

The Monstrous Femininity of Carrie White

Ashley Hajek

Professor Hilsabeck

English 422: Independent Study

October 21st, 2021

THE MONSTROUS FEMININITY 2

Throughout the creation of horror films, many of the monsters seem to be male-dominated or present as the male gender. Having a larger build can make a monster more intimidating than if it were of a smaller stature. There are many films that do not follow this trope, however. One of those is *Carrie* (1976), directed by Brian De Palma. Carrie follows the life of teenager Carrie White as she navigates through high school. Carrie is different from all the other girls though because she finds out that she has telekinetic powers. After slaughtering her entire high school class at prom, Carrie becomes the monster we are supposed to fear. The issue with this however is that Carrie does not start her monstrous rage until close to the end of the film.

Carrie White is a special case of monster. She does not fit into the stereotypical slasher, nor the almost human zombie or vampire. Instead see Carrie as a human first before a monster, which is rare. Even for monsters that turn out to be human, such as Scarface and Jigsaw, they begin as monsters. Their interactions are creepy and have a sense of tension to them for the other characters they are interacting with. From the beginning, the audience is expected to fear the monster. Monsters are hyperfocused, and their only intent is to murder or cause harm to others. Nosferatu and Dr. Jekyll lure in beautiful women, even though they look grotesque, and make them feel a false sense of security before they attack. Carrie White is never like this. For her, it seems that her powers and her intent for murder come out of something deeper and darker than feeling bloodlust. Carrie seems to be driven by both revenge for the way she was treated and to avenge her prom date who was killed by her tormentors. The biggest difference between these classic monsters and Carrie is her gender identity.

In the essay *Gender and Sexuality Haunt the Horror Film*, author Daniel Humphrey brings up this discourse of having female protagonists in horror films when the audience who

watches them are usually male presenting. Humphrey brings up other authors who connect this viewership to male presenting people having a connection to transgender experiences and cross-sex identification because they are living through the female protagonist's trauma voyeuristically. He also brings up author Rhona J. Berenstein whose ideas on what makes up the construct of a monster connect to the creation of Carrie as a monster. "In the horror film's figure of the monster... presumptions of sexual difference on the basis of biology are as fraught with ambiguities and are as historically constructed as those based on gender attributes," (Benshoff, pg. 41). This quote discusses how many monsters, follow along with ideals and tropes we give to specific genders. As I stated, one of those tropes is having a large muscular build which society has given to the male gender as a trope. Females in this sense follow the tropes of being sweet and nurturing which is why they are usually the majority of the ones to die at the hands of the monster. Moreover, Berenstein brings up this idea of a presumption of a sexual difference between the monster and the other characters, usually the protagonist. For slasher films, the use of a knife as the killing weapon connects to the phallic use of a penis. Since the monster is the one usually wielding the knife and penetrating the protagonist, they are deemed the male sex. With the protagonist getting penetrated, they are seen as the female sex.

What makes Carrie different is that she never uses her actual body to perform an action to harm someone. Her powers come entirely from her mind in the form of telekinesis. Telekinesis derives from using a psychic ability that allows someone to move something physically without having to do so physically. Although she does use knives to kill her mother, and those are seen as phallic objects, the phallic object seems more to do with the repressed sexuality and conformity that Carrie's mother put her through rather than her wanting to penetrate her mother. Since she uses her mind as opposed to a physical weapon, Carrie is an interesting case study in the

distinction between how she is a monster compared to other monsters. In horror films usually, there is the definition of the final girl. Final girls usually always outsmart the monsters and survive at the end of the movie. This trope is also used for audience members who are male presenting to have a figure to connect to and root for during the terrifying scenes. In the case of Carrie White, she appears to be both the monster and the final girl. Nobody in the film is wise enough to stop her, nor do we really have this strong connection to another character like we do Carrie. Furthermore, Carrie is intelligent enough to have her entire powers based on her brain. We are able to see Carrie both as an intelligent and pained figure. As audience members, we want to see Carrie succeed and get her revenge since we have watched her torment. Throughout the film, De Palma uses the screen to make us empathize with Carrie rather than fear her, which is a complete contrast to other horror film monsters.

A particular scene that encompasses the entirety of Carrie's transformation, both as a woman and a monster, occurs during the opening scene in the shower. The shower scene opens with a pan of the women's locker room at Carrie's school. The girls have just finished their gym class, and are getting ready for the rest of the day. The locker rooms feel cramped and crowded as we see various women getting ready, running around, brushing their hair. The lighting is dim and hard to see through as the fog from the showers encompasses the entire room. The camera keeps panning and then turns into a dolly as we follow the sight of Carrie. She is alone in the showers, which signifies that she is not as close with the other girls to gossip and chat while getting ready. The fog from the smoke and the lighting above Carrie make her appear angelic in nature. We also see her nude body and connected with the light above, it paints her to be this pure innocent figure.

We then have close-ups of Carrie and her washing her body. This act seems extremely sensual and somewhat erotic, but at the same time, Carrie still seems pure, so the scene seems to imply some naive sexual tension. Carrie starts with her face, then continues to wash down her body hitting her breasts, and then washing down her thighs with soap. As she drops her soap and we watch it fall to the ground, the terror begins. Blood rushes down Carrie's thighs, and she seems horrified. The non-diegetic music stops, and in turn, the diegetic sound kicks on. We can hear the water rushing, the girls chatting, and Carrie's staggered breathing. Carrie starts to walk towards her other female classmates, but instead of being empathetic towards Carrie, they are downright cruel. The entire feeling of the scene changes, as the camera focuses on every single girl's face with a close-up telling Carrie to "plug it up". What seemed to be a safe space for Carrie now turns dark and dim as the final shots in the scene show Carrie crumbling towards the ground in fear while being covered in pads that the other girls threw at her. The fog seemed to turn a dark grey color, and we can now see the floors and the walls of the shower room making it seem extremely claustrophobic. Carrie is left to face her newfound changes alone.

The entirety of the shower scene connects to Judith Butler's essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. Butler notes:

... but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (pg. 522).

What this quote suggests is that people are not born as a woman, even though they might have the biological parts society has said make you one. Butler instead suggests that to be a woman, you have to become one. Ways to do that are by becoming more feminine in nature

which can be dressing up more form-fitting than normal, doing your hair and makeup, wearing high heels, and even changing your voice to sound more high pitched. After being bullied for a basic bodily function, Carrie begins to transform and also conform. She starts to think more about her sexually repressed feelings, and focuses on how other girls her age are able to hook up with boys. After studying those around her, Carrie begins to materialize an idea of herself into obedience by wanting to go to prom with the most popular boy in school. As stated earlier in the film, Carrie knows how to sew and makes her own clothes. After this transformation, Carrie sews her own prom dress which is more scandalous and form-fitting than anything she has ever worn in the film.

This dress is the final outfit for Carrie after it is doused in pigs' blood. The dress itself can be seen as a symbol of Carrie's evolved state because it shows the conformity of women in a patriarchal society to be seen as more sexual and desired, but the blood connects to Carrie's more horrific side. As one final prank towards Carrie, the pigs' blood is supposed to resemble her own period. This is when Carrie snaps. Butler brings up an interesting idea of the female experience being an act, which Carrie participated in. "Hence gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again," (pg. 526). The whole idea of prom and dressing up is an act of fitting into society's norms and pressing gender conformity as the norm. Butler's idea of rehearsing the act of gender connects to Carrie physically making her own dress, getting dolled up, and even winning prom queen. The problem with scripts and acting, however, is that they can be stopped. Actors do not act every single day of their lives and can be complex individuals who still follow their own script of life. Carrie is exactly this way after she lets go of this idealized version of herself as a woman and lets the monster loose.

Looking back at all of the other monsters that dominate the horror film scene, they seem to instead follow the script of a monster and something to be feared rather than conforming to society and rehearsing how to conform. The monsters on the screen do not typically go through a period of conformity or wanting to fit in. Instead their sole purpose is rooted in bloodlust and torture. Monsters on screen are created to be feared and something for the characters and audience to overcome. Carrie White is a monster. Carrie White is a woman. Both of these facts make Carrie more complex than your simple run-of-the-mill serial killer in a horror. Seeing her evolve into both of these concepts makes the audience see her as more than one-dimensional figure who only cares about killing. She is a teenage girl, who just so happens to gain powers based on her own intelligence seemingly as a woman. The depth of Carrie White as a character continues to formulate questions on female monsters in horror and why they appear to be different from other monsters in the genre. In the end, *Carrie* is a film that discusses what it means to be a woman while also giving audiences that slasher action they crave.

References

- Benshoff, H. M., & Humphrey, D. (2017). Gender and Sexuality Haunt the Horror Film. In *A Companion to the Horror Film* (pp. 38–55). essay, Wiley Blackwell.
- Butler, J. (1998). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40, 519–531.