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Freshmen Intensive Writing Seminar

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Carrie: The Failed Institution of Feminism against Patriarchy

The 1976 film *Carrie*, directed by Brian De Palma remains a cult classic, though De Palma's work deserves more credit than its simple reputation as a disastrous Prom Night movie trope. The film is an important case in cinematic history to explore the question of gender and sexuality, in which its depiction of women portrays the oppressive qualities of a domineering patriarchy (Berlatsky). Since the past, the horror genre has allowed for great female characters to dominate the screen, defying the patriarchy and its traditional constructs of gender: Ellen Ripley from *Alien* and Clarice Starling from *The Silence of the Lambs*, to name a few. However, although *Carrie*, like her predecessors, stages its female heroine under a spotlight, the film invites questions over its depiction of women, sexual objectification, and seemingly innate qualities for misogyny. **The film's protagonist, Carrie White, plays both the victim and the villainess as she shares conflicting desires to conform to society and to also struggle against its tyranny. Although the film tries to present themes of female empowerment through character development and various cinematic techniques, ultimately, the narrative structure, setting and plot, fails to break down the patriarchy and ends up reinforcing the exact patriarchal values the film tries to reject.**

Initially, Carrie is regarded as the blameless, innocent victim, characterized by De Palma's dramatic use of mise-en-scène which ostracizes Carrie from society. The film commences with an overhead crane shot: a group of young women are playing volleyball, dressed uniformly in yellow shirts and short black pants. The camera pans downward and starts to focus on Carrie, who is standing in the corner. Despite their uniformity, Carrie is

singled out from the group with her unkempt appearance and her shy disposition. There is the usage of blocking when Carrie fails to receive the ball; her face is the only visible one as her peers have their backs towards the camera, making them indistinguishable from one another. Already, the film's opening sequence has established Carrie as the outsider, qualities that make her the perfect victim to the cruelty of her peers. De Palma continues to exclude Carrie with the balance of the shot, manipulating space to assert Carrie's isolation from the rest of society. In one notable scene, there is an extreme close-up shot of Tommy Ross, the recipient of Carrie's secret affections. Tommy is highlighted in the foreground of the shot whereas Carrie is in the background, depicted as diminutive and insignificant in comparison. The film's asymmetrical balance compels the audience into sharing in Carrie's alienation.

Alongside Carrie's isolation from society, the film incorporates non-diegetic music and slow motion to establish the presence of an overarching patriarchy. After the opening scene, the camera follows a group of young women into the locker room, capturing their laughing and frolicking naked forms. The sequence is lengthened with a slow-motion effect and is accompanied by the use of non-diegetic music. With a heavenly orchestral sound playing in the background, the setting is completed as an almost dream-like sequence. Isolated from the group is Carrie, who is taking a shower in peaceful solitude. As she washes her body with soap, the camera follows Carrie's body: from her breasts to her stomach, down to her thighs. The representation of Carrie's body is titillating as the camera moves towards her vaginal area, but the sexual fantasy is broken as a stream of blood trickles down. The non-diegetic music abruptly ends as Carrie discovers the blood. Uninformed about female menstrual cycles, she reaches out to her classmates for help. In response, the girls cruelly taunt Carrie for her ignorance, throwing towels and tampons as they force her into a corner. The scene not only reaffirms Carrie's separation from her peers but also establishes an omnipotent presence of a patriarchy through a beautified frame of nudity. In cinema, the

“male gaze” refers to the perspective of a male figure, where women are romanticized as sexual objects to enjoy (Mulvey 808). As demonstrated, when the camera follows Carrie’s bare body, the scene induces a blend of fantasy and lyrical eroticism, observing the characters through a male perspective. This early foundation of the patriarchy is important because its presence elucidates how Carrie’s actions either promote patriarchal values, struggle against them, or inadvertently end up accomplishing both.

The patriarchy is also established through the role of religion, presented through Margaret White, Carrie’s zealous mother, and her indoctrination of female sexuality as a sinful nature for women. Margaret believes in an archaic form of Judeo-Christianity and considers blood to be a symbol of sin from God. Thus, Carrie’s menstrual cycle, additional to any other forms of female sexuality, is viewed as a sin in Margaret’s eyes. In one scene, she refers to Carrie’s breasts as “dirty pillows,” denouncing a part of her body that defines her as a woman. Margaret’s behaviors reflect conservative, patriarchal values as she completely denies a woman’s sexuality and believes women should remain virtuous until death. Essentially, Margaret’s obsession with female sexuality and sin stems from her internal fear and resentment towards the patriarchy – how it had promised her fulfillment, but ultimately failed to deliver. The film never directly addresses the absence of Carrie’s father, merely implying that he had abandoned Margaret for another woman. Thus, Margaret’s damage from her past experiences with a man causes her to picture her own body with revulsion, to deny her sexuality altogether, and thereby radically transforming her as a proponent of traditional patriarchal values. Religion stands on a self-fulfilling ideology, where once the idea is implanted, its disciples will work themselves to spread the message of their beliefs. Likewise, the patriarchy, as expressed through religion, has harnessed Margaret’s fragility and manipulates her into believing the very doctrine that harmed her in the first place.

Within the establishment of the patriarchy, Carrie is presented as a conflicted

individual as she desires to break free from the patriarchy, but also projects an opposed desire to conform to society. Carrie's struggle for female agency is primarily expressed through the theme of blood and telekinesis. The opening shower sequence initiates Carrie's first bleeding, signifying her transition towards becoming a woman. As a result, Carrie has already begun her defiance against her mother's inherently patriarchal values by beginning to experience her sexuality. The significance of her telekinesis also derives from its relation to blood, since Carrie's power appears almost concurrently with her first menstrual cycle. Liberated by her gift, she blatantly defies her mother's demands, being able to physically silence Margaret as she leaves the house in disobedience. Therefore, Carrie's power to move objects or people to her liking works as a physical manifestation of her emotional repression and her suppressed desire to express her own sexuality. Nonetheless, Carrie's most superficial desire is also to comply and win the acceptance of her peers. She is given a crucial opportunity to achieve this when Sue, the only student who feels guilty over her mistreatment of Carrie, asks her boyfriend Tommy to take Carrie to the Prom instead. Patriarchal values are once again enforced here since a relationship with a male is defined as a method of gaining social recognition and power for young women. Ostensibly, there is a strong marginalization of male roles in the film; men are portrayed as mere tools to their female partners. Although the accentuation of female characters seems to endorse a level of female agency, it also illustrates a non-mutual dependence on male figures. In a school medium, popularity is a form of social capital. Power, for a young woman, is defined by her ability to lure men, to pleasure them with their sexuality, and to gain their approval. As a result, the female characters who hold the most power are those deemed as desirable, framed as promiscuous and sexually active, exemplified by the main female antagonist, Chris. Carrie, after accepting Tommy's request to Prom, takes her first step towards this prevalent social hierarchy, an accustomed exchange between a woman's sexuality and a man's consent. She rejects her

mother's views, which advocates a conservative stance for women, but instead turns to another form of male subjugation.

Carrie's dualistic desire to both favor and reject the patriarchy reaches its climax at Prom where De Palma foreshadows her inevitable doom, creating a hopeful illusion of acceptance, through diachronic shots. Carrie's transition into society is initially drawn as heavenly, underlining Carrie's view of the patriarchy as a positive force for normality. An important shot shows Carrie dancing with Tommy; the camera angle is low as the two characters fill the entire frame with stars and flashing lights cast above their heads, creating an ethereal effect. De Palma incorporates a revolving dolly shot to follow Carrie and Tommy's first dance, generating a sense of euphoria, representing Carrie's seemingly flawless acceptance into society. However, the segment quickly becomes a vertiginous shot, foreshadowing how events will soon spiral out of control. The tension is intensified as the audience is aware of Chris and her malicious plot to drop a bucket of pig's blood over Carrie's head; the camera follows Sue's point of view, moving from Carrie's unknowing expression to the taut rope, to the unsteady pail full of blood, and to Chris, licking her lips in anticipation. By establishing a sense of uneasiness to the audience, while leaving Carrie in a state of blissful ignorance, the film foreshows that Carrie's dualistic desire will inevitably lead to her own downfall. Finally, when the blood falls, the fantasy that was earlier created is irrevocably shattered by a harsh form of reality.

After the illusion is broken, De Palma employs the color red and a split-screen effect to fully convey Carrie's transition from a weak and innocent victim to an empowered villainess. Similar to how Carrie's period was used to convey the exploration of the female body, the shower of pig's blood represents her full conversion to womanhood. At the threshold of change, Carrie has been publically humiliated by her peers; the scene suggests society's rejection of Carrie as an individual since the patriarchy provides no room

for those who are unable to fully conform. Fueled by anger and betrayal, Carrie is sent on a murderous rampage, leaving the entire Prom set in a bloodstained inferno. The color red empowers Carrie as it is metonymically associated with the expression of her sexuality, yet the red low-key lighting accentuates Carrie as a sinister individual; the violent shade of blood reflects the deepest depths of her rage. De Palma's use of the split screen is also vital to understand the shift in Carrie's character. In the beginning, Carrie was identified as the powerless victim; however, she has now become the villainess, otherwise known as the "monstrous-feminine" (Creed 83). The "monstrous-feminine" is a term that identifies the portrayal of women as ruthless antagonists, defined in terms of their sexuality. Likewise, Carrie's telekinetic power brutally murders all that stands in her way, regardless of their innocence. The split-screen reinforces Carrie's direct responsibility by creating a cause-and-effect relationship with her psychic powers. As Carrie stares out into the distance on one side of the screen, the adjacent screen shows a victim's unjustified execution. The split-screen inverts the previous victim-villain role and allocates the blame on Carrie, and Carrie alone.

Consequently, Carrie's monstrous transformation, in context of the narrative structure, has no choice but to reinforce the patriarchy as much as it tries to reject it.

There is a sense of discreet satisfaction in Carrie's revenge against her oppressors, namely the execution of Chris and her friends, who are the direct cause of her prolonged suffering. Still, regardless of Carrie's sense of righteousness, there is also a strong presence of moral injustice as her power leads to the death of Mrs. Collins, a sympathetic teacher who had tried to help Carrie in the past. As a result, the film's iconic scene of female empowerment is shrouded with the blood of innocent victims. Although Carrie's transformation is an expression of female agency, the monstrosity of her power conveys an ambivalent attitude towards the patriarchy and the role of women. Since the beginning, the film creates a contradictory effect in its portrayal of the patriarchy through Carrie and the high school medium. The school

setting plays on Carrie's isolation and her desire for acceptance, advocating popularity as a form of social capital and establishing patriarchal values as the societal norm. By initially portraying Carrie as an innocent victim, the film also manipulates the audience into sharing the same ideals of the prevalent patriarchy. At Prom, when the crowd cheers for Carrie as she ascends on stage, it reflects the hopes of the audience for Carrie's belated acceptance into society. Hence, *Carrie* is a film that reveals the brutal implications of the patriarchy, and yet still manages to cause the characters, as well as the audience, to believe in the patriarchy and uphold its innate values.

The final confrontation between Carrie and Margaret also reaffirms an ambivalent attitude towards the patriarchy, demonstrating its oppressive yet unavoidable sentence. When Carrie returns home, she washes off the blood and changes into a white gown, indicating her desire to regress to her previous state of ignorant bliss. Despite her wishes, Margaret sees that Carrie has already passed the threshold and decides to sacrifice her daughter in an almost ritualistic fashion. As the tragic finale, Carrie retaliates with her powers, inadvertently killing her own mother in the process. There is no reconciliation between mother and daughter since, for Margaret, Carrie is the byproduct of sin from having been pleased by a man. Her maternal instincts are hindered by her wish to prevent Carrie from ending up as disgraced as she had become by accepting her sexuality. As she is impaled, Margaret utters a series of orgasmic sounds, and the sexual implications associated with her dying moments represent her tragic freedom, which she could only achieve at the cost of her own life. As Margaret passes, her death resembles the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, with both her hands nailed by kitchen knives. The mirroring imagery between Margaret and the Christian symbol is a point of mockery, not of religion, but of the oppressive patriarchal values it represents. Margaret's death, and Carrie's choice to remain with her mother's corpse as the house crumbles into the ground, demonstrates the kind of destruction doomed upon

women who dare to defy the limitations of their gender.

In a striking conveyance of horror through the high school medium, *Carrie* attempts to present a character of female agency; nonetheless, the film ultimately fails to break down the patriarchy as the narrative structure invariably returns to the idea of a domineering patriarchal society. As the plot progresses, Carrie defies her mother's wishes, fighting against her conservative stance by expressing her own female sexuality. However, her character also reflects the desire for societal acceptance, and her role as the victim causes the audience to join in on her search for normality and conformity. Even the definitive moments of female empowerment during the Prom scene are tainted by Carrie's monstrous depiction. Finally, the film's resolution offers no last-minute reprieve, thus establishing the patriarchy as a perpetual, inescapable entity. The sole survivor of the tribulation is Sue, who is traumatized by the cruel reality Carrie has made her realize. Her tenacious fate resembles that of the Final Girl, a common cinematic trope of the female survivor, who acts as a feminist pioneer for women (Piepenburg). Nevertheless, the film closes by mercilessly mocking even the slightest indication of female empowerment. Despite Sue's survival, her vivid nightmare causes the audience to identify her as nothing more than a vulnerable victim of torment, a "tortured survivor," rather than a heroine (Clover 10). Consequently, the ending remains both empowering, but troubling, towards a female audience. In the aftermath of the ordeal, the film itself seems to foreshadow a never-ending, unrelenting nightmare for both the characters as well as the audience. Sue's character remains to deliver the final message: the patriarchy has won; the price of mutiny is death, and the only form of consolation to expect is to live, knowing the horrific ramifications of the patriarchy without the ability to speak against it.

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