



# FINAL SURVIVORS AND SLASHER FILMS: THE FINAL WOMEN IN *HALLOWEEN H20* AND *SCREAM 4*

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## INTRODUCTION: FINAL SURVIVORS AND THE CASE OF FINAL GIRLS

Horror is one of the most popular genres in Hollywood and it constitutes an integral part of pop culture. An important subgenre of cinematic horror is the slasher film. If we deconstruct the narratives of those filmic texts that belong to this subgenre, we can say that these films are about a serial killer who is spreading fear in an American, middle class community by killing innocent people. At the end, the killer is usually defeated and the main character (or in some cases more than one) survives. In this article, I will define one of the most important elements of the subgenre under the term “Final Survivors” and I will analyze the transformation of these fictional characters from Final Girls to Final Women. More specifically, the subject of this article will be two female characters from two popular film franchises: Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), from *Halloween* (1978) and *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998), and Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), from *Scream* (1996) and *Scream 4* (2011).

In a typical slasher film, two characters are the most important people of the narrative: the killer and the survivor. Because of the major diversity regarding the way survivors are represented through the subgenre’s life, I will use the umbrella-term “Final Survivors” in which all the characters that survive in a slasher film can be included – from the teenage girls in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) to a boy in *My Soul to Take* (Craven, 2010) and a couple in *Hatchet* (2006) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012).

At the beginning of the subgenre and especially in the classical cycle<sup>1</sup> of the subgenre in the 1970s and 1980s, the survivor, who was usually a female character, had

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<sup>1</sup> In my book, *The Anatomy of the Slasher Film*, I thoroughly created a corpus of films and, after defined the narrative formula of the slasher films, I divided the lifetime of the subgenre into three



specific traits that were reproduced. One of the most well-known theories around this topic is the analysis of Carol J. Clover, which is about the representation of gender and sexualities in the slasher films. In this theory, Clover introduced the term “Final Girl”, who is the filmic character that manages to stand out from the crowd and be the survivor of the filmic text (Clover 1992, 35-41). This term describes the female character that survives defeating the killer and one of the first characters that incorporated all of these traits in their purest form is Laurie from *Halloween*. The thing distinguishing her from the rest of the characters in the filmic text is that she is not sexually active. From her appearance to her disposition, she bears virginal characteristics that are unique compared to the other characters that end up dead. So, even though she is weaker than the killer, she manages to eliminate and sometimes kill him. Some other main features of the Final Girl are that she is intelligent, resourceful, and watchful almost to the point of paranoia.

In the movies protagonized by the Final Girl, there are two types of possible ending: she will either find the strength to delay the killer long enough to be rescued or she will kill him herself. As the subgenre evolved after *Halloween*, the Final Girl was also evolving into a more active character that would fight the killer without any help from the rest of the community.

Even though Final Survivors are elements that are constantly part of the subgenre’s formula, the Final Girl, as Clover defined it, started to decline as the subgenre was entering its self-referential cycle at the beginning of the 1990s and the element of parody and pastiche became part of the slasher narratives. Jameson (1991, 16-17) argued that “pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style (...) the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.” Slasher films started to mock the conventions of the classical cycle by self-referential elements in the narrative. So, the majority of slasher films of the 1990s often played with this predictability and included hyperconscious characters who knew the formula of the subgenre and were trying to alter it. With the development of postmodern structures in the slasher film subgenre, we can spot different types of Final Survivors. One of these types is adult women, who are usually known to the audience from previous film installments of the same franchise. Paraphrasing Clover’s term, we can name them as Final Women, as they were once Final Girls. Two of them can be spotted in *Halloween H20* and *Scream 4*.

## LAURIE STRODE FROM *HALLOWEEN*

*Halloween* was one of the first slashers and it put John Carpenter’s name amongst those of the top horror filmmakers of the 1970s (Rodriguez and Rodriguez 2007, 107). The

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basic cycles: the classical (1974-1993), the self-referential (1994-2000), and the neoslasher cycle (2000-2013). For more, see Petridis 2019.



story of the film starts on the night of Halloween, in 1963, where young Michael (age of 6: Will Sandin, age of 23: Tony Moran) kills his sister right after she had sexual intercourse with her boyfriend. Then, the film continues from October 30, 1978, when Michael escapes from a clinical facility where he was held for years until he returns to his hometown to spread the fear.

The narrative is full of teenage characters with sexual desires that end up dead by the hand of the killer. The only character who survives is Laurie, a girl with virginal characteristics and without any interest in sexual activity. As Steve Neale (1984, 332) points out:

In babysitting on Halloween night while her friends anticipate a night of sex, she is cast in the roles both of virgin and mother, two roles which are signified elsewhere as exempt from Michael's aggression. Of the four adolescent women who are attacked, it is therefore, logically, Laurie who survives.

Laurie was meant to be the Final Girl and the narrative awarded her by giving her the chance to survive. She embodies exactly the paradigm described by Clover and this is why she manages to live. Her name could as well be a male's, she wears plain shirt and trousers for most of the film, she cannot get a boyfriend, even though she does want one, and she is played by Jamie Lee Curtis whose star persona is based on her androgynous features and appearance (Cherry 2009, 138). Nonetheless, in spite of being active and able to escape from the attacks of Michael, because of her age she is not as fearless as one would expect: as the term "Final Girl" indicates, she is just a little girl. At the end of the first film, Laurie does not defeat the killer all by herself, but Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasence) helps her out.

Twenty years after the first film, another installment of this franchise came into theaters and Laurie Strode was once more the leading female character played again by Jamie Lee Curtis. *Halloween H20* was produced while the self-referential cycle of the subgenre was occurring and, as expected, there are a lot of postmodern traits in this filmic text. There are self-referential and intertextual elements like when Jimmy (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) wears a hockey mask just like Jason's from the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* franchise, or when Molly (Michelle Williams) is in class and she sees the killer outside the window, something that reminds a lot of a scene with Laurie from the first *Halloween*. There are also elements that connect this filmic text with the most well-known pre-slasher film, *Psycho*. Janet Leigh, who interpreted Marion in *Psycho*, in this film plays the secretary of the school, Norma. There is a scene where she speaks with the Curtis' character, Laurie. In their dialog there is the quote "If I could be maternal for a moment..." which is a reference to reality, because Leigh is Curtis's mother. After this dialog, Leigh leaves with the same car from *Psycho*, while the music playing in the background is also from this filmic text. Even the license plate is the same as the second car Marion buys in *Psycho*.



So, *Halloween H20* would appear to be a typical slasher film of the self-referential cycle. But, if we analyze the two characters in depth, we will understand that the Laurie from the second film is the evolution of the Laurie in the first film. Furthermore, we cannot refer to them by the same term; Laurie from the first *Halloween* is a Final Girl, but Laurie from *Halloween H20* is definitely a Final Woman. In *Halloween H20*, Laurie decides to confront Michael Myers (Chris Durand) despite having the opportunity to run away and she is represented as much more powerful than she was in the first film, as well as ready to fight. As Kelly Connelly (2007, 19) says, “Laurie is no longer surprised by Michael’s appearance; rather, she has been waiting for him, and she will now take an active role in moving the film toward its final confrontation.”

An example of this transformation to an adult Final Woman is when Laurie first realizes that Michael is back. In *Halloween H20*, she retrieves a gun from underneath her pillow, unlike the first film where Laurie was dependent on other characters (and especially Dr. Loomis) to provide her with protection. Another example of the evolution is when Laurie sends Molly and John (Josh Hartnett) for help and returns to confront the killer. In the first installment of the franchise, after Laurie sent the kids to get help, she sat on the floor and cried. In this filmic text, Laurie breaks the gate opener after the kids are gone and goes back, as fearless as never before. At the end of the film, Laurie and Michael are alone in the middle of nowhere, Laurie has immobilized Michael and she kills him by swinging a hatchet and decapitating him. This is a very different ending from Laurie’s rescue in the first *Halloween*. She is now a woman, not a girl who cries and desperately calls for help; rather, she takes active steps to survive all by herself and she accomplishes it.

Four years later, though, Michael kills Laurie in the first sequence of *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), punishing her for her fearless actions. Slasher films are very famous for having a gender bias (for more on the topic, see Kendrick 2014, as well as Nowell 2011) and this is a strong example of it because Laurie is being punished for being active, even if her actions are part of the previous installation of the film franchise. But, if we see *Halloween H20* as an individual filmic text, we can argue that the representation of the leading female character has something quite different from the other Final Girls. Now, Laurie is a grown woman and she is brave and courageous like no other female character in a slasher film until the day this film was produced. Laurie Strode was one of the very first Final Girls and she was meant to be one of the very first Final Women.

## SINDNEY PRESCOTT FROM *SCREAM*

One of the most popular slasher films of the 1990s was *Scream*, which was meant to be the start of a very famous film franchise—not only of the subgenre, but of the whole cinematic horror genre. The story is about a series of teenage murders by a killer who



does not show his face by wearing the Ghostface mask.<sup>2</sup> Then, he starts to hunt Sidney, the female leading character. Television commercials for the first *Scream* featured the line: “Someone has taken their love of scary movies one step too far” (Wyrick 1998, 123) and Sarah Trencansky (2001, 71) points out that “Wes Craven’s 1990s version of the slasher reveals the ethos that would become the dominant slasher type for this decade.”

Even if *Scream* is part of the self-referential cycle of the subgenre and has various differences with the classic formula, the archetype of the Final Girl is present with Sidney (Neve Campbell) fulfilling this role. Of course, she has no virginal characteristics: she has a sexual relationship with her boyfriend and she is popular in her school—the exact opposite traits of the virginal stereotype of the Final Girl. Although we have a girl that survives at the end of the film, she does not have many of the characteristics that Clover described in her theory. So, even though *Scream* follows, and at the same time subverts the conventions of the subgenre, it breaks one basic rule of the classical formula: the killing as punishment for sexual desire. In the *Scream* franchise, the murders have nothing to do with any sexual activity and the characters are mocking this convention by referring to previous horror films.

Fifteen years after the release of *Scream*, another installment of the same franchise with the same leading character came to theaters. The story of *Scream 4* takes place in the same fictional town of the first film—Woodsboro, California. Sidney is the author of a book about her experiences with the murders that occurred in the first film and Woodsboro is the last stop in her book tour. There, she reconnects with old friends such as Sheriff Dewey (David Arquette) and Gale (Courteney Cox), as well as with her teenage cousin Jill (Emma Roberts). Then, the killer is suddenly back and the whole town of Woodsboro is in danger. In the end, the audience discovers that Jill is behind the killings and that she did it all for the sake of fame.

Throughout almost the entire film, the audience believes that Jill is going to be the Final Girl because she has all the characteristics that Clover described. Nevertheless, in the same filmic text, there is Sidney, a character who has been a Final Girl for the last three films of the franchise. Of course, she is not a Final Girl anymore and, by being more active and fearless than ever before, she has become a Final Woman, following in Laurie’s footsteps. She does not run away to survive, as most Final Girls would do. Instead, she actively hunts down the killer and risks her life in an effort to save the others. When Olivia (Marielle Jaffe) is killed, Sidney is in the house across the street and sees the murder from the window. Other Final Girls would have screamed and tried to call the police, but Sidney runs to the other house where the murder is occurring, finds the killer, and fights. In this later installment, she is not fighting for her life, but rather she is fighting to save others.

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<sup>2</sup> The mask created for the franchise, but it was inspired by Edvard Munch’s painting, *The Scream*.



Returning to the aforementioned argument that the killer and the Final Survivor are the two most important elements of a slasher film, it is fundamental to clarify that the element of identification of a slasher film, or even of a franchise, is the killer. Usually, the only element that remains constant and unvaried in slasher film franchises is the killing character. Victims and Final Survivors come and go, but the only character who manages to survive albeit defeated in more than one film is the murderer. Freddy Krueger (*Nightmare on Elm Street*), Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*), and Leatherface (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) are just some examples of this argument. Nevertheless, this does not occur in the *Scream* franchise. Sidney is the constant element and we follow her from adolescence to adult life in her evolution from Final Girl to Final Woman.

A very characteristic scene encompassing the traits of the Final Woman in *Scream 4* is the sequence set in the hospital, in which Sidney and Jill fight. Jill tries to kill Sidney, but Sidney manages to survive, in the same way as the killers of other slasher films do. We can say that a role reversal is occurring between the Final Woman and the killer regarding this characteristic trait. In the end, Sidney kills Jill and completes her task as Final Woman.

So, Sidney is another example of the transformation from Final Girl to Final Woman through a film franchise and, compared to Laurie, she is even tougher and more physically powerful. Along with Laurie, she is one of the first Final Women who manages to be more fearless than any other Final Girl and she is the only female character and Final Survivor who has transformed to the constant element of a slasher franchise by stealing this trait from the killer.

## CONCLUSIONS

Final Survivors are an important archetypical element of slasher films, even though only a part of it has been thoroughly analyzed by Clover under the term Final Girl. In this article, I tried to explain how in some films of the subgenre there is an adult version of Final Girls: women that are meant to be the Final Survivor, or, in other words, an unafraid and active Final Woman.

Two are the distinctive examples of Final Women—Laurie Strode from the *Halloween* franchise and Sidney Prescott from the *Scream* franchise. With the analysis of their actions and in comparison to their adolescent versions, we can clearly see that there is a transformation from a girl who starts to take some active steps in order to get away from the killer, to a fearless woman who hunts the killer herself and defeats him with no help. Laurie and Sidney are two of the most characteristic examples of a positive representation of the female gender and this is because the audience has followed them from their first teenage steps to their dynamic actions in their adult lives.



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