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The Horrors of Motherhood:
An Examination of Mothers in the Modern Horror Film

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Abstract

Film has long played a part in portraying the mindsets and values of the time and culture in which it is made. Horror films especially, with a history of employing female characters—often mothers—and exploring traditionally taboo topics, provide a powerful opportunity to analyze the American consciousness on the matter of motherhood over time. From *Rosemary's Baby* portraying America's era of medical motherhood to *Coraline* and the working mother and on into modern day and *The Haunting of Hill House*, American horror media have acted as both representations of cultural motherhood and conversations of the same, simultaneously depicting and influencing perceptions of mothers and motherhood. Both genre and society's perception of motherhood have shifted from punishing women for their perceived shortcomings towards richer depictions of mothers and motherhood. Motherhood is not always something to be feared, and over eighty years of film, American culture has begun to recognize that.

Introduction

In 1960, Alfred Hitchcock's now-iconic film *Psycho* hit theatres, forever changing the landscape of the American horror genre. *Psycho* introduced America to the wicked mother figure of Norma Bates, shifting the direction of the genre away from monsters and towards the family-centric horror, which notably features mothers and mother figures.¹ American horror films since have often relied on the mother, motherhood, or both as sources of horror and conflict within their narratives. Much like Norma Bates' mark on her murderous son, *Psycho*'s influence continues today in horror as one of the first and arguably the most famous depictions of a bad or wicked mother in horror, thus opening the way for motherhood to become a much-debated topic in horror films, as it has been in American society since the revolutionary era.² Film has long played its part in portraying the values of the times and cultures in which it is made. Horror films, overall defined as films where unnatural, violent, and frightening things occur, have a history of employing female characters—often mothers—and exploring traditionally taboo topics.³ They provide a particularly powerful opportunity to explore the American consciousness on the matter of motherhood throughout its history. This paper examines the presentation of mothers and motherhood in five selections of American horror cinema from the latter half of the 20th century to present day: *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Carrie* (1976), *Beloved* (1998), *Coraline* (2009) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018). It argues that the chosen data are representative of the time periods in which they were made and provide useful insight into then-current American cultural views on and fears about motherhood.

Literature Review

Historically, ideals of motherhood in America differ from those in other countries. Prior to the American Revolution, the common view of motherhood in America reflected Puritan ideals; mothers were no more influential on their children than anyone else. In fact, fathers were regarded as moral-

¹ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24–5.

² Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 188.

³ Cambridge Dictionary. 2022. "Horror Film." @CambridgeWords. May 25, 2022. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/horror-film>.

ly stronger than mothers.⁴ In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, however, in the aftermath of the Revolution, a new approach to motherhood began to develop in the infant nation. The concept of republican motherhood, that mothers had a uniquely powerful moral influence on their children and a duty to raise them properly above all else, grew to become part and parcel of American society.⁵ In the early 19th century, this combined with burgeoning ideals of “true womanhood”—that men and women were complete opposites, with man as sexual and woman as maternal, consigned to the public and private spheres of society respectively—to shape the American consciousness on the role of mothers.⁶ Later, at the turn of the century, moral motherhood combined with growing medical knowledge to create scientific motherhood and later psychological motherhood, shifting the power of knowledge (about parenting, pregnancy, and prenatal care, among other things) away from women and into the hands of men as medicine emerged as a profession.⁷ Despite the growth of what is regarded today as “modern” motherhood, new scientific and psychological ideals of motherhood did little to alter America’s unique views of motherhood as an institution. “Modern mothers,” writes Jodi Vandenberg-Daves in the introduction to her book *Modern Motherhood: An American History*, “would be self-consciously gifted with—and burdened by—the idea that they had a unique influence on their children. At least initially, their influence was thought to depend upon their virtue, their watchfulness, their confinement to the home, and their constant availability.” American society’s ideals of motherhood, historically and even now, place pressure on its women and have held them to impossibly high standards throughout the last few centuries. In many ways, these ideals are responsible for placing the blame for “defective” or troubled children on the mother.⁸ Even a casual observer of American horror films can see this blame bleed through into the horror genre over the latter half of the 20th century.

⁴ Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood: An American History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

Discussion

Rosemary's Baby: Hysterical Mothers and the Horrors of Pregnancy

In 1968, Roman Polanski's occult horror film *Rosemary's Baby* hit theaters amid the height of suburban idealism and burgeoning Second Wave feminism. Though the decade saw the release of other iconic horror films such as Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), *Rosemary's Baby* offers an ideal microcosm of the nation's views of motherhood, pregnancy, and women's rights in its themes of female hysteria and natural motherhood. Until 1967, depictions of pregnancy and birth in American films were heavily regulated by the Motion Picture Production Code and were indeed almost non-existent until the latter half of the 20th century due to the Code regarding them as morally unacceptable as late as 1956. The Code was eventually replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America in 1968, the same year *Rosemary's Baby* was released, therefore loosening the restrictions on portrayals of topics such as pregnancy and birth.⁹

Perhaps the most definitive example of pregnancy in horror, *Rosemary's Baby* follows the young couple Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse as they move into a new apartment in a house with a strange history.¹⁰ Rosemary wants a baby, something her odd neighbors seem deeply interested in, and so the couple decides to try to have one. Once pregnant, however, Rosemary begins to feel sick and worry that something is wrong with her or the baby, despite her husband's, neighbors', and physician's constant dismissals. Ultimately, she gives birth to her child and learns that his father is Satan and that she carried the Antichrist as part of her husband's deal with the devil in exchange for success in his acting career. The film ends as Rosemary stands gazing down at the inhuman child she has been forced to bear and faces the question: *Aren't you his mother?*

The question invokes the idea of 'essential' motherhood, which Erin Harrington describes as "the notion that motherhood is a biological and emotional necessity that sits at the heart of the female experience."¹¹ This construct of maternity as something innately biological stands alongside but not quite opposed to 'ideal' motherhood, or the belief that motherhood is something that must be learned. Beginning in the first half of the 20th

⁹ Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 17.

century and growing more commonplace throughout the decades, increasingly scientific views of motherhood led to decreased emphasis on women's knowledge of pregnancy and their own wellbeing. Doctors, most often male, were regarded as the ultimate authority, regularly admonishing women for talking with friends or reading books on pregnancy they did not specifically recommend. Women no longer knew best about the functions of their own bodies.¹² This historical struggle between women and the people telling them that they know better manifests in Rosemary's conflict of her own body and feelings versus the constant dismissals and degradations of those around her.

While in *Rosemary's Baby* the mother's feelings are ignored because those causing her suffering wish to suppress her and know her claims of something amiss to be true, the events echo a wider trend in history—people's tendency to dismiss the “hysterical” woman, the overly-emotional mother, because of her womb, her menstruation or sexuality, or her “inferiority” to or separation from men. Though the film is supposed fear and fantasy, Rosemary's experiences mirror other depictions of oft-hysterical pregnancy in more ordinary media, whether fictional or scientific.¹³ Furthermore, with the onset of the fight for abortion rights and contraception raging throughout the nation in the late '60s and early '70s, as well as the rise of Second Wave feminism calling for Americans to reconsider the roles of women as strictly wives and mothers, not to mention the cultural fear of “over mothering” or “refrigerator mothers” placing even more blame for children who did not meet societal standards upon mothers, Rosemary becomes an even bigger signifier of the women of her time.¹⁴ In the same fashion, it is Rosemary herself who is ultimately blamed for her horror in the film's narrative structure; after all, *she* is the one who wanted a child. Without her insistence, the film seems to be saying, none of this would have happened at all.

It is worth mentioning that the debate over abortion rights, reaching new heights at the time of the movie's release, had become a fight for the rights of the mother versus the rights of the unborn fetus, and at the time, the rights of the fetus were overshadowing the rights of the moth-

¹² Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 85–6.

¹³ Lucy Fischer, “Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*,” *Cinema Journal*, 31, no. 3 (1992):8.

¹⁴ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 224; *Ibid*, 180–1.

er, rendering her and her life irrelevant in the face of the child's own.¹⁵ This dismissal of women is mirrored in *Rosemary's Baby* in the way that the film, while featuring Rosemary as the protagonist, ultimately focuses more on the men of the film—her husband's goals, her doctors' dismissals, her baby; even the devil himself. Occult films, a subgenre of horror that, according to Film Studies specialist Carol J. Clover, of which *Rosemary's Baby* is one, tend to feature a woman on the surface while the concerns and the plot ultimately focus on a man instead.¹⁶ In a similar way, women's rights in the 1960s were superseded—and still are—by those of their children. “After all,” writes Harrington, “[the] film is titled *Rosemary's Baby*, even though Rosemary herself is the protagonist.”¹⁷

Carrie: Mothers, Daughters, and Absent Fathers

America in the 1970s saw the rise of divorce rates and single-parent homes, as well as the continuation of Second Wave feminism, which continued to challenge women's traditional roles in society and to discuss more openly the rising cultural ambivalence towards motherhood that is commonplace to American culture today.¹⁸ Released in 1976, Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, based off Stephen King's novel of the same title, explores all of these subjects and the resulting cultural fears surrounding them. Other films in the seventies saw similar plotlines involving single mothers and supernatural powers—consider Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973)—however; *Carrie* heavily emphasizes (and villainizes) the role of the mother in Mrs. White and revolves around multiple cultural dialogs of its time.

Carrie follows a repressed high school girl discovering her telekinetic powers with the onset of her first period. Bullied by her peers and smothered by her mother, Carrie White attends her senior prom and ultimately wreaks havoc on her classmates and teachers with her newfound powers when she becomes the victim of a nasty prank. At the end of the film, Carrie's religious mother, believing Carrie's very conception to be a result of sin and Carrie to be under Satan's influence, attempts to kill her daughter. Carrie kills her mother in self-defense and her powers bring the house down around them, ultimately killing Carrie and sealing her fate as a monster. Perhaps the most pointed shot in the film depicts Mrs. White,

¹⁵ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 54.

¹⁶ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 66.

¹⁷ Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 88.

¹⁸ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 248; *Ibid*, 228.

crucified by her own daughter and yet still unable to redeem either of them from the “sin” of womanhood.¹⁹

In the face of rising divorce rates between the sixties and the eighties, influenced in part by feminism’s own developments, American society began to shift its view of motherhood once again.²⁰ As the idea of modern motherhood developed, it grew enmeshed with the concept of the private nuclear family, which became heavily emphasized in American culture following the Great Depression and World War II due to its contributions to the revival of the American economy and rising consumer culture.²¹ Divorce and single-parent homes, already long stigmatized, threatened this way of society. As a result, single mothers came to be feared and perceived as a source of danger, a view which is incredibly evident in De Palma’s depiction of Mrs. White and her ambivalence—or even outright hostility—toward her daughter.²²

Mrs. White operates as both a vehicle to express societal fears on motherhood and changing cultural values, and a look into the male perception of feminism and issues of women’s liberation. In the seventies, Second Wave feminism brought to the table the idea that women’s power could be found in their biology.²³ Alternatively, *Carrie*—written by men, directed by a man, produced by a man—implies that both female sexuality and female biology are monstrous and destructive by linking menstruation and female bodies directly to horror and Carrie’s ruinous powers.²⁴ At the time of release, many critics considered *Carrie* to be a critique of American ideals and a tale of female sexual liberation; however, Shelley Stamp Lindsey, writing a critical examination of *Carrie* later in 1991, argues for *Carrie* as a reinforcement of the American patriarchal society, the supposed destructive nature of female sexuality when unregulated by

¹⁹ Shelley Stamp Lindsey, “Horror, Femininity, and Carry’s Monstrous Puberty.” *Journal of Film and Video* 43, no. 4 (1991): 40.

²⁰ Vanderberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 248.

²¹ Ibid, 3; Michael D. Gillespie, “The Family as an Economic Institutio: Historical Contingencies and the Great Recession.” *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 40, no. 1 (2014): 1.

²² Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 203.

²³ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 230.

²⁴ Lindsey, “Carry’s Monstrous Puberty,” 34, 36.

men, and the “curse” of femininity.²⁵ Lindsey’s article has the benefit of hindsight and the ability to place *Carrie* in its historical context—namely the upstart caused by women’s liberation movements calling for a new “just” society as opposed to more nebulous equal rights—while examining its content.²⁶

Carrie, with its telekinesis and emphasis on the struggle between spiritual and secular, is yet another example of the occult horror film, featuring Carrie as its supernaturally powerful monster.²⁷ But every Frankenstein’s monster must have its Frankenstein. As with the wider trend in American culture during the 20th century, the blame for Carrie’s transgressions falls on Mrs. White’s shoulders. She is the classic monstrous mother, overbearing and smothering, the reason Carrie is shy and awkward and ultimately bullied by her peers—and thus, the reason Carrie becomes a monster herself. Both the narrative and the characters within it blame Mrs. White for not educating Carrie, for not wanting Carrie, for not killing Carrie, for not loving Carrie. Everything a mother can do wrong, Mrs. White does; she cannot even kill the horror that her daughter has become. She embodies 1970s America’s belief that fatherless houses lead to horrors.²⁸

***Beloved*: Black Motherhood**

But where is Black motherhood in all these years? Despite America’s foundation upon African American labor and its large population of Black citizens, Western media—especially American media—often lacks non-white representation.²⁹ Though representation has improved in recent years, horror movies also follow this trend. Despite this lack of diversity in mainstream media, Black culture and media has long shown an interest in horror and haunting.³⁰ *Beloved*, released in 1998 and based on the ac-

²⁵ Ibid, 33-4.

²⁶ Jo Freeman, “What in the Hell is Woman’s Liberation Anyway?” in *Through Women’s Eyes: An American History with Documents*, Fifth Edition, Ellen Carol Dubois, Lynn Dumenil (Massachusetts: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2018), chap 11, Kindle.

²⁷ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 71.

²⁸ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 34.

²⁹ Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Race and Racisms: A Critical Approach*, Brief Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap 4, Kindle.

³⁰ Kinitra D. Brooks, Alexis McGee, and Stephanie Schoelman. “Speculative Sankofaration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction.” *Obsidian* 42, no. 1/2 (2016): 237.

claimed novel by Toni Morrison, is a film which not only afforded Black women a place in more mainstream horror, but also provided a unique glimpse into historical Black motherhood. *Beloved* is not the most well-known horror film to emerge from a decade full of movies about cannibals, Freddy Krueger, and horror movies themselves, nor is it what most people would consider a horror movie—it presents as more of a historical drama with psychological horror elements than stereotypical horror film. And yet, *Beloved* remains a horror story at heart, full of ghosts, gore, and the true horror: history.

Set in post-Civil War America, *Beloved* follows former slave Sethe and her daughter, Denver, as Sethe is haunted by both her past and a poltergeist who drives away her sons. A mysterious girl appears in Sethe's life, slowly sapping her attention, money, and eventually, her life. She is later revealed as Sethe's reincarnated daughter, Beloved, whom Sethe killed as an infant to prevent her from being taken back into slavery when Sethe's master came looking for his runaway slave. After an exorcism, Beloved vanishes, leaving Sethe bedridden and mourning the second loss of her daughter. At the end of the film, Paul D., Sethe's lover, comes to her bedside and reassures Sethe that he and Denver will take care of her, and that she is her own best thing, not Beloved.

Representations of Black motherhood have been present and indeed debated in American society dating back to the period of slavery.³¹ Harmful racial stereotypes such as the Bad Black Mother still contribute to mischaracterization of Black mothers today.³² America has spent centuries weaponizing Black motherhood—using it to paint Black mothers as sexually and socially deviant, cementing slavery as a condition passed down through the mother, and racializing infanticide, to name just a few.³³ *Beloved*, however, as a story written about a Black woman by a Black woman, and adapted for the screen by Black women, offers a departure from the historical norm and gives them a chance to be heard fairly. The narrative treats Sethe sympathetically and recognizes the cultural differences between Black and white motherhood and how they affect both the narrative and the reality of Black women's lives and social perceptions.

³¹ Christopher J.P. Sewell, "Mammies and Matriachs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture, 1950s to Present." *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 3 (2013): 309.

³² Golash-Boza, *Race and Racisms*, chap 4.

³³ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 57; *Ibid*, 16; Felicity Turner, "Rights and Ambiguities of Laws: Infanticide in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. South." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 3 (2014): 350–1.

In the latter half of the 20th century, America began to see cultural changes that some saw as the decline of the white suburban nuclear family that had long been the American societal ideal. During this time, cultural fears focused on “bad” mothers, among other things, whom society saw as threats to the American family and their traditional way of life. Unsurprisingly, these so-called bad mothers whom society feared were largely unmarried non-white women.³⁴ During Reagan’s presidency in the 1980s and later in 1996, America underwent massive restructuring of welfare policies which reduced public aid drastically. These reforms, though not mentioning race specifically, were targeted at reforming the (racist) stereotype of Black women as “welfare queens.”³⁵ *Beloved*, released amid these targeted reforms, both embodies and responds to these fears, showing the very mother society was afraid of—deviant, Black, husbandless, unable to keep her family together, unable to protect her children, standing with her dead and bloodied child in her defiant grasp—and then showing her humanity, her pain, and her love, even if that love is “too thick,” as Paul D. says.

Because Black mothers’ historical lived experiences differ so starkly from those of white mothers, it is unfair and ahistorical to examine and depict Black motherhood as if it is the same as white motherhood. The horror in *Beloved* shifts from the traditional narrative of the mother as the cause of the horror to motherhood itself, paralleling white feminism’s views of motherhood as something that confined and impaired women, but diverging in the way it considers the systems of slavery and white-dominated society as equal or even greater causes of the horror.³⁶ This echoes the differences in Black feminism as opposed to mainstream white feminism, acknowledging the full picture of women of all colors rather than only white women. Sethe’s motherhood, had it been untainted and unthreatened by white power, would not have led to the horror that it did in the events of *Beloved*. Within the historical context of Black women in horror, hauntings—and, it seems, motherhood and mothers both—are not inherently negative.³⁷

³⁴ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 253–4.

³⁵ Golash-Boza, *Race and Racisms*, chap 2.

³⁶ Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, “Teaching Motherhood in History.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2002): 236-7.

³⁷ Brooks, McGee and Schoellman. “Speculative Sankofarration,” 239.

Coraline: The Working Mother

The concept of the working mother is not a new one. Mothers have been a part of the American workforce for decades, from poorer women working outside the home to provide for their families to women joining the workforce during and in the aftermath of World War II.³⁸ From the 1950s onwards, middle-aged women, most of them mothers, were encouraged to join (or rejoin) the workforce, and that number only increased over time.³⁹ Much of American society feared the entrance of mothers into the workplace, and though those fears ultimately peaked in the 1980s, they still endured as a longstanding cultural anxiety revolving around the inadequacy of women to fulfill roles as both mother and career woman, despite late-20th century feminism's insistence that women could and should handle both.⁴⁰ *Coraline* (2009) explores the intersection of inadequate mothering and the working mother as a product of these fears. *Coraline*, being an animated children's film based on a children's novella, may seem a surprising choice for this data set. However, it is indeed classified as horror (typically dark fantasy horror) and satisfies typical horror definitions—unnatural and terrifying things happen. There are monsters and body horror and ghosts, and most importantly, the trope of the monstrous mother. With the ever-increasing trend of PG-13 horror films in recent years, it feels remiss to ignore the realm of children's horror in American cinema, especially considering *Coraline's* relevance. For many people, myself included, *Coraline* was our first introduction to the horror genre.

Based on Neil Gaiman's novel, *Coraline* follows the young protagonist Coraline Jones as she attempts to adjust to her new life after moving across the country. Bored and emotionally neglected by her parents, shown as constantly in conflict with her mother, Coraline is intrigued when she notices a little door in her living room. Going through the door in what she thinks to be a dream, Coraline finds herself in what she learns is the "other world" in which awaits her Other Mother, who claims to love Coraline more than her real mother. Coraline soon discovers the Other world is nothing but an elaborate trap, and the Other Mother wants to feed on Coraline to survive. Though the film ends on a hopeful note with the Other Mother defeated and Coraline's parents restored, it still presents a striking depiction of both the absent and the monstrous mother as well

³⁸ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 249.

³⁹ Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 39.

⁴⁰ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 247; Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 202.

as a contrast between the working and domestic spheres of motherhood. Throughout the film, Coraline and her mother are constantly at odds, highlighting the implied impossibility of a balance between mother and child.⁴¹ The story does not shy away from showing Coraline's unhappiness and her arguments with her mother, who seems generally inconvenienced by Coraline's existence. Coraline's mother embodies the cinematic trend in the late 1990s and 2000s of portraying mothers in horror less as the horrors themselves and more as "inefficient gatekeepers" unable to prevent terrible things from happening to their children.⁴² The film contrasts the brusque modernity of Mrs. Jones, who does not cook, dismisses Coraline in favor of her work, and is overall emotionally unavailable, with the more old-fashioned domesticity of the Other Mother, who cooks, sews, and seemingly shows interest in Coraline's activities and wellbeing at every turn. The Other Mother even appears more traditionally feminine, wearing fashionable clothes, makeup, and nail polish in contrast to the frumpy, tired appearance of Mrs. Jones. The conflict between the Other Mother and Mrs. Jones parallels the historical "mommy wars"—disputes between stay-at-home moms and working mothers from the 1990s onward.⁴³

Though the Other Mother is ultimately revealed to be a monster, the narrative alleviates Mrs. Jones of very little blame, as the danger could never have reached Coraline without her mother's help—it was, after all, Mrs. Jones herself who physically unlocked the door to allow the horrors in, and her emotional unavailability that pushed Coraline to venture into the Other world in the first place. In the end, she seems to regret her absorption in her work, following the American cultural norm of commonplace guilt among working mothers. "If these women did not feel guilty on their own," writes Vandenberg-Daves, "the mass media was there to help them along."⁴⁴ In her failure to protect Coraline from the dangers lurking within her own home, Mrs. Jones embodies the next evolution of American fears surrounding inefficient mothers; she, like all mothers as compared to society's impossible and ever-shifting standards, is doomed to fail.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴³ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 263.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁵ Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 201.

The Haunting of Hill House: Motherhood as Horror

Over the years, America's perception of mothers and motherhood has often been characterized as one thing or another, in stark and polarizing terms, rather than considering it in a more nuanced light. Motherhood is a complex existence often characterized by individual experiences and cannot fit neatly into every stereotype the media of any given era has chosen to focus on. From Aster's *Hereditary* and Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* to the television series *Bates Motel*, American horror cinema in the 2010s has featured mothers and motherhood often, but perhaps none so poignantly as Mike Flanagan's supernatural horror drama *The Haunting of Hill House*. The series considers these nuances and issues in its rich and messy portrayal of motherhood, motherly love, and the dual nature of both.

Released on Netflix in 2018, *The Haunting of Hill House* is a ten-episode TV mini-series following the Crain family—father, mother, three sisters, two brothers—through two major timelines; one of their summers spent in the titular Hill House in 1992, and one following their youngest sister's suicide and its aftermath in 2018. Though based on the Shirley Jackson novel of the same title, *Hill House's* plot diverges onto a path all its own as it reveals the tragedy of their mother's suicide in 1992 and the ghosts of Hill House, both of which continue to affect the children as adults, and depicts a family grappling with grief, addiction, and mental illness as they try to understand what happened that fateful night in Hill House. The show presents multiple mothers of different generations and tropes, but at its heart is Olivia Crain and the lasting effect her tragic death leaves on her children. In *Hill House's* most striking moment, it reveals Nell's suicide was not a suicide at all but was caused by Olivia's ghost to "protect" her children from the world. Flanagan depicts the dual nature of Olivia's motherhood with this scene—the powerful love with which Olivia kisses her daughter's forehead, and the equally powerful suffering she causes by pushing Nell to her death.

Though it is possible to argue *Hill House* as a continuation of the typical trend of depicting children "ruined" by poor mothering and the previously mentioned historical practice of blaming mothers for mental illness or developmental disorders in children, ultimately that position must contend with the fact that despite Olivia causing her share of death and suffering, the narrative still portrays her as a victim herself, with the house utilizing her motherhood and her fears of harm coming to her children as a weapon against her.⁴⁶ *Hill House* takes American culture's longstanding

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 197.

belief in moral motherhood—that a mother should be unambivalent and self-sacrificing, willing to do anything for her children—and turns it on its head, exploring the idea that a mother’s love can go too far.⁴⁷

This depiction contrasts the historical criticisms of late 20th century feminism against motherhood, that it was a tool of women’s oppression and hindered women as an instrument of a patriarchal society.⁴⁸ Olivia’s motherhood is something she chose, loved, and would not want to undo; and yet it still causes her suffering. In alignment with the contemporary American mother’s ambivalence toward motherhood, *Hill House* chooses to portray Olivia’s motherhood as neither good nor evil, harmful nor helpful, but rather capable of being an instrument for both.⁴⁹ Due to the narrative’s sympathetic light, Olivia presents a depiction of motherhood that is more personal and complex than her typically cut and dry predecessors, representing the progression of modern society where more and more women have begun to consider and discuss the struggles and merits of motherhood.

Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Ultimately, motherhood possesses a long and storied history in both American history and horror cinema. Over time, the genre has seen something of a shift from the likes of Hitchcock and De Palma, punishing women for their perceived shortcomings, towards richer depictions of mothers and motherhood as American society itself evolves.⁵⁰ From *Rosemary’s Baby* and the rise of medical motherhood to *Coraline* and the working mother, and still more, American horror films have often acted as both representations of cultural motherhood and conversations of the same, depicting and influencing perceptions of mothers and motherhood at once.⁵¹ Examining the course of the genre’s depiction of mothers over the last eighty years, it seems an accurate assessment that whenever American motherhood is headed next, horror will follow. Perhaps the best assessment can be found

⁴⁷ Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood*, 72.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 223.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵⁰ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 61.

⁵¹ Harrington, *Gynaehorror*, 181.

in an exchange from the final episode of Flanagan's *Hill House*. When Olivia's ghost sees what has become of her children, she pleads with her husband, saying, "It's a horror!". Hugh responds, hopefully, "It doesn't have to be." In the end, motherhood is not always something to be feared, and American culture has begun to recognize that over time.

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