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SCREAM'S BILLY LOOMIS AND THE HORROR OF MALE POWER, VIOLENCE AND SEXUALITY

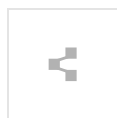
It's over more than 20 years since we were first introduced to classic '90s teen slashers *Scream*. This movie was a gateway to the horror genre for a whole generation of people who watched it at sleepovers and spent the next several days terrified to answer the phone when they were home alone. *Scream* is famous for the way it sends up the horror movie genre, bringing to the

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Movies

Scream

Wes Craven

mainstream the "rules" of horror movies that genre aficionados had known about forever: Don't go anywhere alone, never assume the killer is dead, don't have sex.

It's that last one, though, that has probably stuck with audiences most. As Randy, a young Jamie Kennedy and the film's resident horror expert, points out, "virgins never die."

This rule, that virgins are the only ones capable of surviving a horror movie, ran deep through the genre for a very long time. It was a pretty simple metaphor for equating sex with deviance and chastity with virtue. Virgins, specifically female virgins, were better people than their sexually active counterparts and thus more deserving of life.

Hell, it was in an episode of *Boy Meets World*.



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Thankfully, this trope seems to have gone away with time and the evolution of the genre -- and the slow death of the slasher film -- but its legacy still permeates the collective consciousness of horror fans (see, for example, 2012's *Cabin in the Woods*).

Slasher flicks are inherently sexual allegories. They're usually about a psychotic killer of some kind brutally murdering teenagers in a graphic manner. Since teenagers are at the height of their hormone-induced insanity, you can bet sex is going to come into play over the course of these narratives. Again, look at something like *Cabin in the Woods*, which was its own kind of sendup of the horror genre. Among the archetypes, the company had to find included "the whore," "the fool," and "the virgin," each one representing a certain vice or lack thereof.

But *Scream* is a beast unto itself. While the point of the film is largely just to poke fun at the films that director Wes Craven had made his name on, there is one thing *Scream* has that other slasher films do not: The murders aren't random. While other horror movie villains may have had their reasons for killing people, *Scream's* Billy Loomis is far more

calculating in his choices. There are no murders of convenience in his plot, and when you consider the victims and his motives it becomes quite obvious that *Scream* is about more than just some kids taking a joke too far. It's about Billy's desire to punish a group of innocent people all because of his bruised male ego.

In order to understand what I mean, we need to start at the end and work backward.

In the climax of the film, Sidney Prescott, our main character, discovers that the person behind the half dozen or so Ghostface murders is none other than her boyfriend Billy. Technically, it's Billy and his best friend, Stu, but as the two boys explain their master plan to kill Sidney and frame her father for the murders it becomes glaringly apparent that Billy is the one calling the shots. You see, this all began when Sidney's mother had an affair with Billy's father. Her mother's affairs were an open secret, widely rumored after her death, but in this particular case, Billy's mother discovered her husband's dalliance and left. Billy, upon learning what caused his mother to run off, convinces his best friend to help him commit their very first murder, killing Sidney's mother and

framing that crime on Cotton Weary, another man she was sleeping with.

The events of *Scream* take place a year later, when Billy has decided that, since he's still upset about his mom leaving and they've already murdered the woman he blames for it, it's time her daughter suffers. And so begin the Ghostface murders. There are actually not that many deaths, when you think about it, at least not off the top. You've got Casey Becker and her boyfriend Steve at the beginning, setting up the murderer and giving us an iconic scene in the process, but they are the only ones who actually die before the party that marks the film's climax (the principal is also murdered, but it's not until after school is canceled). Instead, Billy and Stu spend the majority of the movie harassing Sidney with menacing phone calls and multiple chase scenes around her home and school.

At the end of the movie, Billy and Stu

successfully murder five people -- and attempt to murder four others -- while simultaneously attempting to inflict as much psychological distress on Sidney as possible (through phone calls, chases, faking Billy's murder immediately following the loss of her virginity, and attempting to literally murder several people in front of her, including her own father), all because one time her mother had sex with Billy's father and it broke up his family. A single act of female sexuality is used as the inciting incident for a series of murders.

Other than the violence itself, there are several other things to note here when it comes to Billy's actions. The first is that not once does he seek any kind of revenge on his father, even though it does, as they say, take two to tango. Sidney's mother wasn't the only one involved in their affair. His father was equally responsible for the event that precipitated his mother's departure, but it is Sidney's father he attempts to frame, Sidney's friends and family he murders, and Sidney whom he torments. His father is unscathed throughout the entire ordeal.

Then there's the fact that throughout the entire film, Billy is pressuring Sidney to sleep

with him. Initially, this can be seen as just another way the film attempts to play into the tropes of its genre. Virgins don't die in horror movies, therefore Sidney needs to face the pressure to lose her virginity in order for it to work. To Stu, this also likely plays into the way Billy has convinced him the murders are supposed to go. The point is to kill people like they do in the movies, so if they're going to kill Sidney in the end, then Sidney can't be a virgin when it happens. For Billy, though, the motivations are much more sinister (yes, more sinister than murder). The entire plot of the film revolves around Billy's feelings about her mother having sex with his father. In a twisted way, sleeping with Sidney, turning her from a symbol of purity to another sexualized woman, makes her more like her mother, more like the thing he actually hates. By having sex with her, he not only gives himself further opportunities to derive pleasure from this entire twisted situation, but he turns Sidney into a surrogate, allowing him to murder her mother all over again.

The *Scream* franchise actually takes this whole obsession with female sexuality to another level later on when, in the third installment, the killer is revealed to be

Sidney's secret half-brother her mother had abandoned years before giving birth to her. Scarred by his own abandonment, and enraged by their mother's continued affairs, her brother followed their mother around, recording evidence of those affairs in a devious attempt to destroy her. He succeeded, too, as we learn that it was he who told Billy of her affair with his father, an act committed with the hope that it would spur Billy on to murder her.

With that final reveal the franchise lays the murders of dozens of innocent people over three films -- not to mention the ongoing psychological torture of Sidney AND supporting characters like Gale and Dewey -- squarely at the feet, not of the actual murderers, but of Sidney's mother and her inability to keep her legs closed.

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These movies are known for having some great, kickass female characters, and they have endured in a generation of horror fans for a reason. But despite their continued popularity and their contributions to the longstanding tradition of the Final Girls, the *Scream* franchise really says a lot more about men, power, and their twisted view of the female libido.

