

Sympathizing with the Monster: The Ability of Horror Films to Evoke Sympathy for Villains

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Horror film has risen to popularity over the past few decades and, as a genre, has taken the world of contemporary art forms by storm (Carroll, "Nature of Horror" 51). Horror, as it stands here, refers to art, films, and other forms of media, which serves the sole purpose of eliciting a specific emotional response in viewers: a sense of horror (51). The genre exists to leave the viewer feeling horrified, and for some viewers, it leaves them with a sense of gratification from having their thrill-seeking desires fulfilled (Bartsch, et al., "Predicting Emotions" 168). While horror movies share one primary, emotional, goal, they possess the ability to evoke a plethora of feelings and emotions in an audience. These emotions commonly range from fear, anger, sadness, and sympathy for the victims in films of this genre. One feeling that viewers may or may not expect, and that stands out in deepening the narrative, is sympathy for the perceived villain. Sympathy being feelings of concern towards other individuals or even groups, it is commonly activated when the character we feel sympathetic towards is threatened in some way (Carroll, "Movies, Emotions and Sympathy" 16). One may find it hard, then, to believe that sympathy can be felt for the villain. The villain in horror movies tends to vary, and can be anything from the monster under your bed, the creature from your nightmares, an innocent looking sociopath, or a full-blown, chainsaw-wielding psychopath. The common perception of these individuals is that they are evil, full of rage and an insatiable desire to harm others. Films often make a clear distinction between the 'good guy' and the 'bad guy.' Certain aspects of the horror genre allow for this distinction to be blurred, allowing the viewer to feel some level of sympathy towards the villain. By evoking a sympathetic response, the film can create a strong sense of discomfort in the audience, contributing to the unsettling feeling many people get while watching a horror film. This deepening of the horror and unsettling feeling some horror movies produce furthers the experience of watching horror. Typically, individuals who enjoy watching horror enjoy the negativity of the film as it causes them to feel more positively about their own lives, away from the screen (Bartsch, et al., "Predicting Emotions" 183). The greater the feeling of discomfort that the

audience feels during the movie produces a greater enjoyment of the film. The added dimension this technique brings to the film is likely to enhance the positive response to the film. The use of this technique in horror films has existed for nearly as long as the genre has, spanning across many years and subgenres of horror. It takes the experience of a horror movie to another level, heightening the uneasy feeling that it aims to evoke in the viewer.

A horror movie evoking sympathy for the villain is not new and evidence of this phenomena can be found at least as far back as horror films from the 1930s and 1940s, the golden age of horror. These movies, the beginning of modern day horror movies and films, such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1943), may be viewed as some of the first films that encouraged the audience to feel sorry for the villain. These films do this through the backstory of the perceived villain. In *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein's monster never asked to be made. Rather, he was forced into creation. His appearance alone sets him up to be a monster for life and his lack of knowledge of human ways furthers his frustration. His attempt to feel human connection and understand how to live normally are met with fear and repulsion and led to him becoming a villain by unintentionally killing. Frankenstein was a victim of his circumstances and was never given an opportunity to be anything else. *Phantom of the Opera* utilizes this technique very similarly; the villain or "Phantom" is a man who was once an opera composer. Attempting to receive rightful credit for his work he ends up in fight, leaving one man dead and himself badly burned. This altercation sends him into hiding, now completely disfigured and wanted for murder. While his actions were wrong, his intentions were good, since he simply wanted credit for work that was being stolen from him. He is seen not only as a monster but also as a sad man who has lost everything. This technique has persisted in horror films up to present day horror cinema in movies such as *Don't Breathe* (2016). *Don't Breathe* is a film that offers a complex perspective on this concept, offering the discomfort that comes with misplaced sympathy constantly throughout the film, as well as through the use of multiple characters. This movie is an excellent example of ways in which this concept of misplaced sympathy

can be manipulated. Along with 2016's *Don't Breathe*, the films *Darkness Falls* (2003), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 classic, *Psycho*, all play with the idea of misplaced sympathy. These films span different decades and sub-genres of horror, offering a look at how far-reaching the concept of evoking sympathy for a villain can be. Each of these films utilizes this technique in a variety of ways.

It was during the 1960s that the horror genre first saw a surge in psychological thrillers, with films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), *Wait Until Dark* (1967) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). *Psycho* toys with the emotions of viewers, deceiving them and offering them a glimpse into the mind of Norman Bates. *Psycho* causes the viewer to feel sympathy for Norman in how the movie sets up the relationship between himself and his victim. Hitchcock creates an imbalance of immorality between the two. Norman's actions serve to punish the immorality of his victim. This "morality" trope is commonly used in horror movies and causes the viewer to sympathize with the villain. Typically, one would feel positively when the 'good guy' is morally right and negatively when the 'bad guy' does something to interfere with this moral certainty (Bartsch, "Emotional Gratification" 269). By portraying the victim as something of a villain themselves, if the 'good guy' is doing something morally wrong then the violence carried out on them by the villain seems more acceptable. Carroll describes "moral emotions" as the emotions that we experience as a response to situations that fail to align with society's moral standards; by feeling morally superior we can excuse ourselves from thinking immoral thoughts about those who are deemed immoral ("Movies, Emotions and Sympathy" 7). Carroll continues to argue that morality plays such an important role in watching films because the actions of all the characters and our reactions to those actions are condensed into such a short span of time. These instances of morality in film are pleasing to the audience and draws us in because we take pleasure in the fact that we are of a higher moral standing than the people in the film. (9). Morality also helps to explain why an audience will remain sympathetic for the villain, even when they have done something wrong and there is a negative outcome for the protagonist. When something bad happens and the audience is not rewarded with a happy ending to a situation they feel a sense of "empathetic sadness." This heightens their sympathy for the villain since the

empathetic sadness is morally valued (Bartsch, "Emotional Gratification" 270). Applying this knowledge of morality, specifically morality in film, to horror films it can help to explain how an audience may sympathize or side with the villain. Carroll's work points out that audiences feel sympathy for characters who are morally just and we look down on those who are not ("Movies, Emotion and Sympathy" 10), meaning that the audience will side with whomever they believe punishes immorality, be it the protagonist or the antagonist of the film. Many horror films that utilize this technique often introduce the protagonist and eventually reveal to the audience that they are in some way morally unjust. For example, when *Psycho* begins, we are not introduced to Norman Bates, in fact he does not come into the film until about a third of the way through. The first person we meet is Marion Crane. She is intended to be the protagonist of this film and the audience quickly learns that she is an immoral character. Marion is in a relationship with Sam, who lets both Marion and the audience know he is unavailable and still paying alimony to his ex-wife. Marion steals money from her employer and leaves town, going as far buying a new car to maintain her cover. The audience has a difficult time feeling sympathy for Marion, despite her being the protagonist. When the audience is introduced to Norman Bates, he comes across as a likeable character who appears to lack moral flaws. He is all too happy to help Marion, unaware of what she has done, and thus unaware of her immorality. As the movie continues, Norman appears to be berated by his mother. The audience sees him as a kind man willing to help others and accept maternal backlash because of it. This makes him a character that viewers can easily sympathize with. He comes across as moral while accepting abuse from those who are not. *Psycho* establishes an interesting dynamic between the main characters, the protagonist is immoral and the antagonist appears to be morally just. Because of this situation, the audience will feel sympathetic towards Norman without much thought. Shortly after the audience has established a sense of sympathy for Norman, his character begins to change. About forty-three minutes into the film we see that Norman has a peep-hole through which he can spy on Marion. He stops peeping shortly after he begins, but his morality becomes slightly questionable. After an individual, who the audience assumes to be Mrs. Bates, kills Marion, Norman hurries to clean up after her, hiding Marion's body and car. Norman seems to be helping to cover up what his mother did. He is

being both an obedient child, something worthy of being viewed as moral, yet he is helping to cover up immorality. While Norman has now given the audience a reason not to feel sympathy for him, it is Marion's immoral behaviour that allows this sympathy to continue. In sticking with Carroll's ideas regarding morality and sympathy, the audience has achieved a moral 'high' from deciding that they are more morally just than Marion. Feeling sympathy for Marion will get rid of that positive feeling. As well, Norman's immorality up to this point is justified as it is seen as punishing Marion for her immorality.

Once Marion has been killed, the audience finds out that Norman's immorality continues. When Marion's boyfriend, Sam, and her sister come looking for her, Norman puts on an act; he is once again his awkwardly charming self. He lies to them about ever seeing or meeting Marion. This lying would normally cause the audience to see his character as immoral. This can again be explained by considering Carroll's arguments. Carroll talks about the importance of justice being upheld, and the desire for protection of those who wish to do so ("Movies, Emotion and Sympathy" 12). The audience has already established that Norman has the moral high ground, even after killing Marion. This means that his lying can be seen as him protecting his own moral justness. If he were to admit to what he did he would suffer punishment for doing what the audience at this point believes to be the right thing. The sympathy that the audience feels for Norman, and the extent to which they find themselves cheering for his success, is only furthered when Marion's family starts poking around trying to find out about her disappearance. It has already been established that Sam is immoral, but Marion's sister, as far as the audience is concerned, has done nothing wrong. The association Marion's sister has with both Sam and Marion may cause her to be seen as morally unjust. The pair are defending a woman who was immoral, and they are attempting to condemn the person who punished her immorality. The way in which Hitchcock has set up this film and the way the audience has been introduced to the protagonist and antagonist leave the audience continually feeling sympathy for Norman Bates. The audience wants him to come out on top and wants him to be treated the way he should be, as someone who punishes immorality.

Finally, in *Psycho*, the audience is given a classic Hitchcock twist, when the viewer learns that Norman's mother is dead. This death has led Norman to a psychological breaking point, keeping his mother's corpse and taking on her

voice and personality so that he may keep her alive. This psychotic behaviour also means that it must have been Norman who killed Marion and his attempt to hide her body was only protecting himself. This revelation causes the audience to question Norman's morality and it strips away the sympathy that was felt for him because of the verbal abuse he received from his "mother." What saves Norman's status as a sympathetic villain after his morality is questioned is the views other people have of him. The secret about his mother is not brought to the audience's attention by Norman himself, but rather by Marion's family. They intrude into Norman's home without his knowledge or permission and are the ones to reveal the literal skeleton in his closet. From this moment onward, the audience witnesses Norman's real unstable mentality. Norman is so damaged by the loss of his mother that he is beyond repair. He has reached a point where he can change his own personality and take on that of his mother at any point. He has not only convinced himself that his mother is alive still, but that he is able to become her. In the final scene in the film the camera pans to a prison cell and we hear Norman's mother's voice. The camera then pans to Norman's face and again we hear his mother's voice. It is in this final scene that the audience sees that Norman's internal monologue is in his mother's voice and that he believes that he is his mother. It is in this moment that the audience witnesses the full extent of Norman's mentality and the damage that has been done to his psyche. Once again, the audience feels justified in their feelings of sympathy towards Norman. Norman is someone whom they initially like, due to his apparent strong morality, and the audience can feel sympathy for him because of the way he is treated. Norman's ability to punish immorality with immorality and the insight the audience receives into his psyche allow the viewer to sympathize with Norman. We may feel bad for him and see him as a victim of his circumstances. He is someone who fails to see the wrong in what he is doing and the way in which the film is set up allows the audience to interpret what Norman does as fair and just.

After the psychological thrillers of the 1960s, horror experienced a wave of slasher films and with slasher films came villains who were hellbent on killing anyone and everyone. Their only goal was to cause harm and they themselves could never be killed. This character type gives us villains that are heartless and that do not ask for sympathy from the viewer in any way, shape, or form. However, sympathy for the villain still happens, and certain films are capable of causing

the viewer to feel for the blood-thirsty villain. This is easily seen in most slasher films, the kind that have your typical rebellious teen protagonists, the kind of people who drink, do drugs, steal money and have pre-marital sex. These are the kinds of characters who are the embodiment of immorality and impurity. As Carroll points out, not only do we want to side with the most morally just characters, but we also sympathize with those who punish impurity and rid the audience of the disgust that they feel when faced with impure characters ("Movies, Emotions and Sympathy" 13). However, some horror films of this subgenre feature protagonist that were not impure or even immoral, yet we are still able to feel a twinge of sympathy for the antagonist. One particular film that does this is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Like *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* plays with the feelings of the viewers and the perceived views of morality in western society. Briefel argues that the masochism found in the villains in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* prevents the audience from feeling any sympathy for them (20). In fact, everything that Briefel talks about suggests that it is impossible for us to feel any sympathy for any of the villains in the film. However, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* does evoke sympathy for its main villain, Leatherface. By giving us a glimpse into his family life and allowing audiences to examine his morality through his eyes and situation, sympathy builds. Once a viewer has finished watching the movie and examines it as a whole, there are a few things that are very apparent when looking at Leatherface outside the realm of a villain. First, Leatherface comes from a family of psychopaths, cannibals, and murderers. Clearly, many generations of these people including himself, his brother, his father, and his grandfather all live under one roof. Leatherface is not intellectual and he seems to be completely nonverbal. He comes across as someone who lacks proper judgement and the skills to think rationally. The Sawyer home is Leatherface's home and it is where he feels safe. The movie can be further broken down from these traits and Carroll's ideas of what it means to be moral can be applied to it. Such a process shows how an audience can feel sympathy for Leatherface.

First, we must look at his background. Leatherface comes from a family of cannibals, psychopaths, and murderers. He did not have the opportunity to be a good person, except for in the realm of his family unit. Carroll states that we tend to perceive children who obey their parents as having high moral standards ("Movies, Emotions

and Sympathy" 15). Leatherface is incredibly obedient to his family; he does as he is told. He faces constant verbal abuse from his father and older brother. When Leatherface tries to take part in the things that his father and brother do, his brother tells him that he is "just the cook," belittling him time and time again. When his father returns back to the house with Sally he screams at Leatherface for letting someone get away. Leatherface is genuinely scared of his father as we see him whimper and shy away as his father yells at him. We see this again, when the three are eating supper with Sally. Sally has been knocked unconscious and when she wakes up at the supper table with Leatherface and his family she begins to scream. Leatherface's brother and father mock her and Leatherface is the last to join in and the last to stop. He is then yelled at by his father for not understanding the social cues that are taking place. Leatherface is doing his best to be a good child for his father and to make his family happy. This goes as far as killing people so that his family can eat. His father refuses to kill people because he cannot "take pleasure in killing." Leather face has to kill so that his cannibalistic family can eat. When Jerry enters the Sawyer house he finds Pam in a freezer and tries to let her out. Leatherface sees Jerry's actions not as someone trying to help a friend but rather as someone trying to steal the food he has caught for his family. To Leatherface, killing is not a sport; it is a means of providing for his family, despite their abuse. Carroll argues that an audience will feel a sense of sympathy and admiration towards characters who strive to take care of others (15). From considering his family life alone, we are able to see why it is possible to feel sympathy towards Leatherface. He was never given a life where the opportunity to not be murderous was presented to him. In his world, he is striving to be the best person he can be. He provides for and helps take care of his family, he is good to them, and he does everything in his power to make them happy. Leatherface clearly possesses strong family morals which an audience would admire. His desire to do what he needs to for his family is only seen as wrong because innocent people are being harmed in the process.

Next, we need to look at Leatherface's mentality and mental capacities. He has no form of education; he was raised along the back roads of the deep south, and his only form of human interaction is with his psychotic family. Again, we see that Leatherface had no chance of ever turning out to be anything other than what he is, a villain created by his circumstances. Leatherface is nonverbal and lacks the mental capacity to think

rationally or to even convey his thought and emotions. Leatherface had made a safe haven for himself in the Sawyer home. It is here that an audience can feel sympathetic towards Leatherface and experience negative emotions towards the protagonists of this film. The group of teenagers that are headed towards the area of the Sawyer home have been warned not to go there. Their ignorance of what is best for them creates a disconnect between them and the audience. The immorality that these protagonists show is their lack of obedience, which inevitably leads to their demise. These teenagers were warned by the gas station attendant, who turns out to be Leatherface's father, not to head out to the old homes. He even warns them that they could "get hurt." They ignore him and head out to Sally and Franklin's childhood home. The group begin exploring, and Kirk and Pam notice the Sawyer house in the distance. They head to the Sawyer home in hopes of finding some gas for their van. When they cannot get any answer from knocking on the door, Kirk decides to wander on into the home. He hears noises coming from Leatherface's butcher room and lets himself in. Leatherface jumps and his initial reaction is to hit Kirk over the head. He acts out of fear and a need to protect himself and his family. Leatherface's lack of rational thinking leads him to killing all but one of the film's protagonists and bringing the bodies home to feed his family. It is clear that, in his mind, Leatherface has done good. Not only was he brave and faced the people who intruded into his safe space, but he was able to provide food for his family. This fear and sense of desperation causes the audience to feel even more sympathy towards the chainsaw-wielding, masked man. Leatherface is a man of morals and unfortunate circumstances.

Like Norman Bates, Leatherface appears to be both a victim of circumstance and of a poor mental state. Leatherface comes from a family of murderous psychopaths; his violence and sadistic ways are all he knows. The pity that the audience feels for Leatherface, coupled with his own, just morals, creates an inevitably sad character who one cannot help but feel sympathetic towards. Despite the lack of immorality in the protagonists and the drive to kill of the antagonist of the film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is filmed in such a way that the audience feels a sort of sympathy for the villain. However, this sympathy cannot truly be understood until the film, specifically Leatherface's mentality and family life, is examined.

There is another way in which sympathy for the villain can be evoked in horror movies. That is

through the use of identification and empathy. As Jonathan Cohen explains, empathy can be achieved through a strong sense of identification, since the feelings of the audience come through in the feelings of the character on screen (251). Unlike sympathy, strong identification with a character allows audiences to experience the character's emotions *along with* the character rather than for them (251). Some horror films are able to not only make the viewer sympathize with the villain, but also identify with them in some way, creating a connection. To define identification, we will look again at the work of Cohen, who defines identification as "a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside as if the events were happening to them" (245). Cohen also points out that identity does not always happen willingly, but can stem from shared perspectives and world views or even as a coping mechanism and that it is a common occurrence to identify with a villain (247-8). Cohen even states that slightly identifying with a villain strengthens the sympathy felt for that character. Strongly identifying with them allows the viewer to experience a heightened sense of fear, ideal when dealing with horror films (252). One horror film that allows the viewer to both sympathize and identify with the villain is *Darkness Falls* (2003). *Darkness Falls* centers on revenge killings that have carried on into the afterlife, a grudge that went on too long. This film tells the story of an elderly woman who cared deeply for the children of Darkness Falls; she would bring the children treats when they would lose baby teeth and just do things for them in general. Her house catches on fire and she becomes horribly disfigured, which turns her into a monster in the eyes of the townsfolk. When a couple of children from the town go missing, her newfound status as the town outcast leads her to be blamed and punished. She later comes back in spirit as a tooth-fairy-type creature. She kills anyone who dares to look at her, her revenge for what was done to her. The woman is seen as a villain, haunting children and adults alike, trying to teach them a lesson for the failings of their ancestors. It is this idea of revenge killing that allows the viewers a chance to identify with the villain and to feel sympathy for her. While she fits the description of a villain in that her main motive is to cause harm to others, she was once a victim. This complex creates sympathy, and the fear of being treated poorly without proper cause is something that many audience members can identify with.

Briefel suggests that audiences have an easier time feeling sympathy for female villains because their actions are often a result of violence or injustice they have endured. Their actions against others serve as a demand for sympathy (23). When watching *Darkness Falls* the viewers feel an initial sympathy for "tooth fairy" Matilda Dixon. Her husband has died, her house has burned down, and her face is disfigured. Matilda is an outcast who has done nothing wrong; she is morally just and the people who mistreat her are seen as villains, interfering with morality by committing crimes against someone who is morally just. Again, this concept of morality comes into play to help create a sense of sympathy for the antagonist of the film. As the film progresses the audience finds themselves cheering for Kyle and the others who are rushing to get away from Matilda's angered spirit. We see the agony that Kyle and others who have seen the tooth fairy have been living in, constantly living in light and not being able to sleep for fear of the dark and Matilda's spirit being able to reach them. We feel sympathy for both the protagonist and the antagonist in this film. What intensifies our sympathy for Matilda is the audience's ability to identify and empathize with her. The ability to identify with Matilda strengthens the sympathy that the character feels for her and the ability to so easily identify with the villain heightens the sense of fear that the audience experiences while watching this film. In a short time, Matilda, has gone through, and experienced so many things that so many people have gone through, loss of a loved one, loss of belonging, and alienation.

Unfortunately, the things that Matilda has gone through, which cause the audience to feel sympathy for her, are things that many people have experienced themselves. This allows to the audience to identify with her as they witness her experiencing things that they themselves have likely experienced. Most people who are of age to watch horror movies, typically fourteen and up in Canada and the United States, are old enough to have experienced the death of a loved one, or have closely known someone who has experienced such a loss. The loss of a loved one is an incredibly painful experience for anyone to deal with and knowing this the audience is able to easily sympathize and identify with Matilda's loss. When Matilda's home burns down she is displaced and while not everyone watching the film has lost their house in a fire, it is incredibly common to feel displaced. Anything from moving to a new home, to transferring schools, to changing jobs. Having to leave any place where people felt at home and

created a life for themselves is a difficult experience. Along with displacement comes alienation, something else everyone has likely experienced at one point or another. Being excluded from a certain situation without reason or for means beyond a person's control is something that many people can say they have experienced. When audiences watch *Darkness Falls*, they see all the things that Matilda is going through and they are able to relate to that in some way or another. These shared experiences create an unconscious sense of identification. The audience is able to look at her bad experiences and compare them to their own bad experiences, creating a sense of comradery through disaster. This identification, paired with Matilda initially being a morally-just individual encourages the audience to put themselves in her mindset and imagine themselves in her situation. This allows them to feel sympathetic for her throughout the film and forgive her for the vengeance she seeks in spirit form. The audience sympathises with Matilda because they can identify with what she has gone through and are able to empathize with her desire to get justice for what has been wrongfully done to her.

Coming back to *Don't Breathe* (2016), we take things full circle. This film takes all the components of the previous films—sympathy, identification, empathy and morality—and plays off all of them. *Don't Breathe* utilises the techniques of the previous films, and includes yet another form of sympathy in the way of group identification. Cohen discusses group identification in his article, stating that the ability to identify with a group offers the viewers a sense of superiority (248). *Don't Breathe* takes full advantage of the idea of group identification. This film centers on a group of three friends who, for different reasons, double as a trio of burglars. The idea that these three stand as a united front against the Blind Man gives the audience the sense that they want to side with them. Group identification would mean that the audience would want to be on the side of three in a game of three against one, to heighten their sense of inclusion and superiority. However, group identification is not the only way in which *Don't Breathe* allows the audience to identify and sympathize with the characters. All four of the main characters, as well as a few secondary characters, have their pros and cons. Each character in this film has reasons to be liked and disliked. Many have traits that cause the audience to be sympathetic or even empathetic with them.

Rocky, the female lead in this film, appears to

have the most backstory and seems to be the central protagonist of the film. She has the most screen time and plays the role of 'final girl,' the female character who is able to withstand torture and torment from the villain and who still manages to defeat the villain, survive, and come out on top (Briefel 17). When the audience is first introduced to Rocky on her own, we find out that she has an abusive mother, a stepfather who sports white supremacist tattoos, and a young sister. Her mother is clearly neglectful of both Rocky and her sister. Rocky's main goal is to escape this life and take her sister with her. The audience has already decided that they are going to sympathise with the group and partake in group identification, and this scene allows them to sympathise with Rocky on her own. Audiences sympathise with Rocky in several ways. When we learn that Rocky plans to steal just enough money to run away with her younger sister the audience is able to forgive her life of crime. Once the negativity of her criminal actions has been neutralized, the audience is able to see how morally just Rocky is. Not only is she morally just, but she turns herself into a hero, fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves. Rocky is willing to get her sister out of their toxic living environment at any cost. One of the ways horror films succeed in entertaining audiences is that they are able to take the internal fears of a character and turn them into external conflict (Gillmor 22). Rocky is so afraid for her sister's innocence and safety, yet during the film puts her own life at an incredibly great risk. Her desire to save innocence, represented by her sister, from chaos and destruction, that is her home, emphasizes her struggle for morality. Rocky's morality allows the audience to sympathize with her and her goals, cheering her on and getting upset when something gets in the way of those goals. When the film comes to an end and the audience sees that Rocky and her sister have successfully made it out of their parents' home, Rocky is seen as a hero, despite all the negative and criminal things she did in the process. The character of Rocky is likely to especially grab the sympathy of female viewers. According to research by Gillmor, females are likely to feel an attraction to horror movies because horror movies give them an imaginary space to work out their real-life fears. Likewise, horror films tell females that "your fears are validated" (21). Throughout the film, Rocky experiences many things that most women fear. She witnesses the death of her boyfriend, watches her best friend get shot, and is almost sexually violated. Most female viewers will be able to identify with Rocky as she validates and

lives out the things that they are afraid of. They will identify and empathize with her, cheering her on as the final girl. This identification allows them to feel sympathy for her, despite any wrongful things she may do.

Money, Rocky's boyfriend and partner in crime, does not receive the same backstory as Rocky. All the audience really knows about him is that he is the one who finds the houses to break into and sells their stolen goods for money. He is part of the group that the audience identifies with, but has few redeeming qualities. After finding out Rocky's plans for her cut of the money, it is revealed that Money plans to go with her and help provide for her and her sister. Money's desire to help Rocky become the hero and be morally just allows the audience to continue sympathizing with him. The audience wants to be a part of the good things that happen and Money clearly does as well. Once inside the home of the Blind Man, Money is relentless. Up to this point the audience believes the Blind Man to be weak and we feel bad for him because these people are breaking into his home. He is vulnerable and Money wants to take advantage of that. He justifies breaking into the Blind Man's home by saying "just because he is blind, doesn't mean he's a saint," a statement that proves to be true. Once Money confronts the Blind Man with a gun the audience does not want Money to harm him so they can continue to identify with the group. At this point the film draws in the audience and they feel as though they are right there, hoping for a positive outcome. Once the tables turn and the Blind Man gets the gun from Money the audience feels the fear and tension that Money feels; they are invested in his character. The audience feels as though they can identify with Money in his desperation and inability to remain fearless when faced with the threat of death, allowing them to not only sympathize but empathize with him. Money desperately begins apologizing to the Blind Man for breaking into his home, attempting to show remorse for what he has done. Remorse expressed by a wrong-doer allows the audience to feel as though some amount of the crime which was committed may be forgiven (Mohamed 1179). Just after apologizing, Money is asked if he is alone and says "yes," to protect Rocky and Alex. This concern and desire to protect others relates back to the concept of morality. Money is killed right after showing remorse and trying to protect others, making his death seem unfair and unjust. The audience is able to sympathize with him in this moment and feel a sense of sadness and anger towards his death.

Out of the three main characters the one that appears to have the least reason to be sympathized with is Alex. Alex comes from a seemingly good home, with no need for stolen money. His only motivation for doing what he does is that he has feelings for Rocky. His longing to be with Rocky pins Alex as being an immoral character, since the audience knows perfectly well that she is in a committed relationship. The audience questions Alex's moral compass and he is someone that they have a hard time sympathizing with initially. Once inside the Blind Man's home, however, Alex's true morality comes out. He is quick to question why they are doing what they are doing, he wants out of their crimes, and he wants to leave. Alex is the first to admit that what they are doing is wrong and he spends the rest of the movie trying to get out of the situation. As he is about to leave he has another moment of realization and heads back to try and help Rocky escape so that she can safely return to her sister. His moral clarity and his acts of heroism save his character in the eyes of the audience. He is now someone they can sympathize with and someone that they want to see succeed.

Lastly, we have the Blind Man, who is likely the most complex character in the film. His motivation and actions continually shift throughout the film and he is someone that the audience cannot feel one specific way about. Before we even meet this character, we find out that he is a Gulf War veteran, he has lost a child, and he is visually impaired. While the audience identifies with the group, we feel sympathy for the Blind Man due to his handicap and to the fact that he is being taken advantage of because of it. Individuals report a higher level of sympathy towards people with disabilities because of "social desirability" (MacLean & Gannon 792). This implies that people will feel an automatic sense of sympathy towards the Blind Man because it makes them feel as though they are a good, socially-desirable person. When we first see him, the Blind Man is asleep in bed, with what we can assume to be home movies of a small child playing on his bedside television. He is a character that we feel bad for up until we realize he is more than capable of defending himself from intruders. It is at this point that the audience becomes conflicted. While they have taken on the group identity there is a desire to see the Blind Man overcome these obstacles. As the movie continues, it turns into a game of cat and mouse, with the intruders trying to escape and the Blind Man trying to fight them off and defend his home. Later in the film we learn that the Blind Man is holding a woman captive in his basement. He has

inseminated her as a punishment for killing his child in a car accident. He attempts to rationalize holding a woman captive and forcing her to carry his child by saying that she owes him another child. He says that he did not rape her and the insemination was done by other means. By rationalizing what he has done he attempts to make Rocky and Alex, as well as the audience, understand and sympathize with him. This rationalization combined with remorse for the loss of his child, make the Blind Man come off as someone who can still be sympathized with (Mohamed 1185). In this situation, we feel bad for the girl but at the same time we are aware she is guilty of killing a child, an incredibly immoral act. This scene also gives the audience another reason to sympathize with the Blind Man, but also dislike him and cheer on Alex and Rocky. *Don't Breathe* plays with many emotions of the audience and utilizes many aspects of sympathy to create the complex dynamic between characters.

These films offer just a few examples of villains that the audience has the opportunity to feel sympathy for. This trend is notable throughout many works of horror, across many years and subgenres. These films show us how and why the possibility exists for audiences to feel sympathy for the villain or monster that they see before them on the screen, from Norman Bates and his disconnect from reality, to Leatherface and his struggle to be accepted by his family, to a lynching victim turned tooth fairy-esque evil spirit, to a group of people just trying to fight and survive. All four of these films look at the different aspects of what it means to feel sympathy for someone. Additionally, they show us how it is possible to feel sympathy even for someone who has done immeasurable wrong. So, to answer the question, how and why do we feel sympathy towards villains in horror films? The answer comes through a complex combination of morality, identification and empathy. Sympathy as Lanzoni puts it, is a "king of tender-heartedness" linked to moral goodness and goals (266). Morality plays a big part in the ability to sympathize with someone who we may view as unworthy of receiving any tender-heartedness. What research tells us, is that this sympathy is possible when morality is taken into consideration. When we see the victim being immoral, we lose some of the sympathy we may have for them. Likewise, when we witness the villain being morally good or responsible in a number of ways, we praise them and our sympathy goes out to them. Whether that moral goodness stems from protecting morality of others or punishing

immorality, we respond to this moral goodness with sympathy. As for empathy and identification, both stem from a shared experience between the villain on the screen and the audience in the seat. Sympathy can stem from shared experiences, group mentality (Lanzoni 268) and an understanding of what someone is going through (271). The ability to empathize with something that the villain has gone through or is going through allows the audience to feel sympathy for them as well. Having a shared experience with the villain or the ingrained desire to be a part of a group identity (as in the case of *Don't Breathe*) also allows for the opportunity to sympathize with the villain(s). This idea of sympathy for the villain reoccurs many times throughout the entire genre of horror and the research presented here helps to explain why and how this happens. Sympathy for the villain is a complex emotion that is made up of many underlying emotions and rationalities. This sense works to both heighten the amount to which a viewer feels connected with the film and also the amount of fear and discomfort they experience. This powerful influence proves that the ability to sympathize with the villain plays a role in the enjoyment of horror films and the intensity of the reaction they aim to elicit.

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