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Subverting the Horror Trope: It's the Slut's Turn to Survive

Sex and horror have always been interesting bedfellows...

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Photo: Mariana Montrazi via Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/hands-covering-the-person-s-face-8129262/>)

Camp Crystal Lake. 1958. Counselors Claudette (Debra S. Hayes) and Barry (Willie Adams) slip away one night to have sex in an unoccupied storage cabin. A POV shot takes us slowly up the stairs... accompanied by an ominous, percussive chorus of *ch-ch-ch-ah-ah-ah*. The camera hangs back as the teens get busy. When they realize that someone is watching them, they fix their clothes and try to play it cool. Their efforts are, of course, in vain. Both are stabbed to death by an unseen assailant. Victim to the horror trope.

Sex and horror movies are inextricably linked. The connection is deep. Primal. When we watch horror films, our brains release endorphins, dopamine, and adrenaline—some of the same chemicals associated with sex. It's one of the reasons why watching scary movies with a partner can lead to other R-rated activities. That's right: your Netflix and Chill date featuring *Friday the 13th* is backed by science.

Watching horror movies can result in great sex, but for the characters *in* these movies, sex often has some not-so-great consequences—like a gruesome, untimely demise. Post- and mid-coitus murder is so common in horror films that it's become a documented trope spanning multiple decades. In the 1996 slasher-flick *Scream*, the convention of sex leading to death is spelled out:

"There are certain rules one must abide by in order to successfully survive a horror movie," Randy Meeks (Jamie Kennedy) tells his friends. "For instance, number one: you can never have sex. Big no-no! Sex equals death."

But why?

Watch on X

Biblical Sins and the Hays Code

The explanation for the “sex=death” trope that’s cited most often is predictable: the fornicator—or the “slut”—has sinned by having sex outside of holy matrimony and therefore must be punished by execution. The condemnation of non-marital sex has plagued humanity since antiquity.

It’s also an attitude that was explicitly reflected in American films between 1934 to 1968 thanks to the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, which dictated that films could not “lower the moral standards” of their audience. Certain activities, like crime and extramarital sex, could not be portrayed as glamorous or acceptable; interracial relationships and queer characters were not allowed to be portrayed at all. Furthermore, criminals and other “immoral” characters needed to get their comeuppance by the end credits.



“Rebecca” 1940 by Alfred Hitchcock via Office Hours with Doctor Horror (<https://officehourswithdrh.wordpress.com/2020/06/16/gay-killers-and-lesbian-ghosts-the-hays-code-subtext-in-hitchcocks-rope-1948-rebecca-1940/>)

Retribution for Fornication

Alfred’s Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho* (<https://youtu.be/Wz719b9QUqY?si=oW8QoS9e5zwdSWet>) is a classic example of the “slut dies first” trope. Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is a sexually active woman. She goes on the run after stealing money from her employer to pay off her boyfriend’s (John Gavin) debt. On a long drive to rendezvous with her lover, a heavy storm forces her to spend the night at the Bates Motel. It is here where she’s stabbed to death in the shower.

Beyond *Psycho*, horror has an abundance of murdered fornicators—often as the first victims in the story. The *Friday the 13th* (<https://youtu.be/aDrOvFtzPQ?si=XyD6VTZY5aztKqjY>) franchise is well-known for killing off characters who dare to get off. And this starts with camp counselors Claudette and Barry in the original movie from 1980.

In *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (<https://youtu.be/dCVh4lBfW-c?si=QMmrL0htnkoRk4-8>) (1984), Tina Gray (Amanda Wyss)—the best friend of protagonist Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp)—has make-up sex with her boyfriend Rod Lane (Jsu Garcia). Shortly thereafter, she is slashed to death by Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund). Hers is the first death of the film; Rod is next on the chopping block. Nancy, who doesn't have sex during the film, survives.



A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984) via mubi (<https://mubi.com/de/de/films/a-nightmare-on-elm-street>)

The titular Mary Lou Maloney (Lisa Schrage) of *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II* (<https://youtu.be/cxKUQENmcsg?si=hMwvkVYmZI5oPx8z>) is killed by a jilted and jealous boyfriend. This is done in revenge after he finds her locking lips with another guy in the opening scene. In life, Mary Lou was a shamelessly promiscuous high school mean girl. Where opposed in death, she's a shamelessly vindictive ghost.

In *Halloween* (<https://youtu.be/n72XUX96078?si=vlkLBeSdzAmboBd>) (1978), Michael Myers' very first kill, at the tender age of six (Will Sandin), is his older sister Judith (Sandy Johnson). This occurs right after she has sex with her boyfriend. Fifteen years later, Myers (Tony Moran) kills Annie Brackett (Nancy Kyes) when she leaves her babysitting gig early to meet up with her boyfriend. He then kills her friend Lynda Van Der Klok (P.J. Soles) and her boyfriend Bob (John Michael Graham) after they have sex. Michael tries to kill the abstinent protagonist (and early Final Girl) Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), but is unsuccessful.



Halloween (1978) via NYTimes (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/movies/halloween-1978-review.html>)

“The Whore Dies First”

The trope of sexually active female characters being the first kills in horror movies (<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691166292/men-women-and-chain-saws>) has been the subject of discourse among academics and film critics for the past three decades. It's even been commented on in horror films themselves.

A notable example of this is the 2011 horror-comedy *The Cabin in the Woods*. In the film, the enigmatic Organization uses chemicals to turn a group of college students into horror movie archetypes—an athlete, a fool, a scholar, a whore, and a virgin. This is in order to sacrifice them in a humanity-saving Ancient Ritual. The Organization uses pheromones to make Jules Loudon (Anna Hutchison) and Curt Vaughan (Chris Hemsworth), the Whore and the Athlete, respectively, have sex. Jules is then killed in a zombie attack.

Later, the Director of the Organization (Sigourney Weaver) explains to Dana Polk (Kristen Connolly), the Virgin, and Marty Mikalski (Fran Kranz), the Fool, that the order of the sacrifices doesn't matter as long as the Whore dies first (“She's corrupted,” the Director says) and the Virgin dies last—or survives after suffering. Dana isn't actually a virgin, but that doesn't seem to matter: “We work with what we have.”

Cabin in the Woods - Trailer



Is the Trope Really About Moralistic Messages?

While there are some horror movies that punish non-marital sex with murder, there are other interpretations of the “sex=death” trope. One of which comes from *Halloween*. In a filmmakers’ commentary (https://youtu.be/WK1dTFF1_M0?si=5elkvUt3T4BHYEyC), writer/producer Debra Hill says that the moralizing message of sex leading to death in the film was an interpretation that critics had. It was never the intention of either her or the director, John Carpenter.

In the commentary, Jamie Lee Curtis adds that the reason the sexually active characters die isn’t because they’re being punished for having sex. They die simply because they’re not paying attention to their surroundings. Laurie survives because she’s not distracted.

HALLOWEEN DIRECTOR COMMENTARY



Sexually Liberated and Subverting the Horror Tropes

While there are many films that feed into the trope, there are myriad films that consciously subvert it.

In *Scream* (https://youtu.be/AWm_mkbdpCA?si=5VVu80OOSiPMKGzI), protagonist Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) has sex for the first time with her boyfriend Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich). He is then revealed to be the Ghostface spree killer along with his BFF Stu Macher (Matthew Lillard). Billy and Stu try to kill her, but Sidney outwits them and survives.

Revenge (https://youtu.be/eIU_IHfp3cU?si=KAGC2vt9rjvIVqwr) (2017), a rape-revenge slasher, follows Jen (Matilda Anna Ingrid Lutz), an uninhibited and resourceful badass, as she hunts down the man who raped her, the man who witnessed it and didn’t help her, and her married boyfriend who tried to kill her to prevent her from exposing his friends’ crimes and his own infidelity.

In *X* (https://www.youtube.com/embed/Awg3cWuHfoc?si=rktiCFEZ_gUe2-Yc), the 2022 love letter to classic slashers, aspiring porn star Maxine Minx (Mia Goth) recites the mantra “You’re a fuckin’ sex symbol” to herself in the mirror, films an adult movie on an isolated farm in rural Texas, and emerges victorious in a showdown with the elderly, deranged, and murderous Pearl (Goth). Of the six people in her cohort, she is the sole survivor.

Further subverting the horror trope, Lorraine Day (Jenna Ortega), the prudish boom operator, almost survives with Maxine—but goes on a slut-shaming tirade, runs off, and gets gunned down by Pearl’s husband Howard (Stephen Ure).

X | Official Trailer HD | A24



Subversive Slashers Are for the Girls

Although male characters aren't automatically immune to being murdered after a roll in the hay, the "sex=death" trope is inherently tied to female sexuality. After all, in real life, women have historically been, and still are to some extent, castigated for having sex—and *not* having sex. This aspect of cultural misogyny has been scrutinized relentlessly in cinema, with some films, across many genres, directly calling out the double standards and hypocrisy of certain attitudes around sexual behavior.

When taking a look at the move away from the "sex=death" trope, the absence of it from more modern slashers is the least interesting thing to examine. Instead, we should pay attention to how explicit this absence is, especially in cases of conscious subversion.

By bringing the audience's focus to the seemingly radical decision to write female characters who get to enjoy both sex and staying alive, filmmakers simultaneously comment not just on the ridiculousness of the trope, but also on the evolution of how women are portrayed in film, particularly in the horror genre.



Photo: Zayceva Tatiana via Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com/de-de/foto/frau-gesicht-suche-suchen-13068918/>)

The Gender Fluid Horror Trope Angle

In Carol J. Clover's 1987 article, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film"

(https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/statesofdamage/syllabus202324/carol_clover_on_the_final_girl.pdf) gender fluidity and nonconformity of both the killer and the Final Girl is discussed. The killer is equipped with phallic weapons, but his masculinity is questionable: "He ranges from the virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transexual." Meanwhile, "The gender of the Final Girl is likewise compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems, constructs the female), [and] her apartness from other girls." Clover further describes the final showdown between the killer and the Final Girl, who now wields the phallic weapon, as "The castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at her hands... The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with."

Clover later asserts that the Final Girl is essentially a "congenial double" for teenage male viewers. She is feminine enough to scream in terror without the urge to hide her fear, but masculine enough that the male viewer can comfortably identify with her without risking insecurity in his own sense of manliness. "Her sexual inactivity," she writes, "becomes all but inevitable: the male viewer (<https://juicypinkbox.com/the-cult-of-red-pill-incel-culture-and-why-it-is-so-attractive-to-young-men/>) may be willing to enter into the vicarious experience of defending himself from the possibility of symbolic penetration on the part of the killer, but real vaginal penetration on the diegetic level is evidently more femaleness than he can bear."



Final Girls: Sally Hardesty From The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974) via Horror Obsessed (<https://horrorobsessed.com/2021/09/17/final-girls-sally-hardesty-from-the-texas-chain-saw-massacre-1974/>)

Horror Trope Is About More Than Purity Culture

If we accept this reading, then the subversion of the "sex=death" horror trope and Final Girl archetype becomes even more significant than a simple statement against purity culture. Instead, it becomes a rejection of prescribed masculinity. Furthermore, it decenters male viewership. Allowing the slut to survive in a slasher film is a celebration of women who own their bodies, their sexuality, and their femininity. It's an explicit signifier that the film was written for female viewers. At the heart of it, subverting sex negative horror tropes and archetypes is a proclamation of solidarity with women. No matter if they're on-screen, behind the camera, or in the audience. s

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