between the women characters on screen. In particular, this chapter has outlined the ways in which their shared experiences ultimately bring them closer to provide support within the narrative (as is the case with Joyce and Nancy, Max and Eleven, and Sabrina and Theo) or serve to marginalise them even further (as with Fiona Goode). The challenge these women face, in terms of finding acceptance and support from others, becomes a point of pleasure for audiences who are likely already emotionally invested in their success over the length of time which they spend with them.

This chapter has also outlined some paratextual material in order to extrapolate an understanding of the reception of the ideas presented in these texts. The focus of this material

has included popular journalistic pieces and publicly accessible audience interaction on Twitter. This was investigated in relation to some aspects of women's treatment on screen, specifically Joyce Byer's maternal nature, Ryder and Lange's casting, as well as establishing some fan responses to Theo's transition. Unlike the contemporary horror television series used here, however, in *Chapter Four: 'Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in Hannibal and Supernatural: This is the fans' design'* use texts which lack this same acknowledgement of women's narratives. Interestingly, it is well established that these two contemporary horror texts have sustained women audiences. Therefore, in order to address how women are finding or creating space for identification, such paratextual material becomes of significant importance. In fact, the primary focus of the following chapter in establishing the ways that identification occurs in male-driven narratives is through the focus of their fan fiction and art.

Chapter Four: Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in *Hannibal* and *Supernatural*: This is the fans' design.

"Fan creation isn't new. The impulse to create work inspired by cultural touchstones is as old as humanity: many classics of art and literature could be considered, at their core, fanworks."

(Fleck and Fougner, as cited in *RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology,* 2016:7).

Introduction

The previous chapters have examined women's representation within the contemporary horror television series. Many of these analyses have focused on texts with increasing airtime for women's narratives. Yet, there are other texts with significantly less women leads who have recognised women audiences. This chapter aims to examine, these instances, where feminine identification occurs and the spaces in which pleasure emerges for women audiences. Therefore, considering the male driven narratives, such as *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020), requires a greater use of paratextual material in order to investigating feminine identification. While the previous chapters have textually analysed the lead roles that women have taken in the contemporary horror television series, *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020) do not follow this pattern. As such, the use of paratextual material, particularly the use of fan fiction and art, becomes important in analysing how and where women's pleasure and identification occur in such series. The central argument in this chapter is that slash no longer requires transgressive or graphic components that function to challenge or oppose the political or ideological messages embedded in the text, as previous slash scholars have acknowledged (Penley, 1997; Jenkins, 1992). These transgressive or graphic elements are not utilised in slash fiction by fans anymore in order to create these political and ideological debates regarding representation; for that representation is already present within the text itself. Therefore, this new wave of slash fiction upholds the same erotic or romantic sub/text the source television series acknowledges, whilst providing some insight into how these fans are reprioritising women's voices or interests within their own fan works.

Supernatural (2005-2020) focuses on brothers Sam and Dean Winchester, who follow in their father's footsteps, of ridding the world of all supernatural monsters. *Supernatural* has been written about prolifically, both in terms of content, genre, gender, and fan response as Abbott and Lavery (2011), Akass and McCabe (2007), Busse (2016), Macklem (2013) and Zubernis and Larsen (2014) all discuss. This chapter does not intend to go over previous groundwork with regards to the series, but to show how the showrunner's input, as Cohen (2001) and Gorton (2009) acknowledge, helps influence audiences' identification. Yet what both Cohen (2001) and Gorton (2009) fail to recognise is the power of the fan in the creation of their own identification. As such, this chapter serves to explore, through specific cases of fan fiction, how the showrunners are actively supporting and creating space and pleasure for women audiences within a male driven narrative. This will be explored predominantly through fan art or fan's slash fiction, which is recognised as a 'predominantly a feminine form of fan production' (Cherry, 2011, as cited in Abbott and Lavery, 2011). This chapter will argue how slash, the historically-female dominated fan practice, has been reconstructed into a new wave of slash in relation to texts, such as *Hannibal*, that are more explicit in engaging and speaking to women audiences.

The cannibalistic serial killer, Hannibal Lecter emerged in Harris' novel, *Red Dragon* in 1981, but there have been continual changes of the Hannibal story, including to Demme's Best Picture Oscar winner film, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) the first horror film to win an Oscar and more recently, Bryan Fuller's television series *Hannibal* (2013-2015). As the chapter title suggests, 'This is the fans' design' is taken from Will Graham's original phrase in the *Hannibal* (2013-2015) series, 'This is my design'. This is a phrase he uses in his process of reconstructing a crime scene through the killer's mindset. *Hannibal* has been described as 'a striking experiment in "Quality" television, taking an idiosyncratic, avant-garde approach to adaptation through Fuller's auteurist vision.' (Later, 2019: 532). While many note the aesthetic beauty of *Hannibal*, even given the most excessively violent scenes (Abbott, 2017), a prominent aspect of Fuller's adaptation is its address to its audience; there is an active decision and clear engagement with the audience which stems from an intertextual awareness which is associated with a cult television auteur. Abbott acknowledges this intertextuality:

… in which elements of previous adaptations, narrative and aesthetic, are embedded within the matrix of the series, reworking and transforming Harris' stories, not only making them suitable for TV but signalling the changing face of twenty-first century TV (Abbott, 2017: 553).

While the former part of this argument alludes to the intertextual pleasures being threaded from the previous adaptations into Fuller's series. The latter focuses on the 'signalling…changing face of twenty-first century TV'. While Abbott (2018:3) is examining Fuller's 'complicating audience expectations of the Lecter stories, the serial killer genre and network television'; I argue that another of these signalling changes is the way in which *Hannibal* amplifies the slash elements within the narrative in order to address women audience's pleasures.

It is important, as Later (2019) acknowledges, for *Hannibal* fan production to be understood within the context of:

…fanfiction from subculture to mainstream, like the relatively recent emergence of "auteurist" discourse in TV culture, situates Fuller and *Hannibal* at a watershed moment. (Later, 2019).

Here, Later (ibid) is acknowledging that *Hannibal* occurs at a moment when television culture is shifting alongside is the ideological understanding of fan works and behaviour. *Supernatural* (2005-2020) was a significantly longer running series than *Hannibal* and as such has experienced different showrunners across this time, including: Robert Singer, Eric Kripke, Sera Gamble, Andrew Dabb, and Jeremy Carver. All of whom approached the series with slightly different intentions. Yet, as *Supernatural* had fifteen seasons, the text still occupied this period of change for fan participation. Equally, this idea of changing television culture and of fan communities extends far beyond the scope of horror television; the emergence of Disney + and *Wanda Vision* (2021) or *Loki* (2021) evidence the ways that fan communities are becoming more prominent in mainstream culture, particularly in relation to their occupancy on television (Johnson, 2021).

With the acceptance and normalisation of fan cultures from 'subculture to mainstream' (Later, 2019), the production of fan works has subsequently become more commonplace. As such, the development of fan culture becoming more mainstream may partly explain the movement of this 'new wave of slash'. This new wave of slash extends Jenkins' (1992) and Penley's (1997) emphasis on the capacity of fans to resist the textual norms of popular culture to examine a more reflexive dynamic that exists between the fans and the cult text in contemporary popular culture. It is also important to acknowledge that while this new wave of slash allows women fans to articulate pleasure and identity through these fan productions, they have also been constructed with a direct address *to* those fans. This direct address is primarily expressed through character and/or narrative. In the case of *Hannibal*, the fairly minor character of Chiyoh is received by some fans who create and expand new space for her development in their fan texts. Fans utilise Fuller's deliberate use of Chiyoh as helpful in facilitating Hannibal/Will's romantic relationship, as will be investigated in more detail later in this chapter.

The fan texts that have been selected for analysis within the chapter are created by women fans of either *Hannibal* or *Supernatural*. Where possible, they have been interviewed to try and provide further insight into their engagement with the source text. However, as with all fan works, it is important to remember that individual experiences take the utmost priority. Therefore, this means that each individual fan reads, creates, and gains meaning from a text in different ways.

The relevance of the opening quote of this chapter is important in recognising the intertextual connections between 'classic' texts and 'fan creation'. As Fleck and Fougner (2016) argue:

> Fan creation isn't new. The impulse to create work inspired by cultural touchstones is as old as humanity: many classics of art and literature could be considered, at their core, fanworks." (Fleck and Fougner, as cited in *RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology,* 2016:7).

Here, they acknowledge that there are a series of threads which exist between every text and all texts are essentially fan works, originally created through inspiration from a text, or a collage of texts, that came before. Essentially, this type of correlation between texts functions as intertextuality; the past knowledge of a text is used to engage a similar or particular response. As an example, these intertextual points of interest include Demme's decision to prioritise the woman protagonist's voice, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) which was well received by women horror fans at the time (Cherry, 1999). The prioritisation of women's voice is dealt with differently in *Hannibal*, in that the focus is on two male leads, yet their possible romantic relationship has implications in regard to slash practice (Cherry, 2011, as cited in Abbott and Lavery, 2011) which speaks more broadly to women fan communities in which it is most practiced, and how they experience and build upon identification outside of the text.

Fan fiction creator, Elizabeth B has then combined both these components in taking a minor woman character from Fuller's *Hannibal* (Chiyoh), whilst also utilising Demme's strong female protagonist, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and focusing on this female protagonist's use of perspective. Elizabeth B then uses Chiyoh's perspective to help stabilise Hannibal/Will's romantic relationship. Again, reinforcing Cherry's (1999) claim that women viewers enjoy horror films with women protagonists. While Elizabeth B's fan fiction is not a horror film, the narrative priority is of the woman's perspective which is a central point to Cherry's (1999) argument regarding women audiences' pleasure in the text. Here, the 'classic text' as Fleck and Fougner (2016) outlined, is Demme's film and its woman protagonist is used by Fuller to evoke further pleasure, by providing textual space in which fans can utilise Chiyoh, in this instance, to suit their own interests or desires. The way in which this classic text evokes pleasure then becomes adopted and adapted by others to replicate a similar pleasure. These pleasures emerge from Fiske's (1987:1) understanding, outlined in the *Introduction*, that television is the:

> …bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasure, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society. (Fiske, 1987:1)

Part of this pleasure stems from understanding the varied meanings that exist within the television text; in how Fuller is playing into fan behaviour by presenting televisual space for slash to emerge between Hannibal and Will and also by playing into the popularity of Demme's lead with Clarice, by implementing Chiyoh. Fiske (1987) argues that society gains pleasure from understanding these readings and meanings embedded in the television text. It is arguable that Fuller purposefully gives Chiyoh a smaller role in order to evoke fan pleasure as he, as a showrunner, understands and is familiar with the ways in which the meaning will be generated and circulated within the fan community. As such, using Chiyoh in this way allows the audience to identify with her further, in their own fan and slash productions. The way in which Fuller uses Chiyoh is not that dissimilar to the Duffer Brothers use of Barbara Holland (Shannon Purser) in *Stranger Things* (2016-) as analysed in *Chapter Three: The Bonds of Blood; Women and their Community*. While they were supposedly unaware of the 'cult' character that they had created (Kempton, 2017), by giving her only a minor part with some narratively loose ends, it allowed fans to begin to create their own space and meaning for that character.

The idea of all texts, in some way being fan created is even more potent upon realising that Fleck and Fougner's (2016) statement originates from *RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology* (2016). This Fanthology was a Kickstarter funded project by the fans of the *Hannibal* series, published in 2016, shortly after the cancellation of the show. A Kickstarter is a platform from which people can set up potential projects which require the population to hit a certain financial goal for the project to be produced. Therefore, the success of such a project is indicative of its popularity; in this case, *Hannibal's* popularity. *RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology's* (2016) collection of fan-produced slash fiction and art explores fans' engagement with *Hannibal*. The focus of this book was fans' investment in the central dynamics between Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter. Therefore, *RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology* (2016) relies on these patterns of intertextuality and the interpretive nature of meaning in order to create a book full of fan texts which emerge from and/or relate to a source text (*Hannibal*, in this case) which, itself, has been adapted from and influenced by previous iterations (Harris' and Demme's work).

Slash and New Wave Slash

This new wave of slash partly emerges because of the contextual changes which occurred during *Hannibal's* release, particularly the movement of fan culture and practices becoming more mainstream (Later, 2019). This 'new wave' of slash is no longer required to work as hard in establishing those ideological positions of marginality to break through readings of the texts which they so desire. In this case, Fuller's use of an excessive, romantic tone in *Hannibal*, regarding the relationship between Will and Hannibal. This is a clear decision to communicate to that slash audience. However, it is important to recognise the relationship between slash, its audience and the ways in which it prioritises the voice of women, in particular. It is only through understanding the historic trajectory and importance of women's use of slash, that it becomes possible to appreciate how the new wave of slash functions in the mainstream.

The function of slash fiction and art has been well explored in academic fan studies, particularly in the work of Jenkins (1992) and Penley (1997). The formative influence of this on fan studies as a discipline used the way that the producers of slash reconstructed or enhanced textual dynamics. These dynamics emphasise the erotic relationships between heterosexual male characters as a way of highlighting the politically engaged and active relationship of media fans to popular cultural materials. This gave the fans the potential to engage in symbolic production where their pleasure and identities were not met by the text itself. Additionally, he describes fans as those who, 'operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness.' (Jenkins, 1992:26) and use their power as fans to negotiate the space for their individual creativity and interest.

With the emergence of slash fiction, women fans were soon to find their voice and begin to renegotiate the borders of their pleasure from within the source text to their fan works. Penley (1997) defined the term 'slash fiction' as originating from the punctuating slash '/' that emerged from the "Kirk/Spock" erotic fan fiction inspired by the *Star Trek* television series. The content is preoccupied with the romantic male/male manifestations which were authored by heterosexual women, subverting traditional constructions of the male body and male sexuality.

As such, this fan behaviour overturns socially constructed understandings of masculinity, in an attempt to find a platform upon which women fans can be heard.

Penley (1997) asserts that the appeal of presumably heterosexual fantasies being played out "across the two bodies of men" has to do with the greater range of identification and desire, thereby becoming accessible to women. In this sense, women can *be* the lead characters and *be with* the lead characters (Modleski, 2007). Thus, the act of producing fan fiction which contains elements of slash reflects an opposition to the hyper masculine environment in which status of the fan, as per Hollows' (2003, as cited in Jancovich et al, 2003) understanding, and the general way in which society has traditionally viewed fan identity. Similarly, Jenkins (1992:191) argued that slash was "not so much a genre about sex", but instead a, "genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity and about reconfiguring male identity". This idea is reiterated by Busse who argues that:

> Fan writers effectively feminise hypermasculine characters, give them primarily female geeky interests and writerly preoccupations, and in doing so, revert the voyeuristic gaze while projecting their actions and emotions onto the characters. (Busse, 2016:159)

This negotiation of identity, interests, and the reverting of the gaze removes the male dominant reading from the text. Through 'feminising' the hypermasculine characters, women are ultimately creating and projecting a sense of identification of their own personal traits and identity onto these characters. Ultimately, this process emphases and prioritises feminine interests and consequently, reconfigures the position and pleasure of women fans. In the new wave of slash these characters, such as Chiyoh from *Hannibal*, who will be discussed in more depth later, are there and present, provided for women to identify with, but are written with enough narrative space to allow women audiences to utilise them in their own slash fiction.

Busse similarly articulates that the dynamics between fan/text and identification are slightly more complex, noting that the internal issues of character representation within the fandom are vital, but:

> ...visual attraction remains important, so the idea that Captain America as a Tumblr user or Dean Winchester as a cosplaying comic fan allows fan writers to merge attraction with identification. (Busse, 2016:159)

The blurring of the characters' identity boundaries replicates the idea of the liminal identities and meaning between the fan and creator within the various participatory activities involved in fandom; such as cosplaying or contributing to fan forums. This process of identification between the character and audience are also particularly prominent in the new wave of slash in which the source texts are often breaking the fourth wall to acknowledge the fan practices and behaviours that take place around and within the text. The chapter will analyse the moments in which *Supernatural* blurs the line between the Winchester brother's narrative, cosplay, theatre, and fandom. Here, the process of identification is ultimately intensified through witnessing the interaction between the Winchester brothers and the (mostly women) fans themselves who are engaging in similar participatory practices as themselves.

Lynn Zubernis, clinical psychologist and professor at West Chester University and Area Chair for Stardom and Fandom for the Southwest Popular Culture Association, discussed in an interview I conducted, how there is space for slashing to now occur in an arguably less conflicted and more openly accepted contexts which supports and promotes such representations:

> There are more and more characters in mainstream television and film that are canonically not straight and who run the full gamut of sexuality and asexuality, which is incredibly important in terms of representation and combatting stigma and prejudice. Looking to those media for representation and finding it right there in canon is more satisfying for some than finding only subtext and then using your imagination to make

it what you want - but I think both can have their place. Sometimes slashing two characters who are clearly never going to get together in canon can just be pure fun, and can allow imagination and inspiration to take you where it will without worrying what someone else is going to write that character doing. There's a freedom in that.

(Interview with Lynn Zubernis by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

Subtle developments to slash fiction, including the change of approach with regards to the politicisation of slash writing, help to partly explain the emergence of this new wave of slash. Zubernis acknowledges the complexity of such processes in 'slashing' characters together, but importantly addresses the broader impact of improved representation in film and television which enable such readings to be more accepted and potentially less politicised. These concepts become less politicised due to the increased representation of characters 'who run the full gamut of sexuality and asexuality' in turn partially reducing the 'stigma and prejudice' that has previously existed. Of course, there are some slashings that are not politicised, both historically and contemporarily, as Zubernis acknowledges, noting that the creation of slash 'can just be pure fun, and can allow imagination and inspiration to take you where it will'. Yet, there is a historic tradition in slash fiction which stems from the slash writing opposition of dominant political ideology (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1997) particularly with regards to elements of identity, gender, and sexuality. With the new wave of slash, there is a change to this politicisation of the writing content as the issues which were once there are certainly becoming increasingly improved with more diverse representations clearly presented with television, film, and media more broadly.

New Wave Slash in *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020)

Hannibal's (2013-2015) established audience and its continued popularity online contradicted the low ratings (Ionita, 2014; Roberts, 2016) of season three which led to its cancellation. Hills (2010) examined how a prematurely cancelled television series, and a dedicated fan base, can lead to the formation of a series' cult status, as is the case with *Hannibal* (2013-2015). As expected, with its cancellation, there has been some backlash

which has revealed the self-appointed term 'Fannibal'; Fannibal is a term which refers to the fans of the *Hannibal* (2013-2015) series (Roberts, 2016).

As established earlier in the chapter, upon consideration of the many intertextual references that exist between the various iterations of Harris's original work, the concept of creative authority or authorship regarding *Hannibal* seems a difficult concept to establish. This is because while Harris originally created the character of Hannibal Lecter, there is a stark difference between Harris' depiction of Lecter with 'six fingers' and 'maroon eyes', and Demme's 1991 depiction of the more charismatic, but equally criminal Lecter (played by Antony Hopkins) and then Fuller's depiction of Lecter (played by Mads Mikkelsen) which positions him, for the first season, anyway, as the 'good guy'. Additionally, the various fan productions (fan art, videos, texts, forums) that exist online and their successes among the fan community, partly explains why the 'Fannibal' identity has been created; as a way of taking individual ownership of the series as an evident fan. Furthermore, the use of Fannibal directly relates to Fuller's text rather than the other texts that have come before. Therefore, this ensures that the fan contribution is viewed in line with Fuller's particular portrayal. The name also serves as a recognisable label to that fan's interest and potential contributions to the series' success (or renewal). This debate and construction of ownership of *Hannibal* is certainly one of the first renegotiations of power in terms of women 'Fannibals'.

Rather than fans being appointed this label, such as 'Sherlock Holmes fans' being referred to as 'Cumberbitches'; the 'Fannibal' is a self-appointed phrase which is regularly used by *Hannibal* fans online and on social media. The use of the self-imposed label 'Fannibal' contrasts Wardlow's (2017) understanding of dismissed women fans who, through such a title are working to create their own identities within fan communities. Wardlow (2017) notes that this dismissal occurs because women fans find the '(leading) men' attractive and this can be used against them to delegitimise their identity as a fan, rather their fan interest focuses on their attraction and heightened emotions to the lead men in the text. Wardlow (2017) provides an example of where this 'dismissal' occurs; their status as a fan is ignored ('they're not Sherlock Holmes fans...') and their feminine interests and assumed excessive emotions are highlighted as crucial to their fan identity ('they're Cumberbitches').

Wardlow (2017) and earlier, Ehrenreich et al (2005) acknowledges the variety of factors which cause marginality for women fans: their sexuality is the focal point of their illegitimacy and their apparent excessive nature. These factors contribute to their fan identity as becoming a place of isolation and degradation, as evident in the term change from 'fan' to 'bitches' for those Sherlock fans who are women. However, with Fannibal becoming self-imposed, it renegotiates those borders of fan identity. Within the particular community, by articulating part of one's identity as a 'Fannibal' women fans find a shared, collective space into which this category allows them to fit. While not a gendered term in the same way 'Cumberbitches' is, the status of 'Fannibal' provides an element of inclusivity in their support of their own and others fans' identities, production, and online communication. Hills (2002) also notes the participatory role of fan behaviours, which has been well established in Jenkins' (1992:3) *Textual Poachers*, in which he recognises that, 'Nobody functions entirely within the fan culture, nor does the fan culture maintain any claims to self-sufficiency.' As such, this implies a sense of necessity between Fannibals; they rely on each other to share their pleasure of the text.

RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology (2016) is a kick starter project that is unique in that it is only through demand and fans' financial donations that the project will come to fruition and be successful. The success of this project (and its shipping worldwide) shows the prevalence of the Fannibals and the open nature of their discussions. Editors Fleck and Founger's (2016:7) acknowledgement of fan works as 'cultural touchstones', legitimises the following fan works in *RAW* and ensures these texts are read from an empowering platform. Similarly, Woledge (as cited in Modleski, 2007) also demonstrated significant parallels between published texts and fan texts which are inspired by the other published text (Modleski, 2007). As is the case with *RAW*, a published text, based on fan fiction or art surrounding Fuller's television series *Hannibal*. This further strengthens the manner in which the identities of creator, fan, and text, are continually being negotiated. Thus, Woledge's 'parallels' of intertextuality in the fan text evidence these provisions of pleasure for that fan who has replicated (or 'paralleled') that same textual feature. Fans will only write about their pleasures in the text and will discard or change anything they did not enjoy as per the traditions of fan work.

Showrunners' Influence in Fan Communities

So far, the way in which authorship has been discussed is primarily within the realms of fan identity, construction, and articulation of meaning, with regards to the textual meaning. Yet, there is a further dynamic here which implicates the showrunner's role within this understanding of fan's construction of meaning. While the term 'Fannibals' is utilised regularly on Twitter by Fuller who emphasises the positive 'family support' provided by the fan community; it is through Fuller's own Fannibal identity in which he creates a text which purposefully speaks to women audiences, through the opening of textual spaces for fan fiction, specifically, slash. The decision to implement this comes from Fuller's own intertextual knowledge of fan communities and cult television. On numerous occasions, Fuller has been assigned a 'cult TV auteur', a phrase attached to "Quality TV's "cinematic" associations, and aspiring to the cultural legitimacy" (Later, 2019), essentially referencing the "Storyteller-in-chief" (Newman and Levine, 2011).

The importance of returning to the status of the showrunner is, as Bedard (2020) explains, "...a position more like the conductor of an orchestra" is important to return to in this context as in this case, their influence extends beyond the text. As Later (2019) argues:

> The auteur brings both maverick celebrity and authorial reliability to a show, promising a careful chemistry of the auteur's own innovative style to freshen up an adaptation, and narrative consistency through the auteur's total mastery (Later, 2019).

The aspect of cultural legitimacy and authorial reliability, which are contentious terms due to the subjective nature of them, is particularly important when considering Fuller. Within this context, his knowledge of the way in which audiences respond to texts and his own relationship to that fan community becomes pivotal in the success of the Fannibal status. This is because, as noted earlier, Fuller is an active Fannibal on Twitter; therefore, giving the fans support and

status, which ultimately results in the fans trusting Fuller's decisions over the text, reinforcing his auteur status. Equally, having the ability and knowledge to compose a 'Quality TV' text with "cinematic" associations, and aspiring to the cultural legitimacy" (Later, 2019) certainly encourages a far wider, broader audience engagement, away from that Fannibal community.

The showrunner's role, as the example of Fuller evidences, is important to the creation of the new wave of slash. This is because the showrunner, whose knowledge and understanding of the genre and the fan community surrounding that genre, is utilised to maximum effect in order to bolster fan interaction with the text. As outlined, Fuller negotiates various identities throughout his engagement with the text and its audience, both acknowledging his fan status to *Hannibal*, as well as its creator. The label of 'fanboy' is given to television auteur's who are also fans of the text which they are adapting, as made popular by Hollows (2001). This indicates the showrunner's fan status surrounding the text they are recreating or adapting. There are issues with the gendering of the 'fanboy', a term which Later (2019), Busse (2013), Hollows (2003) and Hills (2002), have all acknowledged as problematic in gendered fan spaces. In particular, the term's failure to address intersectionality and its clear exclusion of women or other genders; it marginalises the other genders from becoming the seemingly accepted and dedicated 'fanboy' and amplifies the apparent masculinised nature such a label holds.

Yet Fuller manages to address the problematic aspects that 'fanboy' poses in that he is speaking to these marginal audiences, both LGBTQ+ community and women, by recognising his own interest in fan fiction. Fuller openly recognises that "[Hannibal} was my fan fiction," (Prudom, 2015). Fuller is clearly aware of these issues of marginality experienced within fan communities and dedicates his creation of *Hannibal* to addressing those areas of marginality, telling stories that deviate from the traditional understandings of love, romance, and sexuality as well as using women of different ethnicities. Not only does Fuller's quote about *Hannibal* being his fan fiction echo Fleck and Founger's (2016) ideas in the opening quote about every text being a fan work; it also addresses Fuller's own understanding of his fan boy label in that he aligns it with fan fiction. As discussed, fan fiction is predominately a woman's fan practice (Busse, 2013), as such, Fuller is feminising this 'fan boy' space which is most often seen through a toxic lens (Hollows, 2003). He removes the hyper masculinised understanding of the

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term, and instead uses his 'fanboy' privilege to feminise the story he is telling which is essentially about providing space for the marginal communities which the 'fanboy' status ignores, with a clear focus on queer characters and women's voices.

However, Later (2019) refutes *Hannibal* as fan fiction, partly based on their definition of fan fiction as including "amateur, noncommercial works." While Fuller has taken pride in his liminal role as both creator and fan status with regards to *Hannibal*, Later (2019) has sought to reinforce the boundaries of these identities. Later (2019) summarises her claim:

> I argue that Hannibal is significant *because* it is a show, and because it is *not* a fanfiction. The cultural context of a broadcast TV show could be irreconcilable with the form and core philosophies of fanfiction, if not transformative fanworks more broadly. Fuller's adaptation can only ever be as transformative as the De Laurentis company, NBC, and other official bodies permit (Later, 2019).

This chapter's purpose is not to confirm or dispute Later's understanding, its focus is to evidence the constant negotiation and dissolution of boundaries of identity and associated meaning between the creator, the fan, the text. This includes the text's associated showrunner and broadcaster. Therefore, Later's (2019) understanding only further evidences the difficulty in assigning these identities in relation to the text and the fluidity between them.

The cultural legitimacy provided by Fuller's television auteur status, in combination with Fuller's fan knowledge and passion, means he recognises the fan pleasures and patterns of identification within the text, and actively uses this to promote further fan engagement. In Fuller's case, he is speaking directly to this women audience through the traditions of slash. He has prioritised the male perspective within the narrative, as the two lead characters are Will Graham (Hugh Dancy) and Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikklesen). Through *RAW*, it became possible for fans to document and publish their fan fiction which uses characters from *Hannibal*. Elizabeth B chose to write *Beasts of Prey* from Chiyoh's point of view, as such acknowledging Fuller's use of an erotic subtext with Hannibal/Will romantic relationship,

while using Chiyoh, as the protagonist, which was not as prominent in Fuller's source text. Therefore, Elizabeth B is renegotiating the borders of *Hannibal*, through intertextuality, to empower the women fans' voice and their position in the fan community.

Beasts of Prey by Elizabeth B

An example of this new wave slash, is *Beasts of Prey*, a piece of fan fiction written by Elizabeth B. Published in *RAW, Beasts of Prey,* is predominantly written from Chiyoh's perspective about her and Lecter's relationship. Chiyoh appears in season three of Fuller's *Hannibal* and was a maid for Hannibal's aunt. In defining the role that Elizabeth B takes, it is clear to see how her identity as a fan and creator become merged. This can also be viewed through the dissolution of the fourth wall, as discussed by Zubernis and Larsen (2012:143) in the dialogue between creator and fans. Zubernis and Larsen (2012:143) also note that this relationship is not "top down" or "one way". In this case, there is a clear levelling of power as the fan becomes the creator and producer of a text, whilst stabilising and legitimising her position as a woman fan. Elizabeth B's fan and creator status is informed through Chiyoh's narrative extension and in her role as a published author and contributor to the *RAW: A Hannibal/Will Fanthology* (2016) project.

Interestingly, Elizabeth B extends the fictional world through *Beasts of Prey* which begins at the end of Fuller's final episode of *Hannibal*; most fans were hugely disappointed at the cancellation of the series. Elizabeth B upholds Fuller's use of the sub-textual romantic relationship between Hannibal and Will which he has used purposefully to speak to this slash tradition and subsequent women audience. This evidences one trajectory of the dynamics between *Hannibal* and fan; Fuller's implementation of this erotic subtext aligns with women fans interest in slash and Elizabeth B provides an example of this in practice. These fans, such as Elizabeth B, are then recognising this dialogue, finding places of meaning and pleasure within the text and choosing to explore this further within their fan practices.

Beasts of Prey, although not overly sexually explicit in terms of content, does focus on the preservation of Will and Hannibal's romantic relationship. While there is an argument that

claims this lack of sexual explicitness is a deviation from slash tradition, the difference is that this sexual tension and eroticism is already implicit within Fuller's text. Therefore, this does not need rewriting into the narrative, rather it provides a starting place for fans to begin their slash fiction, which is precisely what Elizabeth B does. In *Beasts of Prey*, Chiyoh ensures Hannibal and Will can escape the hospital once they have sought urgent treatment to recover from the fall off the cliff (as per the final episode of Fuller's *Hannibal*) and eventually, she will support them as they 'build a family' (p.54) together. In renegotiating the positions of women's power in the text, Elizabeth B makes Chiyoh the protagonist in *Beasts of Prey*, with the aim of using this character as a proxy for women to experience a closeness to their favourite character. Elizabeth B's aim of the story, similar to many of the fans' interest, is to preserve Hannibal/Will's romantic relationship. This does echo Fuller's romantic presentation between Will and Hannibal and how his minimal use of Chiyoh in the series has provided space for Elizabeth B to use this character as a vehicle to support that relationship.

Fuller deliberately facilitates slash fiction, through the character of Chiyoh. In *Beasts of Prey*, Elizabeth B is firmly securing her position as a fan and creator as she bypasses Fuller's text and ensures Chiyoh takes the leading role in this narrative extension. In this sense, Chiyoh is no longer the marginal character in the *Hannibal* narrative as Elizabeth B extends her fictional world, negotiating the leading role and prioritising Chiyoh's feminine focus and point of view within the story. Using Chiyoh as the leading role provides a textual similarity that the women audiences may not have experienced thus far when watching Fuller's *Hannibal*. This is because of the central narrative focus in *Hannibal* is on Will and/or Hannibal's perspective, as such the male's narrative viewpoint, whereas Elizabeth B negotiates this narrative from a woman's perspective. Elizabeth B utilises Chiyoh's marginalisation and lack of presence throughout the final series to then take on an empowering position in renegotiating the power structure of that character. Furthermore, through the use of Chiyoh's perspective, the text critiques the hegemonic associations of masculinity, and the 'fan-boy' that Later (2019) and Hollows (2003) discuss, providing a platform in which women's voices (as consumers, fans and creators) are not only heard, but published, distributed, and circulated worldwide. The worldwide circulation of *RAW* (2016) is ultimately a commentary on Elizabeth B's position as the female fan and creator, securing her own agency and legitimacy through her publication in *RAW* (2016).

Elizabeth B's use of animal imagery to reflect Hannibal/Will's romantic relationship as a point of pleasure is pulled from Fuller's text. The use of the animal imagery as representative of the narrative game that is pursued in *Hannibal* regarding Will's manipulation and their unspoken romance is then recognised and played upon by the fans in their own new wave slash works, such as in *Beasts of Prey*. Elizabeth B utilises Fuller's *Hannibal* intertextual knowledge through the use of animal imagery which stems from the other iterations (*Silence of the Lambs; Red Dragon*) in order to encourage further engagement with the text. Specifically, Elizabeth B references the dominant and excessive focus on animal imagery and references which are filtrated throughout *Hannibal*. By highlighting such references and exploring the intertextuality of *Hannibal*, the fans who are circulating their own forms of fan fiction and fan art, begin to share collective knowledge on the use of animal imagery and it becomes one form of Fannibal subcultural capital. In *Beasts of Prey*, as the title suggests, the nature of the characters as animalistic is reinforced throughout the text. This association plays upon Chiyoh being the 'game keeper', as her primary role within *Beasts of Prey* is to protect both Lecter and Graham and their relationship. This role extends Fuller's use of Chiyoh's character in the series, in her caring for Hannibal's aunt's estate, while Hannibal had gone. Yet, Elizabeth B, by using Chiyoh, ultimately supports the budding romance between Will and Hannibal which Fuller set up, as Chiyoh becomes the facilitator and protector of their relationship. This 'game keeper' presentation continues the thematic consistency from *Hannibal*, which uses excessive animal imagery to represent Will's madness; he hallucinates a partially imagined, partially real stag which then becomes a pivotal motif. The stag that emerges from Graham's hallucinations is representative of his sanity slowly dissolving due to Lecter's manipulation and animalistic brutality. Most importantly, this animal imagery connects both Will and Hannibal to a psychosexual positioning directly in the text and is clearly a purposeful technical move by Fuller to enhance this emotional attachment (Gorton, 2009) and as such, reiterate the relevance of slash to the text.

Illustration by Jenny

Following on from Elizabeth B's *Beasts of Prey*, Fuller's use of animalistic imagery in representing the erotic relationship between Hannibal and Will, is once again a point of pleasure for the women contributors in *RAW*, only this time through fan art. In the

Illustration by Jenny, Hannibal and Will are naked, sketched and entwined in black and white, in front of peak pentagon window. Their nakedness is certainly related to the romantic relationship that is presented in *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and is also prominent in Elizabeth B's *Beasts of Prey*, although far less explicitly. Again, to reiterate the key argument of this chapter: slash no longer requires graphic elements that function to challenge or oppose the political or ideological messages embedded in the text, as previous slash scholars have acknowledged (Penley, 1997; Jenkins, 1992); as these graphic elements are already present within the source text, *Hannibal*, itself. Hence, the emergence of this new wave of slash.

In Jenny's *Illustration*, this is demonstrated through the positioning of Hannibal's chin on Will's forehead; there is an expression of vulnerability which permeates the image. Vulnerability, again, seems to be an intertextual acknowledgment by Jenny with regards to the danger Hannibal may pose to Will in Fuller's series. This vulnerability originates in Jenny's illustration from their literal (and metaphorical) background; the linking shapes sketched in red appear to be organic in nature, veins or roots of some sort. This imagery aligns with the iconography and focus on nature and anatomy as evident in the *Hannibal* series. They are both the predator and the prey; they are *in* danger, and they *are* the danger. The simple colour palette of black and white seems to contrast the transgressive, blurred layering of relationships, which is echoed by the blurred relationship between the creator and fan identities. The use of religious symbolism through the stained-red windows is read as ridiculing any hierarchical power and dominant discourse that runs through the *Hannibal* series. This is because any focal structures of hierarchical power presented within *Hannibal's* society, such as the police and the law, pale in comparison to the brutal force that Hannibal is capable of administering.

Additionally, the piece's emphasis on nature and the natural, through the root-like imagery in the windowpane and their nakedness presents nature as being all encompassing and important in the formation of their characters, as that is what they are surrounded by in Jenny's *Illustration*. However, the *Illustration* only acknowledges half of the nature versus nurture debate regarding Hannibal's cannibalistic and murderous traits, which is a point of contention in Harris' books, Fuller's series, academic debate and online fan discussions. In

Fuller's text, this nature versus nurture debate is treated in a fairly condescending manner and contends whether such a simple question could contain the answer to a complex issue.

However, this interrogation of Hannibal's nature could also serve as a critique of the treatment of the women horror fan, the television auteur, and the text, also. The masculine appeal of horror has meant the delegitimization of women, as previously discussed (Cherry, 1999; Clover, 1987; 1991) and yet with Jenny examining Hannibal's nature — a source of extreme abjection as well as attraction — serves to work as a commentary of women audiences' position too. This is because women horror audiences have been a source of abjection, once left on the borders of marginality. This change from women as abject to empowering has been examined in *Chapter Three: The Bonds of Blood; Women and their Community,* although this was explored in terms of representation. Yet, this understanding has evolved as showrunners, particularly Fuller in this instance, begin to engage in a dialogue about their fan practices, on screen. Therefore, Jenny's art, along with many of the other texts in *RAW*, shows an active and creative fan community with knowledge of the source texts which legitimises women's fan identity and status.

Another potential decoding of this image is the existence of a power balance which is reinforced through the position of the hands of Hannibal and Will; there is a weighting of equal force between them and a reliance on each other for physical support, and as fans of the series will know, also emotional support. This acknowledgement of the balance between good and evil within themselves reflects Elizabeth B's *Beasts of Prey* which highlighted, "They were the same strange species, he and Hannibal." (p.49), and is indicative of honesty. The presentation of vulnerability, arguably a socially constructed feminine trait most commonly performed, to use Butler's (1999;1990) term, by women on screen, as well as strength encourages audiences' empathy to Will and Hannibal.

Furthermore, this idea of power balance in Jenny's *Illustration* also relates back to the images of animals and nature, as outlined earlier, in which the role of predator and prey becomes prominent. This equally echoes the trusting relationship between Fuller and the Fannibals. The power balance between Fuller and the Fannibals is uniformly balanced. For

Fuller, his role as 'storyteller-in-chief', his associated auteurism, and need to uphold the status of cultural legitimacy and reliability, has placed his trust within the fan communities by addressing them directly within *Hannibal*. In particular, through his use of providing textual space which actively encourages and facilitates fan art or fiction, Fuller is recognising the fan's own power and authorial intention, trusting them with the continued pursuit of the *Hannibal* phenomena and legacy long after the series had finished.

Destiel and Wincest in *Supernatural*

Figure 9 - Dean Hugging Cas – removed copy right

Art by JackieDeeArt (https://www.redbubble.com/people/JackieDeeArt/shop)

In a similar manner, fans engage in conversations across social media about a romantic connection between the *Supernatural* leads Dean Winchester (Jensen Ackles) and Castiel (Mischa Collins), an angel who became a recurrent figure in the show. This ultimately produced some fault lines in the *Supernatural* fan community; while some fans saw this relationship as a questionable, if humorous, pairing, others immediately acknowledged what seemed to be a constant onscreen communication of innuendo, inside jokes, and real emotional connection between the two. This lasted throughout the seasons and the dynamics between the two, also known within the fan community as Destiel. The exploration of this relationship mirrors that of Fuller's Will/Hannibal in *Hannibal*. Here, the same liminal relationship between the identities of creator and fan are visible in *Supernatural* too with regards to the presentation of the Destiel relationship.

However, echoing Fuller's implementation of the clear slash relationship in the text, the showrunners in *Supernatural* tend to be more implicit in the case of Destiel, only encouraging space for women audiences to fill in the unknown spaces of their relationship that are not shown on camera. There are many incidents which allude to their "special bond" as Cas calls it. This is also acknowledged by other characters too; during season six, Balthazar says to Dean, "You have me confused with the other angel. You know, the one in the dirty trench coat who's in love with you". While there is no direct physical closeness, as there is in *Hannibal*, there is far more alluded to within the text as the above quote evidences, with regards to their romantic

relationship, than there is in the original Kirk/Spock understanding of slash fiction. This is also because the writing of *Supernatural* leans into women audiences and their fan interests, such as fan fiction.

In the fan art by Jackie Dee, Dean, who is wearing a dressing gown, is seen hugging Cas from behind as he makes coffee. The colour palette is neutral, with the coffee cups engraved with pictures of a weather storm and sunshine, representing their oppositional personalities, which somehow occupy similar spaces and makes explicit their romantic relationship that is implied in the series. When asked about the fan response to the relationship between Dean and Cas, Jackie Dee noted during an interview with the researcher, that from her experiences creating and selling the art, the relationship: "resonates because people can see themselves in the characters, situations (abstractly and interpersonally rather than literally in this case), hardships, and desires." (Interview with Jackie Dee by Charlotte Baker, 2021). This connects to the feminine pleasures of this slash relationship within the realistic setting, thus allowing them an emotional closeness. In particular, Desitel allows audiences to participate in this new wave of slash which is perhaps less revolving around the supernatural realm, and closer to the fans' everyday experiences in which they can 'see' themselves within these characters and lives 'abstractly and interpersonally', enabling space for identification to occur.

Similarly, in reflecting upon the act of creating art itself, Jackie Dee during the same interview notes:

> Any pleasure gained from creating art, fandom-related or not, is a direct result of both the audience interaction, and the introspective act of self-exploration taken to create it. Art is an intimate expression of thoughts, wants, desires, etc, and others reacting to and identifying with it is an unmatched experience. It helps open eyes and open hearts. It is a celebration of, and exploration into, viewing characters from a different lens. One of my favorite things to hear when getting feedback on my art is from people outside the fandom who say "I don't ship it but I like this art!" When this happens, it's as if art itself has created a small, accessible avenue with which this person might now see the show differently to this particular person and helped them see the characters from a

different point of view. They might not ship it when they first see my art, but the art might stick with them like a good meal and they could come back to explore further. Hopefully, view the characters and the show from a different lens.

(Interview with Jackie Dee by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

Here, Jackie Dee is acknowledging the personal benefits of art as a form of self-exploration, when combined with the processes of fans seeing themselves in the characters 'abstractly and interpersonally'; then such artistic creation is likely to support and facilitate the processes of self-exploration with the characters in mind and it is possible for fans to enable further processes of identification and self-discovery. While Gorton (2009) and Cohen (2001) acknowledge the role of the creator in the formation of identification, I have signalled throughout the thesis, the ways in which fans, via their own time spent investing in these texts in numerous ways, including social media and fan art, can ultimately influence their own identification. Interestingly, Jackie Dee also perceives the art as a portal in which fans may choose to view the character, and subsequently the show 'from a different lens' as such, allowing for the art to challenging fan understanding and belief regarding their current thoughts on the show. Equally, this same position of perceiving the show or characters 'from a different lens' can ultimately help in creating that identification; audiences are likely to develop a more intense form of emotional investment to a particular character.

In terms of Jackie Dee's thoughts on the way in which the text negotiates the Cas/Dean relationship, she notes during the interview:

It is a textual element within the show itself. Any argument that could be made in the past for DeanCas simply being a "slash" interpretation was nullified when Castiel declared his love to Dean in 15x18. The confession itself being one thing, but the realization that everything in the show ended up happening the way it did because of this unspoken love. And, although it was intentionally (and cowardly) left open-ended

ultimately, there is far more textual confirmation of a shared intimacy between the two characters than most other shows ever bother including in heterosexual relationships.

(Interview with Jackie Dee by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

To have the slash reading of Cas and Dean 'nullified' is a dismissive approach to fan participation, particularly given that their relationship was 'intentionally (and cowardly) left open-ended'. Yet there are fifteen seasons of textual space for fans to develop and analyse this relationship in depth, without any explicit indication. As Jackie Dee explains, there is clear textual confirmation of their shared intimacy, which aligns with this new wave of slash, and the open-ended aspect of their relationship allows audiences to continue to create their own understanding of these characters, their bond, and their narrative in a way that is as close to the fan, who is creating the art, as possible. As such, by confirming this intimacy and providing legitimacy to this reading via its presence within the text, even with serious elements of ambiguity, it allows for great flexibility for the situation and this slash relationship to be interpreted and explored by fans, thus allowing for a more intense form of identification.

It is worthwhile acknowledging that 'Wincest' – the incestuous relationship between the brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester – was also a prominent slash reading, and again clearly acknowledged and engaged with in the text itself. This has been examined by many scholars (Cherry, 2011 as cited in Abbott and Lavery, 2011; Busse 2016; Macklem, 2013, Zubernis and Larsen, 2014) and therefore is not a new perspective, but does add to the argument about how slash becomes increasingly prominent within the texts. From season one, *Supernatural* was self-aware of the homoerotic undertones of "…its two attractive, single leading men, who were frequently asked how many beds they would require when checking into a motel." (Collins, 2019). Collins (ibid) argued that the best thinly coded reference was during 'Playthings', season two, where hotel manager Susan, asks the clueless brothers, "Let me guess, you guys are here antiquing?" While, in seasons five, the sadistic angel, Zachariah, more explicitly describes the brothers as "erotically co-dependent". These are intertextual aspects that run through all the fifteen seasons and have become commonplace among audiences' expectations. However, season four became a significant turning point for the brothers where they come

across the 'Supernatural' novel series which mirrors their own lives and they decide to track the author down.

Supernatural, *Fan Fiction removed copy right*

Upon meeting the author, the Winchesters discover a largely women-driven online fan community which features many erotic stories of Wincest. It is here, while exploring the element of slash fiction on screen, that audiences witness this, knowing that this same experience exists in the *Supernatural* fan communities. Here, the stunned brothers, ask:

Dean: "They do know we're brothers, right?"

Sam: "Doesn't seem to matter."

Figure 10 – Man and Woman with Wings – removed copy right

(*Supernatural*, Season Four, Episode 18, *The Monster at the End of this Book,* 2018)

This interaction becomes a humorous interchange in which the brothers' very literal reading of slash removes the ideological comments that traditionally emerge from such practices. Similarly, the humour that arises here becomes a broader commentary on the wider reception of slash fiction; the brothers' shocked and appalled response to slash is similar to those others who are outside of that slash community as they miss the political undertones that were traditionally created through the slash fiction.

The first episode to explicitly discuss the concept of "Wincest" in the *Supernatural* canon was written by two women, Julie Siege and Nancy Weiner. The idea was then amplified in

"Sympathy for the Devil," penned by creator Eric Kripke, where audiences get to hear Wincest slash fiction read out loud:

"'This is wrong,' said Dean.

'Then I don't want to be right,' replied Sam, in a husky voice.'"

(*Supernatural*, Season Five, Episode 1, *Sympathy for the Devil, 2010*).

However, in its 200th episode, entitled 'Fan Fiction' (Figure 10) *Supernatural* addresses the use of slash, explicitly, for an entire episode. This episode centres around a group of amdram teenage girls' production of Supernatural (the series of books mentioned earlier) to specifically explore "Wincest" references and Sam and Dean's continuing discomfort at this concept, as well as "Destiel" (Dean/Castiel) and even the less-popular "Samstiel" (Sam/Castiel) (Collins, 2019). Here, women audiences are able to see the characters they spend so long with – both in the text and through their participatory, fan interests – within an environment which is playing out such activities. They witness other fans on screen enacting out, creating cosplay, developing subplots and slash in a similar manner to themselves, really aligning the text with the interest of the fan. Arguably, this will intensify the processes of identification as they begin to see 'fans' of the series become complicit in the narrative. While it is a humorous and meta-approach, it ultimately enables fans to see that the creators, actors and community acknowledge their status and also take pleasure in the activities being undertaken.

Zubernis, in the interview conducted during this research, also acknowledges how these ideas of Destiel and Wincest are present in the subtext of the series, rather than solely as the product of such fan productions:

They (Destiel/Wincest) are certainly not written as having a sexual relationship in canon, but they are written as having an extremely intense bond that isn't about being realistic - this is a horror fantasy show. But it is compelling. As that Dean cosplayer says in Season 4, 'to have a brother that would die for you? Who wouldn't want that?' I don't think most people actually would want that level of co-dependency in real life, but it's absolutely fascinating in fantasy and it makes damn good television. Similarly, Castiel and Dean have an unusual and unrealistic relationship too - most of us don't have angels in our lives any more than co-dependent siblings. Castiel as a character resonates with many people because he's written as an outcast, a square peg in a round hole, someone who doesn't fit in. So anyone who has felt that way in real life (and most of us have at some point), finds him compelling because of that. When he succeeds, it feels like all the square pegs can succeed. That Dean - the suave, attractive 'hero' - has such a soft spot for Cas, and that Cas reciprocates that affection, is also compelling. The show does not write that as a sexual relationship in canon either, in my opinion, but in both of these relationships there's enough subtext to run with if that's the road you're inspired to go down.

… the show encouraged fans to invest in both these relationships. The early seasons were liberally sprinkled with "Wincest" jokes and affectionate poking fun at fans who might be shipping it, and when fans immediately saw the sparks between Dean and Cas, the show added those jokes as well. They had no clue what they were setting up in real life, but oh well!

(Interview with Lynn Zubernis by Charlotte Baker, 2021).

Here, Zubernis acknowledges the role of the horror fantasy series in the formation of this relationship and implies that the genre allows such relationships to be invested in more leniently. In particular, the focus of her argument is that these narratives are not rooted entirely in reality as people would not want such intense co-dependency in real life. Yet, the bond that is being created is something that appeals to audiences; a textual and emotional closeness. Similarly, the role in *Supernatural* that Cas, Sam and Dean play, in terms of their nomad

lifestyle in fending off supernatural beings and their marginality also emotionally charges such patterns of identification in that viewers can see themselves in similar positions in the real world. What is most prominent, however, is Zubernis' understanding of how the showrunners actively position these readings within the series, in the sense that 'there's enough subtext to run with if that's the road you're inspired to go down.' This supports the idea that *Supernatural* does form part of this new wave of slash in that there are clearly such slash relationships embedded openly in the text for the fans to be able to respond to and find pleasure in the relationship that they feel most invested in.

Conclusion

In conclusion, slash, in its traditional understanding, no longer functions to challenge or oppose the political or ideological messages embedded in the text, as previous slash scholars have acknowledged (Penley, 1997; Jenkins, 1992). Nor do slash's transgressive or graphic elements feature to create these political and ideological debates regarding representation; for that representation is already present within the text itself. As *Hannibal* and *Supernatural* have indicated, these points of pleasure, such as a romantic relationship with the two lead characters, is present *within* the text already. As Zubernis notes (in the interview with Charlotte Baker, 2021), 'there's enough subtext to run with if that's the road you're inspired to go down.' Thus, this leads to a new wave of slash where there is no longer the need to read against the text for women to identify with the characters or series. In fact, the television series works to facilitate such feminine pleasures within the text themselves. The fan texts evidence similar interpretations of the romantic or erotic connection between the two main characters as well as evidencing the blurring of identities between fan and creator.

Chapter Five: The Conclusion

The academic tradition in writing conclusions is to reiterate what the thesis has achieved and to establish areas for future research. While I intend to match this expectation, it felt pertinent to begin with a relevant event that occurred just prior to writing this conclusion. I felt this added to the justification for conducting research into women's representation in contemporary horror television. The event itself took place on International Men's Day and is focused on a speech led by Conservative Member of Parliament Nick Fletcher. In his speech, Fletcher argued that there were connections between young men turning to crime and women actors playing traditionally male roles in television and film. '*Female Doctor Who Robs Boys of Role Models, MP claims*' (BBC, 2021) the heading read. In his speech, Nick Fletcher, goes on to ask:

> In recent years we have seen Doctor Who, Ghostbusters, Luke Skywalker, the Equaliser, all replaced by women, and men are left with the Krays and Tommy Shelby. Is there any wonder we are seeing so many young men committing crime? (BBC, 2021).

In locating this event's relevance to the thesis, which is examining women's representation on screen, it feels particularly important that such representations are being used as a reason to justify young men's violence and increasing crime levels off screen. This very recent speech mirrors and reiterates some of the academic narratives regarding women's on screen representation which situates them as to being blamed for the violence, even if they have not committed the acts themselves (Creed, 1993; Hernandez-Santaolalla, 2019:84). Only, in the case of Fletcher (BBC, 2021), he makes quite the transition; from women being blamed for the violence on screen, to articulating that by women replacing these roles that are historically occupied by men, they become a contributing factor which is reinforcing young men's violence off screen. While acknowledging that Fletcher did later go on to tweet that his speech, on International Men's Day had been 'misconstrue'; it becomes a point of importance with regards to how women on screen, within horror texts, would have been interpreted by Fletcher. In particular, the question arises as to how women on screen who enact violence, in the case of

Dawn in *Slasher: The Guilty Party*, Eleven in *Stranger Things* or Fiona in American *Horror Story: Coven*, would be perceived by Fletcher in increasing these levels of crime.

The incident with Fletcher (ibid) emphasises the cultural importance of debates and investigations into women's on screen representation and ways in which audiences respond to these characters and their embedded ideology. It also suggests that the need for research into this area is still necessary to begin to critically address how such claims can be made on a large public platform. My assumption was that the debates regarding the effects of media violence and its connection to real life violence were acknowledged as being entirely inaccurate (Barker and Petley, 2002) and that such discussions had become far more nuanced in their approach.

It is the aim of this thesis to explore women's representation in the contemporary horror television series, particularly with regards to their femininity, and the ways in which identification is established. The introduction provided a detailed review of the literature with regards to the field of research which underpinned such understandings of women's representation in horror and the ways in which identification was understood in these terms. The introduction also outlined the more problematic aspects of the field, in particular, the issue of intersectionality. There is a clear absence of recognition both on and off screen of more marginal communities. These issues of intersectionality became prevalent alongside a historical tracing in fan studies where various other privileged markers of identity, in particular masculinity and whiteness, emerged. The absence of more marginal identities in fan studies has been critiqued by Hollows (2001) who focused on gender and Wanzo (2015) and Morimoto (2017) who focused on wider identities (Stanfill, 2011; Booth, 2018). While this thesis has addressed the issues of feminine representation, rather than masculine and therefore has attempted to begin to examine one aspect of this marginal experience; it must be acknowledged that there is far more work to do in ensuring a more inclusive set of representations.

To summarise, a substantial percentage of the influential, scholarly work undertaken on women in horror and identification was mostly examined through film theory and assumptions of their cinematic representations (Clover, 1992; Cherry, 1999; Short, 2006; Giles, 2004; Grant, 1996; Halberstam, 1995; Hanke, 2002; Heit, 2011; Skal, 1993). This provided space to explore

women's representations in contemporary horror television further. Through considering the medium changes from film to television, it was acknowledged that the central aspects in terms of examining gendered identification included: the 'intensity' of identification (Cohen, 2001), the intertextual familiarity and subversion of horror's treatment of women, and the wide range of representations of femininity that the television series facilitated. It was this intertextual familiarity of horror's treatment of women that helped influence the structuring of the chapters. For example, the genre character types and their associated experiences which emerged through their gender politics and a historic understanding of representations ensured certain themes emerged. Some of these character types included: the Final Girl, the Gothic Woman, the mother, the Witch and the teenager.

In terms of broad conclusions, a prominent finding across all the chapters was that women's identification which originated from potential spaces of emotionality and passiveness (Clover, 1987; 1992; Ellen Brown, 1994) had been restructured in terms of using this emotionality from an empowering stance. There is far more depth to the characters that moves beyond their previous basic function to serve as active aggressor or passive victim. In many of the cases discussed, the power in the narrative comes from the character's ability to gage, manage, understand, and/or manipulate the emotional landscape of the scene. This suggests that there is a significant development in the way that women's experiences are explored on screen.

The first chapter, *The Evolution of the Final Girl in Contemporary Horror Television,* examined *Scream: The TV Series* (2015-2019), *Slasher* (2016-) and *Stranger Things* (2016-). The Final Girls in these examples were not presented as entirely innocent members of society that Clover's (1987;1992) original label has associations with. In fact, the evolved, televisual Final Girls embraces and accepts their flawed identity, from an empowered stance in order to address any remaining narrative issues that they must face. They do not work within the passive victim or active aggressor binary that Clover (ibid) originally articulated for the Final Girl character type. Similarly, in terms of LGBTQ+ representations, there is a significant increase in such narratives, which enable a platform to empower such voices. These representations do not follow cinematic horror history's mistreatment of these characters, but in the case of Audrey, Brooke, Emma, Saadia, Dawn, and Nancy, connect and modernise parts of that cinematic and historical representation (such as the use of the Final Girl) to negotiate further

space for women's experiences to be explored in more depth on the small screen. Similarly, this was the first chapter to adapt the developments of Clover's (1987;1992) theory of identification from the cinematic to the televisual, with the 'varying intensity' that Cohen (2001) mentioned. There was also some paratextual materials used in this chapter, specifically the interviews that I conducted with *Slasher* showrunner and writers, Arron Martin, Lucie Page and Ian Carpenter. The use of these interviews did help to establish the showrunner's and writer's intended meanings for the construction of *Slasher's* women characters. This enabled a new insight into the original construction of these representation and subsequently, how the meaning for these characters were framed on screen.

Just as the slasher television series presents the teenage experience in a specific manner in order to engage and/or rewrite particular representations, the Gothic television series also reconstructs comparable patterns in order to provide a commentary on the Gothic Woman. In the second chapter, *Rewriting the Gothic Woman,* the Gothic genre's historic acknowledgement of women's issues and experiences becomes important, as the genre itself is ultimately "…is so powerful because it is so feminine." (Becker, 1992:2). The feminine focus was evoked in these Gothic television texts, particularly with regards to the Gothic Woman and their struggle against 'male authority' (Ledoux, 2017). The Gothic has a long literary history which is recognised as using gender, specifically women and their femininity, to critique particular aspects of women's experience within the context in which it was created. *Penny Dreadful's* Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) and Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), mirrored the power of women, their oppression, and the negotiation of power within these televisual spaces (Boon, 2019; Fuchs, 2017). Similarly, Shirley, Theo, Dani, and Hannah from *The Haunting…* *series* seem to have more resonance within a modern historical context with the representation of femininity that is far more inclusive of broader experiences.

Within this chapter, there were various aspects of the Gothic Woman's marginality that were analysed, including the Gothic Woman's dismissal, Shirley's motherhood, and diverse representations of emotionality, as Theo and Dani evidenced. It was found that these attributes became spaces of empowerment and exploration for these characters in the formation of their own identity. Some of these attributes were also explored in the next chapter, '*The Bonds of Blood*', only without the Gothic Woman's traceable genre history. In particular, the difficulties

that the domestic space offer the women characters is prominent in the Gothic text as is the Gothic Woman's experiences of isolation within their immediate family. Similarly in '*The Bonds of Blood*', women's marginal experiences were also investigated, the difference being that these were examined with regards to the broader community in which they live.

Chapter Three: The Bonds of Blood continued to explore the ways in which the contemporary horror television series presents diverse representations of women on screen. Through the horror genre's historical treatment of women, as exploitative and often dismissive, these contemporary horror television series engage in an intertextual commentary on women's marginalisation, cross generational bonding, and motherhood. Once again, many of these representations began to challenge horror's historic treatment of women, but also focused on the sense of community being built between these women characters on screen and how their shared experiences ultimately brought them closer to provide support within the narrative. This aspect of community on television and the resonance this had with women audiences was an area that had been investigated previously (Ellen Brown, 1994). However, this idea had not been examined in terms of the thematic representation of community, nor in its application to the contemporary horror television series. This sense of thematic community or bonding experience was prevalent in the case studies examined. For example, Joyce and Nancy, Max and Eleven, and Sabrina and Theo all evidence this sense of community through their shared experiences of marginality. Equally, there were instances where this community served to marginalise those characters further, as with Fiona Goode.

The use of paratextual materials, particularly popular journalism, enabled the discourses around some of these actors' previous performances to be read in relevance to their current role. For example, Ryder and Lange's earlier roles, and their previous engagement in the themes of sexuality and class, were discussed. These meanings ultimately then played upon the intertextual familiarity of these characters and potentially create expectations from these portrayals (Joyce Byers and Fiona Goode, respectively). Furthermore, the challenge these women characters face in terms of finding acceptance and support from others becomes a point of pleasure for audiences who are likely already emotionally invested in their success over the length of time which they spend with them, as per the nature of television.

Unlike the television series discussed so far in this thesis, the final chapter '*Negotiating the Borders of Women's Fandom in Hannibal and Supernatural: This is the fans' design*' discusses texts which lack this same acknowledgement of women's narratives, but do have well established women audiences. This posed an interesting case for the argument regarding how women audiences begin to identify and create space for their own exploration of identity in a contemporary horror television text which does not facilitate space for women characters and representations. Therefore, in the analysis of understanding how women find and create space for identification, paratextual material, such as fan works, becomes of significant importance. In fact, the primary focus of this chapter was mostly the analysis of paratextual material to establish the ways that identification occurs in male-driven narratives through the focus of women's slash fiction and art.

The use of slash as a method of women audiences and fans gaining political and textual power has been well established (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1997). Yet this chapter's key argument was that slash no longer requires transgressive or graphic components that function to challenge or oppose the political or ideological messages embedded in the text. These transgressive or graphic elements are not utilised in slash fiction by fans anymore in order to create these political and ideological debates regarding representation; for that representation is already present within the text *itself*. Therefore, this new wave of slash fiction upholds the same erotic or romantic sub/text the source television series acknowledges, whilst providing some insight into how these fans are reprioritising women's voices or interests within their own fan works. The common interests that emerge in slash texts, such as a romantic or sexual relationship with the two lead characters, is present – either implicitly or explicitly – within the source text itself. In fact, *Supernatural* and *Hannibal* work to facilitate such feminine pleasures within the text themselves, through their recognition of fan interests in the text's narrative (such as *Supernatural's Fan Fiction* episode) or by providing fans with the textual space to explore women's narratives (such as Fuller's use of Chiyoh in *Hannibal*).

In finalising my own thoughts, although this thesis has ensured a particular space for research into women's identification in contemporary horror television to be explored, the example of

Fletcher's (BBC, 2021) very recent speech regarding the increase in men's crime indirectly being correlated to the increase of women's representation on screen, indicates that there is further space to begin to analyse and address the response to these characters. Furthermore, the mention of women characters, such as Doctor Who (Jodie Whittaker), are far less aggressive than some of the characters that have been analysed in this thesis. Therefore, it becomes imperative to assess how these more violent characters may be perceived by the wider population. Similarly, the focus here has been on the representations of femininity and women's identificatory processes. Yet, as acknowledged, there is significantly greater work to do in ensuring the inclusivity of more marginal communities in terms of representation that will hopefully become more apparent on television. As such, moving forward, it would be effective to specify down these particular experiences through thematics within these communities to see how such characters serve to create space for identification to occur.

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Appendix

Helen Lord

From:	Helen Lord
Sent:	02 February 2018 13:21
To:	'C Baxer3@unimail.derby.ac.uk
Cc:	Robert Hudson; Nathan Hunt; Jo Bishter
Subject:	Ethics application outcome

Dear Charlotte

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application, project title 'Female Engagement and Identification in Cult Horror Television', has been approved by Chair's Action 2/2/18.

With best regards
Helen

Helen Lord
Research Student Office
The Registry
University of Derby
01332 591853