Doesn't Get Stranger Than This: Introduction

As I write this, the finale of the Netflix show *Stranger Things* has come and gone. The sci-fi/thriller show began streaming in 2016, spawning various novels, lines of merchandise, and even a Broadway show. I was lucky enough to see the Broadway show with my dad on the second night of its opening.

The show was fantastic. The acting, the special effects, the story, everything was incredibly entertaining. The show followed a high school boy discovering he had telekinetic abilities, and how the interdimensional creature that gave him those abilities was slowly corrupting him. About halfway through the show, the audience witnesses the point of no return for the main character. While walking home from school, the boy comes across a cat. Experimenting with his telekinetic abilities, the boy lifts the cat into the air and breaks all its bones in a horrendously visceral display of violence and power. I cannot stress enough that the special effects that allowed this to be performed were very impressive. This act marks the start of the main character's descent into evil. From then on, other characters reference various missing pets (such as a dog and a bird) over the course of the rest of the show, but the only other animal we see the main character kill on stage is a lab rat. Two other characters investigating the missing pets later find the dead cat's body in a shallow grave, and the stage lights flash and images of maggot-ridden guts briefly appear in the background of the stage to shock the audience.

When the show ended, my dad and I went to stand in line for the merchandise table. I hoped I could get a t-shirt or maybe one of the monster plushies I could see on the shelves. However, as we neared the front of the line, I saw something that shocked me: a plushie of the cat that was killed during the show. It had been a cute orange tabby cat, but the plushie additionally featured the cat's eyes crossed out and its tongue hanging out.

It was dead.

It was our turn at the merchandise table, and there weren't a lot of options left. I asked for a shirt and a keychain. My dad asked to see the cat plushie. As it was handed to him, he cringed and nervously laughed. When I raised my brow at him, he silently handed the toy to me. When I took it, I could feel there was a plastic skeleton inside the cat. "It's flexible!" the girl manning the merch table told us. Sure enough, I bent one of the cat's limbs upward and it stayed in place. I shuddered and handed the plush back to the girl. We paid for my t-shirt and keychain and went home.

When I got home, I took out my items and admired them. I took the keychain out of its package and got a closer look. There was a charm with the name of the show, a charm of a jar of spiders… And a charm of a cat, split in two, the two halves held together by a thin chain. Immediately, I took that charm off the keyring with disgust and tossed it in my desk drawer. My own three cats, Skipper, Gonta, and Arlene, sat around and watched me with curiosity.

From that day, I wondered why anyone would want merchandise of a dead, mangled cat. Why would anyone even make merchandise of a dead cat in the first place? However, the realization finally dawned on me. If that cat had traded places with the dog that had been killed off-stage, people would be *upset*. Nobody would have dared to make merchandise of a dead, mangled dog in the first place.

I should note that I am quite biased about this subject. I love horror movies, but I love cats much more. I live with my three cats, each rescued from the life of a stray, and they are the loves of my life. Back in my home state, my parents have eight other cats whom I grew up with and love dearly. My parents also have had dogs all my life. I tolerate dogs (for the most part), they just tend to have too much energy for my taste. However, I suspect one of the reasons I so fiercely love cats is because of how unloved they truly can be. They are misunderstood animals. Dogs are praised for their loyalty and companionship, but cats are "aloof" and "independent". Dogs are "man's best friend", but cats aren't graced with such a title.

When a cat is killed in horror media (*Stranger Things* being just one example) it is done flippantly, not dissimilar to how horror media treats women. Women in horror movies are often boiled down to plot devices and tropes, much like how cats are boiled down to jump-scares and shock value. Both cats and women are disposable "objects" to serve the main plot. How cats and women are treated in the horror media we enjoy is a product of real-life misogynistic beliefs and gendered stereotypes.

"Man's" Best Friend: Gendering Pet Ownership

When considering the gender spectrum, "male" and "female" tend to be seen as opposites. The masculine end of the binary is traditionally associated with strength, aggressiveness, protectiveness, and natural leadership. The feminine end of the binary is traditionally associated with softness, nurturing, grace, and emotional complexity. In the modern age, many of these gender norms are regularly challenged, but one stereotype seems to stand firm: dogs are normatively perceived as masculine and cats are normatively perceived as feminine.

Much like the traditional man, dogs are expected to be strong, aggressive, and protective. By contrast, like the traditional woman, cats are expected to be soft, graceful, and emotionally complex. This is a trend that goes back to the late 1800s where it was found that English speakers referred to dogs with masculine pronouns and cats with feminine pronouns regardless of the animals' actual sex. The study's authors noted that this attribution seemed to align with the cultural perceptions of human gendered personality features (Mitchell & Ellis, 2013). These gendered attributions are still ever-present in modern culture. Participants of a study were asked to watch a video of two men, "Ike" and "Chris", playing a board game. It was ensured that the two men fully epitomized the "male" spectrum (Ike was more "masculine" while Chris was more "feminine"). Participants in the study were then told that the two men shared a common trait, with one of the following descriptors: "each man considers himself a cat person/considers himself a dog person/is gay/is heterosexual/had been adopted as an infant". Participants were then asked to rate the two men on 24 adjectives (such as "aggressive", "sensitive", "masculine", "feminine", "likable", "emotional", etc.) using a 6-point interval scale. Results of this study found that participants rated both men as less masculine when they were labeled as cat people than when labeled as dog people. Ike additionally received a lower feminine rating when labeled as a dog person than when labeled as heterosexual (Mitchell & Ellis, 2013). Gender-related stereotypes between cat and dog ownership can change how a person's masculinity or femininity is perceived by those around them, with dogs being associated with masculine traits and cats being associated with feminine traits.

In fact, the gender ideologies that humans impose on each other are also imposed on their pets, with pets serving as props to enhance gender expression. In 26 semi-structured interviews, participant Kristen, a woman and a dog owner, says she "used to have something against dogs" and that she "always associated cats as more of a 'female' animal and dogs as more of a happy-go-lucky 'male' kind of animal." Participant Bruce, a man and a dog owner, says that he grew up with both cats and dogs but had no plans to get a cat. When asked why, Bruce said "I just don't want one – they're too feminine, you know?" These dog owners often remarked on how their dogs were used as displays to confirm their own gender identities. The male participants of the interviews tended to value their dogs' energy and participation in joint activities, while the female participants of the interviews tended to value their dogs' companionship and affection (Ramirez, 2006). These contrasting values found in dog-human relationships mirror the gender differences that are often seen in human-human relationships, with men valuing shared activities with their friends and women valuing emotional depth with their friends. Pets become a way for humans to fulfill these values in a way that enhances and enforces their own gender identities.

Dogs tend to have the evolutionary advantage when it comes to bonding with humans. The ancestors of the domesticated dog had a pre-existing social nature which humans then intensely selectively bred. Cats did not undergo selective breeding at a similar intensity, but domestication did allow for cats to social bond with humans. However, cats are small animals that are subject to predation by larger animals and therefore are more likely to default to "fight or flight" behaviors than a dog. These agonistic behaviors may be one of the reasons why humans struggle to form bonds with cats, with more people in the United States identifying as "dog people" (63.3%) than "cat people" (36.7%) (Tu et al., 2024). Trends arise when pet owners who own both cats and dogs are asked to describe the personality of their pets. When a questionnaire was administered to 1270 owners of multiple pet species, five common personality traits emerged: sociability, reactivity, protectiveness, neuroticism, and fearfulness. Dogs scored higher in sociability, protectiveness, and reactivity compared to cats. Cats scored higher in neuroticism compared to dogs. However, stereotypical perceptions of pet species may notably affect the judgement of pet personality. Owners more often described their cats as independent compared to their dogs. Dog adopters

also tend to have higher expectations of social behavior from their human-pet relationship compared to cat adopters (Menchetti et al., 2018).

Dogs are expected to be social, energetic, and protective companion animals, aligning with the gender norms that are expected in men. In contrast, cats are often perceived as less friendly and more "feminine" by both men and women. Cats are aloof, neurotic, and independent, which align with more "feminine" human traits. Isn't it interesting that these perceived "feminine" traits that are seen in cats tend to be more negative when compared to "masculine", "dog-like" traits?

Black Cats Crossing Your Path: Historical and Cultural Roots of Stigma

Cats didn't always carry such negative associations. In fact, in many other cultures and mythologies, cats are revered. The Egyptian goddess of fertility and protection, Bast, is depicted as a woman with a cat's head, and her temples became sanctuaries for the beloved cats that ancient Egyptians held in such high esteem. The Egyptian sun god, Ra, was also believed to be able to take on the form of a cat. In Norse mythology, the goddess of love and war, Freya, rides a chariot drawn by cats. In Chinese folktales, cats were seen as mysterious creatures with magical powers like fortune telling and healing (Nikolajeva, 2009).

The negative associations with cats began in the Middle Ages, where Europeans began to associate cats with witchcraft. As the Christian church began to lose influence during the thirteenth century, a scapegoat was needed, and that came in the form of witches. Because of their connection to "pagan" beliefs and their mysterious natures, it became feared that cats were companions of the Devil, and thus cats became associated with witches. Owning a cat, especially a black cat, was evidence enough that a woman was a witch. It was even believed that any cat could be a witch in disguise. To protect themselves from sorcery, Europeans in the Middle Ages would cut off a cat's tail, cut off their ears, smash their legs, or burn off their fur. Any woman seen with similar injuries the next day must have been a witch and would be ruthlessly persecuted. In 1233, Pope Gregory IX officially proclaimed the link between cats and the Devil and gave divine sanction to massacre cats and their female owners (Lawrence, 2003).

As a result of the religious persecution of cats, torturing the animals became normalized and encouraged in early modern Europe. On St. John's Day, cats would be slowly roasted to death in wicker baskets suspended over bonfires, prolonging their torture to ensure that the Devil suffered alongside them. In 1582, cats were chained to ships filled with fireworks, and crowds cheered as the agonized cat sounds mixed with the sounds of exploding gun powder. Killing cats would also be turned into games such as archery practice, "whipping the cat", and "cat-throwing". In the late 1730s, workers in a print shop massacred cats in response to poor working treatment, maiming the cats and performing mock trials where the "guilty" cats would be hung on improvised gallows. The workers thought this event was hilarious, miming the scene several times a day following the massacre as a recurring joke (Lawrence, 2003).

Of course, in the modern era, animal abuse is punishable and socially frowned upon. However, some medieval beliefs still have a hold on modern culture. For example, black cats suffer from "black cat bias", a phenomenon where cats with black fur are viewed more negatively, adopted less often, and euthanized more often than cats of other fur colors. 101 participants in a study were shown 20 randomized pictures of cats with neutral expressions and poses. 10 of the photos featured black cats and 10 featured various other non-black cats. For each cat picture, participants would rate the cat on measures of friendliness, aggressiveness, willingness to adopt, and how well they believed they could read the cat's emotions. Participants also completed measures of religiosity, superstitious beliefs, and prejudicial racial attitudes. Results of the study found that participants rated black cats as less friendly and more aggressive than their non-black counterparts. It was also found that superstitious beliefs predicted black cat bias. Participants also were found to believe they would be less able to read the emotions of black cats compared to non-black cats, thus making them less likely to want to adopt a black cat (Jones & Hart, 2020). While we may not be outright publicly persecuting cats for religious reasons anymore, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs are still making people leery of cats.

Ancient beliefs celebrated the connections between cats and women, revering female deities that had deep connections to the animals. However, medieval Europe flipped these beliefs into being "evil" and

"pagan", killing cats and women for their mere association with one another. We have thankfully, for the most part, moved past this cruel abuse, but cats (and women) still struggle to earn respect.

Not Exactly Nine Lives: Criminological Hypotheses on Animal Abuse

In popular culture (for example, the "Stranger Things" Broadway show), serial killers and slashers (typically male) are shown to start experimenting with killing small animals such as cats, birds, mice, and similarly "vulnerable" animals. Their curiosity may be piqued by an animal they found already dead, and then they may take the next step and start killing the animals themselves. As they become more comfortable and perhaps bored of killing animals, they will escalate to harming humans. Chances are, the humans they begin to target are female, the "vulnerable" sex. The reason for this trend in horror media is because it reflects real patterns seen in crime and violence, often referred to as the "graduation hypothesis". Much of what is known about the graduation hypothesis comes from the late 1970s when professional behavioral specialists began to interview real high-profile murderers and serial killers such as Edmund Kemper, Jeffrey Dahmer, Henry Lee Lucas, Carroll Cole, and Arthur Shawcross. However, empirically, the graduation hypothesis is still under heavy scrutiny due to the lack of consistent results across various studies and meta-analyses, meaning that the ability of animal cruelty to directly predict violent crime is questionable (Walters, 2013).

Even if the graduation hypothesis is forever trapped in theory limbo, animal cruelty can still be a precursor to violence against humans. A sample of 261 male medium- and maximum- security inmates in a southern U.S. state were asked about childhood and adolescent animal cruelty. The questionnaire given to each of the inmates asked a total of 39 questions about past animal abuse, their motivations for committing the abuse, and if they had been convicted of a violent crime (rape, assault, murder). Of the 261 inmates surveyed, 112 had previously engaged in animal cruelty. 48% of the 112 reported that they committed the abuse out of anger, 38% reported committing the abuse for fun, 22% committed abuse out of dislike for the animal, and a little over 15% reported that they were imitating abuse (inmates could select more than one motivation, hence the total being over 100%). Analysis additionally found that those who committed childhood or adolescent animal abuse out of anger or for fun were more likely to repeat the behavior. Further analysis found that the "for fun" motivation was the only statistically salient variable in the model, meaning that inmates who had committed childhood and adolescent animal cruelty for fun were more likely to have been engaged in and been convicted of acts of interpersonal violence (Hensley & Tallichet, 2008).

Another study on the motivations of animal cruelty was performed with 130 undergraduate students at a university in the central north of England. Participants were asked to fill out an adapted version of the Boat Inventory on Animal-Related Experiences (BIARE) which asked questions relating to the intentional harm or killing of an animal, the species of animal involved, their motivation for harming or killing the animal, and the method used. Participants were also asked to fill out the Impulsive Behavior scale (UPPS-P) which assess five facets of impulsivity (sensation seeking, lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance, negative urgency, positive urgency). It was found that 55% of the sample reported intentionally harming or killing and animal at least once (excluding incidents where animals were hunted for food/sport or were humanely euthanized). 86% of those who reported engaging with animal cruelty abused at least one dog. 81% of reported abusers engaged in cruelty against a spider, 35% against a cat, 33% against a bird, 28% against mice, 10% against lizards, 8% against rabbits, and 6% against horses (all reported animals were domestic or companion animals, cases of pest control were excluded). 63% of those who engaged in animal cruelty reported being motivated by prejudice for the particular species they abused. 54% of abusers reported being motivated by amusement, 46% by control, 39% by retaliation against the animal. Other reported motivations included retaliation against a person (11%), displacement of aggression (8%), sadism (6%), expression of aggression through an animal (4%), and enhancement of one's own aggression (3%). The most commonly reported method of animal cruelty was beating and/or kicking the animal (97% of reported abusers), followed by squashing the animal (78%), throwing an object at the animal (40%), shooting (38%), drowning (29%), burning (28%), trapping (6%), deliberately not feeding (3%), stabbing (3%), and strangling (1%). Analysis further found that those who reported "amusement" as their main motivator scored higher for sensation seeking, lack of premeditation, positive urgency (being in a good mood), and negative urgency (being in a bad/upset mood) than those who did not report amusement

as a motivator (Newberry, 2018). Implications of these studies on animal cruelty and motivation find that "amusement" and "for fun" seem to be motivations that may have some sort of connection to repeating violent acts or escalating acts of cruelty.

Not only is finding the potential predictive connections between animal abuse and violent crime difficult, even just defining "animal cruelty" is hard because of how various cultures across the world view animals. In western cultures, domestic animals are often considered companions or even members of the family, while some eastern cultures may view them more practically as working animals. Overall, the views of animal care and treatment can be vastly different between societies. For example, due to the mismanagement of stray animal control programs, Romania has an estimated population of 6.1 million dogs, both homeless and "owned". An eradication law was then introduced which involves the capture and inhumane killing of dogs. Dog catching and disposal has proven to be a lucrative business in Romania, so much so that permanent solutions to controlling the dog population are of little concern. Dogs, often regarded as "pests" in Romania, are often killed publicly by means of poisoning, beating, and being purposefully hit with vehicles. When a family in Romania does own a dog, they often only serve as guard dogs, are fed sparingly, and are kept tethered outside the house. Because of this "socially accepted" animal abuse, it becomes difficult to discern if acts of animal cruelty point towards the possibility of an individual escalating to interpersonal violence. However, in a study by Plant et al. (2016) that focused on comparing children in Romania against children in Germany (where animal abuse is not socially acceptable), it was found that children who witnessed animal cruelty, no matter the culture surrounding the social acceptability of animal abuse, were more likely to then abuse animals themselves. Also, regardless of the culture around animal abuse, it was found that children with higher affective empathy were less likely to commit animal abuse. It was specifically noted that girls were found to be higher in affective empathy than boys. When then comparing children from rural Romania against children from urban Romania, rural children were more likely to abuse animals and were more likely to be exposed to domestic violence, which in turn was associated with more animal abuse (Plant et al., 2019).

In fact, domestic abuse and animal abuse are closely linked to one another. As previously mentioned, domestic animals in most western cultures are considered members of the family, meaning they can also suffer at the hands of a domestic abuser. The abuse of family pets is often reported by victims of domestic violence and is listed as a form of intimidation on the "power and control wheel" diagram of abuse tactics. To assess the effects of animal abuse in domestic abuse situations, 101 battered women (who owned pets) seeking safety in five Utah domestic violence shelters were recruited to participate in interviews (forming the S group), as well as 120 women (who owned pets) in the community who reported no relationship violence (forming the NS group) (Ascione et al., 2007). 52.5% of the women in the S group reported receiving threats to hurt or kill their pet from their domestic partner compared to the 12.5% of women in the NS group. Their pet actually being hurt or killed was reported by 54% of the S group, but only 5% in the NS group. For women in the S group who reported actual animal abuse, severity ranged from injury, pain, torture, permanent loss of function, or death in 72.7% of cases. 86.4% of the women in the S group who reported their pets being threatened or hurt said they were "very close" to their pets, distinct from the possible responses of "liked but not close" or "not close at all". 22.8% of the women in the S group reported that concern for their pet's welfare kept them from entering a shelter sooner than they did, which was especially noted with women who didn't have children. Some women in the S group who did have children allowed their children to be interviewed as well. It was found that these children were often exposed to and distressed by the animal abuse. S group children who had witnessed animal abuse were more likely to have behavioral issues compared to the NS group children, with some of the S group children having a history of animal abuse as well. Nevertheless, half of the children who reported witnessing animal abuse also reported intervening to protect their pet (Ascione et al., 2007).

Something should be pointed out about many of these studies. The point of this essay is about violence against *cats*, yet most of the reviewed studies are either strictly about dogs, don't specify pet species, or show that dogs are abused at a higher rate than cats. There are several potential reasons for this discrepancy. First, more U.S. households own dogs (42.6%) than cats (32.6%) (U.S. Pet Ownership, 2025) which can imply that dogs have a higher frequency of abuse because of sheer numbers. Second, dogs are much more visible pets. Dogs are often walked in public, seen in yards, and heard by neighbors, so this can

equate to abuse being more likely to be noticed and reported. On the other hand, cats are typically quiet, kept indoors, or otherwise hide while outside, often going unnoticed by potential observers. Because of this, it is entirely possible that abuse against cats is underreported. On August 3rd, 2025, journalists Tony Smith and Angus Crawford published the following BBC article: "BBC finds electrocuted, drowned and starved cats in online torture groups". These online torture groups share and sell online videos of cats and kittens being tortured for entertainment. The animal rights activist group, Feline Guardians, says that in the span of a year, a new video was uploaded approximately every 14 hours. 24 different cat torture groups have been documented as active in this past year, the largest group having more than 1000 members. The most active torturer is believed to have filmed the killings of more than 200 cats. The BBC saw evidence that suggested that adults, teenagers, and children were taking part in these groups, sharing posts about various ways to kill cats and how much they enjoy doing so. Johanna Baxter MP, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Cats, says that these groups are a concerning trend, especially among young men, adding that "Animal abuse often acts as a gateway, making future acts of violence easier to rationalize and commit" (Smith & Crawford, 2025). These torture groups are simply one of the few that are known of, with possibly many more committing these cruel acts against cats that go unreported and unnoticed.

Cats tend to be underreported in many aspects, including veterinary research. A New York Times article titled "Why Scientists Love to Study Dogs (and Often Ignore Cats)" by James Gorman (2018) explains that there is little scientific research on cats while there are multitudes of studies on dogs. Gorman interviews various professionals such as a geneticist, a veterinarian, a researcher at the National Institutes of Health, and a bioarchaeologist, and they all state similar conclusions; research on cats is lagging because of behavioral biases against them, and because dogs have been domesticated for longer and have more genetic diversity. Despite this great genetic diversity, however, many of the interviewed professionals also state that in some respects, cats would be better to study than dogs (for example, many cancers in cats are better models of human cancer than cancers in dogs are) (Gorman, 2018). In case "underrepresentation in research" sounds familiar, it's because it is. Women are historically underrepresented in medical studies and clinical trials, which greatly limits biological understandings of the female body in health-related fields. While female representation in medical research has increased in the past several decades (largely due to laws and policies being put in place), there are still several areas of research that underrepresent and underserve women (especially women of color) (Bierer et al., 2022). Yet another way cats and women are alike.

While animal abuse cannot accurately predict if someone will commit a violent crime, those who have committed violent crimes are more likely to have abused animals in the past. Animal abuse can serve as a basis for many researchers who study antisocial behavior and the potential of the "graduation hypothesis". While more research is needed on the direct connections between animal abuse and violent crimes (and just on cats and women in general), it is clear that a link exists between harming vulnerable animals and harming vulnerable humans. This link becomes especially clear when we enjoy horror media as many of the common tropes we see in these films are directly inspired by this real criminological data.

God Forbid a Woman Do Anything: The Moral Panic of Femininity in Horror

Why do people even enjoy horror movies in the first place? Of all film genres, horror has the least industry reputation. Only one horror movie has ever won an Oscar for Best Picture (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 1992) and the number of nominated horror films can be counted on both hands. When a horror movie does receive an award, they are typically reserved for technical achievements such as best art direction (such as *Phantom of the Opera*, 1943), best visual effects (*Alien*, 1979), or best make-up (*The Fly*, 1986). However, these movies do occasionally have great successes. In 2017, nine horror films earned more than $100 million, showing that while horror may be the runt of the film industry, it still has a considerably enthusiastic fanbase. While the literature on the exact nature of *why* people like horror films is extremely limited and perhaps even now outdated, there are some noticeable patterns: low empathy and fearfulness are (inconsistently) associated with more enjoyment in watching horror, empathetic concern and personal distress are negatively correlated with enjoyment of horror involving torture, and there is a (inconsistent) positive relationship between sensation seeking and horror enjoyment. There are also notable sex differences in horror movie enjoyment: males prefer to watch horror more than females, females report

experiencing more fear and anxiety while watching horror than males generally do, and this sex difference may be attributable to females typically having higher disgust sensitivity but also higher empathetic concern than males (Martin, 2019). It should be reiterated, though, that much of this information comes from literature published before the 1990s. The psychology of media preferences is a largely unexplored area of study.

Perhaps one of the reasons people love horror media so much is because it tends to be formulaic. Even if a horror movie is brand new, chances are a regular horror movie-goer has a clear idea of what they're getting into. The plots of horror movies are often predictable and the storytelling devices are recycled. In fact, an entire horror movie was created just to parody many of the popular horror franchises, monster motifs, and character clichés (*The Cabin in the Woods*, 2011). Some sub-genres of horror are especially predictable, such as slasher films. The thirty top-grossing slasher films from the 1980s-2000s were subjected to a media content analysis by Ménard et al. (2019) to examine factors associated with the deaths or survival of individual characters in order to see if the claims of "repetitive" tropes had any validity. Characters were analyzed using demographics such as their sex, ethnicity, age, gender roles, sexual activity, "fight or flight" behaviors, prosocial or antisocial behaviors, and survival status. Results of the analysis found that characters were more likely to survive the horror scenario if they wore neutral/conservative clothing (as opposed to revealing clothing), if they fought back against the antagonist (as opposed to fleeing/hiding), and engaged in a variety of pro-social behaviors (as opposed to those who participated in theft, drug use, etc.). Additionally, 94% of characters who engaged in explicit sexual behaviors died during the course of the sample movies while 64% of those who engaged in comparatively mild forms of sexual behaviors died. The repetition of the "Final Girl" trope (where the last surviving female character confronts and is "victorious" against the antagonist) was also found to have validity. Final Girls are more likely to be attractive, are less likely to engage in significant onscreen sexual behavior, demonstrate more prosocial behaviors and more survival-oriented behaviors against the antagonist, and are more likely to demonstrate an androgynous gender role (as opposed to strictly feminine or masculine) (Ménard et al., 2019). Most characters in slasher films serve as foils for the Final Girl, sending a message to the audience via their deaths about what constitutes being "worthy" of survival in a slasher horror scenario. As long as one is moral and just (and an attractive woman who isn't *too* feminine, who covers up, and doesn't have too much sex), survival in a horror movie is nearly guaranteed.

Since horror movies are made with the male audience in mind, the trope of the Final Girl is a bit curious. With many of the other male victims being killed off, oftentimes the only masculine character the male audience can connect to is the antagonist themselves, the sadistic and horrifying slasher and/or monster. However, as per the formula, the Final Girl is always victorious, defeating the antagonist in the climactic moments of the film. In that heroic moment, the audience cheers for the Final Girl, despite the masculine character they were left to identify with being bested. The reason why a male audience is able to identify with the Final Girl is because of a transference of gender roles and expectations (Clover, 1987). As previously mentioned, Final Girls tend to be "androgynous" rather than feminine despite being attractive women. A Final Girl who is "too feminine" will alienate and perhaps even disgust the male audience, which is why these characters are often quickly established to have masculine interests (Clear Rivers from *Final Destination* is tough, angsty, and welds metal sculptures in her garage), sexual reluctance (Laurie Strode in *Halloween* is established to have a sparse dating history and implied to be a virgin due to her shy personality, starkly contrasting her sexually active friends), and a determined, investigative attitude (Vanita "Stretch" Brock from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* actively seeks out the murderous Sawyer family to expose their crimes). However, while "masculine" in these aspects, the Final Girl is still feminine enough to cry, cower, scream, and tremble in fear, all behaviors typically taboo in men. The male audience can then experience their fear in an "appropriate" way for their gender by transferring their fearfulness onto the Final Girl, all while still being able to relate to her. The intent of the audience identifying with the masculine killer and then transferring to identifying with the Final Girl can perhaps best be seen between *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986). At the end of the 1974 film, Leatherface can be seen wildly swinging his chainsaw in the middle of the street as he watches the Final Girl of the film, Sally, escape him. At the end of the 1986 film, the Final Girl, Stretch, attacks Chop Top (Leatherface's brother) with a chainsaw she grabbed from a shrine and knocks him off the tower

they were fighting upon. Stretch is then seen swinging the chainsaw in a wild, victorious dance, paralleling Leatherface's frustrated flailing from the first film. The Final Girl, one of the few characters in horror movies that are given any depth, must be feminine enough to suffer and be victimized, but not so feminine that they can't be relatable to the male audience.

Some media analysts take it one step further, arguing that the essence of many horror films *is* feminine. In *American Psycho* (2000), the killer Norman Bates is driven to murder women by his "mother-half", a result of his unhealthy relationship with his late mother. In *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986), the monster is a matriarchal creature giving birth to her kind, resulting in the violent deaths of humans. In *Carrie* (1976), the titular character has her first period but is reprimanded by her abusive mother who tells her that menstruating is caused by sin, locking her in a closet and forcing her to pray for forgiveness. Time and time again in horror films, the feminine is exaggerated and grossly caricaturized to disgust and terrify the audience, mirroring many Freudian theories of the mystery of female sexuality and natural female inferiority (Creed, 2020). Whether a woman is the protagonist of the horror film or an antagonist, her femininity is going to be criticized and molded to appeal to a masculine audience.

Women and cats are treated similarly in horror films, their connection to the feminine being punished. A movie showcasing this connection very directly is the 1942 horror film *Cat People*. In it, a woman named Irena Dubrovna meets a man named Oliver Reed. After Oliver sees a statue of a medieval warrior impaling a large cat with his sword in her home, Irena tells him of a Serbian village where the Christian residents turned to witchcraft and became cat-people. The villagers were then all killed by King John of Serbia, except for one who escaped to the mountains. Irena later confesses that she believes she is a descendant of the escaped villager, and that she will turn into a black panther if she is ever intimate. Oliver is dismissive of this and asks Irena to marry him. The marriage is never consummated because of Irena's fear of turning into a panther, and Oliver slowly begins to drift from her and becomes romantically interested in his assistant, Alice. Irena discovers this and, out of desperation, tells Oliver that she will finally have sex with him, but he says that it is too late and he is going to divorce her and marry Alice instead. Oliver and Alice, from then on, feel as though they are being stalked by an animal. Irena attempts to confide in her psychiatrist, but the psychiatrist kisses her. With her sexual agency violated, Irena transforms into a panther and is stabbed by the psychiatrist, but she kills him and escapes before Oliver and Alice arrive. Irena flees to the Central Park Zoo, where she tries to hide in a cage with another black panther. However, the real panther escapes the cage, killing Irena as it flees, and the panther is then hit and killed by a vehicle. Oliver and Alice arrive to find Irena's dead body in its panther form. Oliver says "She never lied to us", and walks away with Alice, marking the end of the film with a somber reminder that Irena was truthful but punished with death regardless.

Cats & Dogs (Not the 2001 Warner Bros. Film): Contextualizing Cats and Dogs in Horror

Below are briefly summarized horror movies that feature the death of a cat, the death of a dog, or both (limited to twelve total movies). Summaries will specifically be focused on the scenes with the animal deaths rather than the entire movie. The films in this sample were pulled from various online forums about horror movies with animal deaths, as well as the movie review website "Does The Dog Die" (interesting website name, I should point out). It should be noted that no real animals were harmed in any of these films.

Cats

Re-Animator (1985): While experimenting with a reanimation reagent in the basement of his roommate, Dan's, house, Herbert West brings Dan's dead cat, Rufus, back to life. However, the cat becomes vicious and attacks West, prompting Dan to wake up and investigate the horrible screeching. Dan enters the basement, not quite understanding what is happening, and grabs the screaming cat and throws it against a wall, killing it. The camera focuses on the cat's bloody body lying on the floor. Dan and West then discuss West's reagent, where Dan believes West must be lying about being able to bring the dead back to life. To prove it to him, West injects Rufus' dead body again. The cat, with organs hanging out and a broken back, yowls in agony and writhes as it again comes back to life.

Pet Sematary (1989): The Creed family cat, Church, was hit off-screen by a truck. Louis Creed's neighbor, Jud, later finds Church's body. The camera focuses on the cat's body on the side of the road, eyes glazed over and fur matted. Jud tells Louis and the two of them place Church's body in a trash bag. Jud, feeling bad for Louis' daughter (who had a very close connection to the cat), brings Louis to a hidden Mi'kmaq burial ground beyond a pet cemetery in the woods and instructs Louis to bury Church there. The next day, Church returns to the Creed house, reanimated. However, now he stinks, his eyes glow, his fur is bloody and matted, and he lashes out violently against Louis. Later on in the movie, Church is encountered again by Louis, but now Louis wields a syringe filled with morphine. He lures Church closer with raw meat, then grabs him and injects him. The camera focuses on Church as he slowly falls over, dead again.
Drag Me to Hell (2009): Christine is being tortured by an evil spirit after being cursed. She visits a fortune teller who suggests that she should make an appeasatory sacrifice. After being attacked in her home by the spirit, Christine reluctantly takes a kitchen knife and finds her cat. The stabbing of the cat is not explicitly shown on screen, but the audience can hear the cat yelp and can see blood being splashed onto Christine. The cat's dead body is then very briefly shown, sporting stab wounds on its side, as it is dropped into a shallow grave and quickly buried by Christine. Later in the film, during a séance meant to trap the evil spirit, a possessed man vomits the dead cat into Christine's lap.
The Autopsy of Jane Doe (2016): While coroner Tommy and his son/assistant, Austin, perform an autopsy, strange figures appear to be standing out in the hallway. Austin goes to investigate, following strange sounds into a storage room. When he checks the air duct, he finds their cat, Stanley (who stays at the morgue with them) mortally wounded. Austin pulls Stanley from the vent and passes him to Tommy, where it is seen that Stanley's intestines are exposed. Stanley is barely alive, whimpering in Tommy's arms. Tommy mercifully kills Stanley by snapping his neck. He then wraps Stanley in a sheet and carries him to the incinerator, burning the cat's body. Tommy is quiet and upset as he watches the incinerator, asking Austin for a moment alone.
Smile (2022): Rose buys a toy train for her nephew, Jackson's, seventh birthday. Jackson begins to tear into his presents in front of everyone in attendance at his birthday party, and happily opens the present from his aunt. When he opens the box that should be holding the train, his face drops. He then lifts Mustache, Rose's cat (who had mysteriously gone missing prior), out of the box by his collar. Mustache hangs limply, the cat's back to the audience. Everyone begins to scream and panic, but Rose begins to sob and rushes forward to hold the cat. In her arms, the audience can better see that Mustache's fur is bloody, and Rose begins to have a breakdown as everyone in attendance watches her in horror.

Both
The Collector (2009): Arkin has broken into a house only to find it has already been broken into by a serial killer who has set traps throughout the house. In a bedroom, a sticky acid-like substance has been spread on the floor. Arkin's shoes get stuck to the floor, as well as the family cat. The cat yowls as it attempts to unstick itself, the slimy substance stuck in its fur and burning it. Arkin slips out of his shoes and hops onto the safety of the bed, but the cat's yowling has alerted the Collector. Arkin grabs the cat and lifts, and we see bloody fur get ripped away from the cat. Arkin tosses the cat over his shoulder and it lands on an open windowsill. However, the windowsill was rigged with another trap, and a guillotine slides down from the window and cuts the cat in half. The back half of the cat falls away, leaving a large blood stain behind. Arkin hides under the bed's pillows as the killer enters. Upon only seeing the cat's back half, the Collector walks away.
Later in the film, as Arkin attempts to break out of the house with the remaining young girl, the Collector lets his dog (who was previously chained outside the house) loose to catch them. As the dog runs up the stairs towards them, Arkin quickly lights toilet paper on fire in a metal trash can. As the dog runs into the room, Arkin quickly slams the trash can over the dog's head and forcefully shuts the door on its neck. The scene cuts to Arkin approaching the Collector, throwing the dog's limp body at him (with the trash can still on its head). The Collector, who had been holding a shotgun and waiting, shoots through the dog and a fight ensues.
Evil Dead (2013): David, his girlfriend, a couple friends, and David's estranged half-sister Mia all arrive at David's family's holiday home, a cabin in the woods. David brings his dog, Grandpa, with him. Later, after

a demon has possessed Mia, David find Grandpa hidden in a shed. David pulls Grandpa's limp body out by his collar and holds his body in his arms, trying to talk to him. When David pulls his hand away from Grandpa's head, it's covered in blood. David then notices a bloody hammer lying on the floor nearby. For a quick moment, the scene cuts to a flashback where Mia is screaming and hitting something off-screen repeatedly with the hammer. During this flashback, Grandpa is not actually seen, but the audience can put together that Mia beat him with the hammer.

Throughout the film, whenever characters enter the back room in the cabin's cellar, several dead cats can be seen suspended from the ceiling by wire and rope. The remains are clearly old and are being eaten by flies. When the room is revealed, the camera focuses on the mummified faces of some of the cats, showing their empty eye sockets and rotting skin. It is implied that they were part of some kind of ritual.

Dogs

Jaws (1975): On Fourth of July weekend, several beachgoers gather on the coast. Among them is a boy playing with his dog, Griffin, along the water. After being shown various other people playing in the water, the audience then sees the same boy from before calling for his dog, unsure of where he is. While the boy is shouting for him, the audience is shown the stick the dog was playing with earlier, floating in the water with no dog in sight. Immediately afterwards, the iconic soundtrack begins and someone in the water is attacked, implying that the dog was an off-screen victim of the shark.

Halloween (1978): While Laurie Strode handles a babysitting job, her friend Annie stays at Lindsey Wallace's house across the street. Michael Myers begins to stalk Annie from outside, but is interrupted by Lindsey's dog, Lester, who is outside and barking aggressively. The shot cuts to Lindsey inside, complaining about the barking. However, the audience then hears the dog's barks turn into a whimper, and the shot cuts back to outside. Myers is holding Lester in the air, strangling him. While Myer's and the dog are mostly obscured in darkness, the audience can see Lester's back legs go limp with one last whine.

The Thing (1982): A research team takes in a strange sled dog, kenneling it with their other sled dogs. However, after being left alone, the other dogs begin to growl at the strange dog. The strange dog then begins to shake, and its face splits apart to reveal that it is an alien creature. Tentacle-like appendages and insect-like legs begin to sprout from the Thing's back and the trapped dogs begin to whine and howl in fear. The Thing shoots a substance at a dog trying to escape. One of the researchers finally arrives to investigate the commotion. When he opens the kennel door, two frightened dogs push past him and run away. The fire alarm is then pulled, and other researchers arrive with guns. The researchers shine their flashlights into the kennel to see a fleshy dog-like creature screeching at them. The Thing is assimilating the dog previously sprayed with acid (now furless and writhing) into its body, as well as another dog that is being choked and stabbed by the Thing's tentacles. The dog that is being strangled howls in pain and then is shot, which upsets one of the researchers. The Thing begins to grow extra appendages, but before it can finish, it is set on fire by a researcher who arrives with a flamethrower.

I Am Legend (2007): Neville, a survivor of a virus outbreak, gets caught in a trap and is attacked by infected dogs. Neville's dog and only companion, Sam, protects him while he frees himself, but is bitten by one of the infected dogs in the process. Back in Neville's lab, he injects Sam with what he believes to be a cure. Neville holds Sam in his arms as she whines. Neville quietly sings to her as he pets her. As he does, he pulls away a fistful of Sam's fur, realizing the cure didn't work. He checks her eyes and gums, seeing signs of the infection in her as she begins to growl and snap at him. Neville averts his eyes as he tightens his grip around Sam, strangling her. Only Neville's face is visible during the strangling, but the audience can see him struggling and can hear Sam choking until she then stops. Neville then becomes tearful and trembles, releasing Sam from his grip as her body rolls to the side away from him.

The Babadook (2014): Amelia, a widow, becomes possessed by an evil entity called the Babadook and slowly begins to unravel. Her dog, Bugsy, begins to incessantly bark, driving Amelia to anger. She chases Bugsy, grabs him, and begins to strangle him. Bugsy being strangled is not shown on screen, but the viewer can see Amelia's twisted face and can hear Bugsy whining and growling. For a brief moment, the viewer is shown Bugsy's back legs as he struggles against Amelia, but with an angry shout, Amelia breaks Bugsy's neck. The viewer then sees her drop Bugsy's dead body to the floor.

Cat Got Your Tongue: Discussion and Conclusion

From the sample of movies previously summarized, a few observations arise. First, two of the seven cats are brought back to life, only to be killed again later on in their respective films. In a third film, a cat's dead body was shown to the protagonist after it had already been buried. Because of this, it seems that dead (or un-dead) cats are often used to "taunt" the protagonist, mocking them for their misdeeds (Louis' neglect of Church and Gage, West's twisted experiments, and Christine's denying a woman an extension on her mortgage). As well as that, the movie can get extra mileage out of the animal's death if it can die multiple times.

Second, cats tend to be killed in much more bloody, gruesome ways than their dog counterparts. Cats in this sample are burned by acid and then sliced in half, gutted, hit by vehicles, drugged, sacrificed, or stabbed. Dogs in this sample are strangled, have their necks broken, are assimilated into an alien, beaten over the head, or eaten by a shark. Grandpa's death was the only truly bloody death out of the dogs, where the cats in *Evil Dead* may be the only cats of the sample that weren't bloody. This is similar to how women in horror films are more likely to be tortured rather than killed immediately like their male counterparts.

Third, dog deaths are much more likely to be shown off-screen or strategically angled away from the viewer. While the audience watches cats getting their necks snapped, getting injected with morphine, thrown against walls, or sliced in half by a guillotine in full view, dogs are given the extra respect to not be shown in the moment of their deaths (with exception of the dogs from *The Thing* or the dog from *The Collector*, both of which are notably films in which the dog or dog-like creature is an antagonist).

Fourth, in the films where women are the pet's owner, they are shown to be hysterical or even driven to desperation or insanity (*Smile, Drag Me to Hell, The Babadook*). However, the male pet owners are "appropriately" upset or able to react reasonably (*Pet Sematary, The Autopsy of Jane Doe, I Am Legend, Evil Dead*). This contrast mirrors the stereotypes of women being the "emotional" sex while men are the "logical" sex.

The observations align with much of the media analysis that has been discussed throughout this paper. Cats, an extension of the feminine, are much more likely to be severely punished in horror films, while dogs, an extension of the masculine, are much more likely to be respected in death. Dogs may be an extension of the antagonist (the Thing and the Collector's dog), the masculine character that the largely male audience is meant to identify with throughout most of the film, while cats are an extension of feminine terror (Mustache's death distances Rose from her family and Church's reanimation was a result of Louis not wanting to upset his daughter). Dogs can die as heroes or protectors (Sam and Lester both try to save their owners), but cats are merely props to shock the audience and have no consequence to the plot of the film (Stanley and the various unnamed cats in *Evil Dead* were ultimately unnecessary deaths and the plots of their respective movies would have been unchanged if their deaths were removed), mirroring masculine and feminine gender roles of heroism and victimization. The death of a dog is meant to upset the audience (Grandpa, Griffin, Bugsy) while the death of a cat is meant to shock the audience (Rufus, Mustache, Christine's unnamed cat), humanizing the "masculine" animal while objectifying the "feminine" animal. The gendered stereotypes we see in the human characters of horror films are extended to the animals of horror films.

Violence against the feminine has been a trend in horror media for decades, exciting and disgusting audiences. It has been normalized and has become an expected part of enjoying horror movies. Horror films will take a long time to escape their clichés, especially as violence against women and cats persists in the real world, and new clichés will likely be created along the way. However, there is hope that the misogynistic and patriarchal trend may be fading. Many modern horror films feature female leads that subvert the Final Girl expectation (*Us, Hereditary, Annihilation, Midsommar*), and many modern horror films are also more willing to show emotionally complex and vulnerable male characters (*Get Out, Nope, The Black Phone*). Animals are also getting more positive attention in horror films, as seen by Indy, the dog starring in *Good Boy,* and Frodo, the cat in *A Quiet Place: Day One.* As culture and social norms change, the media that we consume will change with them. We can hope that the change will be for the better, for both humans and animals.

References

Ascione, F. R., Weber, C. V., Thompson, T. M., Heath, J., Maruyama, M., & Hayashi, K. (2007). Battered Pets and Domestic Violence: Animal Abuse Reported by Women Experiencing Intimate Violence and by Nonabused Women. *Violence against Women*, *13*(4), 354–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801207299201

Baines, L. M., & Oliva, J. L. (2024). Unleashing the Personality Divide: Resilience in Dog Owners, Neuroticism in Cat Owners. *Anthrozoös*, *37*(6), 1155–1170. https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2024.2378592

Bierer, B. E., Meloney, L. G., Ahmed, H. R., & White, S. A. (2022). Advancing the inclusion of underrepresented women in clinical research. *Cell Reports. Medicine*, *3*(4), Article 100553. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xcrm.2022.100553

Clover, C. J. (1987). Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film. *Representations (Berkeley, Calif.)*, *20*(10.2307/2928507), 187–228. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928507

Creed, Barbara (2020). HORROR AND THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE: An Imaginary Abjection. In Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (p. 211). University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvtv937f.14

Doesthedogdie.com. Trigger Warning Database for Movies, TV, Books and more. (n.d.). https://www.doesthedogdie.com/

Gorman, J. (2018, February 26). *Why scientists love to study dogs (and often ignore cats)*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/science/dog-science-cats.html

Hensley, C., & Tallichet, S. E. (2008). The Effect of Inmates' Self-Reported Childhood and Adolescent Animal Cruelty: Motivations on the Number of Convictions for Adult Violent Interpersonal Crimes. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *52*(2), 175–184. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X07303913

Jones, H. D., & Hart, C. L. (2020). Black Cat Bias: Prevalence and Predictors. *Psychological Reports*, *123*(4), 1198–1206. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294119844982

Lawrence, E. A. (2003). Feline Fortunes: Contrasting Views of Cats in Popular Culture. *Journal of Popular Culture*, *36*(3), 623–635. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5931.00024

Martin, G. N. (2019). (Why) do you like scary movies? a review of the empirical research on psychological responses to horror films. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, Article 2298. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02298

Ménard, A. D., Weaver, A., & Cabrera, C. (2019). "There are Certain Rules that One Must Abide by": Predictors of Mortality in Slasher Films. *Sexuality & Culture*, *23*(2), 621–640. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-09583-2

Menchetti, L., Calipari, S., Guelfi, G., Catanzaro, A., & Diverio, S. (2018). My Dog Is Not My Cat: Owner Perception of the Personalities of Dogs and Cats Living in the Same Household. *Animals (Basel)*, *8*(6), Article 80. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani8060080

Menchetti, L., Calipari, S., Mariti, C., Gazzano, A., & Diverio, S. (2020). Cats and dogs: Best friends or deadly enemies? What the owners of cats and dogs living in the same household think about their

relationship with people and other pets. *PloS One*, *15*(8), Article e0237822. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0237822

Mitchell, R. W., & Ellis, A. L. (2013). Cat Person, Dog Person, Gay, or Heterosexual: The Effect of Labels on a Man's Perceived Masculinity, Femininity, and Likability. *Society & Animals*, *21*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341266

Newberry, M. (2018). Associations between different motivations for animal cruelty, methods of animal cruelty and facets of impulsivity. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, *24*(1), 52–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2017.1371305

Nikolajeva, M. (2009). Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats. *Marvels & Tales*, *23*(2), 248–267. https://doi.org/10.1353/mat.2009.a369116

Plant, M., van Schaik, P., Gullone, E., & Flynn, C. (2019). "It's a Dog's Life": Culture, Empathy, Gender, and Domestic Violence Predict Animal Abuse in Adolescents—Implications for Societal Health. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *34*(10), 2110–2137. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516659655

Ramirez, M. (2006). [Rev. of *"My Dog's Just Like Me": Dog Ownership as a Gender Display*]. *Symbolic Interaction*, *29*(3), 373–391. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2006.29.3.373

Reed, I. (2007). Why Salem Made Sense: Culture, Gender, and the Puritan Persecution of Witchcraft. *Cultural Sociology*, *1*(2), 209–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975507078188

Smith, T. S., & Crawford, A. (2025, August 4). *Cats electrocuted, drowned and Starved Cats in online torture groups, BBC finds*. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yp9w5kyw7o

Tu, A. Y., Springer, C. M., & Albright, J. D. (2024). Evaluation of Characteristics Associated with Self-Identified Cat or Dog Preference in Pet Owners and Correlation of Preference with Pet Interactions and Care: An Exploratory Study. *Animals (Basel)*, *14*(17), Article 2534. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14172534

U.S. Pet Ownership Statistics. American Veterinary Medical Association. (2025). https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/reports-statistics/us-pet-ownership-statistics

Walters, G. D. (2013). Testing the specificity postulate of the violence graduation hypothesis: Meta-analyses of the animal cruelty–offending relationship. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *18*(6), 797–802. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2013.10.002