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Abstract

Menstrual stigma, a pervasive societal issue, is consistently depicted and reinforced within the horror film genre. Through the dissection of films such as Carrie, Ginger Snaps, Audrey Rose, and It, alongside an examination of cinematic narratives, character development, and symbolism in horror films—this paper undertakes a thorough exploration of the intersection between gender, menstruation, and the horror genre to expose the broader implications of such portrayals in both the realms of horror films and society at large. The underlying mechanism enacted to perpetuate harmful biases towards women's menstruating bodies is the correlative depiction between menstruation and the emergence of malevolent and violent traits in female protagonists. After establishing the existence of female vilification in horror films, parallels between menstruation-focused horror storylines and the characterization of the menses in public education and general societal discourse are unveiled. To combat the oppressive ramifications of negative menstrual discourse, the implementation of comprehensive, inclusive menstrual education and open conversations rooted in body appreciation and menstrual positivity are critical to building a society in which women may bleed without societal shame.

I lost my purity on a Saturday in late August, standing inside the running shower of my childhood home. As I leaned my forehead against the weathered, yellow tiles, I observed as the showerhead introduced streaming water to the streaks of crimson that were pooling at my feet. The water was made cloudy by the constant flow of blood and stifled tears that interrupted each droplet, and in the clouded consistency I caught sight of myself. My reflection indicated loss; grief pulled at the tails of my eyebrows and stiffened the contortions of my face. I thought of all the instances in which the word "period" was whispered as though it were sinful to speak it with the force of filled lungs. I thought of the way my teacher had sent the boys to the playground while she used paper diagrams to warn us about our approaching bodily changes. I thought of the way the boys in my class recoiled in disgust at the sight of an unopened tampon half-visible from the pocket of a backpack. I stood in mourning until the once steaming water stung my skin with its frigidity. The beginning of my menstruation indicated the end of my relationship with my body. My body had become something to fear, something to be disgusted by, something I could not control. My body had become something that did not belong to me.

In this paper I will examine the depiction of women's periods within horror films to uncover the manner in which menstruation is utilized in horror movies as a tool to incite feelings of terror and revulsion. I will also draw parallels between real-life conversations surrounding menstruation and the use of periods as a thematic device. I ultimately conclude that the stigmatization of women's menses is detrimental to women's relationships with their bodies and engrains unnecessary shame regarding a natural, uncontrollable bodily process. While acknowledging that menstruation is not a bodily experience exclusive to women, this paper will be focusing on the depictions and societal effects experienced by menstruating women. By examining menstruation through the lens of horror films, discussing societal stigma surrounding periods, depicting the way fictional and real-life conversations reflect one another, and exploring the impacts of these parallels on women's health and well-being, I will propose a future that overcomes negative connotations of women's menses. Additionally, I will highlight the necessity of productive, positive period education and representation.

The cinematic horror genre is an expansive amalgamation of films that are produced with the intention to disturb, unsettle, scare, antagonize, and, at times, disgust—often playing on knowledge of human biology to evoke visceral reactions in audiences. The conduits through which these emotions are achieved often involve scenes of bloodiness: the mysterious oozing of red liquid from the walls of an abandoned home, splatters of sanguine across the face of a killer after they capture yet another victim, or the harrowing depiction of a woman's menstruation. The horror genre continuously utilizes the blood, whether in blatant renderings or pointed references, born from a woman's menses to elicit reactions of fear or disgust. In academic literature, this association is commonly referred to as the "menstrual monster" trope

(Creed, 1993). This trope uses menstruation as a tool for the "vilification of female bodies and function" (Nordlin, 2022). Just as blood born from the stab of a killer or the cryptic appearance of thick crimson from seemingly inanimate places is employed to arouse uncomfortable physiological reactions, the presence of menstrual blood in horror is similarly utilized to inspire emotions and bodily sensations indicative of the horror genre.

A requisite example of the "menstrual monster" is Carrie White from the 1976 film adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie*. Reflective of my own menarche, Carrie is showering in the girl's locker room when her first ever period begins. With a deeply religious mother who had never spoken to her of menstruation, Carrie is overwhelmed at the sight of the blood and equates her period to some manner of bodily dysfunction. Amid her feverish confusion, Carrie's peers throw tampons and pads at her as they tauntingly chant "'Plug it up! Plug it up!'" (as cited in Briefel, 2005). It is within that same day that Carrie begins to experience telekinetic powers, which she will eventually use to kill her strict mother, mocking classmates, and herself. The journey that led to Carrie's climactic murders and subsequent suicide was seemingly catalyzed by her period, as her recognition of her own powers coincided with the terror she felt towards her bleeding body. Carrie's menarche was the calamity from which her sinful acts would spawn. Similarly, in John Fawcett's 2000 film *Ginger Snaps*, Ginger's first period occurs alongside a werewolf bite. As her body becomes shrouded in fur and she grows an animalistic appetite for sex and blood, her period equally marks her monstrous transformation. Through the horror genre's inclusion of female menstruation alongside acts of violence, gruesome bodily transformations, and other horrific devices, "the viewer is trained to expect that once the female body bleeds, it will breed a very predictable form of horror" (Briefel, 2005). *Ginger Snaps* and *Carrie* are merely two titular examples of an omnipresent notion pushed forward by horror's depiction of menstruation: in menstruating women are, in one manner or another, subjected to a darker, more violent or impure state of being.

The negative connotations that permeate topics of menstruation are not exclusive to the horror genre, or even to the film industry at large. The negative view of periods prevalent in horror films is an echo of the pervasive societal stigmatization of menstruating women. From a young age, women "are barraged with portrayals of menstruation that warn of its so-called disgusting, disabling and tainting qualities" (Fahs, 2011). In addition to the negative connotations placed on menstruation within itself, there is a common notion that menstruating women capitulate to the repulsive qualities of menstruation and become an embodiment of the horrors of their own period. This is particularly evident in societal framing of Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), a grouping of symptoms commonly experienced by women between their ovulation and menstruation, characterized by heightened emotions, fatigue, and depression (OASH, 2018). Women who show any indication that they are experiencing PMS are often demonized and characterized as irrational or even monstrous. As the source of

these symptoms, the menstruating body is positioned as a virus and PMS is positioned as "the epitome of the 'monstrous feminine'. Premenstrual change in emotion, behavior or embodied sensation is positioned as a sign of madness within, necessitating restraint and control on the part of the women experiencing it" (Ussher & Perz, 2020). Women succumb to the "menstrual monster" monthly—and are left to shoulder the burden of suppressing any indication of their own menstruation while being subjected to hurtful utterances of the repulsive, impure bodily process they are experiencing.

While horror films live within a realm of fiction, they are deeply influenced by the reality in which society views and discusses menstruation. The "menstrual monster" is as much a trope as it is an idea used to dehumanize menstruating women. In Robert Wise's 1977 movie *Audrey Rose*, the parents of a young Ivy are told that she is supposedly possessed by Audrey Rose, a young girl who had passed away prior to Ivy's birth. They disregarded this notion until, following Ivy's menarche, she started to show signs of possession; she was introducing herself as Audrey Rose and having violent night terrors that could only be calmed by the father of the late Audrey Rose (Wise, 1977). The introduction of Ivy's period, directly prior to the events that prove her possession, aligns her supernatural behaviors with her period. This fictional depiction echoes the societal association of "undesirable" behaviors (often symptoms of PMS) with women's menses. In *Ginger Snaps*, a film that reinforces the concept of the "menstrual monster," Ginger directly reflects the stigmatization of menstruating women in a conversation with her sister, where she dreadfully anticipates getting her first period: "If I start hanging around tampon dispensers, moaning about PMS, shoot me—okay?" (Fawcett, 2001). Ginger's snide comment is not merely indicative of existing societal attitudes surrounding menstruation, but the internalization of stigma of which many women find themselves a victim.

In the 2017 film adaptation of Stephen King's 1986 novel *It*, the enigmatic Pennywise is terrorizing a quaint Maine town, and these terrors play alongside Beverly Marsh's own horror as she grapples with her pubescent body. An iconic scene from the story, the viewer watches Beverly stand at the sink of a small, tiled bathroom as the sink overflows with the forceful gushing of blood. She reacts in horror, "...afraid of going through puberty and becoming a woman" (Henery, 2021). She is seemingly as terrified of her own metaphorical menstrual blood as she is of the entity threatening her town. As the most modern of films discussed in this paper, we can see how the subtlety with which menstruation is hinted towards differs from the often-blatant acknowledgment of menses in older films. Yet, the message regarding menstruation remains largely the same: menstruation is something to be feared, a sign of a deep and irreversible personal change, so much so that Beverly Marsh screams at the mere sight of it. Witnessing female characters despair at their own menstruation and the future stigma they will face serves to compound the burden of women's menstruation. The

stigmatization of menstruation is so pervasive that it cannot be escaped even in fictional depictions of womanhood.

Living in a society that is consistently equating your menstruation to impure, violent, and undesirable acts or ideas often leads to an unhealthy mind-body relationship. Menstrual stigma "has negative consequences for women's health, sexuality, well-being, and social status. One of the consequences most frequently noted in literature is self-consciousness and hypervigilance associated with concerns about the revelation of one's menstrual status" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). Due to the abundance of negativity surrounding menstruation, women often feel shame in admitting to their menstruation in any manner. This shame thrives in a society that suppresses conversations surrounding the menses, as "menstrual stigma is perpetuated indirectly through silence. Menstruation is typically avoided in conversation, except under certain circumstances (for example, in private with female friends and relatives, in a health education or biology class, in a doctor's office)" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). Normalization and acceptance cannot take place in spaces that discourage discussion related to the stigmatized subject. This shame may lead women to abstain from social gatherings or physical movement out of embarrassment or a lack of support. Notions of menstruation as taboo "function to separate, exclude, and even banish menstruating women from public and private spheres, preventing their full participation in public life as well as in their own full subjectivity" (Wood, 2020). When a woman's menstruating body begins to prevent her from partaking in daily activities, the relationship that woman has with her body becomes tainted by the barriers it creates. Monthly menses are not the cause of a negative mind-body relationship. It is the societal reaction to the menses that turns women's bodies into their enemies—deprived of existing shamelessly.

The resolution to historically ingrained and presently perpetuated narratives surrounding menstruation is not linear, nor does it exist as a singular answer. Although, in recognizing where harmful connotations originate, we can propose alternatives grounded in societal acceptance and body appreciation. Societal perceptions of menstruation are largely formed by education. Researchers Margaret Stubbs and Evelina Sterling propose menstrual education rooted in the idea that menstruation is a sign of health, going beyond normalization of menstruation to create an appreciation of menstruation as a mark of vitality. This education restructuring "could help to redress the burden of negativity in current [educational] materials" (Stubbs & Sterling, 2020). Menstrual education that is rooted in body appreciation and inclusivity of all persons is a foundational change that would dramatically shift the manner in which menstruation is both perceived and connotated in modern society. This method of education would contribute to a future where women are no longer bound by menstrual shame, where periods are demonstrative of nothing more than the shedding of the uterine wall, and where the "menstrual monster" no longer has the societal context from which to thrive.

Menstrual education is typically given to women alone, while boys are left out of conversations regarding menstruation. This contributes to a lack of basic menstruation knowledge in men, while also implying the necessity of secrecy in regard to menstruation—preventing healthy and open conversations. When boys and girls are separated for menstrual education, educators "are conveying not only facts but guidelines for communication; they are marking menstruation as a special topic, not one for ordinary conversation'" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011). The lack of inclusion in menstrual education often results in an aversion amongst boys to all conversations surrounding menses. A 2020 study found that nearly 70% of school-aged boys said that it was "very inappropriate" or "inappropriate" for girls to discuss their periods with classmates (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020). To remedy the creation of "the menstrual taboo" that is promoted through divided education, the inclusion of male persons in lessons on menstruation is imperative. By encouraging the participation of all persons in the education of menstruation, periods can become a comfortable topic of conversation and women may then feel safe to display and discuss their menstruating bodies.

Nine years later, with my forehead pressed against the acrylic of a new shower, in a new home, I consider the way my monthly bleeding has shaped my perception of self. As jagged streams of water paint swirls on my skin I pinch and poke and prod at my body. A body that I have tried to regulate with birth control and implants. A body that has introduced itself as a stranger once a month for 108 months: bleeding. A body that I have been taught to hate for functioning in the way it was meant to. Standing under the showerhead, I imagine an eleven-year-old girl crying to herself amidst crimson puddles and trickling water, certain that her menarche was indicative of an altered state of living, of being. This thought becomes a series of memories: blurred sensations in which shame, comments of impurity, and monstrousness pull me further and further into myself. I talk to my younger self then, and apologize. I apologize for the world in which she had to live—where the sting of menstruation was compounded by hushed conversations and missing education and horror movies and silence. She accepts my apology, even though it is not mine to give, and together, she and I look forwards to a future in which intentional education and bodily acceptance will rid us of the trauma our bleeding bodies hold. A world where our shame may wash down the drain alongside every water trickle, teardrop, and speck of blood.

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