

THE CHILDREN'S FINAL GIRL: EXPLORING FEMINISM, HORROR, AND  
ADOLESCENCE IN *CORALINE*, *THE LAST CUENTISTA*, AND A *SERIES OF*  
*UNFORTUNATE EVENTS*

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The uses of femininity throughout the horror genre have been widely studied in order to identify the role of the woman within these works. This thesis works to apply Carol Clover's trope of the Final Girl to contemporary children's horror texts in order to unveil the underlying schematics that shape adolescent characters. Using Neill Gaiman's *Coraline*, Donna Barba Higuera's *The Last Cuentista*, and Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning*, this thesis aims to position contemporary children's protagonists as the Final Girl, which in turn attempts to explain the uses and misuses of common horror motifs such as femininity, race and culture, and sexuality citing authors Carol Clover and Barbara Creed amongst others who write in the realm of children's literature and horror. I utilize close readings of the texts, as well as considering real world implications of children's horror texts featuring an adolescent female protagonist.

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## DEDICATION

To Charles Hale, my PawPaw, who supported me in every way imaginable. I miss you every day.

And to Luke Angel and Eli Reign, who have so much ahead of them. Your aunt loves you.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Identifying the Genre*

Many texts are fundamental to childhood, such as fables and fairytales. These stories often come with a “happily ever after” at the end. Children’s horror asks “what if there might not be a happy ending? And how does that change the characters within the stories?” Children’s horror is a subgenre of children’s literature that is often neglected by scholarship that addresses questions and ideas regarding the fundamentals of children’s literature. This is due to horror texts not being viewed as important or educational enough to be awarded a respected scholastic genre. The odd, unnerving, and sometimes graphic nature of children’s horror doesn’t make it a culturally prestigious genre, lessening the reach the texts get within audiences. However, its cultural popularity continues to rise through the years. Because some view horror shallowly, neglecting the oftentimes helpful lessons horror texts can teach children, these texts are less utilized within households and schools.

In order to solidify children’s horror as its own unique genre, it is important to understand where this subgenre stems from. A unique characteristic of children’s horror literature is that it often **spans over and meshes into** other genres such as science fiction, fantasy, dystopian, and mystery fiction, while also being interdisciplinary, touching into areas of psychoanalysis, feminism, and critical race theory. This melting pot of genres and disciplines, as well as the introduction of monsters, the occult, and magic creates the unique genre that is horror. Children’s horror texts exist in a gray area that connects coming-of-age stories with more horrifying imagery and story-telling narratives. Adult horror has much stricter and more well-known structures within its stories—the ax murderer really isn’t dead the first time he is stabbed, the ‘dumb blonde’ will die first while investigating a noise in a dark basement. However, children’s

horror is much more malleable due to the wide variety of what children find horrifying, as well as the span of age groups the genre is catered toward. The genre wasn't acknowledged as its own unique sub-category until an increase in publishing and popularity of children's horror literature in the 1980s and 1990s with texts like *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and the *Goosebumps* series. As a genre, children's horror is often seen as the antithesis to what a children's story is supposed to be, a comforting tale that often ends happily. Horror, in itself, rests on the uncomfortable, unknown, and even the occult. Catherine Lester, author of "The children's horror film: characterizing an 'Impossible' subgenre" says, "This article...asks how it is possible for such a subgenre to exist if the very things that make horror "horrifying" must be excluded, or significantly lessened, in order for these films to remain "child-friendly" (22). While Lester is discussing children's horror films here, the same can be asked for children's books and novels.

So, what makes children's horror any different from other genres targeted toward child consumers? Carol Clover, author of *Men, Women, and Chainsaws : Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, says, "What makes horror 'crucial enough to pass along' is, for critics since Freud, what has made ghost stories and fairy tales crucial enough to pass along: its engagement of repressed fears and desires and its reenactment of the residual conflict surrounding those feelings" (11). This is to say that while children's horror removes some of the "horrifying" in order to appeal to children, as well as appease their parents, it as a genre still interacts with the inner conflict fear creates. This interaction with the inner self and feelings of fear is what makes it a worthwhile genre, especially for children who are learning to interact with themselves and the world around them. Chelsey Roos, blogger on the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) Blog, writes in support of children's horror, delving into the importance of such texts in accessible spaces like libraries.



Reading horror allows kids who have grown up in safe and secure settings to experiment with both fear and bravery. They get to put themselves in the shoes of the main characters experiencing the fright, but also feel the triumph and exhilaration of outsmarting the evil clown or rescuing their little sister from a malevolent spirit. On the flip side, horror can also appeal to kids who are currently experiencing insecurity or trauma because it feels familiar to them (Roos).

By interacting with the horrifying within texts, children are more prepared to meet the horrifying in the real world. Horror allows children to be introduced to the emotions of fright, anxiety, and despair in a contained space, teaching them important principles like how to manage stress, conflict resolution, and problem solving.

Horror also acts as a form of entertainment. While lessons can be found in these stories, whether it be pedagogical or moral, they do not exist in a vacuum. Just as adult horror is not always used to teach, rather to enjoy and to feel emotion, children's horror can be used as a stress-release or past time. Horror stories give children an outlet to feel their own emotions, following characters in the ups and downs of the story.

### *Protagonists*

While children's horror texts do have less strict conventions, there is an important common thread that runs through them. Popular children's horror stories and children's literature as a whole feature male protagonists more frequently than female ones. Why is this? And how do we begin to understand the representation of young girls within literature, especially horror literature, which has deep roots within misogyny as authors like Carol Clover and Barbara Creed assert?

In order to analyze the girls within horror, we must lay a foundation for the understanding of male characters. Authors Kennedy Casey, Kylee Novick, and Stella F. Lourenco explore the overrepresentation of male protagonists in children's literature in their article titled "Sixty years of gender representation in children's books: Conditions associated with overrepresentation of male versus female protagonists." While their focus is on children's literature as a whole, the same can be said for classic children's horror works, such as *Goosebumps* written by R.L. Stine. However, the repercussions of this overrepresentation may increase in horror due to the pre-existing gender bias found within the genre. The problem of the overrepresentation of male protagonists and the misrepresentation of female characters isn't a new phenomenon within horror. The genre caters to the male gaze. "The proportions [of the type of horror viewer] vary somewhat from subgenre to subgenre and from movie to movie (the more mainstream the film, the more "normal" the audience), but the preponderance of young males appears constant. Certainly boys are the unmistakable target audience of horror fanzines" (Creed, 6). The horror genre, in film and adult literature, relies on body horror, the torture and visual destruction of women, and the power imbalances between the victim (oftentimes women), and psycho-killer (oftentimes men). While children's horror literature doesn't rely quite as much on the female body horror we are so used to seeing in horror films, the use of male protagonists over female continues the othering of women within the genre. Further othering of women is produced by tropes such as the "monstrous feminine", which was coined by Barbara Creed in her chapter in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, titled "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." Creed describes the monstrous feminine as, "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (37). Creed asserts that gender determines monstrosity, meaning everything that is woman can, and is seen as monstrous. The

female is a monster, in films and books like *Carrie* (1976) and *Misery* by Stephen King. When she is not, she is the victim that is subject to men's violent gaze and fantasies in order for the film or text to be consumed on a mainstream level. The victimization of women within horror is important to children's horror because of the widely accepted societal idea that children must be protected, especially young girls. Within a patriarchal society, women are viewed as physically, mentally, and emotionally weaker. Adding adolescence on top of that, along with variables like race and class, leaves us with a demographic that society forces protection upon because of their perceived innocence. Whether it be from violence, sin, sexuality, or any other "danger" one may deem ill-fitted for children, young girls are sheltered to preserve their inherent innocence given to them by society. The sheltering of young children, in many cases, may hinder their exploration of the world around them. For children who are exposed to genres such as horror, it can be even more damaging to only see themselves in the shoes of the female victim, rather than in a role of empowerment.

The antithesis to the female victim is the Final Girl. The Final Girl trope in horror literature, and more popularly seen in horror films, characterizes a strong, independent female lead who is canonically the last one standing after the psycho-killer has finished his spree. I will argue that while young female characters within children's horror conform to some of the structures of this archetype, they do so in a way that pushes against the patriarchal norms so prevalent within horror. Carol Clover coined this term, prefacing this section titled "The Final Girl", and delves into the division of gender within the horror film, identifying issues within body horror and its relationship to pornography, investigating the differences in death between male and female victims, as well as virginity and sex as they act as tropes in horror. Since the

Final Girl trope has been so prevalent within adult horror, I intend to unveil how it is translated into children's horror, and further, how the trope is placed upon adolescent female characters.

Clover defines the Final Girl, the lone survivor, as, the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. If her friends knew they were about to die only seconds before the event, the Final Girl lives with the knowledge for long minutes or hours. She alone looks death in the face; but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). She is inevitably female (84).

The Final Girl exists as an anomaly because a woman fighting back against her attacker is, within a patriarchal society, unexpected. Horror plays on this misogyny that patriarchy produces, where the expectation for audiences is to see the woman die, and the plot twist is that she somehow doesn't. The Final Girl canonically has certain characteristics, Clover asserts, some being clearly canonical in children's horror. She is quiet, shy, often academically inclined, and unlike her friends, she is often a virgin. The Final Girl being a virgin isn't as prevalent or as stressed in children's horror texts, as virginity is assumed. However, this characteristic can be twisted and shaped into a foundational aspect of some texts. Especially when analyzing a pubescent female protagonist, as is the case with Violet Baudelaire of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which I intend to explore further.

To investigate the relationship of the Final Girl trope and female protagonists within this thesis, I have chosen three key texts that I believe illustrate the young Final Girl in a unique and structural way as their experiences may relate to the experiences of young female readers.

Experiences like trauma, lack or loss of autonomy, puberty, and loss are all interwoven throughout these texts and may connect to female readers coming up against similar life events. Beginning with Chapter one, I will analyze Coraline from Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, focusing on her youth and femininity while introducing a key term referenced throughout, "weaponized innocence". Chapter one is followed by the introduction of Petra from *The Last Cuentista* written by Donna Barbra Higuera, arguing that her innocence, culture, and resistance to colonialism shapes her into a futuristic Final Girl. Finally, Violet Baudelaire from *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Daniel Handler will be examined in the final chapter, exploring her infantilization, virginity, and knowledge. Because the genre is so interdisciplinary, I have chosen to also focus on femininity, culture, and sexuality within their respective chapters to gain a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the trope and how it is affected by the circumstances each protagonist is placed under.

Firstly, I will be examining *Coraline* written by Neil Gaiman in 2002. *Coraline* follows the story of a young girl, Coraline, who moves into an old house full of secrets. While trying to entertain herself and keep out of her parents' hair, she discovers a small door in the wall. Letting curiosity get the best of her, Coraline explores what lies beyond, finding a seemingly pleasant but secretly sinister alternate world where she meets her Other mother and father, and is urged to allow them to sew buttons into her eyes. Partnered with a stray cat who speaks to her, she is challenged with finding the ghost childrens souls that the Other mother has stolen. After she finds them, she begins to fight the Other mother, using her bravery, innocence, and imagination that is inherent of a Final Girl and manages to escape back to her reality.

The next novel I will be discussing within chapter two, is *The Last Cuentista* written by Donna Barbra Higuera in 2021. This novel was awarded the 2022 Newbery Medal. Set in 2061,

after a comet has struck planet Earth, Petra and her family are a part of about a hundred people who were sent into space in order to continue the human race. While civil unrest puts the mission and Petra's family in danger, something more sinister happens on the ship. While in stasis for hundreds of years, Petra's parents are "purged" from the ship and a totalitarian government called the Collective has gained control of the ship. Ben, who was murdered by the Collective, uploaded stories into Petra's mind while in stasis, allowing her to carry on cuentos, or fables, of Earth that allow her to remind those on the ship of their previous lives. Upon arriving at Sagan, the new planet the ships were headed for, Petra attains a sample of a poisonous plant that the Collective wants to turn into an airborne toxin in order to kill colonists. Petra works to remove the toxin, and while escaping to the colony, she watches drones release the toxin. Petra believes she has let the colonists die, but soon hears music in the distance. While this text is labeled as dystopian fiction, Petra provides ample room to view her as a futuristic Final Girl.

In order to keep the scope of research small enough to balance a multitude of texts, I have chosen to focus only on the first novel of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, called *The Bad Beginning*. Written by Daniel Handler under the pen name Lemony Snicket in 1999, *The Bad Beginning* begins after the death of the Baudelaire parents in a house fire that destroyed their mansion and made them orphans. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny are sent to reside with their relative Count Olaf, whom none of them have ever heard of or met, and who is described as, "a greedy and repulsive villain" (Handler). They spend their days cleaning Count Olaf's dark and dirty home, sleeping on one bed and playing with a pile of rocks. After an abusive tirade over what the children have made for dinner, Olaf asserts that they will participate in a play titled "The Marvelous Marriage," where Violet will play the bride. They soon learn that this marriage will be legally binding, allowing Count Olaf to obtain their fortune left by their parents. Outsmarting

Olaf and his theatre crew, Violet signs the document with her left hand, which isn't her dominant hand. The lights go out, allowing Count Olaf to escape and avoid arrest. The Baudelaire's are left to await the discovery of a new relative to live with.

With the genre being less prestigious, there is no distinct space for children's horror scholarship, especially scholarship that focuses on young female protagonists. Therefore, the knowledge about the inner workings of the genre of children's horror, as well as its future advancement, relies on the increase of attention to and understanding of female characters. The understanding and analysis of young Final Girls within horror present ways to understand their young female readers and how they grapple with the world around them. It is important to emphasize the impacts horror has on popular culture, especially popular culture that impacts children. The adolescent female protagonists I will be analyzing in this thesis, Coraline Jones, Petra Pena, and Violet Baudelaire, open the door to understanding the weight society has placed on young girls, and further the understanding of the patriarchal undertones so prevalent within horror, especially pertaining to minors.

## CHAPTER ONE

Weaponized Innocence, Adolescent Femininity, and The Final Girl in *Coraline*

Written in 2002 by Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* follows the story of a young girl who moves into an outwardly normal house, but soon learns it is full of secrets. Letting curiosity get the best of her, Coraline explores what lies beyond a small door she discovers in the wall, finding a seemingly pleasant but secretly sinister Other world where she must fight to save her family. The Other world is identical to her real home, but it is warmer, there is delicious home-cooked food on the dining room table, and everyone she sees, including her Other mother and Other father, have buttons sewn into their eyes. *Coraline* plays on the relationships and oppositions between binaries throughout the novel. This creates a false sense of comfort for Coraline and the readers alike, before switching to the opposite binary, oftentimes more negative or horrifying binary, when Coraline begins to get comfortable. Her elderly neighbors Misses Spink and Forcible are washed up theater performers in reality, but the Other Misses Spink and Forcible shed their old skin to reveal thin and proficient acrobats on stage, just as her gray, dead real garden is flourishing with whimsical life on the Other side of the door. The novel relies on these binaries to mirror the false and the true for the reader by illustrating a simple good versus bad narrative, only to then reveal that not everything is what it seems. These binaries make it a playground for analysis, as Gaiman clearly places two contrasting ideas or characters up against each other, forcing the reader to see both the similarities and differences between them. Binaries influence Carol Clover's original idea of what the Final Girl is as well, assessing that there are two types of female characters within horror, and that the qualities that mark the Final Girl are further indicated by several binaries; she is clever rather than dumb, virginal rather than sexual. What



*Coraline* does is push against these boundaries, creating a renewed view on the contrasts that create or identify the children's Final Girl. Later in this chapter, I will delve into, and attempt to deconstruct, the binaries of innocence and maturity, masculinity and femininity, as well as the Final Girl and the Monstrous Feminine, as these binaries relate to both the novel and children's horror literature as a whole.

Following the novel's success with both the adolescent age groups that it was marketed toward and adults, *Coraline* moved to the big screen and gained even more of a cult following due to the intricate story, creepy visuals, and Coraline's character development. Coraline is the youngest female protagonist that will be analyzed in this thesis, making her character arc an apt starting point for my argument. Childhood spans, some may argue, from birth to 18 years old, meaning the experiences of adolescent girls can be vastly different depending on variables such as age, race, economic class, and family dynamic. In order to gather evidence of what the Final Girl trope means for children's horror literature, it is critical that we start at the beginning of childhood, i.e. Coraline's eight year old experience. Lori M. Campbell, writer of *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*, identifies what makes Coraline so special as a character, "She rejects the...agency of archetypes like other mother and the pantheon of fantasy's negative female characters—the greedy stepmothers, jealous sisters and stepsisters, and wicked witches—in favor of a power that derives not from supernatural gifts, but from being extraordinarily ordinary (111). This term, "extraordinarily ordinary," is a key point of Coraline's character and the children's Final Girl as well. Coraline relies, as Campbell asserts, on her creativity and imagination and ultimately beats the Other mother's wrath due to her having an imagination that is more creative and child-like than the Other mother. Coraline represents the epitome of creativity, imagination, and innocence, all of which are hallmark characteristics of

what society believes exist only within childhood and should be protected at all costs. The loss of innocence is viewed negatively by society and thought to contribute to a less developed individual as they progress from childhood to adolescence and finally to adulthood.

*Protecting Innocence & Delaying Maturity*

Children exist, most times until adolescence, with a certain amount of care placed upon preserving their ‘innocence’. I place this word in quotes as it is difficult, even impossible, to pinpoint a general consensus as to what innocence is for children. In *The Perils of Innocence, or What’s Wrong with Putting Children First*, Linda Gordon writes,

Examining what the best-interests-of-the-child principle has yielded for specific children and their parents reveals two immediate problems: the arbitrariness of grouping together children of all ages and of defining the beginning of adulthood; and the possibility, even likelihood, that there will be competing definitions of what the child’s best interest is. (332)

Gordon introduces two interesting aspects of children’s innocence, which relates both to Coraline as a character as well as the child readers of *Coraline* and other children’s horror works. One, that it is virtually impossible to group all ages of children together as well as identify a distinct beginning of adulthood. And two, that we cannot define the child’s “best interest,” just as we cannot define what innocence is. The cultural capital of innocence leads to the creation of Final Girls, like those seen in texts like *Coraline*. Innocence, and its weight within society, places young women into specific circumstances that force them into gaining the strength, independence, and bravery to grapple with conflict. Children’s horror texts use the cultural value of innocence to create conflict, and then resolution by highlighting the inherent power within innocence, power that only a child holds. Introducing horror texts, especially where a child is a supported protagonist and has an outlet for discussion, doesn’t erase innocence. Rather, horror provides a defense against

conflict and trauma, arming the child with the understanding of how fear works as an emotion, and how to cope with trauma using that innocence. For a child growing up in a more turbulent environment, horror provides reassurance that emotions like fear, despair, and anxiety are valid. S.F. Whitaker, author of “How Horror Helps with Processing Grief and Trauma,” mentions, “A book can take someone on a journey. You feel the pain with the characters, some surviving while others do not, and there is a resolution of some kind. The final person can become a personal patron saint of healing” (Whitaker).

Just as children’s innocence is protected and valued in our reality, it is also important in Coraline’s reality. Her innocence, and more importantly how she harnesses her innocence, is a contributing factor to her place as a Final Girl. In Coraline’s case, her innocence manifests itself most clearly in her imagination and tenacity towards conflict. We see Coraline’s imagination come to life in the beginning of the novel as she is shopping with her mother, “‘Coraline? Oh, there you are. Where on earth were you?’ ‘I was kidnapped by aliens,’ said Coraline. ‘They came down from outer space with ray guns, but I fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent, and I escaped’” (Gaiman, 22). Although this exchange between Coraline and her mother is small, it represents Coraline’s aptitude towards imagination, and solving problems. This introduces what I term “weaponized feminine innocence”. Coraline utilizes her childhood innocence in order to save her family and be released from the Other Mother’s grip. Coraline’s innocence, especially her innocence as a female, allows her to recognize the danger she is in and use her imagination to find a way out of it. Clover asserts that the Final Girl views death and danger around her and then understands the danger she herself is in and still proceeds to find the strength to overcome the trauma before her. This same process occurs for Coraline throughout her story arc, as she sees her parents missing and finds the souls of the children the Other mother has already captured.

Coraline's weaponized innocence, quick thinking, and imagination that is so prevalent in childhood allows her to overcome her obstacles, even though she is still in fear.

Gaiman writes this novel for his two daughters, saying, "I'd wanted to write a story for my daughters that told them something I wished I'd known when I was a boy: that being brave didn't mean you weren't scared. Being brave meant you were scared, really scared, badly scared, and you did the right thing anyway" (Gaiman, xvii). Here, Gaiman pushes the true meaning of *Coraline*, and even children's horror in general, that while something is terrifying, it can still be overcome, and prolonging innocence and childhood is detrimental to understanding how to cope with fear.

### *Masculinity & Femininity*

Coraline exemplifies many characteristics of a typical child; she is curious, determined, and at times, stubborn. Coraline's qualities are arguably gender-neutral, she enjoys playing in the rain and spending time outside, reading and playing with her toys. However, it can be argued that since Coraline is not portrayed as being overtly feminine, she is understood as masculine, which aligns with Clover's idea of how readers view the Final Girl. Clover notes of the Final Girl, "[she] is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical manners, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (40). This pertains to the male viewership of horror movies, but can also be applied to the readership of female protagonists in children's horror. *Coraline* is a rather confined story, with a set of distinct adult characters that Coraline finds herself amongst. With this, it is impossible to compare Coraline's femininity to that of her other female friends, so we are forced to view

Coraline as an individual. While Coraline is canonically a girl, she doesn't represent feminine stereotypes. Like I mentioned earlier, Coraline can be viewed as both feminine and masculine, but she is first and foremost, a child. This leads to my claim that the children's Final Girl doesn't always subscribe to the societal binary of masculinity versus femininity, but rather that she illustrates the full range of gender. She has yet to be forcibly prescribed to her gender expectations, so she just *is*. This does not mean to say that she is free from external forces pushing gendered expectations on her, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, but rather that she views herself as neither overtly masculine or overtly feminine. As Gaiman writes Coraline, he withholds any explanation of her physical appearance, leaving the reader to be able to envision themselves as Coraline, whether they are male or female. This introduces an interesting question: what would the story be like had Coraline been made a boy? In theory, the story would stay the same, as the character of Coraline presents as visibly gender-neutral, putting more emphasis on her adolescence. However, aspects such as the family dynamic may have changed, as sons may experience a different type of treatment than daughters. One thing would stay the same, though, and that is Coraline's ordinariness. As Campbell mentioned, one of Coraline's key characteristics is that she is ordinary, just as every reader of *Coraline* is. She is not extraordinary in any way, she is not the peak of femininity or maturity, and yet she still harnesses the power and bravery to overcome the obstacles she faces, making her a true Final Girl of children's literature.

### *The Monstrous Feminine & the Final Girl*

In direct opposition of Coraline is the Other Mother. As the antagonist, the Other Mother represents both the expectations of femininity and also the demonization of women. In this instance, the Other Mother goes against both the descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes placed upon women, especially mothers. Anne M. Koenig argues that, "Gender stereotypes have

descriptive components, or beliefs about how males and females typically act, as well as prescriptive components, or beliefs about how males and females should act” (1). However, once Coraline enters into the parallel world, she meets her Other Mother, who looks like her mother but is all of the things she is not, “It was the best chicken that Coraline had ever eaten. Her mother sometimes made chicken, but it was always out of packets or frozen, and was very dry, and it never tasted of anything” (Gaiman, 27). Even this instance of cooking supports a stereotype that women, especially mothers, are to be great cooks. The Other Mother upholds this stereotype, and more feminine-centered stereotypes, acting as a representation of ‘the perfect mother’ as well as ‘the perfect woman’. She is clean, proper, and caring. Her life revolves around Coraline. By contrast, her parents within the real world are more gender-neutral as well, neither taking any typically gendered household responsibilities.

As the Other Mother shifts throughout the novel, we see her grow more evil and grotesque in her appearance, speech, and actions. This is a representation of the *monstrous feminine*, a term coined by Barbara Creed. When the Other Mother is introduced, however, her femininity, her role as a wife, mother, and woman, are all at the ideal standard proposed by patriarchal society. These aspects of herself are shifted and morphed throughout the story as she becomes more and more evil, and increasingly aggressive and controlling, more monstrous. As she becomes the Beldam, which is her final demonic form, her femininity becomes visibly monstrous. The opposition between and relationship of monstrosity and femininity is one that plays an important role in *Coraline*, as well as in horror as a stand-alone genre. For women, society has propounded that there is a fine, arguably invisible, line between being feminine enough to abide by societal norms and becoming monstrous in that femininity to the point of unbearability. As Creed argues, everything that is seen as woman, is also inherently abject.

Gaiman represents this concept through the Other Mother, as she is monstrous in all forms, whether that be her feminine, motherly, and overbearing form, or her Beldam form. David Rudd, author of *An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's Coraline and Questions of Identity*, writes of the Other Mother,

“[the monstrous feminine] combines aspects of a womb-like, suffocating “archaic mother” with a more “phallic” incarnation. The former is apparent in Coraline’s assessment that the other mother “loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold” (p.124). In other words, she would end up as nothing but a doll with button eyes: someone, as the song has it, who only has eyes for you” (166).

Rudd’s mention of a more “archaic mother” is especially interesting when comparing the Other Mother’s first representation of a mother with her final form. She represents all things motherly, until she turns evil. This representation forces the reader, and Coraline, to see her *real* mother as feminine *enough*, and caring *enough*, meaning although she doesn’t necessarily meet the standard of what a true mother is envisioned by society to be, she is better than the alternative. While the Other Mother represents the ideal mother, it is towards the end of the book that Coraline begins to see her mother as whole, “and then a voice that sounded like her mother’s her own mother – her real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother – just said, “Well done, Coraline,” and that was enough” (Gaiman, 132). As the Other Mother grows increasingly evil, she shifts into a skeletal-arachnid creature, resembling a Black Widow spider. This is a stark connection, as female Black Widow spiders are known for their deadliness, symbolizing the Other Mother’s aggression and control of the world around her. This is her final monstrous form.

In opposition to the monstrous feminine is the Final Girl. While the Other Mother represents the connection between femininity and evil, the Final Girl represents the connection

between femininity and power. As Clover suggests, in the eyes of the male viewer, the Final Girl holds many qualities of a male protagonist, regarding her as more masculine than others around her. In the children's horror genre, the Final Girl utilizes the power of her innocence, rather than physical power as we see so often in horror literature and film. While the monstrous feminine is demonized for her femininity and lack of innocence, the Final Girl is weaponized and is able to overcome the destruction before her. This weaponization of the young female protagonist's innocence is a necessity and produces the ability to become a Final Girl by providing her a tool to utilize and ultimately beat her aggressor. Without her weaponized innocence, the female protagonist would fall and succumb to her antagonist. When viewing Coraline as the Final Girl, it is important to note that she is ambivalent in her emotions. As Clover also notes, the Final Girl views the full extent of the danger she is in, while also having the bravery and power to overcome it. What makes the Other Mother so monstrous in the text is that she has almost complete control over the Other world. Whereas what makes Coraline so strong is that she has the innocence and bravery that the Other Mother lacks.

Putting these two character archetypes against each other, as Gaiman does, illustrates a new kind of female against female conflict that is not as prevalent in horror, but is a known fairytale motif, however, which speaks to the deep roots of folktales and fairytales in the children's horror story. There is now a clear comparison between a young, bright, Final Girl, and an older, evil Other Mother, which mirrors society's views on women, loss of innocence, and aging. Age adds onto the assumptions of what it is to be female, and what expectations are set by society that are insisted on being upheld. The female characters such as Coraline and the Other Mother represent stereotypes of femininity, control, and innocence in order to highlight views of female adolescence, motherhood, and aging that permeate through modern society. By



juxtaposing the characters with their “Other” counterparts, Gaiman compares the realities of existing as a woman with the false narratives and expectations of femalehood. In comparison, Coraline not having a counterpart in the Other world pushes the idea that her character archetype rarely changes. She is a child, who is still wholly herself through traumas and triumphs. Using the Final Girl and the Monstrous Feminine, Gaiman presents a conflict between women that is unique to the genre and speaks to the inherent destruction of women as they come into their own power.

Coraline is an innovative Final Girl when she is placed up against adult Final Girls because of her imagination, ambivalent gender identity, and weaponized feminine innocence. She is ordinary, and relies on that fact, which pushes readers to relate to the story. Gaiman employs simple tactics in order to create a horror story, which is a great foundational text for analyzing children’s horror literature. With more texts like this, horror becomes more accessible, and less off putting to outsiders of the genre. *Coraline* is an example of a simple, or rather formulaic story. However, the genre of children’s literature can span over many different genres, like aforementioned, leading to a shifting or meshing of storylines, genres, and tropes. A more modern take on the children’s horror story is employed using dystopian and science fiction genres.

## CHAPTER TWO

Independence, Colonial Horror, and *Cuentos: The Last Cuentista's* Petra Peña as the Futuristic

## Final Girl

Horror, especially children's horror, spans across genres, often utilizing different techniques, tropes, and styles in order to create and shape the story. As previously mentioned, the span of what genres can be considered "children's horror" is wider due to the array of what children find horrifying, as well as how the horror is portrayed. While Catherine Lester's article speaks more towards children's horror film, the same characteristics of the genre can be applied to literature, "Ghostbusters and Gremlins (both 1984), however, were hugely successful, which may have been due to their comedy-horror hybridity and association with well-known names that gave them mass appeal to viewers of all ages" (Lester, 24). As Lester asserts here, the hybridity of the genre allows for different audiences to be drawn in, giving the piece a wider, and potentially more diverse collective audience. Lester's mention of the comedy-horror hybrid genre is interesting, as this genre mix is often used in order to lessen the tension within the story, making it perfect for children's horror. The mixing of genres doesn't dilute or lessen the impact of children's horror. In fact, the twisting and shaping of genres speaks to the moldability, and adaptability, of the genre. With this, I mean to say that because the genre is so unique within itself, it allows for the same uniqueness for readers. There is not one type of child that benefits more from, or is more attracted to horror or any of the hybrid genres that stem from horror. An offset of the children's horror genre is dystopian horror. In recent years, there has been a rise in popularity of young adult and children's dystopian fiction. Martin Stewart explains the popularity of dystopian fiction for TeachWire,

Fictional characters are driven by loss and need, and dystopian protagonists are the purest distillation of that drive. They have lost their liberty, their dignity, their safety – and they need everything. Their lives are structured by the antagonist – the oppressive state/occupying force/space aliens – so the enemy is clear and powerful and loathsome. Dystopian characters are hard-wired with the need for freedom, reflecting the desire of young readers beginning to push against boundaries of their own parent-controlled world (Stewart).

These qualities of dystopian fiction align almost perfectly with horror fiction, making them easily meshed into a hybrid genre. This dystopian-horror genre provides the foundations of texts that have the power to shape generations of readers, one very notable text being *The Last Cuentista* written by Donna Barba Higuera, which features Petra Peña as the Final Girl. Lucia Mulherin Palmer, author of *The Final Girl at the U.S.-Mexico Border: The Politics of Saving and Surviving in Undocumented* (2010), writes, “[The Final Girl] continues to materialize in updates and remakes and bleeds into other horror genres” (1). These kinds of ‘updates and remakes’ are important to consider when analyzing Petra. She is a renewal of the Final Girl due to her resemblance to Clover’s trope, in that she is clever, paranoid, and knowledgeable of the terror before her, in addition to her deeply rooted culture and more modern characteristics resembling a new type of the Final Girl.

Centering Petra, a female protagonist of Hispanic descent, is a huge step for children’s literature, especially in the wake of Donald Trump’s aggressive and racist political discourse. In a time of violent border control, racist hate speech, and discrimination, Petra serves as a beacon of light for young Hispanic readers, especially young girls. Petra is seen throughout the novel holding onto her heritage. She is proud to be Hispanic and relies on her culture to guide her and

give her strength in times of trouble and sorrow. With the colonial tones in this novel, it is apt for application to our current American society. Higuera writes Petra to be the strength for those around her. Novels like these, and others centering female and POC voices, act as a defense against the hatred and discrimination so prevalent within society. Clover's vision of the Final Girl is whitewashed. Clover created a trope that is historically white, and "relatively unexamined in terms of intersectional identity formations and socio-political struggles. In particular, the ways in which she is constructed in relation to race, class, and nationality are often overlooked, despite her reiteration again and again as a white middle-class US woman" (Palmer, 1). Kinitra Brooks asserts this bias and adds, "The coping mechanisms black women developed to deal with their multiple oppressions become a detriment to this particular characterization in contemporary horror. For the black woman's display of strength is read pejoratively even as the strength of the (white) final girl is read as positive" (20). Because Clover's Final Girl is white, what can be said or assumed about the journey or narrative of a Final Girl of color, such as Petra Peña?

*The Last Cuentista* begins in 2061, just as Halley's Comet is about to destroy Earth. In an attempt to save the human race, Petra Peña and her family are chosen to be placed into stasis and travel with other foundational members of society to a new planet called Sagan. This journey is estimated to take 380 years, but with the cutting edge technology, Petra will be frozen as her 12 year old self while being taken care of by centuries of caretakers called Monitors and will wake with a lifetime's worth of knowledge including botany, geology, folklore and mythology studies. Coming from a Hispanic family, Petra's *cuentista* or storyteller legacy is very important to her as it is the last piece she has of her beloved grandmother, Lita. While being placed in stasis, something goes wrong and Petra is conscious to experience her Monitor being murdered and the ship being taken over by the Collective, a group dedicated to purging differences between

humans in order to create a “better world”, eradicating individuality. The Collective works to reset everyone’s memories, creating humans whose entire purpose is to serve the Collective’s group needs. Because of Petra’s stasis malfunctioning, she retains her memories, including the *cuentos*, or stories, Lita had told her throughout her childhood, while the others around her lose their memories. She soon learns her parents have been purged and her brother, Javier, is missing. While going on missions and working in a lab to construct a defoliant for the Collective, Petra learns Javier was taken out of stasis years ago and is working in the same lab as she is, however he is now elderly and doesn’t remember anything due to the Collective wiping his memory. After telling her new friends and a young Collective *cuentos*, they begin to trust her. She shows Javier his belongings from their life on Earth and he remembers her, agreeing to help her and her friends escape. Petra learns the Collective has tasked Javier with making an airborne toxin to kill the first settlers on Sagan and she works to neutralize it. She and her friends depart the ship and land on Sagan as she witnesses the Collective’s drones come to spray the toxin. She is in despair that she failed to neutralize the toxin and that the first settlement has been killed, but they soon hear music coming from the settlers as the Collective ship disappears.

Three aspects of Petra’s narrative support her character in her journey as a Final Girl: her forced independence, the conflict of the postcolonial, and the weaponization of her innocence and imagination through her *cuentos*.

#### *Forced Independence and the Burden of Knowing*

The first character we are introduced to is Petra's grandmother, Lita. Lita, like many matriarchs, is a comforting presence for Petra. For the majority of her life, up until the Earth is destroyed, Lita has acted as a narrator for Petra, telling her stories that have been passed down through generations. Lita acts, even after death, as a guiding force for Petra, especially in times

of stress or fear. However, after Petra learns her parents have been killed, she comes to the understanding that she is entirely alone on a spaceship headed to a new planet. This reality pushes Petra further into despair and depression, “I would’ve been better off if the Collective’s reprogram to my Cog had worked. At least I’d be oblivious like the others. I wouldn’t be lying here wanting to die with my family,” before giving her the strength she needs to save herself and her friends, “I know they’d want me to live. To fight. I can’t stay on this ship any longer. I have to find a way to escape” (Higuera, 115, 125). As a child, this kind of forced independence can be scary to imagine for some, while also carrying a certain amount of excitement and expectation. However, gaining independence is ultimately a part of growing up. The children’s *Final Girl* grows out of these circumstances. Whereas many children’s literature features stories where parents aren’t ever mentioned, we see Petra go through the trauma of learning that her parents have died and that she now has to be independent in an uncertain and perilous situation. HarperKids, a resource from HarperCollins Publishers, writes on Medium.com, “Parentless stories provide young readers role models who successfully achieve their own goals, encouraging readers to see that they, too, are capable of overcoming obstacles and accomplishing things by themselves.” Further, Petra’s process of grappling with the knowledge that her parents are gone illustrates the full range of emotions one might go through when experiencing trauma. Within this kind of forced independence lies the burden of knowing, a feature of Carole Clover’s *Final Girl*. Because we see the circumstances that result in forced independence, we also see the protagonist reckon with knowing and understanding these circumstances. Clover says,

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or *Final Girl*. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and

of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again (166).

This understanding of the horror before her is clear throughout *The Last Cuentista*. Petra goes through the ups and downs of her emotions while she witnesses the destruction before her, and still finds the strength to want to survive and save her friends. The reader also gains the knowledge of the Collective's plan at the same time Petra does, making the reader feel like a Final Girl as well. Forced independence and the burden of knowledge is a common thread through all of the novels I am exploring: *Coraline*, *The Last Cuentista*, and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. While Clover argues that the knowledge the Final Girl utilizes throughout the plot is "paranoia," in the case of children's literature, this knowledge is less nervous, or extensive paranoia, and more clever imagination. Just as forced independence pushes the child protagonist to rise to the circumstances of tackling their trauma, knowledge of the reality of their situation guides them towards the path of problem solving. Some could argue that knowledge of reality, especially that of horror or trauma, erases the innocence within children, both fictional and actual. However, knowledge, especially knowledge for children, acts as experience. Steve Baskin, who writes for Psychology Today, urges, "By protecting our children, we do them a double disservice. First, we insulate them from experiences that can facilitate growth and resilience. Second, by actively protecting them, we send them the message that they are not capable of coping on their own." In Petra's case, Lita acted as a guiding force through her life, urging her to tackle issues by herself through cuentos, while uplifting Petra's sense of self, "You can't ruin [the stories]. They've traveled hundreds of years, and through many people to find you. Now, go make them your own" (Higuera, 5). Lita pushes Petra towards knowledge, rather than

shielding her from it, which gives her the strength and perseverance she needs when independence is forced upon her.

### *Colonial Horror*

Horror plays on many aspects of fear. Where dystopian fiction and horror can intersect is through colonialism. Ken Gelder, a postcolonial scholar, writes,

Horror became defined in at least two ways, both important for postcolonial studies. First, it refused to honour the sanctity of boundaries and borders, whether they were national or bodily. Infection and inhabitation (hence: spectralisation, hybridity, etc.) thus emerged as dominant horror tropes. Horror became increasingly fascinated by *circulation*: one thing passing into another, mutating, even melting, identities along the way. Secondly, horror came to relish the clash between the modern and the traditional, the new and the archaic... (Gelder, 35).

The clash between the new and the old, national and bodily boundaries that Gelder mentions builds the conflict within *The Last Cuentista*. The horror within *The Last Cuentista* rests within the forceful takeover of the Collective and the new world they hope to build; a world free of differences between people. Petra finds herself, and her other friends from Earth, in a state of colonization while on the ship to Sagan. Differences, the Collective believes, lead to disagreements which lead to world hunger, war, and all of the other negative aspects of the society they left on Earth and want to keep off of Sagan. The colonialism that we are more familiar with in our current society relies on keeping differences in tact, and even highlighting them in order to other the less dominant group which forces assimilation and conformity. The Collective, in opposition, creates a more communist-centered utopia, where sameness is a strongly held ideal. The Chancellor says, “What happened to the former world was not a tragedy.



It was an opportunity to leave our past behind. Thanks to the Collective, not a single memory of a world filled with conflict, starvation, or war will find its way into our future” (Higuera, 110). In this instance, the Collective, being the dominant culture, works to convince everyone that Earth is lesser than the Collective, and that the contributing factor to its demise was differences amongst its people. Colonialism relies on othering the humans, their looks, abilities, and ideas, in order to create a power imbalance which places the Collective in the place of the colonizer. Petra’s father counters their claims of depravity through difference, “It’ll be our job to remember the parts we got wrong and make it better for our children and grandchildren. Embrace our differences, and still find a way to make peace” (Higuera, 110). Because Petra’s memories of Earth and her family remain intact, she is able to see how the Collective has, over hundreds of years, controlled everyone’s way of thinking and even their genetic make-up, while murdering everyone who wouldn’t comply. The Collective’s mission is to erase all of the aspects of Earth and humanity that Petra sees as foundational and important, like emotions, opinions, history, even physical appearance and Petra’s culture.

While race isn’t directly mentioned as a difference deemed unacceptable by the Collective, they do biologically create and reproduce in order to create identical subjects that are loyal to the Collective. Petra describes the first time she sees the Chancellor,

The person in front of me barely looks human. She looks more like the ghost shrimp I saw once at the Albuquerque aquarium. Just like the ghost shrimp in the tank, she’s both beautiful...and horrifying, her veins glowing red and blue under pale skin. Her darker cheekbones arch too high on her face, leaving a shadowed valley to her jawline. And her lips, the color of lilacs, are too full (Higuera, 73).

This emphasizes the purging of everything “human” in order to be able to easily identify, and therefore other, those who lived on Earth and have just come out of stasis. Rather than the visual differences of race, the Collective is more concerned with any faults found within the humans that may be identifiable through appearance, like Petra’s freckles.

Someone gasps, ‘what are those?’ ‘An Earth disease. Should we quarantine her?’ A woman’s voice, smooth and twinkly like a wind chime, speaks. ‘I’d ask you not to mention that word in front of them.’ ‘Apologies, Chancellor’...’Freckles.’ A finger rubs over the bridge of my nose. ‘Skin damage from their sun,’ the Chancellor says, ‘Without epiderm filters, this sort of physical anomaly happens.’ (Higuera, 70).

It is revealed in the first half of the novel that Petra suffers from Retinitis Pigmentosa, an eye disease that results in worsening eyesight. While she shouldn’t have been allowed on the ship, Ben, her Monitor, ignores her eyesight and refuses to turn her away Petra and her family. However, the Collective’s new technology identifies this disease which puts Petra at risk of death. “The Corposcope speaks in a rigid tone: ‘Ocular disease. Diagnosis: retinitis pigmentosa.’ ‘Her eyes don’t appear different than the others,’ Crick says. The Chancellor sighs. ‘Many of their physical failings weren’t outwardly visible.’” (Higuera, 80). This interaction illustrates that while the Collective pushes for unanimity amongst their own, they view the humans from Earth within the limits of what they are capable of doing for the Collective, rather than wanting them to conform. The humans are not viewed as a part of the Collective, they are only seen as an object of use for the more dominant culture to use in order to further their power within a colonial setting. The Collective looks past the humans “failings” because they understand the limitations of their ability to conform. The humans will never look like the Collective, or be completely

loyal to them, so rather than pushing them to conform to the more powerful group, they use their skills to gain knowledge, land, and power, as many colonist nations do.

Petra's *cuentos* have been passed down for generations, and they are her last connection to Lita and her life on Earth. However, the Collective dismisses this heritage and history, even calling the belongings of Petra and her family "relics", further antiquating the not-so-distant history of Earth, as Gelder mentions. By creating a distance between the Collective and the humans of Earth, the Collective creates a horror not only for Petra, but for those that don't know any other life than that on the ship controlled by the Collective. Those in positions of power have the ability to manipulate the image of those that are being colonized, creating an image that is to be feared or pitied, furthering the push for colonization. This is a foundational idea of colonialism, and contributes to the kind of horror Petra experiences throughout the novel.

#### *Cuentos and the Final Girl*

Just as Coraline utilizes her inherent childhood imagination to overcome conflict, Petra also subversively uses her imagination in the form of *cuentos*, or stories, to restore the rest of the Zetas and Javier's memories. Petra relied heavily on Lita's stories before the Earth was destroyed, but now that she is placed in the face of danger alone, she is forced to reconcile with her loneliness and carry on Lita's stories while adding her own twist to them. In a review for The New York Times, Tae Keller writes, "Because the other kids on the ship have been brainwashed, the only way to reach them is through story. Stories show them an alternative, freer way of life than the one the Collective proposes. Stories give them the hope they need to be brave. And, most important, stories remind them of who they were — who they *are*" (Keller). Petra's stories, influenced by her heritage and Lita, allows her to overcome the Collective with a weapon they wouldn't even have access to: imagination, history, and culture. While the novel never

specifically mentions Petra's heritage, the reader can assume she is perhaps 2nd generation Latina-American. Petra's culture is a foundational part of her character, which Clover never considered when writing about the Final Girl in 1987. "And while the Final Girl might challenge oppressive demands for "proper" Western womanhood and femininity, she does little to challenge the normativity of whiteness and white femininity and to show how these constructions intersect with normative ideas of US-based "Americanness.'" (Palmer, 2). Without her culture, Petra couldn't be considered a Final Girl, as she would lack the tools to overcome her horror.

Higuera utilizes flashback scenes throughout the novel in order to illustrate Petra's life on Earth before it was destroyed. Chapter 14 flashes the reader back to an evening with her family in the garden when she was nine years old. We are able to see Petra and her family's relationship, as well as her parents' dedication to their family and their work, "'This is our medieval battlefield. I plan on dying with a rake or hoe in my grip.' Dad laughs. 'Petra, we're counting on you to roll our dead bodies right into the raised beds for compost.'" (Higuera, 105). This allows the reader to see just how warm and loving Petra's life was before having to leave Earth, making the horror and devastation throughout the book hit the reader even harder. The children's Final Girl's innocence is an important aspect that sets her apart from others. Imagination, as we see in *Coraline*, *The Last Cuentista*, and later in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, finds its abundance within childhood. As her father takes Javier to have a bath, young Petra embarks on a fairy-searching adventure before bed. "Giant arms of spiky green protrude into the sky. 'There must be a fairy city as big as Albuquerque under that!' I say. And with that, my imagination's off and running" (Higuera, 106). While Petra is imagining her own fairy world

just beyond the skin of the cactus, her mother is looking around at the foliage, appearing to ignore Petra's narration of the fairies.

Mom gasps again, interrupting me and pointing in the opposite direction. 'What's that?' I turn away from the magical fairy party inside the tallest cactus arm. Mom's flashlight is pointing at a very real shrub with little yellow flowers. I sigh, 'Creosote.' 'Great job!' she says. 'Isn't botany great?' 'Mmmh,' I mumble, realizing what this really is. It was fun while it lasted, though (Higuera, 107).

In this scene, Petra indulges in her childhood imagination, letting it run wild and creating a story all her own. Her mother, however, attempts to turn their play into a learning experience, not realizing Petra's imagination is a learning experience in itself that will lead her to gaining the creative power that is necessary for solving problems and overcoming conflicts. Like Coraline's Other Mother, this kind of imagination is lost as one grows and moves into adulthood, making it a foundational aspect of the Final Girl.

Along with her culture, Petra being a girl is critical to her survival through the Collective's colonization. The cuentos she utilizes throughout the novel are passed down through the maternal line, referencing the Hispanic maternal role of being a narrator for the family. Lita acts as a matriarch, then passes her power to Petra as she urges her to make the stories her own. Petra sees the importance in storytelling, even using it to act almost motherly to Javier in the beginning of the novel. This kind of inherited narrative power, specifically being female, in conjunction with weaponized innocence creates a new, revised Final Girl that is Petra Peña.

## CHAPTER THREE

Infantilization, Virginity, and a Wealth of Knowledge: Violet Baudelaire's Transformation into  
the Final Girl

Because Clover's 1987 analysis of the Final Girl was focused on women who were past puberty, it must be asked how the Final Girl goes through, and grapples with, gaining maturity and aging. While as a society we seemingly prioritize innocence above all else, historically, young girls have been forced out of childhood faster than their male classmates and siblings, assigning them more maternal responsibilities like taking care of younger siblings or cousins. This social phenomenon, mixed with a widely held misogynistic view that women are weaker, more emotional, and less capable than men, leads to a rather confusing conflict for teenage girls. As a teenage girl broaches her independence, she may still be treated as a child, and even infantilized younger than her age, whether that be emotionally, intellectually, or even sexually, while also being held to a higher standard of expectations. As mentioned earlier, the discourse surrounding how we identify childhood and the span of ages within it is never ending. While some may assert that childhood stops at 12 years of age, others may recognize someone at age 18 as a child. This causes conflicts when addressing what "appropriate behavior" is for a teenager. Clover's Final Girl is arguably void of sex. Her virginity is a part of what makes her a Final Girl according to Clover. This highlighting of virginity has deep roots in the field of horror studies. Horror, especially horror films, is made and consumed with straight men in mind.

*A Series of Unfortunate Events: A Bad Beginning*, published in 1999, found success and a cult following after its release. Part of its appeal, some might argue, was the almost painfully truthful tone the narrator had, the back summary of the first novel reading,

I'm sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant. It tells an unhappy tale about three very unlucky children. Even though they are charming and clever, the Baudelaire siblings lead lives filled with misery and woe. From the very first page of this book when the children are at the beach and receive terrible news, continuing on through the entire story, disaster lurks at their heels. One might say they are magnets for misfortune (Handler).

*A Series of Unfortunate Events* captured audiences with Handler's blunt and truthful delivery, along with the three main protagonists, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny. Violet is 14 years of age and the eldest Baudelaire child, and is the focus on this chapter. The entire series features thirteen books, but for the sake of the depth of research, only the first book, *The Bad Beginning*, will be used for analysis. The novel begins with the death of the Baudelaire parents in a fire that destroys their million-dollar estate. This leaves the Baudelaire children orphaned and with no known family members able to care for them. In an effort to place them in the care of a relative as their parents' will proclaimed, Mr. Poe, a family friend, locates Count Olaf whom none of the children know to be related to them. While living in Count Olaf's run-down house, the three children are forced to complete tedious chores, one being to cook Count Olaf and his theatre troupe dinner. The children make puttanesca, which results in an angry and violent Count Olaf who claims he told them he wanted roast beef. The children soon learn that Count Olaf is after their fortune by whatever means necessary. Shortly after this realization, they are told they will have to participate in a play titled "The Marvelous Marriage" where Violet will play the role of Count Olaf's bride, all in an attempt to steal the children's inheritance. Using his knowledge and love of reading, Klaus learns this marriage will be legally binding and Olaf will have access to the children's fortune. Klaus addresses Count Olaf about his plan, which causes Olaf to retaliate and

Sunny is placed into a cage dangling from the tower while Klaus and Violet are locked in a room until the play begins. Violet is forced into signing the marriage certificate, but reveals she has signed with her left hand which goes against the wording of the document, “the law clearly states the document must be signed in the bride’s *own hand*” (Handler, 152). This loophole that Violet finds causes the marriage to be void. Before Count Olaf is arrested, his troupe cuts the lights in the building and allows him to escape. The novel ends on a cliffhanger, with Mr. Poe searching for another Baudelaire relative, leaving the children without a proper guardian.

*A Series of Unfortunate Events* builds off of what Frank Furedi calls a “culture of fear”. Nur Aini Annapurna and Dhita Hapsarani build off of this idea within “Childhood and a Culture of Fear in Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*”, arguing, “One aspect of a culture of fear is that it has shaped the identity of being vulnerable. Children are a category that are deemed inherently vulnerable because of their assumed dependence on adults. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Baudelaires find themselves in dangerous situations because they are “at risk”, both as children and as orphans” (171). This idea is even more relevant to Violet, as she is a child, an orphan, as well as a girl. As an at-risk individual, when placed under immense pressure and trauma, Violet is forcibly transformed into a Final Girl through her maternity, virginity, and her knowledge.

#### *The Child Bride: Infantilization Versus Maternity*

In many instances, young girls' first responsibilities given by their parents or other adults caring for them are maternal. Whether it be babysitting, helping feed a younger sibling or cousin, or being given other chores that society has coded as female, these are some of the first experiences of responsibility. This shows young girls that there is a connection between maturity and maternity, a term I am using here to describe actions or responsibilities relating to



motherhood, that to be awarded maturity is to be a maternal figure. This connection is used within children's literature to illustrate to young girls that with maturity comes maternity, there is no disconnection. While this can be rewarding and taken in stride by some, it also further prescribes gender roles onto our youth that continues the cycle of unequal expectations among genders.

As Violet is the eldest sibling, when her parents die she is left to look after her younger siblings despite still being a child herself. She steps into a maternal role, which forcibly pushes her into maturity. Final Girls within children's literature often share this trait of increased maturity which contributes to their overcoming of conflict. However, one could argue that this increased maturity and its ties to maternity contribute to the horror that is created within children's horror for some. Veera Taipale argues in their Master's Thesis that Violet's maternal expectations lead her to finding her inner courage.

One could argue that the reason for Sunny's helplessness in this first part of the series is that the two older siblings are given the task of caring for her – a task that gives them additional courage. If it was not for Sunny, Violet would probably not have had the courage to climb up the tower. Furthermore, by forcing Violet to test and push her own limits, she realizes that she is cleverer and braver than she had imagined. Losing their parents and having to take care of Sunny forces Violet and Klaus to utilize their full potential (Taipale, 36).

Here, Taipale views Violet's appointed maternity as a building block for her bravery, arguing that being the sole caretaker of Sunny is how she was able to overcome the horror before her. However, it could also be argued that her responsibilities as Sunny's caretaker place her in even more danger, as Violet cannot solely worry about her own safety. This clash of maturity and

maternity, and the connections to horror can also be seen through Petra of *The Last Cuentista* and her responsibility for the other Zetas, however this responsibility seems to be self-appointed but could be traced back to Petra being an older sister as well.

While there is a connection between maturity and maternity within children's literature, there is also an inherent connection between infantilization and victimization. The displacement of innocence and abrupt maturity is an effect of trauma, but might be less visible due to the societal pressures placed upon young women. In opposition, because of the cultural capital of innocence, children are sometimes infantilized past their adolescence in order to withhold some amount of innocence. As a teenager passes through adolescence and is presented with more responsibility, they have to grapple with the remnants of childhood and infantilization from adults who are hoping to feign maturity. When analyzing Violet as a Final Girl, there is an inherent connection between her infantilization and her victimization, as is true for many Final Girls.

*Virginity: Foundation of the Final Girl*

The existence of virginity, Carol Clover asserts, is a main component of a Final Girl. "Unlike her girlfriends... she is not sexually active. Laurie (*Halloween*) is teased because of her fears about dating, and Marti (*Hell Night*) explains to the boy with whom she finds herself sharing a room that they will be using separate beds" (Clover, 167). Like innocence, virginity has a lot of cultural and moral weight within most modern societies. Culturally, virginity is a representation of innocence. This is to say that Clover's Final Girl was inherently innocent due to her being a virgin, which can be translated to the importance of the children's Final Girl's inherent innocence.

While *A Series of Unfortunate Events* does not directly address Violet's virginity, she is forced to be wed to Count Olaf, who is a grown man while Violet is only 14. This illustrates the forced maturation of young girls through marriage or sex. Olaf attempts to take Violet's innocence, as many predatory men do. This type of victimization contributes to what makes horror so terrifying for women. However, there is a triumph for the Final Girl as she works to withhold her independence and overcome the horror of having it taken from her. Author Sara Austin states in her review of *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction*, "Horror fiction denaturalizes the female subject, turning her into the Other. This process shows how many of the supposedly natural attributes of femininity are social constructions that girls can push back against in order to regain agency" (Austin). This speaks to the social construct of both marriage and virginity, and how Violet works to disengage with these constructs while also escaping the horror of losing her agency.

#### *Weaponizing Knowledge and Femininity*

Just as innocence is foundational to childhood, children have an innate curiosity about the world around them. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is an example of how a child grows when that curiosity is treasured and nurtured.

Through Clover's lens, Violet very clearly fits the role of the Final Girl, she is clever, conventionally attractive, and uninterested in boys. As an adolescent Final Girl, however, her thirst and aptitude for tinkering and learning acts as her weaponized feminine innocence. "Violet had a real knack for inventing and building strange devices, so her brain was often filled with images of pulleys, levers, and gears, and she never wanted to be distracted by something as trivial as her hair" (Handler, 3). This quote describing Violet early on in the novel clearly distinguishes her as a character. Throughout the novel, she is proper and polite, attempting to

bear through the abuse of Count Olaf rather than immediately fighting back. She is visually and socially feminine. She still is, however, a child who has a love of learning and partaking in activities and experiments that would normally be coded as masculine, which aligns with Clover's outline of the Final Girl. Violet, like Coraline, exists in a grey area that speaks primarily to the ambiguity of childhood. However, we begin to see societal expectations being placed on her through Violet's actions, reactions, and manners. One action that is a small but ritualistic behavior for Violet is the tying of her hair. "Anyone who knew Violet well could tell she was thinking hard, because her long hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes" (Handler, 3). Her long hair represents the feminine expectations placed on her, while the action of tying it back when she is thinking illustrates her disregarding those expectations, if only just for a moment. Violet's duality in this sense shows us an example of understanding how a Final Girl grows and matures in a patriarchal society, leading to a better understanding of the trope as it connects and interacts with children's horror.

Violet's weaponized feminine innocence comes in the form of her tinkering. Similarly to the other two protagonists analyzed in this thesis, Violet relies on her imagination in order to solve her problems and beat her aggressor. While her passion for learning and inventing is inherent to her character, her resources are representative of her social class. Coming from an upper-class white family, it can be assumed that Violet not only had the fundamental education, but might've even had more specialized education that supported her love of building. This goes to say that the makings of a Final Girl may have foundations in her amount of privilege. Violet was able to overcome the death of her parents, the loss of their wealth, and Count Olaf's abuse through the financial, emotional, and material support of her two parents. Had Violet been born

into a lower class family, raised by a single parent, and not had the opportunities to nurture her love of learning, she may not have had the tools necessary for overcoming trauma.

In all, Violet is an example of how a Final Girl is shifted and changed depending on her circumstances. While Violet's deeply rooted youthful imagination and tenacity assist her in protecting herself and her siblings, it is important to note the outside factors that gave her the opportunities to foster these abilities.

## CONCLUSION

As investigated within this thesis, it is clear Carol Clover's analysis of the Final Girl is foundational to horror studies. When addressing the trope through the lens of children's horror, however, there are different characteristics that create a newer, revised version of the Final Girl that more aptly encapsulates what it means to be an adolescent in the face of trauma.

The children's Final Girl is representative of the defenses children and adolescents have in a society where they are supposed to be protected but lack autonomy. Because of this lack of autonomy, we view the protagonists in these stories within the limits of those who control them, Coraline is controlled by the Other Mother, Petra by the Collective, and Violet by both Count Olaf and the justice system. In all of these cases, the entity that is meant to protect the protagonist from harm is ultimately the one who is inflicting the most harm. This speaks to the idea that while children are one of the most innocent and vulnerable populations, they are also able to experience trauma despite society's attempts at protection.

Rather than having inherent qualities that make them a Final Girl, as Clover suggests, each adolescent Final Girl finds herself and her bravery through the experiences of her childhood.

These contemporary reformulations of the Final Girl in film, TV, fan blogs, and literature confirm the pervasiveness and flexibility of the trope, as well as the need to expand discussion of Clover's framework beyond the traditional ruminations of the slasher subgenre that have been so central to most of research to date. While the Final Girl continues to materialize in slasher remakes, usually in a highly self-conscious way, it also circulates in other genres, such as dystopian Young Adult literature or science-fiction

graphic novels, that refocus critical attention on the trope as a cross-media phenomenon (Paszkievicz and Rusnak).

Paszkievicz and Rusnak revisit the Final Girl, further asserting the shifting of the trope as culture changes. This goes to say that the Final Girl is innately connected to the time she is created, while she is concrete, the trope is not. The term “weaponized feminine innocence” is representative of how the children’s Final Girl is able to face and eventually overcome the doom that surrounds her. While each protagonist’s weaponized innocence is different, Coraline utilizes her creativity, Petra, her *cuentos*, and Violet, her tinkering, all are rooted in childlike wonder and imagination, distinguishing the child’s Final Girl from the adult one.

Because the field of scholarship for children’s horror isn’t as prestigious or as widely traversed as others within horror studies, the future of this project has many different avenues. One being the further dissection of the subgenres within horror and the identification of women’s representation within those subgenres. June Michele Pulliam investigates this in *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction*, which triggered my interest in the topic. There is an even further necessity into understanding how women are represented in all horror, not just that of slasher films as Clover’s research focuses on.

This revisiting of the Final Girl does not happen in a vacuum and should be considered as part of wider trends in feminist horror scholarship, which reclaims the horror genre for female viewing pleasures, usually under the assumption that it provides its viewers an aesthetic access to violence and rage, released in a previously assumed male-orientated form (Paszkievicz and Rusnak).

Along with understanding female representation in other subgenres of horror, one may then consider more deeply how female viewer or readership is affected, as Paszkiewicz and Rusnak do in the above quote.

It would also be worthwhile to unveil the effects and impacts children's literature adapted to film and television may have. Two out of the three texts analyzed here have film adaptations that open up avenues for further discussion, spanning into film studies. Further, in a society where children are surrounded by screens, do these representations and adaptations hold more weight than those on paper? As we as a society become more cognizant of representation in a whitewashed America, further study resides in the highlighting and understanding of voices of color in children's horror.

The cultural and societal implications of understanding how young girls and adolescent women are represented in children's horror literature pushes for a real world understanding of how we face trauma. Final Girls within children's horror literature represent bravery, adaptation, fear, trauma, and many other aspects of life that children may or may not be accustomed to. Children's horror allows a safe place between the pages for children to wrestle with these emotions and come out on the other side. The children's Final Girl represents ordinariness, while finding bravery and hope that communicates to young girls that they too have the tools of a Final Girl.



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