

## Eve was Evil

By Cooper Gantz

While womanhood starts with blood, Carrie White's ends in fire. In *Carrie* (1976), directed by Brian De Palma, we are served a poignant message about the pain of adolescence and womanhood. The film is most remembered for Palma's signature voyeuristic style, parallel editing, and his phenomenal casting of Carrie and the other women surrounding her. *Carrie* (1976) was based on Stephen King's first novel, which was of the same name, and was notable because King said it was the superior version of the story. The film is visceral and deals with the deep shame women can often experience emerging from their youths into adulthood through motifs of bewitchment and bullying. All of this is accompanied by Brian De Palma's unsettling mise-en-scène that would come to be known as one of Hollywood's favorite horror films.

Brian De Palma's upbringing was unconventional. His father was a surgeon and often let a young Palma watch the procedures, desensitizing him to blood and viscera. The one happening in his life that seemed to transform him ultimately was his father's infidelity (Brian De Palma: Scene by Scene). His mother ended up finding out about his father's extramarital behavior and even attempted suicide over it. This would further inspire Brian De Palma's interest in voyeurism. He would follow his father to try to catch him cheating on his mother, even going as far as climbing trees and stalking his father in the darkness of nighttime. This resonates with Margaret in *Carrie* (1976), considering that Carrie's mother was abandoned and cheated on by her father. This is one of the factors that led Margaret to

stab Carrie near the film's end. Margaret, who is brainwashed by Christian zealotry, cannot realize that Carrie was not harming her, but the horrible behavior of her ex-husband and the church that they attended. She ends up reflecting this self-hatred onto Carrie, trying to continue the cycle of trauma she experienced in her marriage. This part of the film felt genuinely heartbreaking, and upon reflection, I found it easy to see a part of Palma's truth in this element of the film. There is an inherent empathy towards the women in *Carrie* (1976) towards the patriarchal abuse they experience.

One of the most challenging shots in *Carrie* (1976) comes directly after the intro, which is the iconic and infamous locker room menstruation scene. We are shown a steamy high school locker room of girls in several different states of nudity as our main character, Carrie, lathers her body in soap. As she is doing this, we are shown a rather intimate shot of blood beginning to drip down her leg—her first period. This scene has caused audiences to question Brian De Palma for decades as to whether this scene is a feminist message or if it was gratuitous and indulgent in its sexuality. Many actresses, including Sissy Spacek and Nancy Allen, look back on the scene and find it beautiful and empowering, whereas some of the actresses refused to participate in any full-frontal nudity (Bouzereau). In a film that explores ideas of sin and its meaning for women, including scenes of nudity, it is understandable within its context. Carrie is essentially stoned by her classmates in her most vulnerable moment, naked and afraid, not knowing what is happening to her. She would be punished even further by her mother, who slaps her across the face and likens her to the sins of Eve in the garden. Carrie is a figure of abjection, defying the patriarch by becoming a "menstrual monster" (Creed 72-93). It is easy to see why many women were

able to see past the jarring nudity Palma included because it represented a time in youth that many could relate to, with its shame and confusion.

Brian De Palma's directing in *Carrie* (1976) solidified many of his signature styles as a now-successful Hollywood auteur. Previously, he directed smaller, more experimental films that garnered him little attention. *Carrie* (1976) perfectly matched his original artistic style and mainstream intrigue. He heavily used his split diopter lens to contrast Carrie from the rest of her world. The split screens, long takes, and classic Palma slow/fast motion shots were all inspired by French New Wave films (Mitchell 26). The artistic risks landed him a significant spot in New Hollywood history among Spielberg, Lucas, and Coppola. The prom scene includes several challenging shots, including Billy and Carrie's dance, which required the construction of a spinning platform, and the long take that follows the bullies switching out the ballots and the reveal of the blood bucket. The camera acts as the voyeuristic eye that watches idly as Carrie is drenched in pigs' blood in front of the entire school. Brian De Palma has employed this voyeuristic and complex style in many films, but *Carrie* (1976) is one of the most notable examples, due to the numerous risks he took.

Carrie often faces the Christian martyr, Saint Sebastian, in her prayer closet, which also doubles as a prison cell that her mother locks her in. Brian De Palma, raised within the Christian faith, incorporated numerous religious iconographies throughout the film, both within and outside the White House. Blood crosses and fire permeate the film and happen to be some of the most violent elements of the Bible. Many of Carrie's decisions throughout the film heavily depend on her mother's salvation rather than her own (Hrehor 278). These decisions are what eventually create the divide between the mother and daughter and

push Carrie to use her "witchcraft" as a shield and weapon, hoping to avoid any further humiliation and pain. Religion was constantly used against Carrie for nearly her entire life to teach her how to hate her body, so once she realizes that her body is, in fact, not evil, she, in a way, turns her back on religion (Pheasant-Kelly 26). The image of Carrie standing in a burning gym, lit up red by exit signs, almost looks satanic, and perhaps that is what we should first think of. Upon further reflection, Carrie is more like a phoenix rising from the ashes. At this moment, she was stoned by tampons, threatened with the cross, and doused in pig blood, so it is hard not to see Brian De Palma's depiction of the prom scene as a moment of overcoming the harsh realities of abuse.

While there is pain in blood, there is also pain in how people perceive us. Brian De Palma emphasizes the numerous hidden symbols of good and evil throughout the film, highlighting that it is not always as simple as it seems (Keesey 99-101). Carrie is not the only victim of misogyny in the film. Chris Hargensen is in a tumultuous relationship with Billy, a young man too eager to kill a pig with a hatchet. He can only communicate with her in the way of sexual acts and often polices her language, even though he frequently condescendingly speaks to her. Carrie's mother, Margaret, is warped in her thinking due to the previous treatment she received from her ex-husband. Much of the disgust she shows Carrie is the same disgust the patriarchs treated her with throughout her life. Palma emphasizes these details throughout the story, which adds context to the external and internal misogyny that is enacted.

Carrie's revenge is relatively short-lived. The film concludes in quite a nihilistic tone with the realization that Carrie and her mother were crushed and burned in their house.

What is most fascinating about this ending is that we are not left with the idea that Carrie was a villain, but a misunderstood and tragic heroine. We can see this in how Sue Snell, Billy's girlfriend, dreams about visiting the rubble of the White household. She does not look upon the makeshift grave with animosity or disgust but with intense regret and sympathy. This implies that she understands the prom situation is much more complicated than it appears on the surface. During 1976, many anxieties were fluttering about society, including brutal wars (Vietnam and Korea) and endless gender politics, including the women's liberation movement. Lawrence Cohen, the screenwriter for *Carrie* (1976), recalls how the story had been rejected numerous times due to certain thematic elements, such as a girl experiencing her first period (Carrie (Brian De Palma, 1976) Screenwriter Interview). Many production studios were not telling stories that were resolved around intimate issues that young women experience.

"Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can" (Plath). *Carrie* (1976), despite being directed and written by a male, is poignant about the cruelty experienced during girlhood. The most glaring takeaway from *Carrie* (1976) is the tragedy of being born a woman, as Sylvia Plath said. Carrie was born with her mother's pain inside of her, never able to escape the trappings of this reality. This is also shown in how the other teen girls around Carrie view her. The barbarity of bullying and alienation makes Carrie question her entire existence. *Carrie* (1976) has become even more relevant in light of these ideas and the continued treatment of women. Using techniques that emphasize duality, Palma can

show Carrie's strong separation from everyone else (Mitchell). Carrie is always separated and demonized by the other women in the film, except for Sue and Miss Collins. Due to Carrie's pain, she cannot accept the love from Sue and Miss Collins. They cannot cross that divide because Carrie is taught not to trust anyone, especially women. She feels betrayed by her body, God, and the people in her life.

"Eve was evil." Margaret taught Carrie this, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of fear, pain, and power. Brian De Palma allowed us to share the anxiety and distress of Carrie's womanhood through the burning visuals of rage and religion. Her life is painted by the motifs of blood, religion, and shame, mirroring the realities of Palma's audience. It makes us question if we would destroy everyone around us, including ourselves, given the power. Palma projected this feminine pain with his voyeuristic and visceral imagery, emphasizing the duality of good and evil—pain and pleasure. While we question whether Palma knew what he was making, it does not dim \*Carrie's\* messaging. The raw performances of Sissy Spacek, Amy Irving, and Piper Laurie will forever leave us questioning—was Eve evil?

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