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Embodying the Monster: Gender Bending Affect in Contemporary Horror

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Abstract

The "Good For Her" film is a recently developing subgenre of horror and thriller films as a new iteration of the rape revenge trope in which scorned women are seeking out retribution through morally ambiguous means, leading them to a fate of self destruction. These female protagonists, despite their questionable actions, have garnered respect and adoration across online forums as female audiences appreciate their indulgence in violence. This thesis endeavors to understand how this subgenre has developed alongside other similar but distinct subgenres within television. This is, in part, to explore how neoliberal feminist ideologies have permeated these genres that hail the personal success of white women as emblematic of feminist success. The bulk of analysis focuses on two films, *Pearl* (West, 2022) and *The Witch* (Eggers, 2016), as these films are frequently included in online lists and compilations of "Good For Her" media. The comparison of these two films demonstrates how the destruction wrought by the female protagonist is in direct response to gendered forms of oppression and their violent behavior can be read as a resistance to their coercion into the nuclear family. I argue that criticisms of the neoliberal influence on the "Good for Her" subgenre are warranted but films such as those mentioned above do radically resist foundational aspects of patriarchal control and online appreciation of such resistance is indicative of a wide variety of political attunement present in the subgenre.

Introduction: Feminine Rage on Screen

"I have this thing about feminine rage which people, I think, for some reason…I get a lot of 'men doing really terrible things' and women sitting silently with like one tear, like, slowly falling and I'm like oh no. No no no no. We get *mad* and we get *angry* and I remember pulling Mark [Mylod] aside and saying, 'I'm really sorry, but the only way to play this truthfully is for me to like, attack him,'"

This is an excerpt from an interview between Ali Plumb (BBC Radio 1, 2022) and actors Anya Taylor-Joy and Nichols Hoult. Taylor-Joy is describing a critical moment within their film *The Menu* (Myold, 2022). *The Menu* follows Margot (Taylor-Joy) and Tyler (Hoult) who attend an exclusive dinner prepared by a world famous chef on a remote island. When it is revealed that the chef and the kitchen staff have plotted to kill all the attendants of the dinner because of their abuse of power and money, Tyler appears unsurprised. Upon Margot's realization that he knew of the ultimate conclusion the whole time and was willing to sacrifice her, she slaps him and goes on to cleverly find a way to escape the island, looking on as the elite class trapped inside is burned alive.

Taylor-Joy's remark about "feminine rage" is far from isolated within online discourse surrounding contemporary horror and thriller media, punctuating an emerging moment that rejects feminine stoicism in favor of traditionally devalued 'hysterics' that sees women exploding with rage or jealousy. This small excerpt of the over thirteen minute interview has amassed nearly two million likes on TikTok from user @anyastaylorjoy (Dec. 5, 2022), contributing to the over seventy thousand videos that can be found under #femalerage/#femininerage.

The prevalence of feminine rage as a social disruptor within horror and thriller media is just one manifestation of a growing attunement within these genres. Weinstock (2020) describes a historical shift within horror which previously associated physical deformities with

monstrosity; as a contaminating force and immorality. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, however, he argues that the monstrous body began to manifest no longer as physical deformities, but through the invisible movement of power in politics, economies, and cultures. Cemented after WWII and the anxiety that evil may not be infiltrating bodies seeking destruction, but rather exploitative entities instilled in bureaucratic institutions, the monstrously deformed body became the victim rather than the antagonist. He states, “When the ‘monster’ becomes the protagonist and culture becomes the antagonist, ideas of normality and monstrosity must be reconsidered… Monstrosity thus is reconfigured as a kind of invisible disease that eats away at the body and the body politic and manifests visibly through symptomatic behavior,” (p. 359).

Coming out of this shift are films that see pervasive forms of sexism, racism, and homophobia as the monstrosity within the world rather than queerly coded slashers (Benshoff, 2020) or immigrant vampires corrupting vulnerable bodies at night (McNally, 2012). In this context, films that depict women seeking retribution or expressing anger at being wronged locate misogyny as the monstrous entity, manifesting in the bodies of primarily men. As this theme has been taken up across online discourse, there have emerged two female archetypes that embrace this affective turn of hysteria, using absurd responses to seemingly benign manifestations of gender discrimination in order to communicate the insanity that comes out of repeated marginalization. These two figures are the “Good for Her” protagonist and the feminist joykill.

The “Good for Her” protagonist has received far more attention within pop culture discourse (See Gaffney, 2021; Holley, 2023; Shunyata, 2021; Southard, 2024; Zeller, 2022) than the feminist joykill, only recently proposed by Brüning (2021) in the context of teen horror drama series. Nonetheless, the two images have a great deal of overlap with their ultimate goals of revenge, though often sought after in different manners. In this paper, I will first explore how

these archetypes came to be, both through the circulatory relationship between mass media and pop culture, but also through their developments from established archetypes within horror, such as the final girl. Building upon analyses by Heimberger (2022) and Fugii (2022), I will demonstrate how neoliberal feminist dogma has infused these films with the guise of radical feminist ideology when, in reality, they tout singular victories of white women as emblematic of gendered liberation.

Coming out of these downfalls of both archetypes, I will take a comparative case study of two films often included in the "Good for Her" cinematic universe to explore how they, in some ways, avoid the pitfalls of other films included in these subgenres. Relying on Baraba Creed's (1993) analysis of *Carrie* (1976, De Palma), I will examine *Pearl* (West, 2022) and *The Witch* as departing from key aspects of the "Good for Her" formula that exemplify internal familial struggles perpetuated by reproductive pressures placed upon young women.

Turning to the feminist joykill who is defined by her cooperation with other young women who are similarly oppressed under patriarchy, I will demonstrate how the isolated nature of each family leads the eldest daughters to seek out nonhuman kin as a way of alleviating pressures placed upon them, largely by their mothers. Using an ecofeminist perspective to parse out how the female body already straddles the line between nature and culture, human and animal, I will propose an altered version of Brüning's joykill that sees feminist comrades not as other women who are bonded together through mutual experiences of oppression, but as nonhuman animals and natures that are imagined as similarly passive as these the protagonists.

Ultimately, I propose that these archetypes continue to fall short of any substantial feminist politics that troubles foundational gendered structures. However, by demonstrating the ways in which *Pearl* and *The Witch* disrupt the nuclear family as the foundation upon which

patriarchal control sits, they attract audiences looking for a cathartic release from the anxieties of living up to these gendered constructs. The prevalence of these films and secondary images circulated across social media communicates a degree of attraction to these figures, making them a ripe point of analysis to explore how neoliberal ideas of success are being rejected.

Ch. I: The "Good for Her" Victim/Villain and the Feminist Joykill

Coming out of the rape revenge genre and the 'scorned woman' stereotype, the "Good for Her" (GFH) protagonist and the feminist joykill explicitly use their white femininity to seek out emblematic liberation through the personal pursuit of revenge against those that have wronged them. Though they exist simultaneously, these two figures can also be understood as temporally distinct expressions of a particular affective moment within US politics, each attuned to different demographics of women. In teasing out the development of these archetypes and their subsequent appropriation across internet discourse, I intend to locate what these images accomplish for audiences and where they politically thrive and fall short. In doing so, I will engage with wider discourse on feminine monstrosity, particularly the archetype of the witch. The witch will be interrogated as both a substantial historical figure, mobilized to vilify traditionally feminine forms of knowledge, and as a facet of feminist politics, particularly in the mid to late twentieth century. The witch functions as a bridge between the GFH protagonist and the feminist joykill as both of these characters are depicted as witches themselves, making use of magical powers for feminist ends.

The "Good For Her" Protagonist and Her Neoliberal Commitments

The far reaching presence of the GFH character across existing sub-genres of horror, such as slashers, psychological thrillers, and supernatural horror, has transformed her presence into a sub-genre of her own, often referred to as a GFH film or the 'good for her cinematic universe'. Heimberger (2022) defines these films as following a particular formula:

> *(weaponized femininity+white privilege = "victim villain" main character)+traumatic catalyst+a shifting sense of morality and rage=vicarious revenge plot against a symbol of patriarchal oppression+bittersweet voyeuristic catharsis+sometimes self-destruction* (p. 14).

The phrase ‘good for her’ references a scene in the television series *Arrested Development* (2003-2019) in which Lucille Bluth (Jessica Walter) responds to a shocking news segment about a mother killing her children with a triumphant but understated “Good for her,” (S.3, Ep.1, 2005, See Image 1). Despite the shock her son displays at her blasé response, Bluth stands by her remark. The scene was subsequently circulated across social media, eventually becoming detached from its original context and applied to any action a woman does in the face of patriarchal oppression, especially when her reaction appears blown out of proportion or dramatic (Heimberger, 2022; Fujii, 2022).

Image 1: Jessica Watlers as Lucille Bluth. *Arrested Development,* S. 3, Ep. 1, 2005

Image 2: the “good for her” cinematic universe by @cinematogrxphy, tweet, Aug 7, 2020.

The first application of the phrase to horror and thriller films was by Twitter user @cinematogrxphy who posted a collage of eight films with the remark “the ‘good for her’ cinematic universe” (August 7, 2020, See Image 2). All of the scenes replicated from the films show the female protagonists at a moment of triumph, some covered in blood, others with a look

of satisfaction at having defeated their adversaries. From left to right, the films are *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015), *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019), *Us* (Peele, 2019), *The Invisible Man* (Whannell, 2020), *Knives Out* (Johnson, 2019), *Gone Girl* (Fincher, 2014), *Ready or Not* (Bettinelli-Olpin & Gillett, 2019), and *Suspiria* (Guadagnino, 2018).

Since the iconic tweet, multiple news outlets have attempted to define the genre, pointing out the morally ambiguous ambitions of the protagonists as well as their questionable success (Gaffney, 2021; Squires, 2023). Portraying what could be described as a female version of *Breaking Bad*'s (2008-2013) Walter White, these unruly female protagonists have puzzled entertainment writers who are accustomed to well-behaved, underwhelming female characters. This is particularly salient in the horror genre where the survival of minority characters relies on their 'good' behavior (Ménard et. al., 2018).

Heimberger argues that the resurgence of conservatism within American politics, emboldened by the Trump presidency, combined with the increasing attention paid to the horror genre as a legitimate form of cultural critique, partially accounts for the growing online discourse surrounding the GFH sub-genre. Further, with the circulation of male led revenge stories and superhero films, she states that, "it is unsurprising that female-led films depicting female rage and gender commentary such as the 'Good for Her' genre have emerged, in prevalence as well," (p. 10). Critically, the "commentary" that these films make about gender leaves race, sexuality, and ability untroubled.

Reflecting the late 2010s political moment in which white women felt fury at the mistreatment of their bodies in the new age of conservative politics, women of color pointed out that they had been experiencing the same treatment far before the Trump presidency (Cooper, 2018). This analysis is in line with Fujii's (2022) assertion that, rather than a novel conception,

the GFH protagonist serves as another iteration of the ‘final girl’ archetype prevailing within 70s and 80s slasher films. Articulated by Clover (1992), the final girl is a key archetype within the slasher genre as the sole survivor who is typically an ambiguously gender young woman. Clover states, “The Final Girl is boyish, in a ward. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine-not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends.

Over the course of the slasher film, the final girl is either forced to watch as her friends are slowly and creatively picked off by the slasher or find the aftermath of such violence. Through a series of unlikely victories, hard fought through a desire to live and a mindset of retribution, the final girl defeats the slasher so that she may return to gendered normalcy. Fujii suggests the 'final girl' became the GFH as a result of merging feminist ideals with neoliberal politics, seeing their personal success as indicative of the collapse of patriarchy.

In the context of fourth wave feminism, informed by neoliberal politics, the GFH protagonist has taken power into her own hands to become both the slasher and the final girl. Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 manifesto *Lean In* is often looked to as an exemplary piece of neoliberal feminist dogma that individualizes personal and professional success, ignoring the impact of other identity restrictions (e.g. ability, race, sexuality, etc.) and hailing the maintenance of femininity above all else (Rottenberg, 2014). The evolution of liberal feminism to neoliberal feminism solidified an ambition towards *empowerment* within patriarchal capitalist systems rather than seeking out methods of troubling the *construction* of power or one’s contribution to the maintenance of these structures. Influenced by these sentiments, the GFH protagonist, rather than challenging gendered aesthetics, *leans into* her femininity, using it as a tool to accomplish her ends. If Clover’s final girl is effectively a “male in drag” (p. 216) then the GFH protagonist is a female in drag in her caricatured occupation of femininity.

The Joykill's Solidarity

Coming out of the neoliberal turn that gave way to the GFH sub-genre, Brüning (2022) offers the feminist joykill as a new archetype within supernatural teen drama and horror. The joykill is inspired by Sara Ahmed's feminist killjoy. Ahmed first illustrated the feminist killjoy in 2010 as someone who interrupts the happiness of others to make explicit their injustice. In a phrase, they can't take a joke. In "A Killjoy Manifesto" (2017), Ahmed states, "Humor creates the appearance of distance; by laughing about what they repeat, they repeat what they laugh about. This *about* becomes the butt of the joke. It is no laughing matter. When it is no laughing matter, laughter matters," (p. 261). The feminist killjoy calls out sexist and racist utterances by interrupting the flow of conversation (read: flow of power) by refusing to indulge in such forms of joy. In this way, the joykill is an obstacle to neoliberal feminism in her commitment to obstruct patriarchal forms of humor, even in seemingly innocuous instances.

Brüning's joykill is a subverted version of the killjoy that must be attuned to the "affective regime" (p. 669) within post-feminist neoliberal discourse. This regime sees anger as an inappropriate and, at best, temporary feeling that ultimately inspires coalition building and solidarity in pursuit of revenge. Brüning states:

> An inversion of the feminist killjoy, the postfeminist joykill signifies a discursive and affective shift as young feminists are increasingly no longer *kill*ing *joy* by calling out sexism (Ahmed, 2010), but are instead celebrated for *joy*fully *'kill*ing' the patriarch, or at least standing up to some forms of sexual violence. P. 670.

Brüning demonstrates the prevalence of the joykill across three teen dramas, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), *Riverdale* (2017-2023), and *Charmed* (2018-2022). She asserts that, to some degree, these series do demonstrate the structural devaluation of women, particularly through sexual assault and rape. However, in their endeavors to seek revenge, they inadvertently embrace the 'top girl' or 'girl boss' stereotypes that commodify feminist ideals

within patriarchal aesthetics of perfectly performed femininity with capitalist success (McRobbie, 2007). Further, "the involvement of Latina and Black characters… remains limited to their mere interchangeable presence and visibility" (Brüning. P. 671), perpetuating a multicultural aesthetic while leaving the intersection of race, gender, and sex uninterrogated, a fault of the GFH genre as well.

As a result, both the joykill and the GFH protagonists are versions of a utopic postfeminist, post racial vision that imagines white, cis hetero women seeing patriarchy as a primary injustice, but not an insurmountable hurdle towards personal success. In these films and series, patriarchy manifests clearly in individuals' behavior through overt sexism rather than understanding any nuances of gendered power, let alone how race, sexuality, and ability complicate gender. The primary divergence between the "Good for Her" protagonist and the feminist joykill is in their relationships with others, particularly other women.

A critical facet of Brüning's joykill is that her anger is temporarily lived before being disseminated across a group of other young women who readily share her sentiments and agree to seek out revenge. Their anger rarely extends beyond the catalyst and the joykill's supernatural abilities often function as a way for these women to lead others 'to the light' of feminism. Further still, while there are mixed results with these women's endeavor's, they are largely left unpunished for seeking out revenge despite their questionable moral commitments. They do not seek to destroy the objects of their rage, but rather to 'teach them a lesson' by publicly embarrassing them or expressing power over them through an elaborate ruse. Despite the relatively public manner most of these revenge plots take place, the joykill's white cis-hetero feminine privilege allows them to elide punishment, fashioning them as heroes of neoliberal feminism as they come out on top.

The GFH protagonist, however, typically functions alone, often being accused of hysteria for their continued anger at being wronged. This is in part due to the fact she is "observed to suffer the same microaggressions and daily violences that most, if not all women, are forced to face every day," (Fujii, p. 12). In other words, the GFH protagonist seeks out revenge at seemingly innocuous incidents that are deeply familiar to female audiences. These moments appear as the straw that broke the camel's back as her rage has built up to the point that it is only exhaustible through personal and violent revenge enacted alone. While the object of her rage is almost always fully annihilated by the end of the film, she too is usually destroyed as a result of her narrow focus and disregard for future repercussions. The joykill can be understood as the darker side of the girlboss or top girl stereotypes, while the GFH protagonist is her older and volatile counterpart.

The final crucial distinction between the GFH protagonist and the feminist joykill is where their feminist agendas are located. The joykill is often explicit in her pursuits of feminist ends. Brüning points to a particular scene in the first episode of *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* in which Sabrina is enraged that the sexual assault of her friend is not being taken seriously by her highschool's administration. To fight sexism in the school, they form "WICCA-Women's Intersectional Cultural and Creative Association" that is approved by the school with a bit of witchcraft. The feminist goals of these characters are motivated by their belief that, despite the fact that patriarchal harm is systemic, there are only a few bad eggs that they can shame or educate to discourage them from harming other women. The GFH protagonist, in contrast, is motivated by her isolated, personal goals. In her assessment of the widespread prevalence of sexism or misogyny, no man is left innocent. The feminist overtones in these films

center destruction as the driving force rather than liberation; any morally permissible feminist politics must be read off of the film rather than existing as an internally articulated final goal.

The Witch's Allure

To analyze any form of feminine monstrosity in film necessitates a closer look at the "one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that belongs to woman - that of the witch," (Creed, 1993, p. 73). The witch has emerged as a crucial identity across both the GFH and joykill archetypes throughout the last three decades. Constituting two of the three examples examined by Brüning (*The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *Charmed*) and being the first of the eight images presented by the original tweet from cinematogrxphy (*The Witch*, Eggers, 2015), the witch plays a key role in the reclamation of power by the protagonists in both spheres. An examination of the deep history of the witch can aid in understanding exactly what this figure provides, including the ways in which it too has become subsumed in neoliberal ideals, as well as where it could offer potentially liberating aesthetics.

The images of witches that manifest in popular culture are largely inspired by Western European witch trials taking place from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century. European witchcraft came under scrutiny most violently during the rule of James VI/I after his publication of *Daemonologie* in 1597 that cemented the image of the witch as a threat to religious and national identity. James built upon the fear incited by the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) (Kramer and Sprenger) from 1494 and *Newes From Scotland* published around 1591. *The Hammer of Witches* detailed how to identify suspected witches and explained specific torture techniques to evoke a confession of witchcraft. *Newes From Scotland* was a pamphlet with an unknown author that described the North Berwick witch trials, taking the methods from *The*

Hammer of Witches and putting them into practice as almost exclusively women were rounded up, tortured, and ultimately executed on accusations of witchcraft.

While the witch hunts were certainly religiously motivated (Larner, 1984), scholars such as Federici (2004) examine the witch trials as connected to the shift from feudalism to capitalism. This shift necessitated that traditionally feminine forms of knowledge and labor be devalued in order to justify their destruction or relegation to the domestic sphere in order for the public market to rest upon it. She states:

> If we consider the historical context in which the witch-hunt occurred, the gender and class of the accused, and the effects of the persecution, then we must conclude that witch-hunting in Europe was an attack on women's resistance to the spread of capitalist relations and the power that women had gained by virtue of their sexuality, their control over reproduction, and their ability to heal. p. 330.

Any resistance to reproduction or inability to participate therein justified the violence of the witch trials. This meant that older women who were no longer viable reproductive bodies or poor women who were imagined as less valuable were often accused of witchcraft in order to cleanse European populations of their burdensome reliance on others. In this context, women were no longer agential beings, but rather their corporality was reduced to reproductive sources of laboring bodies. Therefore, any women that insisted on maintaining or facilitating reproductive control were deemed witches, such as healers and midwives (Ehrenreich and English, 2010 [1972]).

The devaluation of these practices were additionally in accordance with larger colonial pursuit of the same era as the singular epistemological perspective was reduced to the white European male body. Motivated by narratives of rationality, the blending of physical remedies with spiritual or religious communications were deemed in direct contrast to the supposed objective stance of biomedical practitioners. Therefore, the use of nature in healing practices was

demonized, perpetuated by the parallel reduction of nature to an inert, exploitable body, just as the female body was.

Merchant (1980) demonstrates how the natural environment, which had previously been imagined as an agential being within organicist views of the world, was effectively killed during the shift to capitalism in order for it to be designated as a collection of inert resources ripe for extraction to support accelerated production. It is a misinterpretation of writing such as Merchant's that inspired many second wave feminist politics to embrace the witchy image as a way of 'returning' to the myth of pre-industry that supposedly had egalitarian cultures concerning gender. Further, the confluence of the revitalization of the environmental movement at the same moment of the second wave sparked a great deal of cross over, interweaving ideas of gender, sexuality, and nature that located the witch as existing between these political issues (Dunaway, 2015; Salleh, 1997)

Moseley (2002) explores the critical link between the taking up of the witch identity during the second wave and its subsequent prevalence across visual media, particularly from the 1990s onward. Attraction to the image of the witch during the second wave was partially motivated by the allure of the coven as sentiments of sisterhood were often touted as an important component of feminist work. Subsequently, ideas of sisterhood were predicated on the universal, essential connection between women and nature that bound all women together in a struggle against patriarchal culture. Authors such as Adler (1979), Daly (1979), and Morgan (1970) imagined the process of becoming a witch as a way to revalue previously persecuted female bodies, such as postmenopausal women (or 'hags' in the words of Daly) or sexually 'promiscuous' women.

While these authors had visions of a feminine future of liberation, their strictly white descriptions paid only lip service to any racial or sexual plurality, a practice well in line with second wave feminist politics. Lorde's (1979) open letter to Daly questions her commitment to a goddess worshiping future that excludes all Black cultural iconography and homogenizes patriarchal oppression under the guise of universality. She remarks:

> I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power…To imply… that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other. ¶ 7.

Lorde's critique of Daly illustrates how 'the witch' in question was implicitly a *white* witch as evidenced by strictly white images of the witch in film and television.

Despite these shortcomings, the witch as a visual figure continued to offer nuanced presentations of gender, power, and history. Clover (1992) sees films such as *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) as exemplifying both femininity and feminism. Mosely (2002) further investigates Carrie as a critical example that showcases the pursuit of femininity (beauty and social success) while also depicting a violent young woman whose power is rooted in her sexual development. In other words, Carrie, as a characters that wants nothing more than to fit in with her classmates and is continually alienated as a result of her sheltered life and inability to exemplify the sexual performance mandated by teen girls, is depicted expressing masculine-coded affect to the point of annihilation of those that have contributed to her shame.

While Carrie certainly upholds traditional forms of femininity that are punctuated by submissive behavior and taming of the body, her tortured state as a result of her sex and gender locates patriarchal pressure as the fuel behind her fury. In this way, Carrie is a dual victim of patriarchal power that manifests through her mother and her peers that leads to her development

of witchy abilities. The film makes explicit the pain that comes out of one's inability to adapt to the many double-binds of femininity that is then transformed into otherworldly powers that, at first, allow her to embrace femininity but ultimately can only nominally combat engrained patriarchal powers. However, through the end of the 20th and early 21st centuries, the acquisition and management of witchy abilities became sanitized as young witches no longer used their abilities to cast off patriarchal pressure or aleve their embarrassment through retribution; rather their abilities aided them in *accomplishing* feminine aesthetics and behaviors. As Moseley puts it, "There is much at stake in the generic shift from horror to the more benign textual spaces of romantic drama, sitcom, and fantasy," (p. 411).

The witches in series such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006) embraced what Moseley explores as the 'glamour' of the witch that constructs femininity "as unknowable essence and essential superficiality" (p. 408). In these series, the young witches see their powers as another aspect of coming of age that they must manage, as if it were body hair or pimples. It is because of their supernatural powers that they are able to 'have it all' by being socially and academically successful while they embody feminine behavior and aesthetics. The horrors of gendered oppression are dissolved, paving the way for typical teen anxieties about fitting in.

Interestingly, it is the reboots of these two series that Brüning analyzes as defining the feminist joykill. Whereas the original *Sabrina* series focuses on the comedy of living as a young witch, the reboot maintains aspects of this genre with the addition of a clearly postfeminist orientation and horrifying violence that would have been inappropriate for the rom-com style of the original. In the same way that the final girl and the slasher are collapsed to create the "Good

For Her" subgenre, the rom-com and horror series are collapsed in order to create the joykill so that the protagonist can pursue her personal ends through morally ambiguous means.

The moral ambiguity in recent GFH films and joykill stories taps into the nuance for which Mosely and Clover praise *Carrie* as female protagonists, even in their pursuit of traditional femininity, demonstrate the harm of patriarchal power structures. As Heimberger puts it “Female characters can and should be flawed in order to be fully developed, realistic, and three-dimensional. They do not have to be moral pillars and liberate all of oppressed society under the patriarchy,” (p. 27).

Play Fighting and the Survivor/Victim Paradox

To turn away from what defines these genres and taking a closer look at what they offer viewers, Heimberger builds upon Mulvey’s (1975) work examining the influence of the male gaze in film to point to the GFH genre as relying on the use of the victim/villain protagonist. Mulvey’s assertion that female viewer “may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (p. 29) still rings true and effectively defines the GFH genre. The victim/villain protagonist locates trauma and harm as being the catalyst that leads to morally questionable actions, but it is this moral promiscuity that attracts female audiences. In further exploring how this catharsis works through the act of wish fulfillment, Larson’s (2018) analysis of the victim/survivor paradox is helpful.

Larson (2018) explores the victim/survivor paradox as being a critical aspect of rape culture that relies on ablesist sentiments. The paradox configures *victims* as unreliable and non-agential narrators of their stories of abuse while *survivors* are expected to be ‘healed’ and past their traumas. In using disability theory, Larson demonstrates how the notion of one being a

survivor necessitates their return to a normative state, reflecting a compulsory discomfort with divergent bodies that marks them as intrinsically deficient. In the context of horror films, the victim/villain is both a victim and an authoritative voice on the realities of gendered violence. They do not seek out revenge or violence in order to 'move past' their traumas or to heal, rather they pursue these often self-destructive plots in order to materially reclaim power.

This reclamation of power is subsequently reflected in the viewer who is able to engage in the fantasy of revenge. Schubart (2018) describes these indulgences in horror as a method of play fighting that is a form of "edgework" in which "we engage in dangerous activities for fun and work the edge between danger and trauma," (p. 56). Because of gendered restrictions in physical play fighting, Schubart emphasizes the specifically female pleasure this edgework enables when other outlets are unavailable.

These many related but distinct expressions of affective investment in the GFH film illuminate how and why these stories have been produced and reproduced over the last few decades. Even with their failings, these acts of play fighting authorize identification with protagonists for female audiences that is readily available for male audiences across many other genres (Heimberger, 2022). However, the ever evolving aesthetics of these films necessitates a sustained attunement to the many variations of films therein.

Ch. II: Inappropriate Affect in *Pearl* and *The Witch*

The films *Pearl* (West, 2022) and *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015) are both examples of the "Good for Her" sub-genre. The theme of retribution paired with depictions of female protagonists seeking liberation through the annihilation of those that represent their oppression has earned both of them a place within online discourse surrounding the genre. *The Witch* has existed within the GFH cinematic universe since its popularization in 2020, harnessing aspects of the witch's aesthetic that has attracted audiences for decades. Similarly, *Pearl* is popular within the subgenre for its unapologetically gory horrors that are presented in nostalgic three stripe technicolor techniques (Shachat, 2022). In attempting to define the genre by breaking down popular GFH films and awarding *Pearl* as the "most solidly good for her" (❡5), *Vulture* writer Squires (2023) states, "Mia Goth and Ti West set out to create a character who was a unique monster, but they accidentally stumbled upon an Everywoman," (❡ 19).

Though these films are often revered as exemplars of the genre, I will demonstrate that they depart dramatically from the formulas of the GFH genre laid out by Heimberger and Fujii. In particular, the antagonistic tone of the mothers in each film is the primary difference as the oppressive patriarchal force manifests through another female body as opposed to a male love interest or adversary. Because the power distributions in the film differ from other GFH plots, I argue that the emotional catharsis elicited by the films remains obscured in the current analyses of the genre and perhaps reflects a troubled arena in neoliberal feminism.

Crucial to this analysis will be Creed's (1993) illustration of how the monstrous feminine is created within the horror film and what it communicates about cultural anxieties related to the female body and femininity. Returning to *Carrie* as another example of the horrors born out of mother/daughter conflicts, Creed's analysis of the abject female body and the passing on of

womanhood from mother to daughter will make explicit the psychological progression present in both *The Witch* and *Pearl.*

The Witch opens with the casting out of a Puritan family from their colony in 1600s America. The family includes father William, mother Kate (who is pregnant upon their departure), eldest daughter Thomasin, son Caleb, and two young twins Mercy and Jonas. The family settles in a seemingly untouched wilderness that is absent of any signs of humanity, colonial and indigenous alike. Shortly after settling, Kate gives birth to baby Samuel. When Thomasin is charged with watching Samuel and he seemingly vanishes into thin air, the family presumes that he was taken by a witch, an accusation that spills over onto Thomasin as she becomes the family's scapegoat for the ill fated events that follow. All members of the family either die of mysterious means or disappear, leaving just Kate and Thomasin. When Kate accuses Thomasin of killing the family and attacks her, Thomasin must kill her mother in self defense, leaving her as the last one standing. It is this final act of violence that allows her to sign her name in the Devil's Book, subsequently becoming a member of the coven of witches in the woods.

The film *Pearl*, set in 1918, follows the title character as she dreams of escaping her family's Texas farm while her husband Howard is away fighting in WWI. Pearl is largely isolated on the farm by her mother Ruth who is fearful of both of her daughter's violent tendencies and the Spanish flu that is wreaking havoc. Pearl finds escape by secretly watching films in the town's theater which inspires her to audition for a dance troupe that comes through town as a way to finally escape her mother's oppressive force. When she accidentally harms her mother the evening before her audition, her previously hinted at violent tendencies come to the fore as she goes on to kill her father, sister-in-law, and a theater employee with whom she had an affair. Importantly, *Pearl* is a prequel to the film *X* (West, 2022) that depicts an elderly Pearl and

Howard, living on the same farm, as they hunt down and kill a band of twenty-somethings that are using their property to film pornography. As a result, the viewer presumably knows that Pearl does not succeed in her escape as the film concludes with Howard arriving home to find Ruth and Pearl's father's decaying bodies sitting around a table of rotting food as Pearl goes about her chores.

The Witch and *Pearl* depart from the GFH films in three primary ways. First, rather than a man instigating the catalyst moment of revenge for the protagonists, the mothers in both films represent patriarchal control against which their daughters rebel. As a result, both the protagonists and the antagonists within the film are victim-villains as the daughters are oppressed by their mothers who are, in turn, oppressed by their husbands and the wider culture. Second, in many ways, GFH films embrace feminine stoicism in the clever and thought out plans of revenge that the protagonists seek out after their catalyst events (See *Gone Girl* (Fincher, 2014), & *Knives Out* (Johnson, 2019)) as opposed to seeing passionate actions of anger or jealousy. Though there are some instances of planned violence, most of the gore in these films is the result of pure expressions of rage, jealousy, or fear. Finally, though not a critical foundation for the GFH film and rather a side effect of the political moment in which these films take place, neither *Pearl* nor *The Witch* demonstrates a post-feminist reality of achieving liberation through personal success. In fact, the protagonists demonstrate little reflection on their gender and its impact on their experiences; the audience is left to fill in the implicit bias present in the films.

Thomasin and Kate: The Witch's Menarche

The primary antagonistic force within GFH films is often presented as either a (previous) partner of the protagonist or a man with whom she happens to come into contact with that disrespects or harms her in some way. Rarely is another woman the object of the protagonist's

revenge. However, Kate and Ruth, the matriarchs in *The Witch and Pearl,* respectively, operate as the most salient oppressive forces in their daughter's lives. By examining the mother/daughter dyads in these films within the wider context of gender in the horror genre, the vindictive affect necessary for a GFH film becomes obvious and perhaps more salient than if these characters triumphed over their love interests or random men in their lives.

In *The Witch,* the relationship between Thomasin and her mother Kate appears typical as the first twenty minutes of the film sees them only occasionally interacting. The first substantial altercation between Kate and Thomasin occurs presumably a few days after Samuel was 'taken by a wolf' when Thomasin is again charged with watching her siblings, this time the twins Jonas and Mercy. While Jonas and Mercy ignore her pleas to do their chores, she slinks off and looks longingly into the woods, sitting in the same spot from which Samuel was taken.

She returns to the farm at the same moment that Caleb and William return after having secretly checked the game traps William set previously. Kate comes from inside the home to find that the twins are playing with Black Phillip, the family's black billy goat they say speaks to them. Kate demands to know where Thomasin was, saying "I told thee to keep watch of Jonas and Mercy." to which Tomasin replies, "I was and I bade them help me and they paid me no mind." Speaking over her daughter, Kate replies, "What's the matter with thee Thomasin? *What* is the matter with thee? Take thy father's rags to the book and wash them. And brush out his woolens. Help him!" as Thomasin meekly protests that the twins will not listen to her (0:20:30).

From this first moment, it is clear that Thomasin's association with Samuel's disappearance has severed any relationship she had with her mother. While this instance at first seems to be simply a moment of tension in the family as Kate was worried to find William, Caleb, and Thomasin missing, shortly after, as Thomasin cleans her father's clothes, Mercy

accuses her of witchcraft. Finding her and Caleb sitting by the brook, Mercy says that Thomasin let the witch of the wood steal Samuel as she pretends to fly around on a broom. When Thomasin asks her, “Why is’t when thou dost a wrong, I am a-washing father’s clothes like a slave, and thou art playing idle?” to which Mercy simply replies, “Because mother hates you.” (0:24:40). Neither Thomains nor Caleb protest this accusation, and though it clearly upsets Thomasin, it appears as an uncontested fact that Thomasin has become the object of her mother’s scorn.

The tension within the family comes to a fever pitch when Kate finds that the silver cup that her father gave her has gone missing, which she accuses Thomasin of losing or stealing. The cup, though monetarily valuable, also represents the life that the family had before leaving England for the colony. Frustratingly, the viewer knows that it was not Thomasin but William that took the cup and sold it for hunting supplies. William told Caleb of this lie when they were in the woods checking the traps. Neither of them speak up to defend Thomasin as Kate asks, “Did a wolf vanish that too?” (0:28:00).

That same evening, as Kate and William prepare for bed, Kate’s anger and fear of her daughter is nominally explained when she tells William “our daughter have begot the sign of her womanhood,” (0:33:00) and insists that William sell her to another family to serve now that she is of age. With little food prepared for the winter, William relents, justifying his decision as a way to reduce the numbers of mouths to feed.

After eavesdropping on this conversation between their parents, Caleb and Thomasin go into the woods to procure food and save the eldest daughter. However, when the siblings are separated after the family horse and dog act bizarrely, Caleb is unable to find his way home and is subsequently bewitched by a beautiful woman in a red riding cloak. He is not found until late that evening, completely naked in the rain and nearly unconscious. The twins again accuse

Thomasin of witchcraft, this time, in front of Kate and William who are beginning to suspect that something is awry as she always seems to be associated with the harm coming to the family.

When Caleb dies from his mysterious affliction, William traps the remaining three children in the goat house for the night when he realizes he cannot trust any of them. By morning, Mercy and Jonas have vanished and William is killed by Black Phillip. As Kate exits the hut and finds her daughter standing by her husband's dead body, she drags her away by her hair, accusing her of having made a pact with the devil and seducing her own brother and father to kill them. Kate then tackles Thomasin to the ground and beats her daughter while Thomasin repeatedly screams “I love you!” (1:18:20). Forced to defend herself when Kate begins to choke her, Thomasin kills her mother with a billhook and then holds her dead body against her chest as she continues to cry (See image 3). Standing from her mother’s corpse, coated in her mother’s blood, the stark red on Thomasin’s body marks her as the witch, just as the riding cloak had done for the witch of the woods.

Image 3: Anya Taylor-Joy as Thomasin and Kate Dickie as Katherine. *The Witch,* Eggers, 2016.

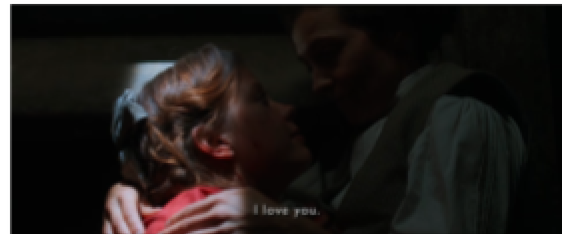

Image 4: Mia Goth as Pearl and Tandi Wright as Ruth. *Pearl,* West, 2022.

Pearl and Ruth: Becoming What You Hate

The mother/daughter dyad depicted in *Pearl* is introduced far earlier in the film than in *The Witch* and with far more conflict. The opening scene finds Pearl, dressed in one of her

mother's nice dresses, fantasizing about being in a show as stage lights are heard clicking on and dramatic music swells. Less than three minutes in, however, Pearl's mother Ruth barges into her room, cutting off the music and bringing Pearl back to reality. Framed by the dark silhouette of the doorway, standing in a gray vest with a high starched collar, Ruth scolds her daughter in German for wearing her old dress and procrastinating to avoid her chores. From the outset, Ruth reflects the stereotypically austere German woman in her curt, harsh words as she stifles her daughter's creative fantasy.

That same evening, Ruth requests that her daughter no longer engage in such "selfish" foolishness as dancing around. The pressures of the war have taken all the farm hands that Ruth previously employed and Pearl's father, having been left paralyzed and nonverbal by an unnamed illness, is of little help so it is up to the two women to keep the farm afloat until the men return. Though Ruth indicates her deep worry about the farm, the remarks roll off of Pearl as she becomes excited about the newspaper sitting by the hearth. In response, Ruth states, "You can read it after supper…I don't want to hear about any more dead Germans tonight," (0:07:16).

The tension between the Ruth and Pearl manifests from both of their feelings of being trapped on the farm with someone who does not understand their plight; Ruth because Pearl does not comprehend the importance of keeping her head down and working until Germans experience less scrutiny in the US, and Pearl for her mother's insistence that she look nowhere else for fulfillment than her family's farm.

Because Ruth is deeply afraid of becoming ill, it is Pearl's responsibility to go into the small Texas town to retrieve the medicine for her father. Using the change from the money her mother gave her, Pearl goes to the pictures to watch the silent films of the dancers. The primary conflict between Ruth and Pearl comes out of this choice when Ruth finds the playbill from the

show that Pearl attended, telling her that she must spend the evening in the barn until they know that she is not sick. At this moment, Pearl decides to tell her mother that she will be attending a dance audition the following day. Begging her mother to see reason, she asks that Ruth let her go and if she is not selected, she will never speak of it again and will stay on the farm with her parents.

Ruth's horrified reaction at her daughter's plan is revelatory for a few reasons, both for Pearl and for the viewer. When Pearl asserts that Ruth does not "know what she's capable of," (0:46:10), Ruth reveals that she has been well aware not just of Pearl's tendency to daydream and shirk off responsibilities, but that her daughter has a deeply violent nature that puts all of those around her at risk. She yells, "You are not well Pearl! It's only a matter of time before you hurt someone else. Malevolence is festering in you, I can see it. I will not, in good conscience, let you leave this farm again," (0:47:15).

While Pearl's predilection for violence has already been depicted, as Ruth continues to admonish her daughter, Pearl's tendencies no longer appear a result of her circumstances, but perhaps as something that has been passed from mother to daughter. Ruth begins to threaten her own husband in jest, saying that perhaps they could both go off and leave behind the life that Ruth has fought to build. Ruth asks her daughter what makes her so selfish, to which Pearl innocently responds, "I just don't want to end up like you, is all," (0:48:55). It is this final insensitive remark that pushes Ruth to physically harm her daughter as she strikes her across the face. When Pearl retaliates, they begin to tussle, resulting in Ruth's dress catching fire from the open hearth in the room. Ruth's whole body is quickly consumed by flames which Pearl puts out with the pot of stew sitting on the kitchen table. Though she is still alive, Pearl makes no effort to

help her mother nor does she call a doctor, rather she drags her down to the cellar before leaving the home to sleep with a movie theater employee with whom she was having an affair.

This moment of violence is the instigating event for a string of gory actions. By the end of the film, after having been rejected from the dance troupe and having killed nearly everyone around her, Pearl decides that she is not fit to leave the farm and that her mother was right all along. Going into the cellar and seeing Ruth's dead body, Pearl crawls into her lap, puts her mother's burned arm over her, and hallucinates her singing a German lullaby (See image 4).

By tracking the development of the monstrous qualities across all four of these female characters, the specific manifestations of monstrosity exemplified by each daughter comes out of their relationship with their overbearing and harsh mothers. While this is not a new phenomena as Wood (1986, quoted in Creed (1993, p.77)) states, "The child-monsters are all shown as products of the family," the specific relationship between a daughter and her mother operates uniquely. To analyze how these relationships function within the 'good for her' formula, Creed's (1993) exploration of *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976) will aid in teasing out the ways that *The Witch* and *Pearl* remain GFH films in spite of their diversions. Specifically, Creed's assertion that both Carrie and her mother Margaret exemplify the monstrous feminine while also inciting a great deal of sympathy from the viewers reflects the dynamics between Ruth/Pearl and Thomasin/Kate. The striking similarities in the themes, plots, and relationships is cause enough for questioning how these ideas are being continually recycled and admired.

Menstrual Blood as Magical Stuff

Creed's analysis of *Carrie* focuses heavily on the abject nature of menstrual blood and reproductive capabilities configuring the female body as monstrous. Expanding upon Kristeva's notion of the abject as "what does not respect borders, positions, rules" (2020 [1980], p. 97),

menstrual blood is a volatile substance that blends the boundary of life and death. By communicating a failed reproductive opportunity, menstrual blood is indicative of a cavernous, consumptive female body that threatens the stability of masculine culture.

Naming Carrie as a "menstrual monster" (p. 78), Creed demonstrates how menstrual blood is a highly abject substance, blurring the boundaries between the interior and exterior. The instability incited by menstrual blood becomes increasingly volatile in the context of Carrie and Margaret's relationship due to Margaret's emphatic religiosity where "the sins of woman are inherited" (p. 79) from Eve's original sin. Menstruation, therefore, is not a natural byproduct of aging but a morally impermissible sign of female sexuality.

The monstrous signification of menstrual blood within a Christian context is reflected in *The Witch* as Thomasin's 'sign of womanhood' is the instigating moment that the family begins to experience misfortune. Though the viewer is present for Carrie's menarche, Thomasin's menstruation is only referenced. Nevertheless, blood as a symbol of rot follows Thomasin, such as when she is harvesting eggs and finds a broken, partially fertilized chick (0:17:36) or when she is milking the nanny goat whose milk has turned to blood (0:49:23).

Most substantially, however, is during her final altercation with her mother where she is bathed in Kate's blood from striking her face in self defense. In this way, it is Kate's blood that turns Thomasin from a child into a woman, not her own menstrual blood. As Creed puts it, "It is also blood which flows between mother and daughter and joins them together in their life-and-death struggle," (p. 78). It is the literal flow of blood from mother to daughter that causes Thomasin to become the witch/woman, subverting the typical sequence that sees the witchy powers as being necessary to triumph over oppressive forces such as in Carrie and Margaret's relationship.

The Split Consciousness of Carrie and Pearl

The function of menstrual blood in *The Witch* and *Carrie* is critical to communicating the intrinsically monstrous quality of the reproductive female body and subsequently the monstrosity of Thomasin and Carrie. However, Pearl's monstrous qualities are far more straightforward as she has little to no regard for what she must destroy in order to accomplish her goals. This simplistic, even sociopathic, apathy, at first, sets her apart from most female protagonists, especially the final girls, who must be incredibly clever and charming to survive their own movies. However, the similarities between Carrie and Pearl as characters with distinctly split qualities brings to light how their violent actions elicit sympathy, and even appear justifiable, to audiences.

Reflecting the greatest visual parallel between the films, the concluding acts of violence committed by Carrie and Pearl are displayed on split screens as half-screens take a close shot of gore, often paired with the image of Carrie/Pearl's face (See images 5 and 6). This visual shift, found nowhere else in either film, conveys a break within the consciousness of these two characters as they appear to have accessed some form of auto-pilot, taking their mindless revenge against those that have harmed them. Creed states, "Carrie is…a divided personality. On the one hand she is a painfully shy, withdrawn, child-like girl who just wants to be 'normal' like every other teenager, while on the other hand she has the power of telekinesis which enables her to transform into an avenging female fury," (p. 78).

Carrie effectively comes to contain the paradoxical double-bind of patriarchal stereotypes of women. She is both the "child-like girl" who is unable to care for herself and must therefore be dominated by paternal entities *and* the insane witch that uses her demonic powers for evil against the innocent bodies of the public. The dual screen here nominally absolves this paradox

by communicating that the patriarchal pressures placed on her by both her community and her family have led to her insanity. Just as the screen is visually split, so too is her mind.

Image 5: Sissy Spacek as Carrie. *Carrie*, De Palma, 1976.

Image 6: Mia Goth as Pearl and Emma Jenkins as Misty. *Pearl*, West, 2022.

In contrast, Pearl's final act of brutality (cutting up her sister-in-law Mitsy with an ax) appears in line with her previous displays of violence. However, this scene is preceded by a nearly nine minute long monologue in which Pearl reveals her deepest secrets to Mitsy. During this monologue, Pearl admits to a variety of things as if she were speaking to Howard. While some of these confessions consist of actions that the audience has seen, such as her sleeping with the movie theater employee, others reveal devastating truths about Pearl's internal pain, such as her being grateful for a miscarriage she had and fury with Howard for never taking her off of the farm despite his financial mobility.

The quiet and slowed pace of this scene is in direct contrast to the rest of the film that is loud, brightly colored, and fast paced, allowing a window into Pearl's mind that is typically hidden behind her fantasies of grandeur. Displaying Pearl's violence towards Mitsy with the split screen complicates the previously simplistic view of Pearl that the majority of the film perpetuates. In previous scenes, Pearl and Mitsy were close, bonding over their shared appreciation for performance. Pearl's choice to harm Mitsy comes about because Mitsy becomes afraid of Pearl as she slowly learns about what she is capable of, just as Ruth predicted.

Both Pearl and Carrie's moments of violence are preceded by auditory and visual hallucinations. Carrie imagines that her classmates begin laughing at her after she is covered in pig's blood during prom when, in reality, most students and faculty are similarly horrified as she is. In this way, Margaret's hysteria and paranoia has been passed onto Carrie as she imagines that her mother's warnings have come to fruition and that she has brought about her own destruction through sin. Similarly, during Pearl's audition for the dance troupe, Pearl is told that she does not fit the bill of the "All-American" (1:12:00) dancer the judges were searching for. They then morph into the charred and bloodied bodies of those she has harmed. Pearl imagines her dead mother, father, husband, and the theater employee as shuttering her hope of escaping the farm, once again driving home that it was not their presence that prevented her from accomplishing her dreams, but herself.

When she returns home with Mitsy, who was awarded the position in the dance troupe, Pearl's fury turns towards her as yet another scapegoat on whom she can blame her failures. After this final act of violence, Pearl returns to her mother's corpse in the cellar who she imagines is singing a German lullaby, forgiving Pearl for her actions. Pearl admits that her mother was right and she must stay on the farm. The abrupt oscillations between ruthless destruction and repentant submission further communicate Pearl's inability to connect her actions with their repercussions, configuring her as an additionally split character.

These moments represent the girls' departure from reality as they finally pursue violence with abandon, destroying even those that have had nothing to do with their suffering or suppression. Their oscillations between obedience and rebellion ultimately concludes with a severing of themselves as they disconnect from their actions and any consequences that may come from them.

Carrie, Pearl, Thomasin: Sisters in Sympathy

Though monstrosity is differently reflected across Pearl, Carrie, and Thomasin, their most remarkable connection is how their stories incite sympathy not just for them, but for their mothers as well. Creed states, "Like the witches of other horror films, Carrie has become a figure of monumental destruction sparing no one in her fury. But because she has been sadistically treated by her fellow classmates and her insane mother, Carrie is also a very sympathetic figure," (p. 81). Carrie's abuse at the hands of her mother is certainly more severe than that experienced by either Pearl or Thomasin, and yet there is still some sympathy for Margaret, despite all that she has done to Carrie. Margaret's internal life is shuttered by her fanatic Christianity as she repeatedly tells Carrie that she must repent for the sin of having been born a female. It is not until just before her death that Margaret reveals to Carrie that she was conceived when she was raped and she enjoyed it. Though it is clear that Margaret's religious affinity leaves no woman spared of sin, her own self-loathing is thrown into relief during this scene. Carrie is clearly a victim turned villain, just, as it seems, her mother is.

Similar to Margaret, Kate is additionally depicted as largely powerless against the men in her life, consistent with gender roles in the mid-17th century. Though she is harsh with her children, her motivations for doing so seem to be directly related to her despair at having been removed from her home rather than any animosity at having to care for her kin. Kate's deep sadness over leaving England, as communicated by her despair at having lost her father's silver cup, is often brushed aside by William as it was his decision to leave the country and, later, the colony. Any dissent or regret the family may have for following him throws his authority into question. Kate is unable to mourn the loss of her previous life because of William's pride. His dismissive treatment of her misery is then translated into Kate's complicated feelings with

anything that reminds her of her past life. This includes Thomasin as the only one of the children that remembers England, reflected in her pondering of the glass windows their English home had. In an attempt to forget her memories of her world previous to their voyage, Kate appears determined to rid the family of any reminders, including her eldest.

This sense of displacement is further reflected in Ruth as she struggles to find comfort in the foreign world of rural Texas. Ruth's interiority is the most explored of the three mothers, particularly in her fight with Pearl as she explains the deep loss she has experienced just to make a life that has produced a husband she must care for (in every sense of the word) and an ungrateful daughter who does not respect her. Just as the viewer can understand that Pearl wants to escape, so too can they understand that Ruth is similarly trapped. All three of these mothers receive sympathy for the plights, just as their daughters do.

In this way, *Pearl* and *The Witch* function differently, but perhaps more effectively, within the typical construction of a GFH film. The experience of struggling against one's mother is not necessarily time bound; from the 1600s, to 1918, to 1979 and beyond, the glorification of the child breaking free from the mother is a recognizable and relatable trope. The complicated feelings these daughters have towards their mothers are appropriately nuanced. Many GFH films elicit sympathy for the protagonist by demonstrating the hardship she had gone through as she chases retribution by destroying a man who has no sense of what living in the world as a woman feels like. In the case of Pearl and Thomasin, they know that their mothers understand their gendered struggles and they resent them for exacerbating their suffering.

The treatment of the mothers' dead bodies in *The Witch, Pearl, and Carrie* is the final point of analysis that further illustrates the complicated emotions between mothers and

daughters. Carrie intentionally kills her mother by elevating a series of knives to impale her against a doorframe, crucifying her as she dies. Creed states:

> Carrie pulls her mother's impaled body from the wall and returns to the womb-like closet in which her mother once entombed her, forcing her to pray to God for forgiveness that she was born female…*Carrie*'s thematic movement suggests symbolically a return to the womb; a final statement of complete surrender to the power of the maternal entity. P. 82.

This symbolic movement is found within both *The Witch* and *Pearl.* As has been mentioned above, Pearl hallucinates that her mother is alive and well as she crawls into the womb of the cellar as Ruth tells Pearl that she loves her. Pearl then moves her mother and father's bodies to sit at the family's dining table reflecting the violent exchange that took place in the same space that ignited Pearl's murderous rampage. The dining table, therefore, becomes a womb like space where the maternal reigns and Pearl can imagine a world in which she heeded her mother's warnings, a world in which the nuclear family remains intact.

Similarly, Thomasin, shocked at her own violence towards her mother, walks into the family's small home, undresses from her bloody clothes, wraps a blanket from her parents' bed around herself, and falls asleep with her head on the family's dining table. She too is attempting to return to the space of the maternal despite it being a space of conflict between herself and her mother. Thomasin and Pearl are both surrendering to these spaces in an attempt to soothe themselves in the aftermath of their behavior.

The mother's corpse, being the symbol of utmost abjection, is cradled by each girl, communicating a sense of regret and understanding that would be impossible to explore while their mothers were alive. Ultimately, both mothers are correct in their accusations. Those around Pearl do come to fear her and she does fail to become the star she was sure she would become. Thomasin does eventually, though not at the moment that she destroys her mother, become a

witch and make a deal with the devil. It is only after their demise that the truth of their words can be fully comprehended by either the viewer or the girls themselves.

Against Feminine Stoicism: Crimes of Passion

Thomasin and Pearl's violence is largely a result of heightened emotion, at either being scorned or attacked. In Heimberger's (2022) analysis of the GFH film, feminine rage must be taken seriously and not written off as hysteria as the protagonists express typically masculine-coded affects. However, even in Heimberger's case study of the "quintessential 'good for her' film" (p. 32) *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020), revenge is sought by the protagonist through the majority of the film in methodical and complicated ways. While Heimberger argues that this presentation of feminine rage suberts patriarchal expectations, the protagonist, Cassie, must still perpetuate aspects of feminine stoicism in order for her systematic process of revenge to be realized.

In contrast, Pearl and Thomasin almost never indulge in brutality that is planned, rather they exemplify truly 'hysterical' acts of violence when they are overtaken by their emotions. The audience, those who are being harmed, and the girls themselves are shocked at their actions. However, the distinct associations that Pearl and Thomasin have with volatile emotions, where Thomasin is largely level headed and Pearl is liable to scream or cry in the face of adversity, in some ways, reverse after their final acts of destruction.

Despite Pearl's much more frequent indulgences in violence, she is shown expressing a great deal of regret for her actions after she has killed everyone around her. Pearl's desire to return to normalcy, reflected in her staging of the family's dinner tables, is so great that she becomes fully disconnected from the reality that she has created, only seeming to understand the weight of what she has done once Howard returns. When Pearl notices Howard as he walks

through the door, finally home from deployment, he is understandably horrified to find Ruth and her husband's rotting corpses sitting at a table of maggot infested food. This moment leads to one of the most striking images of the film as the camera is positioned directly in front of Pearl's face as she stares down the audience.

In a caricature of joy at her husband's return, Pearl at first wears an unconvincing, toothy grin. Slowly, her expression deteriorates to a strained smile as she bares her teeth to the viewer. Just as tears begin to roll down her face, so too do the credits scroll across the screen. Similar to Ruth and Mr. Goose's interruptions of her daydreams, Howard's arrival home disrupts the static fantasy she established by maintaining the literal corpse of the family at the heart of the home around the dinner table. Pearl's contradictory expression communicates her despair at having been relegated to the position of wife due to Howard's return, the credits atop her face indicating her sealed fate despite all that she has done to escape the family and farm that she loathes.

Thomasin, on the other hand, appears to revel in the violence she is forced to enact. Though she is certainly in shock after her actions, she never appears to regret her choices, finally seeing herself as free. Tempted by the fineries she enjoyed in England by the devil, who has transformed from Black Phillip into a well dressed handsome man, Thomasin signs her name in his book and takes up her place as a witch.

If Thomasin were devastated by deaths of her family, the film would not likely be considered 'good for her' and instead a typical tragedy; it is her continued pursuit of power now that no one is stopping her that leaves the audience sympathetic and, to a certain degree, similarly satisfied as Thomasin appears. Pearl's initial brash apathy and conviction to chase what she wants makes her attractive, and even though she does mourn her parents, the lasting images

of Pearl doing whatever it takes to achieve her dream similarly elicit cathartic sentiments from the viewers.

Reading the Political: Pre-Feminism

One of the greatest downfalls of the GFH genre that reduces its generative impact on substantial feminist work is its persistent commitment to neoliberal politics. Asserting that white women's personal vendettas are representative of feminist success may be entertaining, but it is certainly limited in exploring cultural pitfalls such as rape culture, affective exploitation, or the many manifestations of sexism when in conjunction with other identities. Therefore, the feminist overtones of GFH films such as *Promising Young Woman, Gone Girl,* or *The Invisible Man* may cause the films to fall short for those that find these feminist ideals performative. The lack of these overtones, then, in *Pearl and The Witch,* may make them more attractive for an audience seeking feminist stories because their application to politics can be read off of the plots rather than being spelled out for the viewer.

With that said, in every sense of the word, these films are entirely color blind and white washed. The only people of color between either film are two ambiguously located Native Americans depicted walking away as Thomasin and her family leave their colony. Though this brief moment nominally acknowledges the expressly colonial project of the plantation that brought Thomasin and her family to North America, any indigeneity to the land in the film is conveyed as belonging to the white witches in the woods. These witches are additionally colonial in their 'home' of these lands despite the destruction of indigenous people that would be necessary to embrace the 'uninhabited' aesthetic the film perpetuates. Both films contribute to the obscurification of racialized struggles, triumphs, and stories. While the absence of any non-white or queer bodies does not exploit the aesthetics of multiculturalism as Brüning

criticizes in the joykill stories, these films continue to perpetuate white feminine catharsis as emblematic of feminist struggles, effectively erasing struggles perpetuated by intersectional oppressive powers.

Additionally, neither of these films are feminist in nature, let alone post-feminist. While locating exactly what qualifies a film as 'feminist' is slippery and well beyond the scope of this paper, my metric for making this assertion lies in the ultimately oppressive conclusions for both protagonists. Pearl's fate, though ambiguously communicated in *Pearl,* is explored in *X* where she is seen residing on the same farm sixty years after her murderous rampage, still resentful of Howard and never having accomplished her dream of becoming a star. Further, Thomasin's ecstatic inclusion in the coven reifies the masculine leader/feminine follower power construction as the devil is the one that 'leads her to the light' of freedom.

With that said, neither film makes any assertion about their feminist orientations, rather they tell the stories of women pushed over the edge because of repeated marginalization. The lack of political philosophizing or reflections on how gender impacts the treatment and behavior of Pearl and Thomasin allows the viewer to flexibly relate to them. These characters' experiences are not predicated on any one aspect of their identity (race, time period, social standing, etc.) besides their gender, therefore, to quote Squires (2023) once again, they are 'Everywoman'.

Ch. III: The Nonhuman as Comrade

Returning to Creed, she asserts that the construction of the monstrous child that comes out of the archaic mother is "abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which *the father is invariably absent* (*Psycho, Carrie, The Birds*)" (p. 12, emphasis added). In the context of *Carrie,* the only mention of the paternal figure is when Margaret admits to being raped and enjoying it, where the rest of the film he is visually and conversationally absent. In both *Pearl* and *The Witch,* weak or symbolically absent fathers make way for the archaic mother to consume her children.

Critiquing Creed, Arnold (2013) argues that this reading "is complicit with dominant ideology. Where fathers are not representative of the 'Law' and do not successfully suppress the maternal, chaos will follow," (p. 85). In other words, the heterosexist necessity of paternal power effectively tames the insanity of motherhood to ensure that the mother can be relegated to the sphere of the devalued woman when the child is ready to extricate themselves. While in some ways Arnold does not acknowledge that Creed's analysis is indicative of *masculine* fears that over-value the presence of the father, her critique opens up a view that sees the absent father as contributing to the downfall of the family and the monstrosity of the daughter exactly because the family structure is insufficient. The patriarch, as having the greatest control over the family and therefore the foundation upon which the rest of the family relies, must be additionally analyzed when determining the development of monstrous children.

In order to offer a reading that resists vilifying the mothers, I will take an ecofeminist perspective to analyze the symbolic structure of the family, as opposed to the psychoanalytic as Creed and Arnold do. In doing so, I will explore how the instability of the nuclear family in these

films does not essentilize the presence of a patriarchal figure, rather they convey the fragility of the traditional family that is further weakened by isolation. To do so, I will illustrate how the patriarchs are physically present but fail to fulfill their roles in different ways. As a result, the foundation of the family is thrown into question, forcing the daughters to look elsewhere for kin when they become the victims of the families' frustrations. In doing so, Thomasin and Pearl reject reproductive responsibilities, further cementing them as monstrous in the context of Western politics of reproduction.

Finally, I will apply Brüning's image of the killjoy in order to parse out how Thomasin and Pearl are able to make kin with similarly oppressed beings, but their isolation forces them to turn to the nonhuman. However, the nonhuman nature of their kin is not a benign artifact of the locations of the family. Rather, by crossing from the boundary from culture to nature, their violence is accelerated as their kin do not limit their actions, as is typical of the joykill's sisters, but authorizes them. This reading is not offered as a way of intrinsically linking femininity with the natural world as much of early ecofeminist theory did (Gaard, 2011), but as a way to understand another facet of these films' acceptance into the GFH genre as they recognize not only how women are harmed under patriarchy, but other beings beyond the human as well.

The Weakened Father

Though Pearl's father is physically present and cognitively aware of his surroundings, his inability to move his body or speak leaves him with little ability to express even his own thoughts, let alone power over others. Because the responsibility of caring for her father largely falls on Pearl, she often shares secrets with him that she knows would upset her mother, fostering a sense of appreciation for him. Though it is clear that she cares for her father, in some ways, she blames him for not allowing her to leave the farm as she feels a sense of duty to care for him

after his illness. Therefore, any affection she feels for her father and catharsis she gets from sharing her secrets with him are both tinged by her resentment for his being disabled. As a result, though she clearly does her best to care for him, he is not exempt from her sadistic tendencies as she is shown pinching his skin and choking him, waiting for a reaction she knows he is unable to provide.

After Ruth has been burned and Pearl throws her into the cellar, she is left wondering what to do with her father. She ultimately decides to suffocate him with a pillow as she imagines she is freeing him of a trapped life that she too loathes. As she approaches her father, the camera slowly closes in on an image of a bird in a cage, flitting around while the sounds of struggle emanate from Pearl and her father (1:03:4, see image 7). The symbolic act of smothering her father represents Pearl's own feelings of being suffocated on the farm while the visual impact of the bird in the cage represents her false liberation. Despite the destruction that she is bringing upon those in her life that she imagines as keeping her on the farm, her wings have effectively been clipped, indicating that she is her own limiting force despite blaming her parents, the theater employee, and Mitsy for her isolated life.

Image 7: Trapped bird displayed during Pearl's father's (Matthew Sunderland) murder. *Pearl,* West, 2022.

Image 8: Ralph Ineson as William with Black Phillip. *The Witch,* Eggers, 2016.

From the outset, Pearl's father is clearly unable to fulfill traditionally patriarchal roles that are defined by physical prowess and power exerted over one's family. William, on the other

hand, initially appears typically patriarchal in his decisions to move the family out of the colony and onto the homestead, directing the members of his family on what to do and when. However, through the film, it becomes clear that William's pride combined with his inability to actualize masculine tasks sets the stage for the destruction of his family. With crops riddled with disease, misbehaving animals that no longer provide viable milk or eggs, unruly children who leave the stead without permission, and an inability to trap or hunt game, William's power is in name only. After particularly embarrassing moments of failure, such as being toppled over by Black Phillip (0:22:17) or being slapped by his wife (0:47:50), William is depicted chopping firewood for the winter as the only way that he can successfully provide for his family.

When William confronts Thomasin about her suspected witchcraft and demands she beg forgiveness from God and tell the truth of her sinful behavior, his hypocrisy pushes her over the edge as she says, "You let mother be as thy master. You cannot bring the crops to yield, you cannot hunt! Is that truth enough? You canst do nothing save cut wood!" (1:03:15). This is the inciting event that leads William to shut all of his remaining children in the goat house for the night. When he rises the next morning, he finds that goat house destroyed, as if something broke in through the roof and blew up the nailed on planks from the inside. Thomasin lays among the disemboweled nanny goats, blood on her hands. Before William can parse out what happened, Black Phillip impales him in the stomach with his horns, causing William to cough up blood and fall to the ground. When he begins to pray, Black Phillip again impales him, causing him to fall back into the huge pile of chopped wood. The final image of him is his dead body, buried under the symbol of his patriarchal failure after being penetrated by one of the nonhuman bodies over which he supposedly reigns (see image 8).

Straddling the Nature/Culture Divide

The structure of the nuclear family effectively sees the mother as standing on the divide between nature and culture in which she maintains the home sphere by preventing any dirt from entering the familial site of culture. Bolstered by the implicit cultural association between women and the natural world, the physical location of women within the home configures them as absorbing the sticky, dirty aspects of nature both through the actual cleansing of items and spaces, but also through the tactile task of caring for other bodies that are abject in their existence so close to the border of life and death. Salleh (1997) states:

> Women's caring for sick infants and aging parents bring them in touch with permeability and 'contamination'. Bodies on the margin of nature dribble, smell, ooze, flake, even decay before our eyes. Women have the patriarchally accorded privilege of touch and holding together the fragments of human nonidentity in this mesh of enduring time. Men bleed, urinate, ejaculate, but the discourse of mastery forces them to be contemptuous of bodily flows. Capitalist patriarchal languages and institutions offer men an armoury of externalizing gestures to bolster their separateness from matter. What they get is desensitisation, a false sense of individualism, crippling loneliness, and destructive compensatory drives. P. 147.

Nussbaum (2018) goes on to illustrate how the association between women and nature extends to ideas of animality. Having periods, giving birth, and taking in seamen during heterosex all construct the female body as disgusting in its uncanny human/animal image. It is the blending of the human and animal beyond the mother that begins to construct other bodies as monstrous.

In the context of *The Witch* and *Pearl,* the failing patriarchs leave the foundation of culture within the family unsettled, making way for the entrance of nature to construct the children's bodies as monstrous. Pearl's father's paralyzed state leaves him vulnerable to the bodily fluids that construct children's bodies as not fully human in their uncontrollable state. William is unable to exert control over literal nature. Neither father is the pillar of culture that the family is expected to rely upon. Therefore, the mothers must take on masculine responsibilities, including tending to the land themselves and caring for the livestock.

The upset structures of these families leave the eldest daughters at the impasse of human, animal, adult, and child. Where the mother and daughter would be expected to foster relationships with one another, the added stress of their percarity incites conflict; the father does not mediate the relationships within the family, and their isolation leaves the daughters little way to exhaust their frustrations with other sympathetic parties. Therefore, they turn to the nonhuman as a form of comfort and a way to break out of their constraints.

The Nonhuman in "Pearl" and "The Witch"

Between the farm's physical distance from others and Ruth's fear of the Spanish flu, Pearl is isolated on her family's property. After Pearl is scolded by her mother for playing around in her old dresses and neglecting her responsibilities at the beginning of the film, she takes to the barn. Looking at the animals, all of whom are named after Pearl's favorite actresses, she begins to dance around with a pitch fork and states, "Well I do love a good audience. Y'all see me for who I really am…A star!" (0:04:20).

Just as Pearl's fantasy begins to take shape, a male goose runs into the threshold of the barn, mirroring the scene from just before when Ruth similarly interrupted Pearl's show. This time, however, she approaches the goose (Mr. Goose) before raising the pitchfork and skewering him. Abruptly, Pearl is depicted casually walking into an Eden-like part of the farm with the goose hanging from the end of the pitchfork as she yells across the pond for Theda. Theda, Pearl's alligator for whom she appears to adore, approaches Pearl on the small boardwalk where Pearl is offering her Mr. Goose. As the music swells, Theda launches herself from the water to take the bait just as the title of the film flashes across the screen and freezes the frame (See image 9).

Image 9: Mia Goth as Pearl with Theda. *Pearl,* West, 2022.

Obscured by the title, the end of Theda's body and the beginning of Pearl's are obstructed from view as they are connected through the violent act of consumption. Pearl's attachment to Theda stems from her fascination with the animal's power and freedom to reign over her pond. Theda's name comes from the actress Theda Bara, a famous silent film actress credited with popularizing 'the vamp' aesthetic, becoming one of the first sex symbols in film (Love and Pollack, 2017). Bara's name appears on the theater marquee in town, advertising her film *Cleopatra* (1917) which Pearl is depicted attending, clearly not for the first time.

Pearl's affection for the many different animals in her life have one thing in common: they are all female. The only male animal in her proximity does not last long and dies a bloody death with no remorse. Pearl's closest comrades are her animals. Further still, her treatment of them is near motherly, a disposition in direct contrast to her consistent resistance to any reproductivity.

During Pearl's monologue to Mitsy where she 'practices' what she will say to Howard when he returns, in reference to her miscarriage, she states:

> I never wanted to be a mother. I loathed the feeling of it growing inside me. It felt like sickness. Pulling and sucking on me like some needy animal in a barn. How could I be responsible for another life? Life terrifies me. It's harsh, and bleak, and draining. I was so relieved when it died. It was one less weight keeping me trapped here, but then the war came and you left me, too. (1:21:10)

Pearl's lack of desire to become a mother is visually linked to nonhuman animals, particularly Theda. After another harsh encounter with her mother in which she warns Pearl to be prepared when life does not work out how she expects, Pearl appears to seek out Theda for comfort. As Pearl seeks out her companion, she comes across Theda's nest of eggs. When Pearl decides to steal one and place it in the barn, the viewer assumes that she is taking her mother's comment to heart, practicing for when she may become a mother by caring for and hatching the egg. However, as she begins to leave, she turns back around and, as she visualizes Howard exploding from stepping on a landmine, she violently crushes the egg in her hand, looking satisfied at another moment of rejecting reproduction.

Pearl's continued refusal to have children paired with her affection for the female animals on the farm fashions her as an oddly queer character. Her masculine chores on the farm paired with her hypersexuality and attraction to masculine accessories (such as a man's hat she steals off of a scarecrow) all convey her as walking the line between femininity and masculinity, further illustrating her as an uncanny monster.

Thomasin and Pearl are rather divergent in their initial treatment of the nonhuman world. While Pearl finds great comfort in the nonhuman animals around her, Thomasin, representing colonial power and perceptions of the 'untamed' wilderness, at first perceives the nonhuman animals as adversaries. However, both girls come to relate to the animals in a way that refuses reproduction. Rot follows Thomasin as half-fertilized chicken eggs are broken by her touch and the life-giving material of milk turns to blood in her hands, not to mention her presence for the

disappearance of Samuel. Just as those who historically facilitated reproductive care were persecuted as witches, so too is Thomasin accused of stifling reproduction.

Unlike Pearl, Thomasin does not seek out the nonhuman, rather, it seeks her out. The witch of the woods appears to Thomasin and Caleb as a hare that lures their hunting dog Fowler (and subsequently, Caleb) deep into the woods where he is bewitched by her. The hare is then seen again just before Thomasin finds Caleb in the rain.

While the hare appears to be following Thomasin, she appears additionally attracted to the nonhuman world as it is to her. At one point, she is seen completing her chores before seemingly being overtaken by a draw to the woods. As the script describes it, “EXT. THE EDGE OF THE WOOD… THOMASIN kneels at the spot where SAMUEL disappeared. She runs her fingers tenderly through the grass. She looks into THE WOOD. Pause. How could this have happened?” (Eggers, 2013, p. 21). Again, moments after killing her mother, she is seen gazing into the landscape, the majority of the shot obscured by the back of Thomasin’s head Neither the script nor the film make it clear as to whether Thomasin is drawn to the woods by her desire to see Samuel again, because she fears what may be lurking beyond the treeline, or because she is drawn there by some unearthly force. Either way, these quiet moments of contemplation show both her continually orbiting the unruly space of untamed nature.

Though Thomasin feels no affection for the nonhuman animals in her life prior to her family’s demise, after, when she is truly isolated in the ‘wilderness,’ the devil, as Black Phillip, leads her to a new set of kin. After signing her name in his book and removing her shift, the billy goat leads her into the woods, side by side, until she comes across a coven of witches during a ceremony where they are orgasmically yelling into the sky and eventually begin to levitate. Coming into the open area of the witches, a bon fire lights the forest with dramatic shadows

obscuring the faces of the witches and the surrounding area. Thomasin's movement into the circle represents her own acceptance of this new kin as she sheds the darkness of her family and follows the light of the liberating joy of the witches. In doing so, she too begins to smile and float away as the film concludes. As she bonds herself to an entity beyond human, represented in the form of animal, her status as human begins to dissolve.

Making Kin: The Joykill's New Sister

In attempting to understand how non/human relationships function in these two films, Brüning's joykill is helpful in examining when the GFH protagonist is put in community, if only we extend that community to encapsulate nonhuman beings. The isolation of these characters forces them to look for kin wherever they can find it. Pearl's relationship with the animals on her family's farm is clearly reminiscent of kin as she is displayed speaking to them as if they were friends or kissing Charlie's (the cow) nose when she is excited about her dance audition. However, a critical distinction between Brüning's theory and Pearl's relationship with her animals is how the friends of the joykill are responsible for reigning her back in when she ultimately takes her revenge too far.

The GFH protagonist is defined by her self destruction as a result of an unmitigated pursuit of violence. The joykill has friends who understand and validate her plight but ensure that any revenge she seeks is measured and secretive to make certain that no lasting damage comes to her or the object of her rage. The animals in Pearl's life, however, appear to authorize her violence as they typically view or aid in her acts when she is taken by the desire to destroy others. In many ways, the relationships she makes with these animals cause her to feel empowered to continue harming those that get in her way as her cruelty escalates throughout the film. Pearl uses Theda to hide her violent acts, feeding her parts of the theater employee and

Mitsy's bodies. Pearl's imagined kinship with Theda configures her as an accomplice as she shares her joy at triumphing over others with the alligator.

Thomasin, on the other hand, can only make kin and therefore find joy in her killing once she has accepted the nonhuman into her life. It is the act of admitting her lack of regret and desire for finery that she becomes one of the witches, indulging in violent joy to the point of ecstasy. Though she and Caleb are close and he understands that she receives the brunt of the harsh treatment from Kate and William, his limited sympathy for his sister drives them apart. Subsequently, it is his death that ignites the chain of events that quickly brings the family to its knees as the secondary male figure of the family has been annihilated by unknown forces, requiring Thomasin to find other kin.

The imagined passivity of women, nature, and nonhuman animals sees them as devalued within Western patriarchal culture structures. Both of these films revalue these beings as agential entities in their blending together and intensification of violence against oppressive forces. In Thomasin and Pearl's turning away from reproduction, away from the family, and towards the nonhuman, they look outside of their denominated status that would await them were they to stay in the family. Though their 'liberation' is certainly incomplete or, in many ways, nonexistent, they embrace a recognition of a queer practice of kin making when the family is insufficient to fulfill one's needs and desires.

In expanding Brüning's feminist joykill by including the nonhuman world and contextualizing it with the weak nuclear family, the starkly anti-reproductive construction of Pearl and Thomasin comes to light. By resisting this critical aspect of heteronormative culture and embracing a queer kinship with typically devalued bodies, these films explore nuanced forms of breaking out of patriarchal control that is, in some ways, more subtle than would

traditionally be found in GFH or feminist joykill film. Finally, by holistically examining the families and the power relationships therein, I hope to offer a more sympathetic reading of both mothers as true victim/villains.

Conclusion: Against the Family

As political and cultural constructions of gender continue to shift, so too does its presentation in horror and thriller films. Depictions of gender in these genres have received great attention in the past, but with emerging neo-liberal feminist politics becoming increasingly salient, the influence of these ideologies must continue to be analyzed in order to resist the valorization of short sighted 'liberatory' aesthetics. This maintained attention is similarly critical to the history and political image of the witch as she has been repeatedly reappropriated at different moments for a variety of ends. In taking a closer look at the "Good for Her" and feminist joykill films, I have demonstrated that they are not innocent of appropriating this violent history which ultimately perpetuates a sanitized notion of justice. Nonetheless, both sub-genres elicit genuine catharsis for female viewers as they resolve aspects of the victim/survivor paradox.

Both *Pearl* and *The Witch* elicit this catharsis by exploring the transformation of gendered trauma into gendered monstrosity. By examining these films in tandem with Creed's analysis of *Carrie,* I have illustrated how the mother/daughter dyad remains a deeply contested site of power negotiation within the family. Further still, centering the family as the ultimate arena of struggle in the life of young women, these films take seriously the trauma that is necessary to produce culturally appropriate expressions of gender. The precarious historical moments in which these films take place further exposes the traditional family as an unsteady foundation upon which a flourishing life can rest.

The disrupted family structure further contributes to the monstrosity of Pearl and Thomasin as they are effectively ousted from their homes and forced to seek kin elsewhere. Their simultaneous embrace of the nonhuman world and rejection of reproductive responsibility positions them physically and symbolically as against the family. Making use of ecofeminist

analyses of the nature/culture divide, I have argued that the weak construction of the patriarchal figure in both films has led to the deterioration of the already fragile family structures by allowing a blending of two distinct spheres of life. While the conclusions of both films leave a great deal to be desired and I do not argue that either could be imagined as a feminist victory, the online discourse that admires the actions of these young women communicates a longing for a release from gendered pressures, particularly as they manifest within the nuclear family.

The adoration that these films have received over the last ten years is indicative of a wider rejection of the affective regime necessitated by fourth wave feminism. In these contexts, anger and jealousy are not configured as detrimental emotions, rather they have been recognized as productive attunements to injustice as they have in previous feminist waves. The rare depictions of racialized and queer struggles in these films is only one limit to the utility of these narratives in orienting feminist endeavors. However, it would be a mistake to brush aside these films as simply entertaining or politically neutral in their bold depictions of women seeking out freedom where they are so often excluded.

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