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## Can You Believe She Did THAT?!:Breaking the Codes of "Good" Mothering in 1970s Horror Films

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Can You Believe She Did THAT?!: Breaking the Codes of *Good Mothering*  
in 1970s Horror Films

by

Jessica Michelle Collard

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Dedication**

For my parents, Steve and Barbara, thank you for not only for encouraging my curiosity but for also showing me how to be the type of person I strive to be: kind, creative, and full of random information. And for Big Joe, who made me want to prove that being a “nerd” is not a bad thing.

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## Abstract

The threats found in horror films change with time, each decade consisting of threats that were most frightening for the time period. Horror film scholars, such as Andrew Tudor, determined that in 1970s horror films the threat has migrated from external forces into the home and the family. Invading aliens and monsters were thrown replaced by psychosis and evil children. This notion of making the familiar unfamiliar and threatening is paralleled in concerns addressed during the second-wave of feminism; women were making the normative and familiar idea of mother unfamiliar as they migrated from the private and into the public sphere.

This thesis looks at what happens when women from three separate horror films of the 1970s begin to trouble the normative ideas of what a *good* mother is by exaggerating the very conventions themselves. The films of analysis are *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *The Brood*, and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976). Rather than directly defying normative expectations of the *good* mother, the women of these films adhere to these codes in such exaggerated fashions that they become monstrous. Once the spectator deems these women as monstrous, their behavior is noted as performative and open to a possible reimagining of what constitutes a *good* mother.

It is in this possible reimagination of the *good* mother, due to negative illumination rather than positive prescription, where the revolutionary power of the carnivalesque perspective truly lies. As the main theoretical framework for this thesis, Mikhail Bakhtin's

carnavalesque perspective grants spectators the chance to participate in the reimaginings of the normative construction of the *good* mother. It is here where the monstrosity of these mothers can be seen as not solely as monstrous but also as critical of the normative. As the monstrous interrogates the normative, the spectators begin to question the patriarchal ideals and expectations of the *good* mother, which allows for reimagining of what constitutes the *good* mother.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Nola, sitting in the center of a darkened altar, raises her arms as her white gown splits down the middle, causing her arms to appear as wings. The vibrant white glow of her gown radiates softly as the camera pans down Nola's delicate body. Both the viewer's and Frank's attention are centered upon Nola. This slow gaze down Nola's body, typically utilized to reveal attractive bodies, unexpectedly turns repulsive as Nola's body is exposed. Tension builds at Frank's sudden look of horror and retreat. After Frank's abrupt backing away, the shot shifts to Nola. Her dress widens just enough to reveal a pulsating external fetal sac. The camera cuts, once again, to Frank as he is unable to look away. Disgust fills his face and the viewer is also struck with rapt repulsion. Nola's angelic visage is destroyed as she proudly presents her body for Frank and the world to see. She drops her winged arms, softly covering her body while prominently displaying her throbbing amniotic sac and its parthenogenetic fetus.

Nola's angelic beauty abruptly turns horrific as she transitions from a woman of exaggerated beauty and innocence, one that is almost angelic, to something repulsive and monstrous. It is in this exaggeration and transition in *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979) that I argue ruptures prescribed social codes. In fact, this thesis as a whole analyzes horror films from the 1970s that render horrific prescribed social codes, particularly those surrounding the progression of normative motherhood, precisely because these films exaggerate the social codes. The progression of normative motherhood becomes



monstrous and this monstrous maternity serves to unsettle the normative categories and trajectories of motherhood.

The main films of analysis in my thesis are *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *The Brood*, and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976). These films interrogate the questions central to this project concerning what happens when maternity turns monstrous via the exaggeration of conventional norms surrounding the normative progression of mothering. In the analysis of these films, normativity itself becomes monstrous through exaggeration, and it is through this monstrous exaggeration that the notion of normativity is troubled.

### Research Question and Argument

I assert that normativity is troubled and becomes monstrous via the exaggeration of social codes surrounding the ideals of good mothering. This troubling monstrosity is a result of the central claims of my thesis. These claims are as follows: (1) society inscribes socially constructed codes of what it means to be a *good* mother upon women<sup>1</sup>; (2) the mothers and mothers-to-be in these films exaggerate these codes in their strict adherence to them; (3) the prescribed codes become the site of monstrosity as the exaggeration and the fulfillment of these codes simultaneously fascinate and repulse the spectator; (4) the fulfillment of these codes and the codes themselves are seen as performative due to the excess the monstrosity releases; (5) the transgressive performance momentarily allows for a possible reimagining of what it means to be a *good* mother. As normativity turns monstrous through exaggeration, it allows for alternative possibilities for what it means

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) suggests a similar notion, specifically suggesting that disorders that are normatively gendered feminine, such as hysteria, anorexia, and agoraphobia, stem from the pursuit of normative femininity itself.

to be a *good* mother. These alternative possibilities are not a result of positive prescription or direct defiance, but rather drawing attention to social codes as codes. When the codes are recognized as codes, the normative boundary between what is *acceptable* and what is not is made visible—“making the movement visible breaks the silence about it, challenges prevailing notions, and opens new possibilities for everyone” (Scott, 1991, p. 774). While Joan W. Scott is referring to the binary of hetero- and homosexuality, the idea of making something visible in order to reimagine it is the main force driving this thesis. In order to reimagine what it means to be a *good* mother, we first must be aware that the expectations surrounding this category are socially constructed. Viewing the social constructedness of motherhood is possible in carnivalesque perspective.

Spectators participate in a carnivalesque reading of *Halloween*, *The Brood*, or *Carrie* when they are allowed an opportunity to reimagine what it means to be mother. As conceived by Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque allows a temporary space for challenging and reimagining social structures and hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1984). A carnivalesque reading of these films provides spectators a space to trouble the socially constructed notion of the normative mother by way of monstrous exaggerations. The exaggerated fulfillment of the social codes surrounding *good* mothering allows the women to be classified as grotesque bodies. The grotesque body, as imagined by Bakhtin, has “exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness” as its fundamental attributes (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 303). The grotesque body will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. However, it is not the exaggeration or the grotesque bodies themselves that are sites of transvaluation. The sites of transvaluation lie in the negative revelations the

exaggeration and grotesque bodies make possible. These unveil the excesses, the alternative possibilities, which social structures and hierarchies seek to contain.

This thesis has a dual interest in the representation of the normative *good* mother and the effect its exaggeration has on the spectator. Exaggerated depictions of maternity and the spectator's viewing experience of these depictions allow for reinterpretations that are the goal of this project. This thesis offers an alternative perspective to feminist approaches to horror spectatorship as well as horror scholarship. This thesis analyzes the way normativity can become a provocative site of interrogation due to its relationship with monstrosity. As normativity itself is exaggerated and becomes monstrous, the ability for to reimagine the *good* mother appears.

### Why Horror?

My selection of horror films, particularly 1970s horror films, for this thesis is a very specific choice. While horror films of the 1970s exhibit parallels to concerns of second-wave feminism, which will be discussed in detail in the following section, it is in their depictions of the monstrous mother that my attraction lies. The power of monstrosity lies in viewing it as more than just a simple opposition to the normative. Monstrosity can be seen as a departure from and troubling of the normative, as a site of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, and as a return of repressed excess.

#### *Departure from the Normative*

The relationship between monstrosity and normativity can be seen as similar to feminist scholar Simone De Beauvoir's (1949) discussion of how women are seen as Other to men. According to De Beauvoir, "man defines woman not in herself but as

relative to him” (1949, p. 13). The monstrous is defined in relation to the normative. However, monstrosity is a notion theorized as both an opposition to and potential critique of normativity.

The interrogative nature of the relationship between the monstrous and the normative is “the essential subject of the horror film” (Robin Wood, 1986, p. 71). While the monstrous is placed in opposition to the normative, its very existence allows the normative to be problematized; normativity is disrupted by the monstrous. The monstrous body “represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities” (Judith Halberstam, 1995, p. 27). While reinforcing previously existing cultural boundaries, the normative disruptions found in horror films allow the spectator to temporarily experience the monstrous and what had been repressed and contained by normativity.

### *Attraction and Repulsion*

Horror films are a site of both attraction and repulsion. Similar to Judith Halberstam’s celebration of monsters for their disruption of categories, horror scholar Noël Carroll sees them as “category-jamming” because they violate socially constructed categories of identification and knowledge (p. 194). Carroll explains that the repulsive and attractive qualities of monsters stem from “category-jamming.” According to Carroll:

Monsters...are repelling because they violate standing categories.... But for the...same reason, they are also compelling.... They are attractive, in the sense that they elicit interest ... because they violate standing categories. They are curiosities. They can rivet attention and thrill for ... the same reason that they disturb, distress, and disgust (1990 p.188).

The monstrous is repulsive because it represents a threat to the normative and is uneasily categorized, yet it is also attractive because it allows spectators to feel pleasure as they are allowed the opportunity to build new categories that accommodate the previously “category-jamming” monsters.

The simultaneous attractive and repulsive qualities of horror films are similar to feminist scholar Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. As Kristeva has suggested in her discussion of abjection, the abject is “that which does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, p. 4). The spectator is repulsed by the return of what was once repressed yet is simultaneously attracted to what was once known and familiar. It is this cycle of the return of what culture has radically excluded that produces feelings of attraction and repulsion in the spectator. When something threatens the boundary between dichotomies, such as self and Other, that is the abject. The abject must be expelled in order to establish the boundaries, borders, and meanings it threatens. However, the abject always returns. By allowing for the return of what was abjected, spectators of horror have an opportunity to reorganize cultural boundaries, to reimagine what it means to be a mother and a woman.

### *Return of the Repressed*

The mothers in this thesis challenge socially constructed notions of motherhood, they become difficult to categorize as they continue their exaggerated performances. While they may be adhering to the qualities that are normatively attributed to what makes a *good* mother, they do so in such exaggerated fashions that they become horrific. When their exaggerated and horrific performances break the social codes surrounding these

normative definitions, taboos snap and allow for a return of what was formerly repressed by the taboos and codes.

In this sense, the monstrous mothers in this thesis offer a literal representation of the return of the repressed. In his 1970s work on the horror genre, film scholar Robin Wood (1986) offers a discussion of what is repressed in our culture: sexual energy, bisexuality, female sexuality and creativity, and the sexuality of children. Wood sees the qualities as repressed because they threaten the normative. These qualities threaten the “ideal inhabitant of our culture, ... the individual whose sexuality is sufficiently fulfilled by the monogamous heterosexual union necessary for the reproduction of future ideal inhabitants” (p. 64). Wood sees value in horror’s return of the repressed because it complicates the normative by allowing for excess and different possibilities to return. Wood’s argument concerning the relationship between normality and the monstrous, as explicated above, is one that views monstrosity as critical of the normative. Wood sees the ambivalence of the monster as simultaneously attractive and repulsive, with the monster representing the “fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere” (p. 32). The smashing of oppressive norms, in Wood’s terms, allows repressed energies to be released. Horror films and their relationship to the return of what was once repressed links Wood’s work to that of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and his notion of the Uncanny in particular.

Freud (1955) sees this shift from familiar to unfamiliar as *unheimlich*, or uncanny, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (p. 220). The uncanny object recalls, though never fully or explicitly, that which has been repressed and anxiety emerges when the repressed returns by way of its

link to the uncanny object. What is repressed was once familiar; however, upon repression it has become unfamiliar. When mothers trouble the familiar definitions for a *good* mother by way of exaggeration, they become uncanny. The familiar notion of mother becomes unhomely, monstrous. It is this unhomeliness that ushers forth excesses that have been repressed. When the mothers and mother-to-be in *Halloween*, *The Brood*, and *Carrie* draw attention to the social construction of the codes surrounding normative mothering, the taboos put in place to repress and regulate behavior momentarily snap and release the very behaviors they were put in place to regulate. Suddenly, with this return of the repressed, the familiar idea of what constitutes a *good* mother is troubled and becomes unfamiliar, thus allowing for a reimagination of what makes a *good* mother before what has returned is repressed once again.

### Second-Wave Feminism

According to horror scholar Andrew Tudor, horror films of the 1970s began to focus on internalized threats, such as psychosis and possession, rather than external and invading forces, such as ghosts or vampires. “Madness becomes psychosis: a secular, dependent and internally articulated threat” (Tudor, 1989, p. 57). While new internal threats of the 1970s horror film began to trouble once familiar notions, similar concerns were arising from second-wave feminism. Second-wave feminism also began to trouble the notion of the *good* mother by making it unfamiliar. Women were getting restless at being relegated to the private sphere and began to desire a move to the public sphere. This restlessness was first addressed by feminist scholar Betty Friedan, the informally credited instigator of second-wave feminism. With her 1963 publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan brought to light the “problem with no name;” this problem was the

unexplained unhappiness the women of the 1960s and 1970s experienced while they achieved what society deemed ideal—a husband, children, and a house. Friedan states:

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman.... She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home.... Her only dream was to be a perfect wife and mother. Her highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, her only fight to get and keep her husband.... She gloried in her role as woman (p. 18).

In response to this ideal, Friedan suggests women need to move outside of the home in order to be complete, fulfilled, and happy human beings. They cannot be relegated solely into the roles of mother and housewife. Her questioning created a space for the concerns of second-wave feminists. There are specific concerns within second-wave feminism that are mirrored in the films of this thesis. *Halloween* privileges concerns of androgyny; *The Brood* is concerned with childbearing, particularly non-normative childbearing; while *Carrie* interrogates the biological and cultural aspects of childrearing, particularly between mothers and daughters.

### *Androgyny*

In John Carpenter's *Halloween*, androgyny is privileged by way of Laurie Strode and her exaggerated mix of masculinity and femininity that results in ambiguity. Laurie becomes monstrous in her exaggerated performance of the young girl who is continually shifting between categories such as child and adult, masculine and feminine, and normative and non-normative sexuality. Radical feminists were one of the groups concerned with the issues surrounding androgyny.

Radical feminists saw women as sisters, each sharing a similar experience as a woman while proclaiming “the personal is political;” they ultimately insisted that men



having control over women's sexual and reproductive lives was "the most fundamental of all the oppressions human beings visit on each other" (Tong, 2009, p.49). However, despite agreeing that this sexism was the worst and deepest form of human oppression, not every radical feminist agreed on specific details of the issues. These disagreements split radical feminists into two sub-groups: radical-libertarian feminists (RLFs) and radical cultural feminists (RCFs). The androgyny promoted by the RLFs is the most applicable one to this thesis.

The RLFs promoted androgyny as a way to end gender oppression. They encouraged women to embody the desirable qualities of both masculine and feminine characteristics instead of solely feminine ones. RLFs argued women's personality traits are not based on their biology, "just because a woman is biologically female does not mean she is destined to exhibit only feminine characteristics" (Tong, 2009, p. 50). RLFs such as feminist scholars Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone advocated for the elimination of solely masculine and feminine identities, suggesting that only the desirable traits of masculinity and femininity should be used in creating the androgynous personality (Millet, 1970). Firestone (1970) saw the power for this change in the realm of reproduction and familial structures, claiming that once women and men were allowed to experiment sexually, solely masculine and feminine identities would be of no use.

Laurie's mix of both masculine and feminine traits align her with the RLFs view of androgyny. Rather than eliminating masculine traits from her personality, Laurie combines both masculine and feminine traits in a way that allows her to survive, as well as keep the children she is watching alive. Laurie is a caretaker who is also, at times, extremely aggressive and overly observant.

## *Childbearing*

Radical feminists not only saw sexuality and androgyny as possible oppressors of women, but they also saw biological reproduction as a possible tool of oppression. Paralleling concerns of normative childbearing raised in David Cronenberg's *The Brood*, radical feminists were concerned with childbearing, specifically non-normative childbearing. In *The Brood*, women's ability to give birth is troubled by Nola as she parthenogenetically produces children of her repressed resentment and rage. Nola births these children naturally, without machines or any external help; however, it is also unnatural because she is the only one involved in the conception, and the children gestate in an external fetal sac. She enjoys birthing these demonic children and has essentially taken control of her own body. RLFs thought artificial modes of reproduction should replace natural reproduction, while RCFs thought natural reproduction was essential to women's power.

RLF Firestone (1970) argued that artificial reproduction needed to replace natural reproduction. She advocated against natural reproduction, claiming it was against the best interest of women, she saw the "joy of giving birth" as a "patriarchal myth" (Tong, p. 75). RLFs want to reclaim control over female bodies both physically and mentally. These feminists advocated for artificial reproduction because they thought if women were not physically, emotionally and socially tied to producing and caring for babies, they would have more options for contributing to society as a whole.

While RLFs thought that women should give up natural reproduction in order to create equality with men, RCFs thought that if women give up on natural reproduction,

they are giving up on the only power they have that men do not. RCFs support biological mothering and believe that women should take control of childrearing and child bearing. Feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (1977) discusses how men took control of the birthing process, replacing female midwives with male obstetricians; they did this in order to control women and continue the reign of patriarchy. RCFs saw the medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth as a way for men to control women and their bodies, thus keeping the patriarchy in power.

### *Childrearing*

Brian De Palma's *Carrie* questions ideas of childrearing as biological and cultural, especially concerning the relationship between mothers and daughters. Rich saw the patriarchal definitions of biological motherhood as something that women must reclaim as their own. She argued that within patriarchal society, women have been convinced that unless they are mothers, they are not really women (1986). Rich discussed how, according to social convention, *good* mothers are not allowed to have selves or identities outside being mothers. Mothers are supposed to give up all other aspects of themselves and do so without resentment. Writing about her inability to always meet the patriarchal definition of a *good* mother, Rich claims:

Sometimes I seem to myself ... a monster, ... and I am weak sometimes from held-in rage.... A 'natural' mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace turned to theirs, that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless. ... I was haunted ... by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren't those parts then abnormal and monstrous? (p. 21).

Rich's assertion that she feels like a monster when she deviates from the ideal good mother without a sense of self is critical to this thesis. In *Halloween*, *The Brood*, and *Carrie* the mothers appear monstrous as they embrace this notion of the mother without further identity. Rather than defy this convention, as Rich suggests she sometimes does, the mothers exaggeratedly embrace it and become monstrous.

The RLFs and RCFs positions on childrearing mirror those of childbearing. RCFs were in favor of biological mothering, just as they favored natural and biological pregnancy and childbirth. RCFs believed women should not only take control of childbearing, but also childrearing. Rather than favoring natural pregnancy and childbearing, the RLFs argued against natural childbearing; they similarly argue against biological mothering. They claimed biological mothering was not only unbeneficial for women and men, because it reproduced the idea that women had to be primary caretakers, but they also saw it as one of patriarchy's tools of control (Tong, 2009). RLFs suggest that mothers are made and not born, that women are socially conditioned to want to be a mother (Oakley, 1974; Firestone, 1970). This suggestion that the desire to mother is socially constructed, rather than biological, and that girls are socialized to want to mother is echoed by Nancy Chodorow.

Chodorow (1999) acknowledges there is a cross-cultural tendency for women to mother as opposed to men, attributing this to the more relational sense of self girls have as opposed to boys. Chodorow asserts that it is the relational capabilities of women that are valued in the domestic sphere and cause women to mother. She sees women's mothering as a contributing factor in the reproduction of the normative and patriarchal notion of family, as well as the sexual division of labor. Noting that the heteronormative

notion of family produces “socially gendered women and men, ... [and] men who react to, fear, and act superior to women” (p. 209), Chodorow sees this fear as a factor in reproducing the sexual division of labor that places women in the home and men outside of the home. With women as primary care-givers, this cycle of normative mothering is continually reproduced, and as a consequence of this cycle, the same prescribed social codes also continue to be inscribed and perpetuated.

As second-wave feminism addressed issues of androgyny, childbearing, and childrearing from opposing positions, the questions surrounding how to change the normative ideal of the *good* mother still exist today. The monstrous maternity that results from the exaggeration of normative femininity in *Halloween*, *The Brood*, and *Carrie* expresses not only cultural concerns but also curiosity about androgyny, childbearing, and childrearing. Unanswered questions from second-wave feminism are reanimated through the exaggerations of the mothers in this thesis. These films and issues in second-wave feminism prompt similar questions, while the carnivalesque perspective allows the space for possible solutions. Laurie invites curiosity about the clearly feminine adolescent girl due to her androgynous ambiguity; Nola prompts questions about normative childbearing due to her monstrous ability to give birth parthenogenetically; and Margaret troubles the codes surrounding normative childrearing with her intense grasp on religion and overprotection of her daughter.

### Chapter Descriptions

I organize this thesis around three horror films from the 1970s, *Halloween*, *The Brood*, and *Carrie* and the way each one represents a stage in the normative progression of motherhood. While each film represents a stage in the normative progression of

motherhood, it also privileges different concerns found within second-wave feminism. *Halloween* privileges androgyny; *The Brood* privileges concerns about non-normative, dare we say “monstrous,” childbearing; and *Carrie* privileges questions of childrearing. Each of these women becomes monstrous due to unintended exaggerations of normative social codes. At the first stage of the normative progression of motherhood, Laurie is the young adolescent girl, learning how to be a mother. She exaggerates the codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous mother-to-be and her resulting androgyny and ambiguity aligns her with the monstrous Michael. Nola is at the next stage; she is already a mother as she exaggerates the code surrounding the selfless caretaker. Margaret is at the final stage, where she ought to be setting her daughter on the path of normative motherhood, but instead she exaggerates her role as enforcer of chastity and virtue. However, their monstrosity is more than just an extreme deviation from the norm. While monstrous, yes, these women also trouble the existence of the normative social codes, the monstrous begins to question the normative.

As I have suggested, Chapter One focuses on Laurie Strode in *Halloween*. This chapter prompts questions concerning the social codes of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl at the beginning stage of normative motherhood. Through exaggeration Laurie’s virtue becomes monstrous as it leads to androgyny that is similar to the radical-libertarian notion of androgyny, one that privileges the combination of both masculine and feminine traits. Her androgyny contributes to her ambiguity, as she vacillates between the categories of child and adult, feminine and masculine, and normative and non-normative expressions of sexuality. As Laurie’s monstrosity grows, it allows for a return of excess and provides a forum for possible revelations and the reimagining of

what it means to be a *good* mother. To the extent that Laurie not only meets, but meets too well, the prescription of virginal adolescence, she draws attention to the performative aspect of feminine social codes.

While Laurie is just entering the first stage of normative mothering, Nola Carveth from *The Brood* is already firmly established in the second stage; she is also the focus of Chapter Two. This chapter privileges questions concerning normative childbearing while Nola's monstrosity troubles the codes that suggest a mother must happily give up her self and identity once she has a child. Nola troubles the idea that the *good* mother does not express resentment at events from her own past or at the prospect of having a child, an act that ultimately changes her life. As Nola represses her independent self and past, as well as her resentment at having to sacrifice these parts of her, her repressed feelings begin to return. This results in a monstrous self-less-ness as her repressed feelings return physically on her body in the form of an external womb and the ability to transform her rage and resentment into demonic children. Nola's monstrosity disrupts the normative progression of motherhood as it begins to question the convention that a mother must have the sole identity of caretaker.

While Nola is fully immersed in this second stage of mothering, Margaret White from *Carrie* is at the final stage of normative mothering, where she would typically set her daughter on her own normative progression of mothering; she is also the focus of Chapter Three. Margaret exaggerates her position as the enforcer of chastity, using religion as her defense. With time and repetition, this position turns monstrous as she refuses to set Carrie up for normative adult motherhood. Margaret's gradual exaggeration of these codes mirrors Carrie's journey of self-discovery and sexual maturation, and each

of these journeys terminates in a monstrous return of the repressed. Margaret's monstrosity is a result of her exaggerated virtue; she disrupts the normative progression of mothering by troubling the idea that the mother must subjugate her own desires to that of patriarchy.

Laurie, Nola, and Margaret give patriarchy exactly what it asks for and, in turn, exactly what it does not want. The women follow the codes that patriarchy claims make a good mother. However, by their strict adherence to the codes, their behavior becomes monstrous and troubles the very existence of the codes. The codes are seen as constructed by the spectator and are suddenly open to reinterpretation.

### Literature Review

The monstrosity that results from the exaggerated fulfillment of social codes and the spectatorial experience of horror films lay at the heart of this thesis. As Laurie, Nola, and Margaret fulfill the codes surrounding what it means to be a *good* mother in such exaggerated fashions, they become monstrous and transgress the very taboos and codes put in place to regulate their behavior. The monstrosity that results from this transgression allows for the codes that have been transgressed to be open for reinterpretation. While I look at monstrosity as transgression and the revelation that can come through the interrogation of normativity and exaggerated femininity, I am not alone in looking to monstrosity for the purpose of transvaluation. While Wood, as previously mentioned, sees the monstrous as a representation of the return of the repressed and a way to challenge the normative, feminist and film scholar Barbara Creed (1993) presents



an argument that seeks to transvalue monstrous females into something other than just normatively lacking.

Creed views these monstrous mothers as not only shocking and repelling the audience, but also “provid[ing] us with a means of understanding the dark side of the patriarchal unconscious” (p. 166). Monstrosity opens the patriarchal unconscious up to questioning, allowing it to be seen as socially constructed and thus possibly oppressive and wrong, rather than a universal truth. Creed utilizes her term the “monstrous-feminine,” as opposed to “female monster,” because the women are more than a “simple reversal of male monster,” and because they frighten the spectators in different ways (p. 3). Creed argues that women in horror films are horrifying not only because they represent the threat of castration (Freud, 1955), but also because they are “defined in terms of [their] sexuality.... [Their gender is important] in the construction of their monstrosity” (p. 3). Creed claims that when the female body is seen as monstrous, it is “almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (p. 7).

Because the maternal body evokes a reminder of woman’s ties to nature by way of its reproductive functions, the mother is seen as abject. The reproductive functions of the maternal body “threaten the symbolic order,” because she draws attention to its frailty (Creed, p. 83). Monstrous mothers interrogate the normative definitions of what the patriarchal unconscious says constitutes the *good* mother. By troubling the normative codes surrounding *good* mothering, the mothers help enlighten spectators to the constructedness of these codes, thus allowing for new interpretations. My thesis analyzes what happens when these mothers follow the patriarchal ideology in exaggerated fashions as opposed to directly defying the ideology. I see the monstrous mothers and mothers-to-

be in *Halloween*, *The Brood*, and *Carrie* as problematizing the normative by exaggeratedly adhering to the regulating codes of behavior the normative demands and deploys. Laurie, Nola, and Margaret do not only threaten the symbolic order by way of their reproductive functions, as suggested by Creed, but also illuminate the constructedness of the symbolic order by following it in an exaggerated fashion. They emphasize their sexualized Otherness from men as they follow the qualities patriarchy deploys upon them.

While Creed offers the monstrous-feminine in reading the abject maternal body, feminist and horror scholar Judith Halberstam (1995) and film scholar Harry Benshoff provide queer readings of monstrosity. Benshoff (1997) asserts that there is a link between monstrosity and homosexuality, and this link can actually be critical of the normative rather than a homophobic expression of the normative. In particular, for Benshoff, queer does not mean gay; it simply means an anti-heteronormative theorization. For Halberstam and Benshoff, the queering of a horror film allows for an expanded reading in which monstrosity is viewed from more than one perspective. So, while Creed offers the monstrous-feminine as horrific because of its gendered and reproductive abilities, Halberstam sees the monster as a site of multiple meanings, representing “gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body” (p. 21). Halberstam’s monster has a monstrous gender that is neither solely masculine nor feminine. She asserts that in postmodern horror, we are warned to be more “suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence” (p. 27). Similar to Kristeva’s idea that the abject rejects and reinforces cultural exclusions and boundaries and the necessary dichotomy between Self and Other

as conceived by De Beauvoir, Halberstam's monster disrupts boundaries and categories, thus reinforcing and problematizing the normative. Not only does Halberstam's monster problematize the normative, but its grotesque body is also celebrated and revered for its ability to blur dichotomies and boundaries. For Benschhoff, the monstrous is necessary in order for the normative to exist; there cannot be one without the other. A queer reading of horror films and monsters allows for this questioning of the normative. The monstrous mothers of this thesis allow for a queer reading of monstrosity and normativity. However, instead of direct defiance of normative gender codes, the mothers' exaggeration of gender codes allows for normativity itself to become monstrous.

The transvaluation of the monstrous relies not only on the filmic representation of monstrosity, but also on spectatorial experiences of it. Benschhoff offers a queer reading of monstrosity and spectatorship, writing that "queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a question of the status quo, and ... the nature of reality itself" (p. 93). For Halberstam, monstrosity "is historically conditioned ... [and] makes strange the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity.... Monsters always combine the markings of a plurality of differences" (p. 5- 6). She ultimately considers a spectatorial queer reading of a horror film as allowing for the "ability to reconfigure gender not simply through inversion but by literally creating new categories" (p. 139). Benschhoff relates the spectatorial experience of horror films to that of Bakhtin's carnival, hypothesizing that spectators take pleasure when "the conventions of normality are overturned ... in order to celebrate the lure of the deviant" (p. 98). The spectator receives pleasure from a temporary reprieve from the normative. However, a queer reading is not the only way to think about spectatorship in the horror film. Feminist film scholar Carol J. Clover (1993)

offers an explication of the horror film by ways of cross-gender identification via her notion of the Final Girl.

The Final Girl is the ambiguously gendered lone survivor who is ultimately masculinized for male spectator identification. Clover asserts that the Final Girl encourages “cross-gender identification” (p. 154), and the spectator begins to identify with the androgynous Final Girl. This identification with the Final Girl allows the spectator to identify with feminine vulnerability in addition to masculine victory. I depart from Clover’s notion by looking at the way these monstrous mothers strictly adhere to social codes surrounding femininity and maternity. While Clover asserts that the Final Girl is androgynous, and ultimately masculinized, I am analyzing what happens when these mothers perform femininity and maternity to the extreme. These mothers embrace the social constructions of femininity and maternity in exaggerated fashions. This representation of the exaggeration encourages the queer reading Halberstam and Benschhoff promoted. The exaggeration allows the spectator to participate in a carnivalesque reading through which they are able to question the normative social codes.

### Methodology

I am interested applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque to horror scholarship and feminist approaches to horror representation and spectatorship. As conceived by Bakhtin, the carnivalesque describes a temporary space for challenging and reimagining social structures. The spirit of carnival is able to “liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions.... This carnival spirit offers the chance ... to enter a completely new order of things” (1984, p.34). The carnivalesque is a provocative tool. It offers a venue to create a dialogue between marginalized voices and

the dominant order. The carnivalesque perspective provides a temporary space where normative and patriarchal ideas can be interrogated and inverted or, at the very least, opened for reimagination.

Providing a carnivalesque reading of these horror films allows monstrosity to show its transvaluation ability on and off screen. The exaggeration that results from Laurie, Nola, and Margaret's strict adherence to the social codes surrounding *good* mothering draws the spectator's attention to the constructedness of social codes. Once the codes are seen as codes, the taboos put in place regulate excess are temporarily suspended, thus causing the women to be seen as monstrous. The transgression of the taboos allow for the negative illumination of the normative. Suddenly, the normative codes are problematized and have the possibility to be reimaged. The exaggerated performances of Laurie, Nola, and Margaret transgress taboos and evoke, without prescribing, new alternatives for what it means to be not only a *good* mother, but also a mother in general. Because the carnivalesque subverts current societal prescriptions, it does not offer concrete alternatives; instead, it offers a space in which alternatives can be imagined. The carnivalesque space and its suspension of taboos are only temporary, however. Order must resume, but it does not have to be the same order. This possibility for change motivates not only my thesis, but also the films I have selected for analysis and the theoretical and methodological frameworks that are being utilized.

One of critical features of the carnivalesque is the grotesque body. As described by Bakhtin, the grotesque body has "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness" as its fundamental attributes (1984, p. 303). While Bakhtin conceives a more literal and physical grotesque body, I employ a more theoretical notion of the grotesque. Bakhtin

looks at physical characteristics, such as larger-than-life eyes and mouths or the “human nose being transformed into a snout or beak” (p.316). Instead of looking at physical traits of these women, I analyze their behavior and, in some cases, their clothing and use of props. Aside from exaggeration, another feature of the grotesque body that is critical to this analysis is its change and ambiguity. The grotesque body transgresses boundaries while never reaching a terminal end. It is in a perpetual state of change. The grotesque body “is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, treated, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (p. 317). The grotesque body defies easy categorization because it is always changing and adapting; it is never finished. It is not only constructed by society, but also constructs other bodies by deploying the same constructions it is attempting to disrupt. By their participation in the normative progression of mothering, Laurie, Nola, and Margaret are never finished. They are always reacting to and unintentionally exaggerating the social codes patriarchy deploys upon them. This thesis analyzes the exaggerated, hyperbolic, and excessive behaviors of the mothers. Each of the women in my thesis displays an exaggerated adherence to the codes that regulate what a mother *should be*. The exaggerated adherence to these social codes directs the viewers to see their behaviors as grotesque performances.

These grotesque performances draw attention to the social construction of the codes that are regulating what makes a good mother. As these mothers exaggerate the normative social codes at their stage of normative mothering, they are classified as grotesque bodies and the very codes they exaggerate become sites of monstrosity. Their monstrosity begins to disrupt the normative progression of motherhood and the codes are

then seen as socially constructed. Thus, the fulfillment of the codes are seen as performative and open to reimagination. This grotesque performance of *good* mother harkens to Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (1990). Butler asserts that gender is performative, rather than biological. The performativity of these codes come as a result from the monstrosity of the mothers as they transgress the very codes they exaggerate.

The transgression and temporary suspension of these taboos draws upon the work of Georges Bataille (1986), who argues that the fascination surrounding the transgression of taboos exists because it allows a temporary break. The taboos will be put back in place and order will eventually be restored, though not necessarily in the same way. The transgression allows for a temporary moment in which new possibilities exist; however, the transgression is "all the more powerful because the return to stability afterwards ... and without that the outward surge could not take place" (Bataille, p. 80). It is in this temporary chaos due to the suspension of taboos where the carnivalesque perspective is able to provide opportunity for the reinterpretation of *good* mother. Bataille's theories of taboos and transgression theorize the interplay between fascination and repulsion the spectator feels while watching these mothers challenge dominant structures of femininity and maternity via exaggerated performances of motherhood.

### Concluding Thoughts

It is important to note that the carnivalesque is sanctioned by the status quo. The dominant order that it subverts and interrogates is the same order that grants it permission to exist. The mothers of this thesis are not acting in direct defiance in the ways expressed by Creed, Halberstam, and Benshoff. This thesis differs from the direct defiance of the

normative because it explores the possibilities that result from troubling the normative via subscription to it. This project explores the possibilities of normativity itself becoming a site of critique and transformation by way of exaggeration. As Bakhtin's carnival seeks transformation through the inversion of the normative structures that sanction it, I am proposing a project that seeks a possibility for the reimagining of the social codes surrounding the *good* by way of exaggerating normativity itself.



## **Chapter Two: Halloween: Laurie Strode: The Good Girl?**

Annie walks into the kitchen clad only in a men's button-down white shirt and a blanket draped over her shoulder. Wiping her hands on the dishtowel draped over her shoulder, apron-wearing Laurie listens as Annie begins to tell her how she ended up wearing her half-missing outfit. Angry with Annie for calling Ben Tramer and telling him that Laurie found him attractive, Laurie tells Annie to call Ben and tell him that she was "just fooling around." Annie reveals that she might consider calling Ben in the morning, if Laurie watches Lindsey, the child she's babysitting, while Annie goes to pick up her boyfriend. As Annie walks out the door, Laurie continues to wring the dish towel in her hands, and turning back into the kitchen, says, "The old Girl Scout comes through again."

This notion of Laurie Strode as a Girl Scout, a "good girl," is repeated throughout John Carpenter's 1978 film *Halloween*, starring Jamie Lee Curtis and Donald Pleasence. The film focuses on the return of Michael Meyers to his hometown of Haddonfield, Illinois, fifteen years after he killed his sister. However, this Halloween, Michael's attention is on sixteen-year-old babysitter, Laurie. As Michael relives his crime, Laurie struggles to keep herself, and the two children she is taking care of, alive. A conventional reading of this film classifies Laurie as the good girl who defeats the villain and saves the children with whose care she is charged. In this reading, it is easy to see Laurie and Michael as complementary, yet opposite, parts—Laurie as heroine and Michael as monster. This conventional reading allows for clearly defined roles and categories. Laurie

is the protagonist who follows societal expectations of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl, while Michael is the large masculine killer who punishes teens for their premarital sexuality. However, a closer examination of the film acknowledges that there is something amiss about Laurie and that maybe the distinction between heroine and monster may not be as clear as previously thought. Carol J. Clover (1992) encourages a different reading as she sees women as “protagonists in the full sense: they combine the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero” (p. 17). I, like Clover, also offer a reimagining of the conventional understandings of Laurie. However, while Clover utilizes cross-gender identification to underscore her unconventional reading, I focus on exaggerated normativity and the way the resulting monstrosity complicates the normative. This close examination reveals ambiguity in both Laurie and Michael, linking the two in monstrosity. Laurie’s ambiguity results from her exaggerations of conventional femininity and consistent vacillations of categories, while Michael’s results from a child-like lack of self and identity. This exaggeration and resulting ambiguity helps to classify Laurie as a grotesque body. Once Laurie is seen as ambiguous and therefore a grotesque body and monstrous, her monstrosity disrupts the normative progression of motherhood.

Laurie depicts and troubles the social codes of the virginal and virtuous mother-to-be. She is the epitome of the “good” girl, the Girl Scout. However, it is her very portrayal of the good girl, the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl, which sets her apart from her peers and causes her ambiguity. While the film uses Laurie to promote the ideal of the good girl, it does so in such an exaggerated fashion that she is the one that is continually marked as different, Othered. Her interests appear to lie solely in her studies and babysitting while her friends are interested in boys and sex. Even Laurie’s physical

appearance and clothing mark her as different, she chooses to wear more conservative clothing than her peers. These differences, despite their exaggerated adherence to conventional femininity, result in Laurie having an ambiguous personality, an ambiguity that is mirrored in the monstrous Michael. The ambiguity exhibited by Laurie and Michael is compounded by their continued vacillations between the categories of child and adult, feminine and masculine, and normative and non-normative expressions of sexuality. As monstrosity troubles the normative, it leads to the spectator to see the behavior as performance, which disrupts the normative progression of mothering and allows for possible reinterpretations of what it means to be a *good* mother.

### The Reproduction of Normative Mothering

It is important to note that Laurie, unlike Nola Carveth of *The Brood* or Margaret White of *Carrie*, is not a biological mother. She is a mother-to-be. At sixteen, Laurie is at the beginning stage of learning how to be a mother and a caretaker, teetering between the end of childhood and the start of adulthood. She is an experienced babysitter, as evidenced by the “small fortune” her friend Lynda claims Laurie must have as a result of “babysitting so much.” Laurie’s high frequency of babysitting is also suggested when she runs into her babysitting charge, Tommy, and tells him that she is coming over that night, “same time, same place.” At this early point in the film, Laurie’s relationship with Tommy is clearly that of a babysitter and someone else’s child. Laurie quickly agrees to Tommy’s wishes for entertainment for that night—watching monster movies, being read to, and making jack-o-lanterns; she also gently teases him about his fear of walking up to the old Meyers house. However, as the film progresses and she is placed not only in charge of Tommy’s safety, but also his neighbor Lindsey’s survival, Laurie becomes a

more maternal figure. She refers to them as her “babies.” While Laurie may be at the start of the normative progression of motherhood, the film quickly advances her progress due to the narrative threat Michael introduces. The introduction of Michael demands adult and feminine behavior of Laurie, who is also childish and, in some ways masculine.

### Exaggeration

This section looks at the exaggeration of normative conventions of femininity that Laurie performs. However, despite this strict adherence to normative social codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl, Laurie is marked as different from her friends. This difference is pointed out, not just by her friends, but also by Laurie herself, it is specifically shown in her physical appearance, interests, and sexual experience and expression. Laurie’s difference is shown physically in how she dresses and presents herself in comparison with her peers. In the first half of the film, while Annie and Lynda are in jeans and tight sweaters, Laurie is wearing a long skirt paired with a turtleneck shirt, long sweater, thick leggings, and loafers. In the second half of the film, while Annie is walking around in just a man’s button-down shirt with a blanket over her shoulders and Lynda is naked or wrapped in a sheet, Laurie is in jeans with a white button-down shirt covered by a dark blue sweater. Laurie’s matronly look is even more evident when Annie comes over to Tommy’s house to drop off Lindsey. Annie, still clad in her shirt and blanket, is shown standing next to Laurie, whose sweater has been replaced with a flowery apron. This juxtaposition of Annie and Laurie illustrates the idea that there is something different about Laurie. While Laurie follows normative social conventions by appearing virginal, almost matronly, Annie rebels against it and flaunts her sexuality. However, despite her adherence to normative conventions, it is Laurie who

is the different one. The spectator feels as if there is something suspiciously off about Laurie precisely because she is following the normative social convention so strictly while her friends so clearly rebel against it.

It is not only Laurie's physical appearance that marks her as different, it is also her interests and how that differs from her friends and convention. When Laurie and Lynda are walking home from school, Lynda is busy brushing her hair and putting on makeup, while Laurie is carrying a large stack of text books, to which Lynda jokes that Laurie needs "a shopping cart" to get those books home. As Lynda chronicles her overly busy life—having to learn three new cheers, get her hair done, and attend the homecoming dance the next day—Laurie mentions that she has nothing to do "as usual." Lynda replies, "It's your own fault, and I don't feel a bit sorry for you," implying that Laurie has turned down invitations in order to pursue other activities, most likely studying or babysitting. As Annie joins the twosome, Lynda and Annie discuss their plans for the night—Annie is going to babysit Lindsey, while Lynda and her boyfriend, Bob, fool around at the house. Laurie, who will be babysitting three houses down at the Doyle residence, is excited at the thought of the three friends being able to "keep each other company." Annie quickly quells Laurie's excitement by comparing talking to Laurie with watching "the kid sleep" and listening to "Lynda screw around." Annie clearly has no interest in babysitting; she calls Laurie and makes plans with her boyfriend, while Lindsey is watching television alone. Laurie, on the other hand, clearly enjoys the activities she does with Tommy and Lindsey. Laurie and the children watch scary movies, carve jack-o-lanterns, and make popcorn. Laurie is just as interested in these activities as the children, while Annie separates herself from Lindsey and takes the

first opportunity she can to leave Lindsey with Laurie. These different interests from her friends mark Laurie as different, they are also looked down upon by her friends. Annie correctly assumes Laurie is having fun with the children. Laurie's enjoyment of these childish activities marks her as different from her friends who are enjoying flaunting their sexuality.

The most salient way Laurie is marked as different from her friends is with regards to her sexual inexperience and implied disinterest. Laurie fulfills the expectation of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl. When Laurie thinks she sees Michael disappear behind a hedge, Annie investigates as Laurie hangs back. When Annie sees no one, she jokes that "he wants to take you out tonight." When Laurie asserts that she saw someone there, Annie shakes her head and sarcastically says, "Poor Laurie. Scared another one away. It's tragic. You never go out." Here, she implies that Laurie prefers babysitting to dating. At other times, Annie directly addresses Laurie's virginity and virtue. When Laurie arrives home from school, she receives a phone call during which all she hears is what sounds like "obscene breathing." Laurie hangs up, the phone rings again, and it is Annie asking why Laurie hung up on her. After explaining that she was chewing, Annie says, "You're losing it, Laurie." Laurie tells her, "I've already lost it," to which Annie replies, "I doubt that." While Laurie is implying that she has lost her senses, Annie takes a more carnal view and not only suggests that the "it" Laurie has lost is her virginity, but also the idea of Laurie losing her virginity is preposterous. Despite Laurie's fulfillment of the social codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl, she is marked as different by her friends precisely because of this exaggerated adherence.

While Laurie's difference is remarked upon by her friends and Laurie herself, the perception of this difference varies for each party. Laurie perceives this difference as slight. She believes guys do not ask her out because they think she is "too smart;" she is upset that she, "as usual," has nothing to do on homecoming. Her friends, however, place the fault on Laurie. Lynda and Annie see Laurie as "scaring" boys away and turning people and invitations down in favor of homework and babysitting. Laurie's conservative dress, enjoyment of childish activities and her studies, as well as her virginity and sexual inexperience, are conventional values she fulfills. However, this fulfillment marks her as different because her peers rebel against these conventions. The very fact that Laurie's difference is perceived in such varying degrees provides a foundation for a departure from the conventional reading of the film. While Laurie represents a conservative ideal of teen-aged femininity, the film mocks this ideal by making her different from her peers, challenging the very ideal Laurie represents.

Clover utilizes Laurie as the prototypical example of the Final Girl, a figure that also challenges normative sexuality. Clover's Final Girl is the ambiguously gendered lone survivor who defeats the male monster, her ambiguity allowing for cross-gender identification. Laurie, as the Final Girl, "is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (1992, p. 40). While Clover utilizes this ambiguity, specifically in response to questions of spectatorial identification, I see the ambiguity as a result from Laurie's exaggeration of the social codes surrounding conventional femininity and the virginal and virtuous

adolescent girl. While Laurie does fit facets of Clover's Final Girl, it is her exaggeration of the code of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl, and the way this exaggeration marks her as different, that lead her to be seen as an ambiguous and grotesque body. However, her exaggeration is not the only characteristic of Laurie that aids in her ambiguity and construction as a grotesque body—it is also her vacillations and simultaneous inhabiting of seemingly opposing categories. Laurie's vacillations emerge from her exaggerations, allowing her to be constructed as a grotesque body.

### The Grotesque Body and Monstrosity

Laurie is in an interesting position to blur conventional dichotomies and trouble categories. Rather than fully embracing the category of masculine or feminine, child or adult, and normative or non-normative expressions of sexuality, Laurie vacillates between them. She never fully embodies one or the other, but rather, simultaneously traverses each category. Her constant shifting causes Laurie to queer dichotomies put in place to regulate and categorize women. Laurie's continual shifts also contribute to her classification as a grotesque body, as one of the tenets of the grotesque body is it is constantly changing. The grotesque body "is never finished, never completed" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.317). It is always changing and growing, it can never be finished. Laurie's continual category shifting causes the spectator to see her as ambiguous because she becomes difficult to categorize as she inhabits two seemingly opposing positions. This ambiguity is mirrored in Michael, aligning Laurie with the monstrous.

Laurie's opposition to easy categorization and monstrous transformation begins with her shifting between childlike and adult behavior. To begin, Laurie exhibits an



intuitive (un)awareness of Michael's presence. When Laurie is by herself or with her peers, she is always the first one aware of Michael's presence. When Laurie is walking with her friends, Lynda and Annie, she is the first to notice Michael drive past them, and she is also the first, and only, one to see him when she and Annie are walking home. Laurie appears to have an intuitive awareness for Michael's presence when alone or in the company of her peers. However, when Laurie is with the children, she suddenly is the last to notice Michael's presence. After Laurie stabs Michael with a knitting needle, she runs upstairs to find the hidden children. As Laurie is telling Tommy and Lindsey that everything is safe, Tommy notices Michael as he slowly walks up the stairs. When Laurie is with her contemporaries, she is more childlike, yet when she is with children, she is thrust into the position of an adult. Her (un)awareness is a sign of her childishness and her adulthood as only the children of the film are truly able to see Michael clearly. William Paul unintentionally points to Laurie's child-like state of being when he writes, "The virgin [Laurie] is the only main character who remains alive at the end of Halloween.... She is also the only babysitter in the film who actually does her job, who stays focused on the children and who knows how to talk to them. *And it is only the children that she cares for who can see the murderous Michael most clearly*" (1994, p. 323). Paul links Laurie to the children, even as he unwittingly suggests her adulthood by placing her in the role of caretaker. Laurie simultaneously inhabits positions of child and adult as she vacillates between the two stages.

As Laurie vacillates between the position of child and adult with regards to her (un)awareness of Michael's presence, her behavior also becomes a sign of her adulthood and her persistent childishness. At the climax of the film, when Michael is in the house

with Laurie and the children, Laurie focuses her energy on not only her survival, but also the survival of the two young children for whom she is caring. When Laurie realizes Michael is in the house, she sends the children upstairs to hide as she waits in the living room, armed with a knitting needle. She cries as she waits for Michael to reveal himself. Michael attempts to stab her and misses, allowing Laurie an opportunity to attack. Michael, however, is not dead and Laurie is forced to hide in a closet, rather than escape off the balcony. After several moments of crying in the corner as Michael breaks his way into the closet, Laurie stabs him in the eye with a wire hanger and picks up his knife when he drops it, stabbing him for the third time. Laurie gathers her “babies” and instructs them to run to a neighbor’s house and call the police, while she stays alone in the house. Laurie’s behavior in her attempts at defeating Michael in the climax of the film switch between childlike and adult-like within moments of each other

Similar to Paul and his unwitting suggestion of Laurie’s adulthood, Dr. Loomis, Michael’s psychiatrist, unwittingly validates Laurie’s adulthood. As Michael is attempting to kill Laurie for the final time, Loomis rushes up the stairs and shoots Michael. Michael falls through a window to the ground outside. Laurie, from her crouched position on the floor in the corner, looks up at the elderly man with tears streaming down her face. She unsteadily whispers, “It was the boogeyman.” Rather than scolding the sixteen-year-old for believing in the boogeyman, Loomis replies, “As a matter of fact, it was.” After saving the children and herself, Laurie regresses back into a state of child-like fear, utilizing the childhood construction of the “boogeyman” to express the terror of what has happened. The confirmation of Michael as boogeyman, while marking Michael as monster, marks Laurie as an adult because Dr. Loomis, as an

adult, appears to be validating Laurie's childhood belief. Her behavior indicates her adulthood as she manages to save the children and stay alive without help, at least until the very end when Loomis shows up; however, her behavior also indicates her persistent childishness as she cries and hides instead of fleeing or fighting. In one moment, she appears to be the adult as she instructs the children to hide, yet, in the next moment, she is cowering in the closet corner in tears. The spectator doesn't know whether to cheer Laurie on for her quick thinking and resourcefulness, like making a weapon out of a wire hanger, or to shake her for foolishly tossing her weapon aside without knowing if Michael is truly dead. Her shifts in behavior strengthen the ambiguity that develops in her initial (un)awareness of Michael's presence.

Laurie's mix of childishness and adulthood also links to her mix of femininity and masculinity (themselves frequently mapped onto childhood and adulthood) and her mix of normative and non-normative expressions of sexuality. Laurie's ambiguity that started as she traversed between childishness and adulthood is compounded as she vacillates between feminine and masculine, contributing to an androgyny that is similar to the one promoted by the RLFs of second-wave feminism. I assert that this androgyny is a result of Laurie's continual shifting between masculine and feminine categories and contributes to her monstrous ambiguity.

In the climatic fight at the end of the film, Laurie blends the dichotomy of masculine and feminine via her behavior. The way she shifts between childishness and adulthood is the very way she shifts between femininity and masculinity. The very way she is childish, as she cries and hides in the closet, she represents normative conventions of femininity. As she exhibits behaviors that are more commonly associated with

adulthood, she suddenly becomes more masculine, more aggressive. When Michael breaks into the closet Laurie hides in, her crying momentarily ceases as she stabs him. However, immediately after she stabs him, she cowers and continues crying. Clover asserts that while aggressive displays may be gendered masculine, “abject terror ... is gendered feminine” (p. 51). Laurie is seen as displaying both aggressive displays of force one moment and then immediately following these moments with “crying, cowering, screaming ... [and] trembling,” all actions that “belong to the female” (Clover, p. 51). Every aggressive act that Laurie performs is coupled with one gendered feminine, creating a sense of ambiguity and androgyny that causes Laurie to be considered monstrous. Laurie’s ambiguity and vacillation between categories also extends to her expression of sexuality.

While Laurie is continually shifting between child and adult and masculine and feminine, she is also shifting between normatively sexual and non-normatively sexual. As previously explicated, despite her strict adherence to conventional social coders, Laurie is seen as different from her friends precisely because of this adherence. Laurie’s lack of dates and her sexual inexperience are constantly remarked upon throughout the film, by both her friends and herself. It is implied by her friends that Laurie is not interested in dating or boys. Her friends point out that not only has she turned down dates, but also has “scared” boys away. However, it is not disinterest in dating, Laurie has trouble expressing her sexuality in normative ways. The film attempts to position Laurie as a virgin who, whenever she expresses an interest in boys, is met with shock by the other characters in the film, as well as the spectator. When Laurie questions Annie about what she plans to wear to the homecoming dance, Annie replies, “I didn’t know you thought

about things like that, Laurie.” Laurie remains silent as Annie attempts to prompt Laurie to continue discussing the dance. Annie tells Laurie that all she has to do is “ask somebody” to go to the dance with her. Laurie quickly shoots down that idea, saying that she “couldn’t,” but she knows Annie could. Laurie is clearly uncomfortable with the discussion of her sexuality as she continues to embrace the code of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl. Previous to this discussion, whenever boys are mentioned, Laurie is either silent or prompts her friends to answer questions. Despite her adherence to the social codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl, Laurie appears to be uncomfortable with this ideal; she also appears to be uncomfortable with the alternative of the sexual adolescent represented by her friends. Despite her discomfort with the ideal and the alternative, Laurie is unable to solely inhabit the ideal or its alternative.

The appearance of Michael during Laurie’s first demonstration of her sexual desire casts Laurie’s expression of sexuality as suspect, and potentially monstrous. As Laurie walks to school on Halloween morning she begins to sing; however, it is not a popular song, but rather, one she makes up. Laurie sings, “I wish I had you all alone, just the two of us. I would hold you close to me, so close.” As Laurie walks and the song fades away, Michael suddenly walks into frame and his heavy breathing gradually eclipses the song. Laurie’s first display of sexuality, and the first appearance of Michael and Laurie in the same shot, causes fear in the spectator as Laurie is now linked to Michael and his monstrosity.

Laurie’s ambiguity and androgyny lead her to a monstrosity that disrupts the normative progression of motherhood. She appears fated to grow and become a mother

according to the normative and conventional ideas surrounding motherhood and its progression. However, her ambiguity troubles this normative progression. Laurie's destiny, her fate, appears to be in danger. This is not necessarily a bad thing because her disruption of normative codes permits the excess that was once repressed to be released, allowing for the possibility of reimagining. Her discussion of fate in school suggests how all the mixing and categorical shifting might actually be about disrupting normative gender and sexuality and ultimately unveiling alternatives that have been repressed. When Laurie first sees Michael, she is gazing out the window of her school classroom. Laurie is called upon by her teacher to answer a question concerning the nature of fate. Laurie suggests that fate is "natural" and unavoidable. It's suggested that fate is "immovable, like a mountain. It stands where man passes away. Fate never changes." This discussion suggests an unavoidable path of normative gender and sexuality, involving clearly defined categories. However, Laurie disrupts this normative path, via her ambiguity, thus unveiling the excess normative social codes repress. Once the normative paths of gender and sexuality are disrupted, the excess that has been repressed returns, classifying Laurie as monstrous because she represents this return of the repressed. Her monstrosity links her to Michael as, he, too, is ambiguous when it comes to normative and non-normative expressions of sexuality, childhood and adulthood, and femininity and masculinity.

Laurie and Michael are linked in ambiguity and its resulting monstrosity, as Laurie is difficult to categorize, so is Michael. At twenty-one-years old, Michael is, by normative definitions, an adult. However, his behavior has not changed in the fifteen years since his first Halloween massacres; he is still silently killing, hiding behind a

mask. Everyone Michael kills has not only been a sexual being, but have also been open about their sexuality as they defy conventional social codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl. His sister had just had sex and was sitting naked at her vanity; Annie was on her way to pick up her boyfriend to bring him back to the empty house to fool around; and Lynda and Bob had just had sex. Michael appears to be punishing his victims for their sexuality, especially his female victims. However, Michael, like Laurie, is uncomfortable with his sexuality. He is used to repressing sexuality, yet, when he sees others so open about their sexuality, the repressed begins to return. The only way he can banish this return is by killing those who provoke it. Michael appears to get pleasure from reinstating the cultural regulation surrounding sexuality by way of killing those who transgress it. Director John Carpenter sees a link between Laurie and Michael in their “sexual repression.” In response to criticisms that *Halloween* punishes female sexuality, Carpenter says, “The one girl who is the most sexually uptight just keeps stabbing this guy with a long knife. She’s the most sexually frustrated. She’s the one that killed him. Not because she is a virgin, but because all that repressed energy starts coming out” (McCarthy, 1989, p. 17-24). Sexual frustration is itself normative. However, there is a way in which a return to the repressed not only challenges such normativity but repression itself. Laurie’s monstrosity is this challenge. The link between Laurie and Michael can also be seen in terms of their shared ambiguity and grotesqueness. Clover sees Laurie and Michael having “a shared masculinity...and it is also a shared femininity” (p. 49). His ambiguity also extends to the category of childhood and adulthood, just as Laurie’s does. As Michael is still, at the age of twenty-one, killing

people behind a mask as he did as a child, he blurs the dichotomy between childishness and adulthood, and femininity and masculinity.

One way Michael blurs this dichotomy involves his mask. Michael's face is never shown unmasked except for two brief instances—once when his father removes the clown mask from young Michael's face as he stands on the lawn after killing his sister, and again, when Laurie struggles to get away from Michael when he is strangling her. There is something oddly childlike in Michael when Laurie rips his mask off as he struggles to put it back on. Even Dr. Loomis appears to notice the childlike quality of Michael struggling to put on his mask because Loomis waits until the mask is fully back on before shooting Michael. Michael hides behind his mask as Laurie hides behind her exaggerations of conventional femininity. However, both Michael's mask and Laurie's exaggerations mark them as Other and, ultimately, ambiguous. This ambiguity leads to the spectator recognizing the performative aspect of conventional femininity.

#### Performance and Reinterpretation

Laurie's ambiguity allows the spectator to consider the codes surrounding appropriate masculinity and femininity as socially constructed, because she shifts so easily and often between categories. Similar to the way Clover sees gender as a "permeable membrane" (p. 46) and gender as "theater" (p. 58), Laurie's simultaneous embodiment of conventional masculine and feminine characteristics and resulting ambiguity illustrate how gender is permeable and performative.

Once the codes surrounding conventional femininity and the normative progression of motherhood are seen as performative, suddenly they are open to



reimagination. Judith Butler (1993) understands gender as performance and dependent upon context rather than a biological truth. Similarly, these codes are now seen *as codes* and their fulfillment as performances and, thus, open to change. Laurie's femininity is seen as performative once the codes are seen as socially constructed, her "femininity itself which is constructed as mask—as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity" (Mary Ann Doane, 1982, p. 81). Film scholar Mary Ann Doane uses the term masquerade not in terms of hiding but in the sense of wearing a costume. The filmic use of costume and props help cement Laurie's ambiguity and her performative nature of her femininity. Laurie employs the socially constructed ideals of femininity while trying to fit the socially constructed ideals of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl. However, her exaggerated fulfillment of these codes marks her as difference, and this difference is only compounded as she utilizes clothing and props to demonstrate her traditional femininity.

For most of the film, Laurie is presented with very little, if any, makeup, while her friend, Lynda, brushes her hair and puts on make-up as they walk. Even her clothing marks Laurie as different from her contemporaries. In the first half of the film, she is wearing a long skirt and turtleneck; she is covered from head to toe. While she is wearing a skirt, an item of clothing that is normatively worn by women, she does not appear as feminine as her friends who are clad in tighter jeans and shirts. Laurie manages to look like a matronly young girl, almost like a child playing dress up and wearing what she thinks other girls wear. In the second half of the film, Laurie has changed into a more conservative and masculine outfit—a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt. When Annie comes over to drop Lindsay off, Laurie is wearing a floral apron over her button-down shirt. Annie's overt femininity casts Laurie's subtle femininity as different and causes

Laurie to be read as masculinized and performative. As Laurie's performative femininity and her exaggerated adherence to the social codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl mark her as different, it also marks her as monstrous, a parallel found in Michael.

Laurie and Michael question what it means to be monstrous. While Michael kills people and Laurie does not, they each can be considered monstrous because they trouble normative categories and social codes. The androgyny and ambiguity that results from her constant categorical shifting and exaggeration of the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl causes the spectators to see the very categories and social codes to be seen as socially constructed. Laurie's behavior is seen as performative, allowing possible reimaginations of what it means to be a woman and a mother. These new reimaginations could include and validate more ambiguous and androgynous women and mothers; it could allow for women to be able to break free of the sole identity of mother and have broader definitions of femininity. This reimagination is allowed because of Laurie's classification as a carnivalized grotesque body, because of her exaggeration of social codes and continual categorical shifting. Laurie's monstrosity, resulting from her ambiguity, becomes a powerful tool to challenge conventions and norms surrounding the virginal and virtuous mother-to-be.

### **Chapter Three: *The Brood*: Nola, the Selfless and Self-less Mother**

Frank Carveth and his mother-in-law, Juliana, sit on her couch as his daughter, Candy, looks at old photographs. Sipping on scotch and fighting back tears, Juliana thanks Frank for bringing Candy to her house, knowing that if it were up to her daughter, Nola, she would never see Candy. After a brief and uncomfortable silence, Juliana tells Frank that he must now know what it is like to be a parent. Her statement appears to be aggressive as she clearly resents how Frank is only now gaining this knowledge at such a late stage. Juliana mentions how she had to sacrifice her past, because having a child and being a parent is to be “blamed for everything... The past [becomes] distorted, so you don’t even recognize yourself anymore.”

This chapter analyzes how Nola Carveth exaggerates the codes surrounding the sacrificing and selfless mother, resulting in a monstrous self-less-ness. As Nola sacrifices her sense of self in order to maintain the identity of mother; she represses the resentment she feels at being required to disown her past and her self. However, due to her participation in the controversial therapy, Psychoplasmics, her repressed resentment begins to return. This return disrupts the normative cycle of power in which Nola was participating and results in a possible transformation for what may constitute a *good* mother.

Tagged as the “ultimate experience of inner terror,” David Cronenberg’s *The Brood* (1979) follows Nola’s institutionalization at SomaFree and her participation in the Psychoplasmics with Dr. Hal Raglan, while her husband, Frank, raises their young

daughter, Candy. Psychoplasms involves a combination of drugs and intense emotional role-playing exercises, during which Dr. Raglan assumes the identity of someone important to his patient, typically a parent or a child. Dr. Raglan urges his patients to “go all the way through it. Go all the way through it to the end. Come out the other end.” Raglan pushes his patients to explore and vocalize their repressed anger and resentments, and psychosomatic side effects tend to accompany the release of repressed rage and emotions. Working with Dr. Raglan, Nola’s internalized rage at having to sacrifice her sense of self, her identity, to patriarchal expectations of the *good* mother, begin to return and physically manifest itself. This results in the birth of a horrific brood of demons to do her bidding.

The idea of a *good* mother who is protective, selfless, and embraces motherhood without resentments is both depicted and troubled in Nola. The notion that mothers are expected not only to mother without resentment, but also sacrifice their senses of self is perpetuated in both our society and our history. Still, the qualities of a *good* mother are neither definite nor biological; they change based on the context. Horror scholar Shari L. Thurer (2007) argues against the idea that there is a formula for what makes a *good* mother, “The current ideology of good mothering is not only spurious, it is oblivious of a mother’s desires, limitations, and context, and when things go wrong, she tends to get blamed” (p. 331-332). If a mother does not follow the social conventions surrounding *good* mothering, she violates social norms and taboos and becomes monstrous. However, I argue if she follows the codes *too perfectly*, she is also viewed as monstrous. While it may be easy to see Nola as a monster because of her ability to reproduce parthenogenetically, I assert that she is actually monstrous because she exaggerates the

qualities society assigns to the sacrificing and non-resenting *good* mother, thus disrupting the normative progression of mothering. Nola exaggerates the codes surrounding the selfless and devoting mother who mothers without resentment, including the mother who is happy at having to give up her past and sense of independent identity to be a *good* mother.

Nola represses resentment at this sacrifice, which ultimately returns via Psychoplasms, causing her to become monstrous. Nola's monstrosity is compounded as she participates in cycles of power deployment—she imposes the same expectations, conventions, and abuse upon her daughter that her mother, Juliana, deployed upon her. Still, the monstrosity exhibited by Nola also disrupts the normative power cycle she participates in, allowing for possible reinterpretation of *good* mothering.

#### Sacrifice and Selflessness

For being the subject of horror, spectators know remarkably little about Nola. Nola has no identity other than who she is in relation to the other characters. Whenever Nola is talking, talked to, or talked about, it is always in relation to another character. Nola is mother to Candy, wife to Frank, daughter to Juliana and Barton, patient of Dr. Raglan. When Frank goes to Dr. Raglan to confront him about the scratches and bite marks he finds on his daughter after she visits her mother, he tells Raglan, "I want to see Nola. I want to see my wife." Frank and Raglan continue to talk about Nola and refer to her as "her [Candy's] mother." When Barton Kelly, Nola's father, attempts to tell Nola about her mother's death and is stopped by Raglan, he continually refers to Nola as "my daughter," or "the girl;" while Raglan only discussed her in terms of her therapy. Nola is never simply Nola, her relation to another person is always emphasized.

Compounding this lack of a clear self is an extreme lack of knowledge surrounding Nola and her past, including what led to her institutionalization. It is not revealed how long Nola has been in therapy with Dr. Raglan nor is it revealed why she was initially admitted to the Somafree Institute. It is insinuated that Nola had some sort of breakdown, but the spectator is never given a specific reason. The closest revelation the spectator receives is when Nola admits to Dr. Raglan in a therapy session: "I feel so guilty for my part in it [her undisclosed breakdown]. I wish it had never happened." In addition to the unknown reason behind Nola's admittance to Somafree, the spectators know nothing of Nola. The spectators do not know if she has a job or how Nola and Frank met. The only brief mention of their relationship is when Frank and Ruth, Candy's teacher, are having dinner. He reveals to Ruth that he "got involved with a woman who married [me] for [my] sanity, hoping it would rub off. Instead, it started to work the other way." Nola herself does not reveal any specifics concerning her relationship with Frank. In a therapy session, Dr. Raglan presents himself as Ruth to Nola, saying that she and Frank were together and going to get married. Raglan, as Ruth, says, "From what Frank tells me, it was lousy from the very start. You never had anything real together." Nola becomes angry and informs Raglan/Ruth, "We had a lot. We had beautiful things, things that you couldn't understand." Rather than offer Raglan/Ruth, and the spectators, any specifics concerning what these "beautiful things" are, Nola leaves everything vague. Nola's lack of a clear self exaggerates the social convention of the selfless mother. However, due to the exaggeration, Nola becomes monstrously self-less as opposed to selfless.

The idea that a “‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity” and that “maternal love is, and should be ... literally selfless, ... a single-minded identity” is discussed by feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (1986, p.3). Once Nola became a mother, any clear and independent sense of self was transformed into that of mother. While she may be discussed in relation to the others, Nola is always defined as mother to Candy, while Frank continually refers to Nola as “wife,” he consistently follows the term by referring to his “child.” Rich references how she sometimes views herself as “a monster” and is “haunted” (p.3) because she knows that there are pieces of herself that will never fit into this social expectation of mother. Nola becomes monstrous because she fits too well into this social expectation. Rich questions if her qualities that don’t match the ideal make her “abnormal and monstrous” (p.3). Rather than defying Rich’s notion of the natural mother, Nola exaggerates it.

While Rich discusses this single-minded identity as a societal convention and expectation, Thurer discusses how a mother may be fearful because “she ceases to exist.... Her needs as a person become null and void.... Her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant. Once she attains motherhood, a woman must hand in her point of view” (p. 335). Thurer also quotes psychoanalyst Alice Balint, a psychoanalyst, writing “The ideal mother has no interests of her own” (p. 343). Rich sees herself as monstrous because she challenges the social convention while Thurer sees all mothers as fearful of this singular identity of mother. Both Rich and Thurer raise a fear concerning the loss of self in becoming and being a mother. Considering this expectation for women to sacrifice their independent sense of self for the singular identity of mother, it should not come as a surprise that

resentment arises. However, according to convention, resentment at sacrificing this sense of self is not allowed—at least it is not allowed to be shown. If resentment is to arise, a mother must repress it and never admit that it exists.

Nola's exaggerated adherence to the social codes surrounding the selfless mother who has no resentments makes her another example of Bakhtin's grotesque body. Bakhtin writes that "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness" (1984, p. 303) are traits of the grotesque body. I consider the exaggeration of social codes put in place to regulate behavior, while Bakhtin tends to look at the exaggerated physical attributes of the grotesque body—such as noses, mouths, and stomachs. In the case of Nola, both physical and social attributes are at stake. In the previous chapter, Laurie's exaggeration of the codes surrounding the virginal mother-to-be and the resulting ambivalence causes her to be monstrous. In this chapter, it is Nola who is the grotesque body. Nola exaggerates the code of the selfless mother, the woman who mothers without resentments. However, her exaggeration of this code results in a monstrous self-less-ness that, ultimately, alerts spectators to her repressed resentment at this sacrifice due to her participation in Psychoplasmics.

### Resentment and Repression

While Nola does not appear to fear the selfless identity of the mother, she does appear to resent having to sacrifice her independent sense of self, and her past, for that of mother. If Nola did not harbor some repressed rage or resentment, she would not be participating in Psychoplasmics, a therapy specializing in the return of repressed rage. Nola represses her resentment and rage at having to give up her past, essentially



invalidating all that she went through, such as the physical abuse she endured as a child. In one session with Raglan, Nola tells Raglan, who is presenting as Candy, “Mommies don’t hurt their own children.” Raglan/Candy pushes further, asking “They don’t? They never do?” Suddenly, Dr. Raglan has seamlessly shifted back to being himself and makes a statement: “They never do.” Raglan appears to be condescending as he tells Nola mothers never hurt their children. He is giving her a mixed message, telling her to express her rage but only in his prescribed ways. Nola becomes angry and says, “Sometimes, but then they’re bad mommies. They’re fucked-up mommies. ... Mine was. Fucked up and bad.” Dr. Raglan shifts into Juliana and denies her claim of being a bad mother who hurts her child, “You’re being so unfair, sweetheart. Mommies never do that. Mommies never hurt their own children.” Nola, suddenly child-like, reveals that Juliana did hurt her. She was beaten, scratched (the same injuries Frank found on Candy), and thrown down the stairs. As Nola reveals the abuse, she becomes angrier; however, she clearly struggles to express this anger. Dr. Raglan urges Nola to explicitly express her rage. He urgently whispers, “Show me.” However, Nola closes her eyes, looks down, and says nothing. Nola is still fully embracing the code of the mother without resentments, the selfless mother without a past of her own.

Nola is clearly struggling with repressing this resentment at having to sacrifice her past and independent self, she is attempting to repress her resentments at her family and, I argue, society. In the 1970s, Rich saw women feeling resentment as a result from the societal “devaluation of woman in other [external] spheres and the pressures on woman to validate themselves [solely] in maternity” (1986, p. *ix*). Women are viewed as bad mothers if they express resentment at this devaluation. Mothers are in a double bind, if

they express resentment at giving up a sense of self, they are viewed as monstrous bad mothers. However, if they do not express this resentment, if they repress it, they become monstrous mothers once their repressed anger returns.

Rich discusses the “exquisite suffering” she experiences as a mother. She claims it is “the suffering of ambivalence, ... [of] bitter resentment. ... [She] feels weak sometimes from held-in rage” (p.21). Rich views mothering as an ideology as opposed to a historical construct, it is subject to interpretation and change. A mother is “beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing.” Mothering is her “*single destiny and justification in life*” (p. 33). It is expected for mothers to repress any resentment or conflict she may feel concerning her role as mother and the huge life change that occurs as a result. If resentment is felt, there is no acceptable venue to express it. Any resentment or “conflict about mothering is tantamount to being a bad person; it violates a taboo” (Thurer, p. 333). The mother becomes monstrous if this taboo is violated. Nola’s monstrosity, originating in her sacrifice at having to give up her independent self is compounded as the repressed resentment towards her sacrifice begins to return.

#### Return of the Repressed

Nola represents a literal, and monstrous, return of the repressed. As Nola’s repressed resentment at her sacrifice begins to appear, thanks to her participation in Psychoplasms, she begins to develop psychosomatic side effects. According to a former patient, Raglan “encouraged [his] body to revolt against [him].” For male patients, the physical side effects include open sores and the development of gills (medically diagnosed as lymphosarcoma). However, the physical side effects for women are different. While it is never revealed the gender breakdown of Raglan’s participants in

Psychoplasms, Nola is the only female patient introduced in the film. This suggests that the internalized rage that Nola has repressed is so deep that not every woman is aware of this internalized rage, marking her as threatening. As the only female patient, Nola develops an external womb and begins to parthenogenetically produce demonic children. These children are products of Nola's internalized rage that have gestated in the external fetal sac, unwittingly suggesting that the prescriptions of the ideal *good* mother come from the outside. This suggestion also permits the fact that these external prescriptions are internalized as there is a child gestating inside the external fetal sac. The children in her demonic brood have a mental link to Nola, and, when Nola expresses the rage and resentment she has repressed, the demonic dwarfs kill those with whom Nola is angry. Nola's victims are representative of two central ideological institutions, family and school. Victims include her mother, Juliana, her father, Barton, and Candy's teacher, Ruth. The more rage and resentment Nola expresses in her therapy sessions, and the more explicitly she expresses it and the more violent the attacks. While the spectator sees neither the attack nor Nola's confession of annoyance, Raglan tells Frank that the scratches and bite marks on Candy were a result from the brood attacking Candy because she annoyed Nola, the reason for Nola's annoyance is never explicated. When Nola expresses some of her rage and resentment against her mother for abusing her as a child, Juliana is killed with a meat pounder in her kitchen. Nola is more explicit about her rage and resentment when discussing her father's lack of protection against her mother's abuse, and Barton is killed with a crystal sphere in the bedroom. Nola was able to reveal more of her rage and resentment when discussing her anger at Barton. Nola is most explicit with her rage and resentment when she discusses the threat she thinks Ruth

represents to her marriage and Ruth is killed with multiple toy mallets in her classroom. Each of these deaths becomes more and more violent as Nola's rage returns more and more clearly.

Along with Nola's return of her repressed rage and resentment in her therapy sessions, there is also material evidence that reveals the monstrous return of the repressed in the film. There is a framed poster on Dr. Raglan's office wall has a literal representation of the return of the repressed. It is a piece of art that features the title of the book he wrote, *The Shape of Rage*, as well as an extended version of the book cover. The artwork reveals what happens when the internalized rage that is suppressed is suddenly released. The black background has five white squares lined in a row next to each other. The first square is a closed fist being held up; the second square is the same fist, but where the fingers meet the palm, there is a slightly parted mouth; the third square is the hand open almost all the way, yet it is almost entirely covered by the open mouth; the fourth square is solely the open mouth, complete with tongue and teeth; the final square looks as if the mouth and the fist imploded under shattered glass; it is a chaotic mess of red and black. Each of these boxes represents the stages of Psychoplasms and ultimately how Nola becomes monstrous as her repressed feelings slowly returns and are expressed. These images suggest a move from violence to speech, with the teeth and the implosion suggesting that speech can also be violent. As Nola is the only female patient the spectators are introduced to, this suggests that not only are violent actions off limits for mothers but so is speech and the expression of returned resentment.

The theory of the return of the repressed originated with Sigmund Freud. Typically, feelings or experiences that violate cultural norms or expectations, including

violent actions or words for mothers, are repressed for ego constancy. These violations cause a sense of discomfort and unease which are unable to be easily rectified. Instead of sorting through these uncomfortable feelings or experience, we repress them. Freud saw what was repressed as unable to stay fully hidden. In some way, what is repressed will break through our unconscious boundaries and return, but disguised, when it does return, it produces anxiety. However, the return of the repressed is temporary and will ultimately be repressed again (1955). While Freud aligned his theories with ego repression, his idea grew and was applied to social oppression and the horror film by horror scholar, Robin Wood.

Robin Wood applies Freud's return of the repressed to horror films, seeing the end of a horror film as a typical return to the state of repression (1986, p. 61). Wood also discusses the link between repression and oppression. Wood suggests that repression is similar to oppression because we might also be unaware of how we are oppressed, "we are oppressed by something 'out there.'" Wood, in fact, claims that repression can be defined as "fully internalized oppression" (p. 64). Nola's repressed rage and resentment over having to sacrifice her self, in order to retain the identity of mother, begins to return and she becomes monstrous. As the poster of *The Shape of Rage* in Raglan's office is separated by stages, so appears Nola's return of the repressed. Each stage builds upon the previous one, allowing more and more of Nola's repressed rage to break through the cracks. The stages are also represented in her attacks on Juliana, Barton and Ruth, as discussed above. As Nola's rage begins to return and break through the cracks, she begins to take increasing pride in her ability to create life without a partner.

She does not see anything monstrous about her “new life, [her] new adventure.” These children are as much her own as Candice, if not more so because she created them herself, without the help of a man. She becomes the epitome of Kristeva’s abject body. Nola violates the boundaries between internal and external as she gestates life in an external fetal sac. She aligns herself with nature as she births one of her demonic children and licks the blood from its head. Yet, both the spectator and Frank are repulsed and fascinated, unable to look away from the monstrous woman that is displayed before them. As Nola lifts her white dress, she reveals an external fetal sac resting on her lap. The white dress frames it on each side, drawing the full attention of the spectator and Frank. After showing Frank her external womb, Nola caresses it and lowers her mouth to it. What begins as a soft kiss turns into a savage bite, ripping the sac open, blood begins to pour out. Nola continues to tear at the womb, widening the opening to show that there is indeed something inside. She gently pulls out an infant with a fleshy sac hanging off its back. Cradling it to her, Nola brings her mouth to the infant, causing a visceral response in Frank and the spectators. She embraces an animalistic side and begins to lick the blood from the infant’s head in an attempt to clean it. Frank recoils in horror and disgust, while Nola looks up at him with a proud and happy smile on her face. Nola’s happy smile suggests her pride at having born this child on her own, without help. As Frank backs away, Nola sees his disgust and becomes angry. With blood around her mouth, Nola, at first, softly and sadly whispers, “No. I disgust you.” Then she becomes angry and yells, “I sicken you. You hate me.”

Frank’s horror at Nola and her new ability can be read as simply horror at Nola and her external womb. However, I read it as horror at the break of boundaries. Nola has

literally placed the inside on the outside. She has transgressed the boundary of the clean and proper body, and she enjoys it. Nola enjoys her new ability, her new power, as it allows her to establish something of her own. It is a symbol of her desired independence. She revels in what she sees as natural. Nola threatens an order in the world; she has reproduced on her own, without a man. She “disturbs identity, system, order [and] ... does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, p. 4). She has become more than just a woman, she is a woman who is able to reproduce on her own. She becomes monstrous because she becomes abject; she threatens the “symbolic order” (p. 102) because she not only is reproducing on her own, without the help of a man, her repressed rage and resentment has now returned. Nola’s ability to reproduce on her own is an expression of selfhood as well as a sign of her repressed rage. Nola’s monstrosity begins to transform and complicate the normative progression of motherhood and cyclical deployment of power in which she has been participating. Rather than viewing Nola as monstrous because of her abject womb (Creed, 1993), a representation of disgust at the female body (Paul, 1994), or as a warning against women and their sexual power (Wood, 1986), I assert Nola’s monstrosity is compounded by her participation in cycles of power deployment. This participation cements her status as a grotesque body and thus the transformative possibilities of her monstrosity.

### Cycles of Power and Transformative Possibilities

While Nola can be considered a grotesque body by way of her physical body and exaggeration of social codes surrounding the *good* mother, she also becomes one by both inscribing and being inscribed upon by social codes. Nola is in the midst of a power deployment cycle wherein she is teaching her daughter to do the same thing society, and

her own mother, has taught her to do—repress her feelings. As Nola becomes silent while she represses her rage, Candy is silent when asked about her injuries after visiting her mother for the weekend. When Frank confronts Dr. Raglan about his daughter's injuries, he mentions, "Candice won't talk about it. She pretends the whole thing never happened." Candy represses what really happened to her, never revealing who, or what, really injured her—just like Nola refuses to discuss what Juliana did to her as a child.

After Juliana is beaten to death in her kitchen by Nola's demonic brood, Frank goes to the police station to pick up Candy. When he does, he is informed that she was with the police psychologist. Frank looks worried and asks, "Was she hysterical?" Rather than asking if she was frightened, a more reasonable expectation, Frank immediately assumes Candy must be hysterical. While hysteria and fear appear to be expected of women, both these reactions are stigmatized. However, the police officer tells him, "No. On the contrary, she was very cool throughout the whole thing. A little too cool." When the psychologist comes in, he tells Frank that he thinks Candice may have seen what happened, or "something which traumatized her, confused her, disturbed her in some way." The doctor tells Frank that he must attempt to help Candy remember what happened to her grandmother, otherwise, Candy may have a breakdown because "these things tend to express themselves in one way or another." When Frank attempts to initiate a conversation about what happened, Candy stares blankly at him as she remains silent. Frank tries to get Candy to discuss the events just as Raglan attempts to get Nola to discuss her past. The film suggests that the emotions should be explored, in order to prevent this breakdown, or more specifically, psychosomatic side effects. It also suggests that silence may result from prescription and a patriarchal expectation that expression be



routed in particular ways. Raglan attempts to explore Nola's repressed rage and resentment via Psychoplasms, while Frank prompts Candy to simply tell him what happened to no avail. The cycle of silence, of repressing troubling events and memories, is one in which Nola and Candy participate. It would not be a stretch to imagine that Juliana participates in this cycle as well. This cycle of silence mirrors Chodorow's notion of the reproduction of mothering. The daughters learn from the mothers how to mother. In this cycle, the daughters learn to repress traumatic events and not discuss them.

However, the most chilling example of this cycle of power deployment has to be the final scene of the film. After Frank strangles Nola to prevent her demonic brood from killing Candy, the father and daughter are driving away from Somafree. The camera zooms in, focusing on the bloodstained Candy. Panning past the bloody fingerprints on her upper arm, the camera tightens on two tiny bumps on her arm, holding the image there just a bit too long the screen goes black and the film is over. The two bumps on Candy's arm are similar to the ones Juliana describes Nola having as a child. The unexplained presence of these bumps on Nola is the reason Juliana gives Candy for why Nola was so often in the hospital. The repressed emotions are developing psychosomatically upon Candy, just as they had on Nola. At the young age of five, Candy has already learned to follow the codes about suppressing anger and fear. As Nola is teaching Candy, Juliana taught Nola these codes. This cycle of power deployment in motherhood is passed on from mother to daughter.

Barton unintentionally brings attention to this cycle of power deployment in motherhood. When Frank picks him up at the airport, Barton discusses his sadness at seeing Frank and Nola in the same situation he and Juliana once experienced. "When I

think about you and Nola and this sweet child having to go through the same heartaches we went through, it's enough to make you cry.” Barton excuses himself and Frank from blame. The “same heartaches” Barton and Juliana went through are now happening to Nola and Frank; however, from Barton’s point-of-view, these problems are something that happens to him and Frank, not something in which they participate. This lack of participation suggests this cycle is found between the mothers and daughters. Nola unintentionally confirms the cyclical nature of motherhood by saying Frank “thinks that I’m turning into my mother. Day by day, moment by moment, he thinks I am trying to make Candy into Baby Nola.” Candy is the new Nola, Nola is the new Juliana, and Frank is the new Barton. Now, instead of being abused child, Nola is the abusive one. It is a seemingly never-ending cycle that exists because women are conditioned to sacrifice and not express their resentment and rage. However, this cycle is not solely regulated to mothers and daughters. Institutions, like family and medicine, are put in place to encourage repression or, in the case of Nola, prescribed expression. Nola’s participation in Psychoplasms allows for sanctioned expression of her rage. However, this sanctioned expression is allowed by Dr. Raglan and her husband. These men act as conduits of patriarchy. They temporarily allow Nola to express her previously repressed resentment; however, it is in the space and way they deem appropriate. These men, while not directly in the cycle of power deployment, act as regulatory representatives of patriarchy.

This cycle of the monstrous woman who suppresses her anger and lacks a sense of self, does not die with Nola. It continues to live on in Candy and may possibly be reproduced by her children one day. There is no end in sight, “in the grotesque body, ... death brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is

renewed in the next generation” (Bakhtin, p. 322). While Bakhtin means this as a positive aspect of the grotesque body, in this instance of Nola and Candy, the repeated power deployment has the negative consequence of deploying the same expectation of the sacrificing and non-resentful mother. Nola deploys onto Candy the same constructions and expectations that patriarch place on her. The grotesque body “is continually built, treated, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (Bakhtin, p. 317). It is a part of power deployment, like the progression of normative mothering. It has codes and power inscribed upon it and in turn deploys these codes and this power upon other bodies (Foucault, 1978). As Foucault’s docile bodies are constructed by discourse and maintained by surveillance, so, too, is the grotesque body and motherhood. Nola learned to sacrifice her independent self and to repress her resentments from her mother, and Candy is learning to repress her feelings from Nola. However, there is something transformative about the always changing grotesque body. It allows for the possibility of change and disruption of the cycle.

Bakhtin’s grotesque body is one that is always changing while it “transgresses its own limits” (Stam, 1989, p. 157). The grotesque body blurs boundaries between the body and the outside world; it is limitless:

There is a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn quite differently. ... The grotesque starts when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions. ... It constructs what we might call a double body. ... It retains the parts in which one link joins the other, in which the life of one body is born from the death of a preceding, older one (Bakhtin, 1964, p. 318).

It does not only take the constructions society inscribes upon it but, in turn, deploys these same constructions upon others. It is limitless and yet still is connected to that which attempts to control it. For Nola, her changing body and ability to give birth without a male partner helps classify her as monstrous. However, the similarity between her relationship with her mother and her daughter suggests that the cycle of power deployment link the women. Nola is even linked to the patriarchal culture which is deploying these social constructions of *good* mothering upon her via her participation in the male-dominated Psychoplasms. Nola's monstrosity and classification as a grotesque body not only allows for change, but also expects change. Within the grotesque body, "there is nothing stable and calm" (Bakhtin, p. 25). Because it is always changing, Nola has the ability to transform expectations of what it means to be a *good* mother. As she draws attention to the social constructedness of the patriarchal expectations of the *good* mother, Nola allows for a reimagining of what constitutes a *good* mother. If she did not allow for this possibility, she would be providing a new prescription of *good* mothering. A new prescription would suggest a new ending, a completion which is the opposite of the grotesque body.

Nola attempts to follow the social code of the happy mother who has no resentment. She embraces the ideal of the mother without a self and without resentments too perfectly. Her lack of self and repressed resentment becomes monstrous as she begins to violate the very boundaries put in place to regulate *good* mothering. Despite the boundaries and limitations placed upon her by society, her own family and doctor, and her own attempts to adhere to this social code, Nola's repressed anxieties and resentments return. Nola's monstrous maternity is a result of her exaggerated performance of what

society tells her makes a *good* mother. As Judith Butler (1990) sees gender as performative as opposed to biological, I consider mothering and what makes a *good* mother to be performative and constructive. We perform what it means to be a *good* mother, just as we perform what it means to be feminine and masculine. Once the spectator sees *good* mothering as performance, the spectator is able to recognize the social codes put in place to monitor and regulate the performance. Nola's exaggeration of a *good* mother is thus able to open possibilities to reimagine what it could mean to be a *good* mother.

I assert that Nola can be considered a grotesque body because of her exaggerated performance of *good* mother. Nola's strict adherence to the belief that a *good* mother is one who loses her sense of self without resentment becomes monstrous when Nola's repressed rage and resentment begin to return. As this rage and resentment return, they are physically embodied by the external womb and her rage-birthed children. Nola's monstrosity is not found solely in her abject body or external womb. Nola is seen as monstrous because she draws attention to the social construction of the patriarchal definitions of what makes a *good* mother. Nola's strict adherence to what society tells her is a *good* mother and her place in the progression of mothering makes Nola monstrous. This monstrosity disrupts the cycles of power and the reproduction of mothering and allows for the social constructedness of these expectations and codes to be revealed. This negative illumination allows for reimaging what constitutes a *good* mother without offering positive prescriptions.

#### **Chapter Four: Carrie: Margaret White: The Overprotective Mother?**

Carrie walks slowly down the stairs, staring at the still figure of her mother near the phone; she hesitates in the threshold of the dining room, neither entering nor leaving, neither young girl nor grown woman. Margaret, Carrie's mother, stands shrouded in black in front of the tapestry of the Last Supper on the wall. "Who was that? Who called?" Carrie asks hesitantly. Margaret turns slightly towards Carrie, holding the Bible. In a low voice, Margaret tells Carrie, "You're a woman now," implying Carrie has somehow reached sexual maturation. Still in the threshold between the two rooms, Carrie pleads to her mother, "Why didn't you tell me, Momma?" Margaret suddenly raises her hand and hits Carrie across the face with her book, *The Teenager's Path of Salvation through the Cross of Jesus*, causing Carrie to scream and fall to the ground. Opening the book to the chapter entitled "The Sins of Women," Margaret begins to recite the passage to her fallen daughter, forcing her to repeat the lines: "And the raven was called sin. ... And the first sin was intercourse.... Eve was weak!" As Carrie sobs, she questions her mother, "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me?"

Brian De Palma's 1976 film, *Carrie*, based on Stephen King's 1974 novel, stars Sissy Spacek as the title character and Piper Laurie as her mother, Margaret White. Described on the back of the DVD case as "the ultimate revenge fantasy," the film revolves around Carrie, a lonely and awkward sixteen-year-old girl who is a victim of high-school bullying. Carrie lives with her overzealous and religiously fanatic mother and

soon develops the power of telekinesis. When Carrie accepts an invitation to the prom, Margaret expresses her intense disapproval of Carrie's attendance. A cruel prank at the hands of a resident "mean girl" on prom night results in Carrie unleashing her telekinetic rage on the students and faculty in a bloody massacre, killing all the students but one. Carrie returns home and seeks comfort from her mother and both Margaret and Carrie perish by the end of the film. While the film and the majority of the scholarship on the film focus primarily on Carrie, as the simultaneous victim and monster, I believe Margaret offers an excellent example of monstrous maternity. It would be easy to read *Carrie* as a cautionary tale that classifies female sexuality and power as monstrous and the female body as abject (Creed, 1993; Paul, 1994; Lindsey, 1996); however, it also can be seen as yet another example of what happens when the exaggeration of social codes turns maternity monstrous.

Margaret exaggerates her position as the enforcer of virtue and chastity, using religion as her defense. With time and repetition, this position turns monstrous, particularly to the extent that it becomes irrational and abusive. Margaret tends to see herself as a martyr for virtue and chastity in a corrupt world, while the spectator begins to see that she has also sacrificed her own sexuality by subjugating her own desires to patriarchy in the form of religious performance. This performance begins to align her with the film's other monster, Carrie, whose sexuality is expressed via telekinesis. By the end, Margaret, who experiences ecstasy in a return of the excess she has repressed, does not recognize what this means, but the spectator does. Carrie's monstrous release is Margaret's own and it points toward a reincorporation of that excess to less detrimental ends.

### Exaggeration of Virtue, Chastity, and Protection

The spectators of the film are aware that there is something different about Margaret before she actually appears in the film. After Carrie has her first period in the locker-room shower at school, Miss Collins, her gym teacher, speaks with Principal Morton. Miss Collins informs Morton that up until a half hour ago, Carrie had no idea what menstruation was. When Morton expresses his surprise at Carrie's lack of knowledge, Miss Collins says, "I don't know why that should surprise us. I mean, knowing that mother of hers." This time, Principal Morton interrupts Miss Collins, "We can't interfere with people's beliefs." Carrie's lack of knowledge sets her apart from the other girls her own age. However, the comment about "knowing that mother of hers" also marks Margaret as different. The only clue to Margaret's difference is that it has something to do with her beliefs.

Margaret's difference is compounded when she interacts with Mrs. Snell, the mother of one of Carrie's classmates. Mrs. Snell's surprise, and apparent discomfort, at Margaret's unannounced visit alerts the spectator that something is different about Margaret. She ignores Mrs. Snell's attempts at small talk and suddenly interrupts her when Mrs. Snell extends an invitation for Carrie to come to the house. Margaret informs Mrs. Snell that she is "here on the Lord's work." Mrs. Snell's smile falters, and she appears to be expecting this. Margaret tells Mrs. Snell about the new book, *The Teenager's Path of Salvation through the Cross of Jesus*, which is supposed to help lead teenagers to the path of "salvation," implying that teenagers, specifically young women, are in need of saving. This saving, according to Margaret, can only come through religion. As Margaret leaves, she suddenly turns around and raises her hand to the sky



and proclaims, “I pray you find Jesus.” Margaret’s religious fervor marks her as an oddity, not only in the world of the film, but also in the world of the spectator as well. However, Margaret’s religion is her way of exaggerating her position as enforcer of virtue and chastity.

The scene described at the start of this chapter allows the audience to see Margaret and her exaggerated performance of the enforcer of virtue and chastity much more explicitly. When Margaret finds out that Carrie has started her period, rather than empathize with and inform her of what is happening, Margaret punishes her. After Margaret physically slaps Carrie to the ground with her Bible, she begins to tell Carrie about menstruation. However, instead of revealing the biology of menstruation, Margaret reads from her Bible: “And God made Eve from the rib of Adam. And Eve was weak and loosed the raven on the world, and the raven was called Sin, ... and the first sin was intercourse. ... And the Lord visited Eve with a curse, and the curse was the Curse of Blood!” After forcing Carrie to repeat specific phrases, such as “the raven was called sin;” “the first sin was intercourse;” and “Eve was weak.” Margaret prays with Carrie. As Margaret continues to tell Carrie that her sin brought upon the “curse of blood,” However, by the Bible’s standards, Carrie has not sinned. She got her period but she did not have sex. Despite this fact, Margaret still exaggerates and overextends what she sees as the law. Carrie denies that she has sinned as Margaret continues to accuse her. Margaret attempts to suppress sexuality through religious discourse and the patriarchal ideologies it represents. She not only vilifies those who express sexual desire, or in Carrie’s case, begin the journey towards sexual maturity, she ultimately punishes them. Margaret forces Carrie to continually repeat her scripture, blaming Eve for sinning and

setting the raven of sin free into the world. Margaret locks Carrie into her prayer closet to pray for forgiveness for her assumed commitment of the “sin of lustful thoughts” that brought on “the curse of blood.” Margaret’s suppression of sexuality via religious ideologies turns monstrous with time and repetition, particularly in how it turns irrational and abusive.

Throughout the film, Margaret is continually repeating herself. Whether it is repeating herself over and over to make her daughter reiterate her religious discourse, or repeating actions, such as chopping a carrot on the same spot on the cutting board, even after the vegetable falls, Margaret unintentionally uses repetition in her attempts to suppress sexuality. Rather than offering a valid justification, or setting reasonable expectations, Margaret acts as a broken record, repeating herself and her actions as if stuck. These repetitions could be a way for Margaret to control her own desire, rather than expressing it, she holds it back by way of her excessive repetition. This repetitive “stuckness” alludes to the cycle of motherhood. Margaret is stuck in this point of her normative progression of motherhood because she is refusing to allow her daughter to begin her own path of normative mothering. The fact that Margaret is stuck suggests that there is something else, something different that awaits once she becomes unstuck. Her repetitions build on the oddness the spectator notices when Margaret interacts with Mrs. Snell. However, with Margaret’s eerie repetitions, the spectator becomes aware that there is a potential for monstrosity in Margaret. This potential is confirmed as monstrous as Margaret’s behavior turns irrational and abusive.

## Monstrosity and Martyrdom

While Margaret views Carrie's menarche as undeniable proof that Carrie has "lustful thoughts," she is irrational because there is no way Carrie can avoid getting her period. Margaret applies this irrationality to little things as well. When Margaret asks Carrie why she isn't eating her apple cake, Carrie tells her it will give her pimples. Margaret simply tells Carrie, "Pimples are the Lord's way of chastising you," as she changes the subject. Margaret is also abusive. There are multiple times throughout the film when Margaret slaps Carrie, sometimes causing Carrie to fall to the floor. She drags Carrie across the floor and locks her in a tiny prayer closet and throws her beverage in Carrie's face at the dinner table. Margaret's physical abuse reaches its peak at the end of the film when she stabs Carrie in the back. Margaret's stabbing Carrie in the back, once again, suggests how Margaret is working for patriarchy not herself, Carrie, or other women-come-mothers. Margaret is not only physically abusive to her daughter, she also isolates Carrie from others her own age. In her attempts to keep Carrie innocent and suppress her sexuality, Margaret does not allow Carrie to have friends of either gender. When Margaret and Mrs. Snell are talking, as described above, Mrs. Snell extends an invitation for Carrie to "come [to] visit." Margaret refuses to acknowledge the mention of Carrie and informs Mrs. Snell that she is there on the "Lord's work." While Margaret sees herself as protecting her daughter, her exaggerated position of enforcer of virtue and chastity turns monstrous.

One way to read Margaret's monstrous maternity is to see her as abject. Kristeva's abject is "that which does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p. 4); the abject is repulsive because it's returned from expulsion, but also attractive,

because it was once part of us and our experience of the world. In her discussion of Kristeva's abject, Barbara Creed notes (1993) Kristeva's views on maternal authority and the mother-child relationship, the relationship becomes one of conflict in which "the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it" (p. 11). Under patriarchy, the child helps to give the mother purpose. When the child matures, the mother begins to lose the sole identity of mother she was forced to inhabit. According to Creed, Margaret's "desire to control Carrie appears to stem more from a religious than a maternal sense of duty" (p. 82). However, I believe that patriarchal institutions, including religion, actually help produce this sense of duty. Rather than separate religious and maternal duty, I believe the religious duty reinforces and encourages the maternal duty. Margaret is afraid of letting Carrie go. As Carrie has offered Margaret a sense of validation and purpose for the past sixteen years, Margaret has a difficult time losing that. Her attempts at keeping Carrie virtuous and chaste are her attempts at keeping Carrie a child. If Carrie separates from Margaret, if she forms her own identity and starts on her own path of normative motherhood, it suddenly leaves Margaret with no purpose or validation, as she has sacrificed her own pleasure for her belief in patriarchy. The loss of this sole identity of mother may also put her face-to-face with everything her repetitions are holding back. Carrie tells Margaret that she wants to try and be a "whole person," one who has her own and separate identity. Margaret is threatened by Carrie's independence and desire to have her own identity, and I would imagine, is also hurt as she has sacrificed, albeit apparently more willingly, her own pleasure in order to fulfill the codes of *good* mother.

Margaret's irrational restrictions and abuses transform the social ideal of virtue and chastity. The mother, as enforcer of these traits, also transforms into a monstrosity, and appears to subject herself to the very restrictions she is enforcing and, in some ways, seem to resent. As Margaret becomes monstrous, she not only deploys the social codes and conventions she enforces, she is also victim to these very same codes and conventions. This deployment of the very codes to which she is subjugated allows Margaret to be classified as a grotesque body. As I suggested in Chapter Three, Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque body is inscribed with expectations from patriarchy and also deploys the same expectations upon others. It "is continually built, treated, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (1984, p.317). The grotesque body is created by the social codes inscribed upon it by society; the codes are put in place to regulate the body, including, I argue, its behaviors and expectations. In turn, the grotesque body also deploys the same codes that are inscribed upon it onto others. Margaret fits this aspect of the grotesque body because she attempts to place the same regulatory codes to which she subscribes on her daughter, particularly the codes surrounding the enforcement of virtue and chastity. After Margaret locks Carrie in the closet, she leans against it while chanting: "We will pray. We will pray, woman. We will pray to Jesus for our woman-weak, wicked, sinning souls." While Margaret appears to fully believe in what she is saying, she parrots common patriarchal and religious discourses that classify the sexual woman as evil. In *Thinking Sex*, feminist scholar, Gayle Rubin (1984) discusses how any sex that is not between heterosexual, married couples

who are trying to have a child is seen as immoral and abnormal; anything differing from this norm is not only punishable and oppressed, but is also repressed. Even in this post-1960s, second-wave feminist moment, the dominant ideology disapproves of such sex.

These punishments and oppressions stem from patriarchy's attempts to compensate for its own anxieties and instable institutions of power. The demonizing of female sexuality involves issues of power rather than an inherent evil in female sexuality. This classification could be because "male weakness ... is specifically defined as a consequence of female sexual allure" (Paul, 1994, p. 362). This "male weakness" is compounded when viewing women as abject. Woman is seen as abject because her "ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world, ... [which] reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order" (Creed, 1993, p. 47). Creed sees the female as "an abject figure" because she is seen "within patriarchal discourses as an ... enemy of the symbolic order.... [She] sets out to unsettle boundaries.... Her evil powers are seen as part of her feminine nature" ( p. 76). The woman unsettles and rather than understand or accept this unsettlement, the solution is to attribute her unsettling to "nature" rather than culture. This "natural" unsettling provides a fictitious biological basis for patriarchal fears. Patriarchal discourse compensates for weakness by demonizing female sexuality. In the terms of *Carrie* and the argument of this thesis, Margaret is monstrous. Margaret's exaggerations heighten this weakness as she draws attention to it. However, Margaret does not oppose the symbolic order or patriarchal discourse. She embraces them and attempts to inscribe them on her daughter; yet, in doing so, reveals their weakness and contradictions.

While Margaret may be the enforcer of virtue and chastity by way of religious discourse, she also tends to see herself as a martyr for the very codes she is enforcing. However, the spectator begins to realize that Margaret has sacrificed her own sexuality by subjugating her own desires to patriarchy. Margaret believes she is a martyr for patriarchy, while the spectator might also be able to see her as a martyr to patriarchy. She sacrifices her sexuality because she believes it is demanded by her religion; however, she is fulfilling the patriarchal expectations of the non-sexualized mother. Margaret's martyrdom to patriarchy and religion is not only illuminated by her behavior; it is also represented by the shrine of St. Sebastian she keeps in Carrie's prayer closet. St. Sebastian acts as a symbol for Margaret, revealing how she sees herself. When I first viewed the film, I assumed the shrine in the prayer closet was to Jesus, with the figure being Jesus on the cross. However, after a closer viewing and more research, I realized it was Saint Sebastian—the patron saint of archers, athletes, and soldiers. According to Catholicism, Sebastian healed and converted many people to Christianity. Two of the people he healed and converted were women; one woman had been mute for six years and managed to alert Sebastian to her desire to be a Christian. Sebastian performed the sign of the cross over her mouth and she suddenly could speak. The other woman was a blind girl who helped nurse him back to health after he failed to die from multiple arrows wounds. Sebastian asked the girl if she “wished to be with God,” and when she answered yes, he did the sign of the cross on her head and she could suddenly see. I believe Margaret sees a connection between herself and Saint Sebastian. Like Sebastian, Margaret seeks to reveal the “truth” to her daughter. As Saint Sebastian healed those who converted to Christianity, Margaret attempts to heal Carrie from her assumed sins as she

begins her journey of sexual maturation. Saint Sebastian was a martyr, dying for what he believed in. Margaret sees herself as a martyr, similar to Saint Sebastian. Just as Saint Sebastian was martyred for his secret (though it was discovered) Christianity, Margaret is also harboring a secret. Margaret is hiding secret desires, which are increasingly revealed to the spectator. These desires cut against patriarchy and reveals that Margaret is not only a martyr for religious and patriarchal institutions; she is a martyr for these institutions.

Margaret has sacrificed her own sexual desire, her own pleasure, and her on future beyond child-rearing in order to meet the patriarchal expectations of mother as enforcer of virtue and chastity. While Margaret never explicitly admits having resentments at giving up her sexual desire, she admits to having, at least in the past, experienced sexual desire. At the end of the film, after Carrie returns home and cleans up from the prom massacre, Margaret cradles her daughter and begins to reveal what she sees as her ultimate sin and transgression. Not looking at Carrie, Margaret begins her confession:

I should have killed myself when he put it in me. After the first time, before we were married; Ralph promised never again. He promised, and I believed him. But sin never dies. Sin never dies. At first it was alright. We lived sinlessly. We slept in the same bed, but we never did. ... And then, that night I saw him looking down at me that way. We got down on our knees and prayed for strength. I smelled the whiskey on his breath. And he took me. He took me, with the stink of the filthy roadhouse whiskey on his breath. And I liked it. I liked it. All that dirty touching, with his hands all over me. I should have given you to God when you were born, but I was weak and back sliding. And now, the devil has come home. We'll pray. We'll pray. We'll pray. For the last time, we'll pray.

Margaret's confession causes her to be viewed as monstrous, according to her own prescriptions rather than those of the spectator, because she transgresses the



ultimate taboo—the mother who has premarital sex and enjoys it. Margaret’s confession illustrates that she herself is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to follow the codes and conventions she tries so hard to enforce upon Carrie. At the end of her confession, Margaret’s repetition of “We’ll pray,” once again alerts the spectator that something monstrous is coming. It also confirms Margaret’s parroting of patriarchal discourse as performance, in the eyes of the spectator at least. Her repetition is also assign of her battling back her desire and anxiety. It appears to become most stringent at the very moments all the excess that patriarchy represses seem to be most pressing their way through. When Margaret’s sacrifice to patriarchy is shown as religious performance, the spectator begins to align her with the film’s other monster, Carrie, whose sexuality is illustrated through her telekinesis.

#### Release of Excess

After her confession, Margaret attempts to kill Carrie, who she sees as a tool of Satan because of her telekinetic powers. Her telekinesis acts as Carrie’s release of sexual desire, as she has no normative way of expressing sexual desire, due to her mother’s views on sexuality and desire, Margaret stabs an unsuspecting Carrie in the back, causing her to fall backwards down the stairs, into the kitchen. Carrie manages to pull herself away as Margaret descends with a dreamy smile on her face. At the foot of the stairs, Margaret stops and, as if she is going to heal Carrie as Saint Sebastian heals his converts, makes the sign of the cross. Margaret advances towards Carrie, moving so smoothly that it appears as if she is floating. She has a horrific smile on her face, looking truly happy to be “saving” her daughter from the devil. As Carrie pulls herself into the kitchen,

Margaret's happy smile widens to a wordless scream as she raises the knife to plunge into her daughter. Carrie uses her telekinesis to stab Margaret with other knives and various kitchen utensils, culminating with her outstretched hands being pinned to either side of the doorframe. As she is crucified and dying, Margaret screams and moans in a highly sexualized manner. Her smile stays on her face as she writhes in what looks like pleasurable agony. Her thrusting body and sexualized moans continue on and on while Carrie huddles, wounded in the corner in front of her prayer closet. Margaret dies in the same position as the Saint Sebastian figure in the prayer closet. Her ecstatic demise represents the release of what she has repressed, the release of excess Margaret has been trying to hold back, linking her to Carrie, whose telekinesis represents the same release of excess. The pleasure Margaret feels at the release of the excess she had been holding back is similar to Georges Bataille's ideas of taboos and transgressions. Bataille discusses how taboos are put in place because when the taboo is transgressed, the transgressor feels pleasure as the repressed excess returns (1986). There is also a momentary revelation of everything the taboo holds back.

This momentary reveal of everything the taboo holds back is where the reimagining of alternative possibilities lie. As the excess is revealed in this momentary suspension, the patriarchal expectations of what constitute a *good* mother is seen as constructed. This moment of release is when Carrie kills Margaret. Carrie's monstrous release, which results in both hers and Margaret's deaths, is the same release Margaret experiences in her moment of death. Margaret's pleasure at the moment of her death is her release. All of her repressed feelings have been released as the excess is revealed. The spectator is suddenly presented with a chance to reimagine the *good* mother.

While *Carrie* can be easily seen as a cautionary tale concerning the powers and dangers of female sexuality, it is also more than that. Margaret is a vastly overlooked character. The majority of scholarship on *Carrie* is focused on Carrie herself as Margaret is typically relegated to the religious fanatic and overzealous mother. Film scholar Michelle Citron (1977) sees *Carrie* as a “female rite of passage film” with a “neurotic oppressive mother ... [who] is the evil ultimately responsible for the destruction which occurs” (p. 10-12). However, when looking at Margaret’s behavior, it is clear that she transcends boundaries. Yes, Margaret is a monstrous figure. However, her exaggerated performance of the qualities society claims makes a *good* mother allow for future reinterpretations of the qualities. Margaret listens to what the patriarchal society tells her makes a good mother and she tries her hardest to possess those qualities. However, when she performs them in such exaggerated fashions, she transgresses the taboos that are put in place to regulate women. It is in this transgression that alerts spectators to the ability to modify and change social codes.

### **Chapter Five: Epilogue**

This thesis explored the way monstrous maternity unsettles the expectations of what a *good* mother is, according to the normative progression of motherhood. Laurie, Nola, and Margaret each challenge socially constructed codes surrounding the *good* mother, not by direct defiance, but by exaggerating the codes themselves. It is in the exaggeration of these codes that the transvaluation of monstrosity lies.

As Laurie, Nola, and Margaret exaggerate the codes surrounding their stage in the normative progression of motherhood, they become monstrous and are able to be classified as grotesque bodies that utilize monstrosity to challenge normative and patriarchal definitions of the *good* mother. Laurie exaggerates the codes surrounding the virginal and virtuous adolescent girl who is just beginning along the path of normative motherhood. As she exaggerates these codes, she becomes androgynous and ambiguous, aligning her with Michael Meyers, the film's conventional monster. Nola is already a firmly established mother, and she exaggerates the codes of the selfless mother who has no resentments. As she represses her rage and resentments, per societal convention, she becomes monstrous as her repressed feelings begin to return. Margaret is at the final stage along the normative progression of motherhood, when she should be setting her daughter along her own normative path of motherhood. Exaggerating the codes of the virtuous mother who has sex solely for reproduction rather than enjoyment, Margaret turns monstrous as her position as the enforcer of virtue and chastity turns irrational and

abusive towards her daughter. The monstrous maternity these mothers now possess challenges taboos that have been put in place in order to regulate their behaviors, and as a result, point to social conventions as performative. Once spectators recognize the performativity of these conventions, the normative progression of motherhood is disrupted, allowing for a possible reimaginings of what it means to be a *good* mother.

This troubling of the normative permits a carnivalesque reading of the films. I intentionally used the carnivalesque perspective as it offers a temporary place for sanctioned interrogation of normative social structures. Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival spirit offers a

liberation from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things (1984, p. 10).

As a new graduate student in the Women's Studies Department at the University of South Florida, Bakhtin's carnival spirit struck me as very similar to what I considered a goal of feminism. I saw the carnivalesque perspective as a provocative tool, a way to create a dialogue between marginalized voices, the dominant order, and its normative ideologies. The carnivalesque perspective provides a space where normative and patriarchal ideas can be interrogated and inverted or, at the very least, opened for reimagination. I saw the carnivalesque space as similar to Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *la frontera* (1987), a place that not only allows but encourages the deconstruction of externally imposed identities while choosing qualities to create new identities. In Anzaldúa's case, *la mestiza* is the new identity she constructed based on her conflicting identities of Chicana American. For

my thesis, the carnivalesque reading allowed for the possibility of reimagining the qualities that patriarchy say make a *good* mother.

The ability to interrogate the dominant order and normative ideologies is critical to my thesis; however, the carnivalesque temporariness is also extremely important. To some, its temporariness and sanction by the dominant order may seem a detriment, yet it is precisely this temporariness that I find compelling. The carnivalesque temporariness affords negative revelations, not determinate prescriptions, to offer new prescriptions would be just as detrimental as the original prescriptions that are being interrogated. Negative revelations offer possibilities that are endless and open-ended, a parallel that is found in the films I analyzed for this thesis. As the grotesque bodies of the carnivalesque are open and ambiguous, so, too, are the endings of *Halloween*, *The Brood*, and *Carrie*.

The three films all close in an ambiguous and open-ended ways. *Halloween* ends after Michael is shot and falls out of window; he lays on the ground unmoving, yet when Dr. Loomis looks, Michael has disappeared. The end of *The Brood* finds Candy and Frank driving home after Nola's death. The camera pans slowly down to a silent Candy's arm and focuses on two bumps that look suspiciously like the ones Juliana described Nola as having as a little girl. The finale of *Carrie* has a classmate walking to the now empty land where Carrie and Margaret's house once stood. She bends down to place flowers at the base of a cross memorializing the spot, and a hand, presumably belonging to Carrie, thrusts out of the ground and grabs her. The classmate wakes up screaming from a dream. The open endings of the films allow spectators to imagine what could be next; they prompt future possibilities.

Negative revelations and the temporality afforded by the carnivalesque can do more for feminist scholarship than positive prescriptions. As time and culture changes and progresses, it is nearly impossible to offer a prescription that will be culturally and socially relevant for extended periods of time. This is evidenced by the different waves of feminism, with first- and second-wave seeing the experience of being a woman as universal, essentially ignoring the intersections of race, class, and sexuality with gender. I also believe positive prescriptions are able to be used as tools of oppression and control more easily than negative revelations. Embracing possibility rather than prescription allows for change and transformation as opposed to stasis and exclusion. By allowing possibility as opposed to positive prescriptions, we are able to leave open not only what can constitute a *good* mother, but a mother and a woman, thus validating different experiences and ambiguity.

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