

# **No More Haunted Dolls**

Horror Fiction that Transcends the Tropes

Edited by

**Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar**

**Series in Critical Media Studies**



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# Introduction

Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar

Like the final girl who makes it to the end of the novel, thwarting the killer, horror fiction has endured despite obstacles and tired, recycled plotlines. From *The Twilight Zone's* Talking Tina to *Child's Play's* Chucky or *The Conjuring's* Annabelle, the haunted doll cliché is an example of something that has been done so many times that any new story feels stale. Look at any website of short horror fiction, and you'll find escaped killers, cursed artifacts, and lost ghosts—it's all been done before and *keeps* being done over and over, often with little to differentiate the story from those that have come before.

Horror, like any genre, has its common elements. Rather than the meet-cute in a romance, there's boy meets ghost or girl kills vampire. While certain horror tropes have been reused for centuries, *great* horror writing moves beyond the formula by adding elements that are new and unexpected. We *want* to be terrified, to read something so sinister that we breathe with relief when finished and sigh in contentment as we tuck ourselves in at night, hoping that the creatures about which we read will stay confined to the page rather than reaching out from under our beds. The same old storyline redone with a fresh coat of paint isn't always enough to raise the goosebumps on the backs of our necks.

What makes horror fiction resilient? What breathes new life into a genre that thrives on stereotypes? There's still an enormous audience for horror fiction, but writers and filmmakers must create content that feels unique and exciting. The idea for this book was conceived due to my lifelong love of horror and appreciation for that which is both innovative and entertaining rather than overdone and trite. The title is inspired by a rejection letter I received from an editor after sending him my very own haunted doll story. He complimented my characterization and pacing but said that I didn't offer anything new to the plot with a haunted doll terrorizing a family. He was right, and it got me thinking about horror tropes and how creators use them.

*No More Haunted Dolls: Horror Fiction that Transcend the Tropes* is a multi-author work united by the common theme of critical analysis of the use of horror tropes in literature, film, and even video games. Tackling issues dealing with gender, race, sexuality, social class, religion, politics, disability, and more in horror, the authors are horror scholars hailing from varied backgrounds and areas of specialty. This book may be used as a resource for classes that study horror or simply as entertainment for horror fans; readers will consider diverse perspectives on the tropes themselves as well as their representation in specific works.



## Chapter 1

# Disturbed Mask-ularity: The Mask Motive in the Slasher Film

Stefan Sonntagbauer

### Abstract

This chapter shows how the mask of the iconic slasher killer marks a deeply wounded masculinity. While a lot of criticism during the golden age of the genre (1978-1984) dismissed the slasher as misogynistic, Carol Clover saved it by shifting the focus to the female survivor figure, the famous final girl. Just so, comparatively, little has been said of how the slasher reflects on the problems that men face in a patriarchal culture. Examining iconic killers like Michael Myers (*Halloween*), Leatherface (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), and Jason Vorhees (*Friday the 13th*), the chapter shows that putting on a mask is a (typically masculine) reaction to the traumatic experience of social exclusion. Hurt boys turn into murderous men when there is no way for them to develop a suitable persona that could guarantee them participation. It is the mask of the killer that makes the man visible in the social sphere and protects him from the pain of not belonging.

**Keywords:** masked killer, final girl, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Scream*, *American Psycho*

\* \* \*

One of the most common tropes of horror is surely the recurse on the formulaic nature of its subject. Even though all genres, by definition, constitute themselves and evolve in interaction with some never-changing core elements, such as settings, narratives and characters, horror seems to have a special connection with repetitive forms (Grant 9). Certainly, this is linked to its traumatic structure. Horror has always been about the past haunting the present, materializing in unpleasant comebacks—from the ghost of more or less beloved relatives to the undead that come walking (and consuming) amongst the living. Repetition is what marks the haunting as a form of trauma, just as it forms the trope over time. Still, it seems there is another aspect about the ever-recurring tropes of horror, a deeper truth, a bigger “why.” Repetition is

pressing for resolution. The tropes endure until we are finally able to embrace what they are trying to tell us about ourselves as individuals, as humans, and as a society. Just as the ghosts are condemned to haunt the world of the living until they are “seen” or understood, the tropes keep coming back until we understand them. Only then are they free to go their way, change their form, and take on new meanings.

One such remarkable trope that has stuck around for a while now is the masked killer. No doubt, the mask itself is an “enduring generic motif in horror cinema” (Heller-Nicholas 191). As such, it doesn’t only bring up the different philosophical implications of the mask as a *dingsymbol*—a concrete object and highly loaded signifier—but also comments on, criticizes, and revises them. The masked killers that became popular with the slasher in the 1970s and 1980s brought up a discussion on gender-stereotypes. The distribution of the roles—killer and victim—follows a simple recipe: the masked killer is usually a man, while the heroine, i.e., the main victim, is usually a woman.<sup>1</sup> So, it is no wonder that, in the beginning, a lot of criticism dismissed the whole genre as misogynistic.<sup>2</sup> Carol Clover saved the slasher with her legendary 1987 essay “Her Body, Himself” by shifting the focus to the female survivor figure for whom she established the legendary term, the “final girl” (84).

As Clover’s theorization became popular—and popularized<sup>3</sup>—a strong focal point for further criticism was set. As a “strong, feminist heroine who turns the

<sup>1</sup> In Moore and Heffernan’s list of the 15 most iconic masked killers in *Collider Magazine*, the quota of males as killers is 100%.

<sup>2</sup> It all started with Roger Ebert’s essay “Why Movie Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore,” in which he describes the slasher as an act of masculine revenge on all the women who dared to live out their sexuality, an argument that was gladly taken on by a lot of second wave feminists. From then on, the meta-trope of the misogynistic slasher persisted. Zhou gives an overview over the debate, and Lizardi and Hayt present different takes on the matter, proving at last, that, in terms of the slasher and misogyny, *it’s not over yet*.

<sup>3</sup> The popular idea of the final girl as feminist heroine has little to do with Clover’s original account. In her essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” she points out similarities between the female protagonists and the killer: “Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine [...]. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her [...] with the killer himself” (88). Later on, she makes a clear stance: “To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development [...] is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking” (100). This concept received some criticism while remaining a central focal point for the debate around the genre. In *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Jack Halberstam reads Stretch, the final girl of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, as a representation of the monstrous gender, going beyond the binary matrix, finally turning into “something messier than male or female” (143). Going beyond Clover’s theorization, Halberstam pleads to reconfigure gender “not simply through inversion, but by literally creating new categories” (139). Pinedo goes in

knife on the killer,” the final girl should very soon become an “interpretative framework that has largely determined the reception” (Paszkievicz and Rusnak). Meanwhile, the killer himself—as a man with severe problems—somehow got out of sight. Until today, comparatively little has been said of how the slasher reflects on problems that are specifically connected to masculinity. Probably this lack of attention is linked to the specific characteristics of the killer, as he is a man who is just not there. He lacks the human ability to reflect, interact, and negotiate with himself. At the same time, he embodies Žižek’s definition of the drive, which cannot be subjected to dialectical mediation (102-03). That is also why it is impossible to get through to him. The killer strikes like a force of nature instead of (inter)acting as a social being. The simultaneity of presence and absence is also reflected in his ontological status. In his interview with Mark Kermode, John Carpenter discusses Michael Myers, the iconic killer of the *Halloween* franchise: “There is a slight supernatural edge to this guy: Sure, he is a person that escapes from a mental institution, [...] but he can’t be killed, and there’s a certain feeling of, maybe he is not quite a human being.” The killer, literally, is larger than life yet still less than a man. Just like that, the slasher reduces the killer to a narrative function.

This is also why viewers often do not see the full picture. The slasher genre typically works with a lot of close-ups of phallic weapons like machetes, knives, or hammers. Just like in mainstream pornography, viewers hardly ever see the male part. The killer appears as an automaton without any individual features; i.e., he is good for exactly one thing. The mask is generic, not at least in this sense, as it dehumanizes the killer. Thereby, it is not just a hide-out but a symbol of a certain kind of masculinity. bell hooks points out the fact that *mask* is literally a part of *mask-ularity*; this is significant, as men learn from an early age to repress their feelings when they are not compatible with common notions of masculinity (163). In this respect, masculinity means wearing a mask, or even more, masculinity is a mask that is used to hide. Behind every man, there is a *human* that, in patriarchy, is prohibited from expressing itself fully. In this sense, becoming a man means to disappear. The killer is not only a perpetrator but also a victim of a certain dynamic. The human whom he once might have been disappears behind the function, which is not exactly an expression of free will but superimposed by parent structures—of the genre, of patriarchal society, or of a troubled psyche.

This chapter provides a new perspective on one of the most influential tropes in horror history, exposing what is behind the mask of the killer. The main objective is to explore the mask-ularity that is modeled in—or behind—the

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the same direction, arguing that gender stereotypes get reproduced as “power is coded as masculine, even when embodied in biological females” (81–82).

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