

A film about a woman who travels to Sweden with her boyfriend and his friends. Visits a “village” that turns out to be a cult and ends up being crowned queen and burning her boyfriend alive. Another film about a family broken by death, mental illness and demonism. The mother, father and sister all die leaving the brother to be taken over by a demon and leading a cult of Satanists. What do these films have in common? Well, for starters, they are both two projects, *Midsommar* (2019) and *Hereditary* (2018) respectively, created, written and directed by Ari Aster. Both films also deal with a female protagonist that deals with grief. However, though both spearheaded by Aster, how female grief is dealt with and presented in our female protagonists is staunchly different.

Dani in *Midsommar* deals with her grief violently but because of the circumstances, by the end of the film she is either hailed as a justified victim or as a vicious killer (depending on the viewer). However, grief in *Hereditary* with our female protagonist Annie is much more finite: Annie attempts to solve her issues but as a result, she becomes a victim, dying by the hands of higher powers (we’ll get into that soon). Victimhood, murder and female grief: both *Midsommar* and *Hereditary* deal with these topics and they speak to the enveloping concept of how female grief is depicted in horror. Using a feminist framework and research via the lens of the conventions of horror, I will analyze how our two main female characters’ in the two films, Dani and Annie, grief is handled, how this affects where these women end up by the end of each film, and how their grief is relatable to mainly female audience members. First, I will speak to the horror genre as a whole, Ari Aster as a creator and some feminist theory terms, to set the scene and provide some context.

## The History of Horror

In order to understand more about Ari Aster and the horror stories he tells, we must take a deeper dive in horror as a concept, its history and its future included. The horror genre goes back to the 1800s with the beginnings of horror literature (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). Horror writers got their ideas for their stories in these early times from English authors who developed and wrote under the gothic tradition (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). The horror genre works best and is so distinct because it relies more so on evoking emotions from the audience (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). These original writers understood this, leading them to create and write characters like demons, ghosts, serial killers, possessed characters, etc.... (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). Early writers like Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis are some examples of the generation that transitioned from typical gothic tradition to what we see as horror today (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134).

What we see as the horror genre today in terms of film can be traced back to the beginning of film itself. Early horror films got their inspiration from horror literature that had its roots in “folk stories and fairy tales,” (Prohászková, 2012, p. 37). Early horror films were more comical in comparison to the boundaries and complexity in which horror movies operate today. Back then, we saw things like zombies, ghosts, werewolves, Frankenstein (Prohászková, 2012, p. 137). Those are the roots of horror that have expanded and given life to more modern monsters.

The progression of the horror genre can be best represented by looking at staples from each decade. In the 1920s, original horror classics like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) were shown for the first time ever on-screen (Prohászková, 2012, p. 137). The 1930s and 1940s was a time in which production strides were made in the movie business the genre was really able to

take off with films like *Dracula* (1931) and *The Mummy* (1933) (Prohászková, 2012, p. 137). The 30s was also the first time a werewolf in horror was shown on screen (Prohászková, 2012, p. 137). In the 50s, horror movies began to reflect real-world issues like The Cold War with movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) (Prohászková, 2012, p. 137). The 1960s is the era of horror cult classics from popular horror directors like *Psycho* (1960) from Alfred Hitchcock and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) from Roman Polanski (Prohászková, 2012, p. 138). The 1970s continued the tradition of introducing now classics to the zeitgeist of horror film with movies like *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) by Stanley Kubrick, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) from Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) (Prohászková, 2012, p. 138). The 1980s and 1990s was the era of slasher films, a type of horror films in which the "main character [is] usually a mentally disturbed serial killer or mass murderer, who chose youngsters or women as his victims," (Prohászková, 2012, p. 138). The characters Freddy Krueger and Jason are some key examples to come out of this period of horror films. Contemporarily, slashers have taken on a new 21<sup>st</sup> century form (Prohászková, 2012, p. 139) with movies like *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (2009) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) and its following sequel. The idea of sequels and remakes have become staples when we talk about horror that is post-1990s. One example of this is the *The Ring* franchise (Prohászková, 2012, p. 139). Older films like *It* (1990) have gotten their contemporary remakes during this current era (Prohászková, 2012, p. 139). Modern horror films continue to draw inspiration from their past ancestors to expand stories and craft new ones, like the ones we see in *Midsommar* and *Hereditary*.

### **Types and Conventions of Horror**

Tzvetan Todorov, a famous philosopher and literary critic, created and broke down horror into three different categories: the uncanny, the marvelous horror, and the fantastic horror

(Prohászková, 2012, p. 132). *Midsommar* and *Hereditary* deal mostly with the uncanny type of horror, a story that deals with and includes supernatural moments and events that are “disturbing, shocking, unexpected or unique,” (Prohászková, 2012, p. 132). Along with these categories come subgenres of horror. There are many that exist, including rural horror, cosmic horror, crime horror, and occult horror (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* fit into a few of these subgenres. *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* are occult horrors, psychological horrors, and surreal horrors. Occult horrors are stories that deal with some heavy stuff: exorcisms, the antichrist, cults, etc.... (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). A psychological horror is one that relies on the main protagonist’s feelings of fear, guilt, and an “unstable emotional state of mind,” (Prohászková, 2012, p. 134). A surreal horror is one that is both disturbing to the characters and the audiences watching the story take place, and it deals with some aspect of surrealism (Prohászková, 2012, p. 135). Some conventions of horror that these tales focus on are the concepts of characters being in mortal peril and being messed with by some life-threatening entity.

### **Feminist Framework and Terminology**

This paper seeks to look at the horror genre from a female angle. In order to provide more context, feminist theory and terminology can be best applied here for the sake of analysis. Feminist and critical rhetoric researchers often use a psychoanalytic feminist approach when talking about horror films: the reasonings behind why horror films appeal to viewers can be best explained by analyzing the movie’s plot, story, and characters (Freeland, 1996, p. 742). Feminist researcher Linda Williams argues that for a concept called the female gaze: the fates of women and monster are often reliant on each other in some way (Freeland, 1996, p. 744). The types of women that benefit or participate in the female gaze oftentimes threaten the patriarchy in the film

(Freeland, 1996, p. 744). Julia Kristeva is also a feminist researcher is behind the idea of the horrific mother. When it comes to a child, this type of horror mother is “all engulfing, primitive, and impure or defiled by bodily fluids,” (Freeland, 1996, p. 744), and the bodily fluids usually include menstrual blood or breastmilk (Freeland, 1996, p. 744). I bring up that last part because we see these uses of body fluids in *Hereditary* with Annie and her mother and a bit in *Midsommar* as well. Researcher Barbra Creed argues that horror films exist to show “the work of abjection,” (Freeland, 745). The term “abject” describes when something holds a threatening stance in a patriarchy (Rachmaputri, 2021, p. 4). The monstrous-feminine is the “patriarchal representation of female monster,” (Rachmaputri, 2021, p. 4), making this type of representation an abject one. Historically, some horror films depict women getting attacked because of their patriarchal threat and are treated as monsters themselves in order to justify their deaths within stories. Ari Aster does kill off his female protagonist in *Hereditary* for the patriarchal-type threat she poses as in *Hereditary* but in *Midsommar*, Dani is actually our sole original survivor, flipping this idea of abjection on its head.

### **The Horror Genre: Female Grief as Transformation and as**

Dani’s grief results in her transformation. The monstrous feminine is a less metaphoric. Dani, like Annie, starts the story in pain...with grief. What makes Dani more of a monster is that her grief is connected to revenge. She has been with a boyfriend who does nothing but gaslight her, her “friends” aren’t really her friends, and she starts the film still reeling from the loss of her sister, mother, and father. But our last few moments with Dani at the end of the film shows that not only has she learned to make her feelings of grief and rage known outwardly for the first time to this extreme but also, she “expands or grows in excess of herself, her environment, and the structures that both bind her and hold her,” (Huber, 2019).

We see Dani travel on a journey from internalization to outward acts that reflect her grief through the entire film. And the reason for this can be partly chalked up to her environment. The Hårga are a group that almost forces the grief out of anger and forces her to act like...not herself. Dani has, oddly enough, found a safe place to be able to express her sadness, frustration and this ultimately leads her to seeking the ultimate revenge on her boyfriend Christian: she gets to decide whether he lives or dies and chooses the latter, as part of a ritual conducted religiously by the Hårga. There is even that final moment that we see on Dani's face at the end of the film: one that has transitioned outwardly. Her grief is connected to her issues as a female protagonist (emotionally checked-out boyfriend, orphan, involved in a cult where women have specific roles) but she is able to eliminate some of these areas of grief and repurposes others. Dani is the perfect example of a female protagonist whose fate seems doomed, but instead she ends up benefitting from the female gaze as she watches her role become one of the monsters as she watches the original bad guys be burned alive. Aster subverts typical horror practices to keep the female protagonist alive.

Annie's endgame is the exact opposite of Dani. She also plays an opposite role: the Horrific Mother, contemporarily copping with death, loss, and relationships. She smothers her daughter Charlie but has much contempt for her son Peter. Annie's mother has ties to Charlie that involve breastfeeding her when she was little (textbook definition of a horrific mother if you ask me). Also, unlike Dani, Annie fits into a female horror trope and her death seems warranted and rather normal given the circumstances. Her death is one of our female protagonists, which is very commonplace in a genre like horror.

Annie's relation to grief is one that seems to almost travel backwards in relation to Dani's. Annie doesn't seem to have much luck when it comes to feeling grief and coming out on

top. She literally dies at the end, and not even by her own means (she is possessed by the demon Paimon). Annie's grief is similar to Dani's when we look at its core: familial issues, emotionally check-out partner, death. But Annie's monstrous-feminine arc actually costs her, rather than giving her a means to a better end. Unlike Dani's pivotal moment of catharsis of emotions at the very end, Annie has several of these moments herself and they are sprinkled throughout the film. This makes Annie's grief seem more pervasive, more threatening, more relatable. The scene in which Annie finds Charlie's dead body in the back seat of her car is a perfect example of just how relatable Annie's female grief is: she hovers almost animal-like on her bedroom floor, reeling from the loss of a child...of a daughter. Losing a child or a parent or a sister can pain anyone, but a mother losing a child strikes a different nerve.

With each spurt of grief, Annie is forced by her environment to reel it in: go to therapy, work on art, conduct a séance to find the answers so that things can return to normal. Well, that's just the thing: normal was never in the cards for Annie for several reasons. And by the end of the film, in an attempt to finally control her grief, Annie is almost punished for her grief and she dies a gruesome death. She lacks autonomy at the end of the film, while Dani's grief brings her the most autonomy she has ever experienced.

## **Conclusion**

So, what do these two experiences say about women, grief, and contemporary horror stories? Well, for starters, contemporary horror stories have come a long way. Horror's roots are far from long gone but newer stories do their share in scaring us all by starting out as purely interesting stories. Secondly, women in horror have had a bad time, haven't they? But what Aster and other contemporary horror storytellers are doing are making female horror characters more well-rounded, more human. What we see in *Midsommar* is female rage and female grief turned

into female autonomy. What we see in *Hereditary* is female grief turned into female resilience, up until the very end. Women in horror stories are the most relatable they've ever been, with these types of characters having rooted experiences with real-world emotions. Female grief is a topic that should be explored and, relating back to our feminist framework and history of fright, the horror genre has been one that audiences pay attention to since its inception. Aster is pushing horror forward...and he's starting with characters and emotions.

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