

# Deliverance at the Table

## Culinary Symbolism and Estherian Transcendence over Death in Contemporary Horror Film

### Abstract

Horror film has traditionally disregarded the possibility that heroines can bring a permanent end to evil. HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022) is therefore a landmark, and its depiction of a woman victorious against evil also conveys a symbolic victory in theological terms. With the use of domestic tools as weapons for communal survival, the utilitarian power of Laurie Strode's fight against her tormenter, Michael Myers, breaks the convention of horror lacking symbolic quality on the behalf of women. Through brave craftiness and rich symbolism of heroine leadership, the film is a dignifying, biblical-like story of deliverance by a heroine that has parallels with the story of Esther's victory over Haman, who also had his murderous intentions thwarted.

### Keywords

Horror, Bible, Esther, Heroine, HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022)

### Biography

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## Introduction

The biblical story of Esther contains unprecedented heroine bravery, ability, and responsiveness to plotting representative of malicious hypermasculinity. Esther is forced to hide her Jewish identity, navigate the plans of her enemy, Haman, and risk her life by entering the king's court in an effort to

save her people. Succeeding through all of these challenges, she delivers her community, a role that is not usually bestowed upon women in the biblical text. In the film HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022), reverberations of Estherian deliverance are present in the victory of Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) over her enemy, Michael Myers (James Jude Courtney), who has stalked her for forty years. Both Esther's success and Laurie's transcendence are responses to masculine aggression. Laurie's story mirrors the cultural significance of Esther's victory and deliverance of the Jews amid murderous plots.<sup>1</sup> In HALLOWEEN ENDS, Laurie performs a priest-like eradication of evil as she kills Michael on a proverbial sacrificial altar: the kitchen island. I identify Laurie here as a specifically *religious* hero in two ways that are intertwined: as an Estherian deliverer who saves her community, and as a priestly figure who kills evil on an altar that permanently subsumes her enemy. This study explores the domineering threats in a cumulative setting – the climactic battle scene, where the villain is defeated – with Michael functioning as an evil figure reflective of Haman.

With a hermeneutic approach that utilizes the biblical story of Esther, I argue that Laurie Strode becomes a communal deliverer from death in response to hypermasculine aggression. Laurie and Esther face the same question: how can we deliver our communities from death? The concept of sacrifice is used in this study in light of the biblical practice of priests killing animals in a performance of repentance – a symbolic demonstration of leaving evil behind to draw closer to God. This hermeneutic analysis examines the parallels between Esther and Laurie in terms of heroine empowerment, the parallels between the threatening villains in the film and in the biblical story, culinary craft as deliverer from evil, the kitchen as a site for deliverance, and women's dignity in victory. While David Gordon Green's trilogy<sup>2</sup> works as a single story of Laurie's battle against Michael, the analysis in this article is dedicated to the metaphoric capacity of the last part of the trilogy, HALLOWEEN ENDS, which takes up biblical and religious imagery and themes.

1 De Beer 2021, 1.

2 David Gordon Green's trilogy comprises HALLOWEEN (US 2018), HALLOWEEN KILLS (US 2021), and HALLOWEEN ENDS (US 2022); it was preceded by John Carpenter's HALLOWEEN (US 1978).

## The Estherian Hero and Empowerment

Invading perpetrators are manifest in settings where theological belief is a common theme in response to villainy. The heroine engages in a (fist) fight that has a theologically symbolic end. Deliverance, which also informs our current condition to evade death, comes after the masquerades of predators, both Haman, in his biblical performance as an ally to the king, and Michael, who wears a mask as he torments women in the movie. The cinematic portrayal of deliverance through heroism on behalf of a community that removes the power of hypermasculine dominance is an echo of the story of Esther. Heroines act even in their most vulnerable circumstances, specifically in Laurie's entrapment with a serial killer and Esther's risking her life in the political setting.

Important to note is the presentation of historical frustration from scholarly evaluation of horror cinema where heroines prevail, but the driving force behind narrative is not depiction of struggle but blood-ridden plots that glorify the killers in cinema.<sup>3</sup> Carol Clover's treatment on the history of horror captures this sadistic victimization of women.<sup>4</sup> HALLOWEEN ENDS contains a violent physical battle, but its heroine's victory is novel and richly symbolic. While in horror female victims and escapees typically suffer in the lair of their enemies, in HALLOWEEN ENDS the heroine selects and controls the setting for the final confrontation. The scene's religious and biblical imagery of priestly sacrifice situates a woman as an authority who controls and carefully kills evil on her own terms. The film does have a plot-centered fixation on glorifying violence, especially in the final sequences, when Michael's protégé engages in a city-wide killing spree that includes explicit and disturbing extended displays of murder. The "horror-pleasure"<sup>5</sup> of such depictions explains the audience's enjoyment of slasher-heavy films, which usually have thin plot development.

HALLOWEEN ENDS also contains, however, a physical and metaphoric treatment of hypermasculine aggression and murderous intention being thwarted by Estherian strategy and an Estherian voice, both of which resonate with feminist ideas. The unsavory aesthetics of the film place it firmly within the horror genre,<sup>6</sup> yet its depiction of a woman in control is a power-

3 Schneiderman 2022.

4 Clover 2015.

5 Schneider 2004, 133.

6 Hunter 2014.

ful display of heroine transcendence, in a triumph that has taken decades to achieve. Flashbacks to earlier films in which Michael prevailed over Laurie invite the audience to reflect upon the nature of Laurie's achievement against her longstanding tormenter. As I shall show here, this new approach within horror embraces the abilities and dignity of the heroine.

The representation of evil in horror film can often be understood in theological terms.<sup>7</sup> In this reading, the greater the presence, intimidation, and illusiveness of evil, the more religious faith can assist in evil's defeat.<sup>8</sup> Although both history and Jewish and Christian scriptures have depicted women as disempowered, the novel depiction of a woman as heroic in this movie offers parallels with the Esther story in the Hebrew bible.<sup>9</sup> In her heroic actions, Laurie's long-awaited victory over her tormenter operates as the Estherian "healing" of a community amid contemporary aggression toward women.<sup>10</sup> The women are in life-threatening circumstances in both instances – Laurie locked in her home with Michael; Esther revealing that she is Jewish. "Esther is depicted as an underdog," writes Sanrie De Beer, "an 'every (wo)man' who is summoned on a journey presenting exceptional challenges and conclusively steps out as the redeemer of her people."<sup>11</sup> That description applies equally to Laurie. The scene in which she locks Michael into her home and fights him in her kitchen can be compared to the strategic planning of Esther, who invites Haman to eat with her and the king. Thus, Laurie liberates her community from the terror of Michael just as Esther exposes Haman's plot.

HALLOWEEN ENDS adopts the survivalist form of human storytelling,<sup>12</sup> with the fight back against the intruder accomplished with the very tools that sustain life through food preparation and consumption. When engaging in a cultural effort to defeat masculine monsters, religious and horror narratologies share "intertextual functions" with "the spatial-temporal aspects of gender roles."<sup>13</sup> Hence, Laurie's heroic actions are a response to the human survival instinct but are performed with the means that this female liberator has to hand and in a location she inhabits easily.

7 Beal 2018

8 Plate 2017.

9 Reyes 2022, 96.

10 De Beer 2021, 2.

11 De Beer 2021, 9.

12 Yergensen 2024a.

13 Reyes 2022, 96.

Deliverance in HALLOWEEN ENDS falls to an older, wise, combative-ready grandmother,<sup>14</sup> rather than to, for example, a sexually objectified teenage girl. Laurie's decision to lock herself inside with Michael is the Estherian action of a woman who "has thus a form of her own liberation" and transcends "the fear" of masculine dominance.<sup>15</sup> Her decision mirrors the proverbial response from Esther, who has "Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him" (Esther 5:4, KJV used throughout). While Laurie's domestic life and culinary arts are not typical components of the hero narrative, they compose "the mundane domain in which the hero resides".<sup>16</sup>

## Horror, Facades, and the Heroine Fight

The heroic response by a woman in this horror movie from 2022 came at the same time as populist religious groups were working (as they continue to work) to reinforce a culture of masculine authoritarianism.<sup>17</sup> The HALLOWEEN series builds to this moment of delivery by a heroine. Michael at first, in John Carpenter's HALLOWEEN (US, 1978), eludes justice for murdering or wounding his victims by escaping. In David Gordon Green's HALLOWEEN (2018), he is assumed to have died, but then in Green's HALLOWEEN KILLS (2021) he emerges alive and more furious and violent than ever. Michael's brutality could be stopped only in HALLOWEEN ENDS (2022), by which point it is possible for Laurie, the heroine deliverer, to exert a new authority that concludes her journey against evil.

In refusing to bow to aggression toward women, HALLOWEEN ENDS echoes a contemporary need to move beyond historically masculine-dominated deliverance, narrative and theological. Both religion and horror address evil as narrative tropes,<sup>18</sup> and thus they form a narratological pair.<sup>19</sup> With kitchen weaponry that allows her to out-craft her enemy, Laurie becomes an Estherian hero who "displays an intellect of stunning proportions," with

14 Lahdenpera/Tanskanen/Danielsbacka 2018.

15 Hatzaw 2021, 29.

16 De Beer 2021, 2.

17 Marzouki/McDonnell/Roy 2016.

18 Vaishnav 2021.

19 Cowan 2016.

“traits that go beyond the normal and are beyond typical expectations”.<sup>20</sup> As sites of negotiation between good and evil, horror and religion intertwine, their battles played out with objects that are symbolic, such as crosses and knives.<sup>21</sup>

Foreshadowing in the film establishes the possibility of a female deliverer of her community. Laurie is writing her memoirs, a book she titles *Stalkers, Saviors, and Samhain*. Here we find potential religious symbolism, with the idea of Laurie as “savior”. As Laurie writes about her two previous battles with Michael, whose whereabouts are unknown, her voice talks of evil with a description of Michael’s dominating influence. She describes how “the people of Haddonfield descended into a plague of grief, a plague of paranoia. The suffering Michael caused became an infection, passing onto people who never even crossed his path.”<sup>22</sup> At the end of the film, we hear her describe the burden of deciding how to act: “It’s up to each of us whether we lock the door, find the resolve, or let him inside.”<sup>23</sup> Laurie says the phrase repeatedly, changing the final words to be more specific and settling on “or let *evil* inside”. The “him” that is Michael is interchangeable with “evil”.<sup>24</sup>

Laurie’s prophecy that evil might be “let inside” is fulfilled when she subsequently locks Michael within her home, which he has repeatedly penetrated, this time securing the door to prevent him from leaving. Now he can no longer harm the community that needs a “savior”. Voiceovers containing her intentions and, later, reflections form a “cadence”,<sup>25</sup> with the seriousness of her tone demonstrating her determination. Her rhetorical voice<sup>26</sup> thus predicts the resolve she will need in the final battle. Armed with the tools of cooking, Laurie places her enemy in a crucifixion position before killing him.<sup>27</sup>

Like Esther, Laurie uses her traditional role to perform her task as deliverer of her community. Neither woman needs to abandon “her feminine corporeality”.<sup>28</sup> Each woman takes on a “double identity” – Esther as Jew and

20 McGeough 2008, 53.

21 Bush 2013.

22 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:13:05–00:13:21.

23 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:14:16–00:14:24.

24 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:14:44–00:14:46.

25 Cutting 2016.

26 Yergensen 2024c.

27 Forasteros 2022.

28 De Beer 2021, 4.

queen, Laurie as deliverer and cook for the family.<sup>29</sup> Natalie Hayton has noted the “religious connotations” given to one story (Little Red Riding Hood) when “the hero of the oral tale becomes the archetypal fallen woman”, noting the parallels with Mary Magdalene.<sup>30</sup> That traditional process is ruptured by the plot, and hence themes, of HALLOWEEN ENDS. Laurie exhibits the Estherian break from the masculine norm of religious heroism, for “gradually her actions supersede or contradict expectations of behavior established in wisdom literature”.<sup>31</sup> That physical capacity of her persona allows her to deploy her culinary craft, with cooking tools becoming religiously symbolic weapons as kitchen knives are used to control evil, a microwave is used to distract the enemy, and a fridge keeps the villain from escaping.

## Culinary Craft as Symbolic Power

Laurie’s self-deliverance from her attacker can be understood in terms of both her “traditional” grandmother role – she is a homemaker caring for her granddaughter – and her opportunity to act heroically when evil enters her domain. Laurie’s return from her exile in the previous two films has enabled her to reenter normal life. Writing of the “monomyth” behind all stories and myths, De Beer records, “the hero must endure to go back to the ordinary world, but still maintain the acquired self-assurance and learn to accept the ordinariness of daily life again.”<sup>32</sup> That “ordinariness” is Laurie’s embrace of her role as a nurturing grandmother. With evil bound to the table and being destroyed, she participates metaphorically in an act of food preparation and ends the threats to her community once and for all.

The actions around Laurie’s eradication of evil through the killing of Michael mirror food preparation even as the plot moves toward increasingly religious imagery. Laurie uses a kitchen knife to slowly slice Michael, who dies on the sacrificial altar that is the kitchen island. The placement and use of kitchen props is coupled with the dense symbolism of food preparation as a survival strategy, thus participating in “discourse of cinema”<sup>33</sup>

29 Hatzaw 2021, 25.

30 Hayton 2013, 66.

31 McGeough 2008, 44.

32 De Beer 2021, 3.

33 Schubert 2020, 183

that situates setting, symbolism, and plot culmination in a single setting. The kitchen battle takes place in the dark, locating their fight in the same dark, nighttime lighting as in Carpenter's 1978 movie. Now, however, Laurie's mastery of her destructive tools is exercised precisely in the setting in which she sustains the life of her family. Within the domestic setting of her kitchen, she frees those oppressed by Michael. Her bravery ends their fear of death, replicating the "solace given by religion".<sup>34</sup> Similarly, God's grace allows Esther to overcome the unprincipled masculine aggression of the Haman plot.

Michael's aggression as he moves toward and into Laurie's home causes an impulsive reaction by the heroine deliverer. The historic order of masculine dominance and abuse is challenged and defeated in the domain of the traditional homemaker.<sup>35</sup> In an Estherian rising to the moment, with both Laurie and Michael locked into her home and one of them about to die, Laurie "breaks free from the inscriptions intended for the female body," as Ciin Sian Siam Hatzaw describes Esther's self-liberation from prescribed female roles.<sup>36</sup> Laurie thus mirrors Esther's empowerment in the Bible.

## The Kitchen as Context

Forty years after Laurie was first tormented by Michael, she utilizes her own territory as the setting to kill her enemy. Michael starts the fight; Haman, the king orders, is to "make haste" (Esther 5:5) to the banquet. After Laurie locks Michael in her home, their battle transitions from trading blows to potentially lethal attacks with homemaking tools – knitting needle, garbage disposal, fridge, frying pan. Laurie finally seizes a weapon that can "evoke important narrative meaning"<sup>37</sup> and that was used against her and other victims in previous movies: a kitchen knife. After fastening her enemy to the kitchen island with multiple knives in a cruciform position, she taunts him.

Laurie first stabs Michael in the side – her knife is like the Spear of Destiny<sup>38</sup> that pierced Jesus as he was crucified– then steadily and carefully

34 Vaishnav 2021, 82.

35 Kelly 2017.

36 Hatzaw 2021, 29.

37 Schubert 2020, 183.

38 Hone 1926.

slices Michael's neck and wrist. Her actions are like those of a sacrifice upon a priestly altar. When she cuts Michael's carotid artery, the aerial shot of the bloody table triggers "specific cinematic implicatures"<sup>39</sup> related to horror imagery. Laurie duplicates the culinary craft of delicately preparing a fish ("cuts should sweep from head to tail in an unbroken motion"). She grips Michael's hand ("Holding the pectoral fin firmly") and cuts his wrist ("make a slash"), allowing the blood to rush out – her action also references Jesus's wrist being used as an anchor in his crucifixion. Her slow and careful slicing ("comfortably insert the point of the knife ... making downward slashes") ensures her enemy dies as blood gushes from both wounds, satisfying the decades-long wait for his death.<sup>40</sup> Laurie controls the liberation of herself and her community from the carnality of violent aggression, with the Haman-type figure representative of "chaos, that is, the absence of order and control".<sup>41</sup>

Laurie "prays every night that he [Michael] will escape ... so I can kill him,"<sup>42</sup> her pleading to God foreshadowing her anointed role as deliverer. Providence controls the outcome for Laurie, just as it does for Esther. Laurie becomes the priestly figure who ends the reign of evil. In doing so, she changes the "symbolic environment" of women needing male heroics that has been a central feature of horror.<sup>43</sup> She performs a theological-like representation of the defeat of evil – in this instance, masculine aggression and its weaponization of fear<sup>44</sup> – on a biblical altar<sup>45</sup>.

Laurie's crucifixion of her enemy is central to the new feminist presence within the horror genre. The character has evolved from the original 1978 HALLOWEEN movie, where it followed the standard trope in which, as Chad Brewer has demonstrated, "the female victims run, hide, or scream, but they do not fight back".<sup>46</sup> In the final movie, by contrast, the Esther-like Laurie "performs her gender to maximum effect" in her moment of victory.<sup>47</sup> She does not abandon the traditional female roles of a homemaker but

39 Schubert 2020, 188.

40 Filleting instructions from T. Marzetti Company 2023.

41 Jurgens/Hackett 2017, 38.

42 HALLOWEEN (2018), 1:01:32–1:01:42.

43 McGee 1984, 1.

44 Wojinika/Mellström/de Boise 2022.

45 Moffitt 2020.

46 Brewer 2009, 26.

47 Hatzaw 2021, 25.

instead deploys them to new ends, which moves women in horror away from what Faithful has described for science fiction and action films as well as horror movies as “implausibility and irrelevance.”<sup>48</sup> Instead, as I demonstrate here with the example of Laurie, woman can be an active participant in the discourse against evil.

## Victory

The final battle scene is rife with religious iconography. The stakes could not have been higher for Laurie, as was also the case for Esther as she sought to expose Haman. Esther knew that her husband, the king, might decide to execute his wife, and yet she declared, “if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). Michael had entered Laurie’s home in order to kill her, believing himself capable of finishing what he had started decades earlier, and so too “went Haman forth than day joyful and with a glad heart” (Esther 5:9). Haman was “full of indignation” (Esther 5:9) against his enemy, as was Michael, but both are caught in a snare laid by a brave and skilled heroine. The “evil” that has been “let inside”,<sup>49</sup> to Laurie’s home and Esther’s banquet, is trapped.

In *Little Red Riding Hood*, the death (and consumption of the flesh) of the grandmother is, according to Richard Chase Jr. and David Teasley a “mockery of the mass”, but in *HALLOWEEN ENDS*, that travesty is avoided by the survival of the grandmother, aka Laurie.<sup>50</sup> Laurie’s long journey, during which she has been damaged and tormented, concludes, like Esther’s journey and in line with the heroic pattern, with “a trip to the Underworld, from which [the hero] re-appears, conveying a new consciousness of himself or herself, his or her limits and his or her relationship with the powers of the universe.”<sup>51</sup> When Esther reveals the wickedness of Haman, then “Haman was afraid before the king and queen” (Esther 7:6). Michael’s quivering body comes with a camera shot of his wounds, which provides “full visual access” to his certain death.<sup>52</sup> Like Haman, Michael enters a setting determined by his prey in which evil in the outward form of hypermasculinity is outwitted.

48 Faithful 2016, 362.

49 HALLOWEEN ENDS, 00:14:44–00:14:46.

50 Chase Jr./Teasley 1995, 775.

51 De Beer 2021, 6.

52 Schubert 2020, 186.

As a communal group, the long-tormented inhabitants of Haddonfield form the congregation at a midnight funeral at the landfill and watch as Laurie drops Michael's lifeless body into the trash compactor. Laurie has appropriated from her enemy the control that is enabled by fear of death.<sup>53</sup> This scene is the formal conclusion to the rescue of the community and encapsulates the long-awaited (for four decades) deliverance. The timeliness of this moment is redemptively encouraging for the community of observers. The scene captures the human pursuit of order that is shared across members of a shared community.<sup>54</sup>

Laurie's victory over Michael engages with the cultural narrative of death through crucifixion. Where Jesus's body is resurrected, Michael's body is destroyed in a garbage compactor. The fight to the death with her kitchen utensils and equipment draws on "religious sensibilities" that "intersect with the gendering of food preparation."<sup>55</sup> Both women enter a confined space associated with food, its preparation or its consumption, in order to overthrow masculine power. Within these places masculine abuse is apparent, but women save both themselves and their communities.

## Conclusion

With Laurie's kitchen a metaphoric "banquet" in line with Esther's victory over Haman, Laurie, like Esther, displays her determination to act even while afraid.<sup>56</sup> Esther feared what it might mean to enter the court and speak up before the king. Laurie hid in fear in a pantry until Michael found her. The courage of each woman comes out of fear, but they must be brave if they are to save their people. As heroic deliverers both women play a role in the course of cosmic events governed by cosmic powers.<sup>57</sup> Laurie breaks the mold that determines the depiction of women in horror, who historically, in horror movies and in scripture, have been vulnerable victims.<sup>58</sup> She is a domestic warrior, which conjures parallels with other stories of women

53 Jurgens/Hackett 2017, 38.

54 Hepp 2022.

55 Sered 2021, 647.

56 De Beer 2021, 6.

57 De Beer 2021, 6.

58 Hayton 2013, 56.

narrated through the kitchen.<sup>59</sup> To defeat evil is to transcend death – for both Esther and Laurie and for both the Jewish people and the people of Haddonfield. Laurie has Michael’s mask on her desk in the last shot of the film – a symbol of his “beheading”. Communities are preserved and protected by female grit.

Early in the movie, Laurie records a need to let evil into her home to contain and end its hypermasculine reign; Esther similarly plans a banquet to entrap Haman. Both women respond to possible death by ensuring it is the threatener not the threatened who dies. Importantly, they do so by outwitting their hypermasculine murderous enemies. Death, ever present and ever at work in the psychology of the human,<sup>60</sup> is overcome by the heroines of these tales. Defiance of death is heroism, both in the movie HALLOWEEN ENDS and in the biblical narrative of Esther, which provides a hermeneutic lens through which to examine the film.

Neither Haman and Michael could be trapped or defeated by masculine enemies, but Laurie, like Esther, upends the male-only heroism ideology with what Hayton terms the “unmistakable and distinctly feminist edge.”<sup>61</sup> In a realm that is symbolic of her being and contains vision and hope, Laurie is victorious over her assailant, just as Esther is victorious over the enemy of her people. Laurie’s weapons – her knife, frying pan, knitting needle – sustain the lives of her family, the lives of her community, and ultimately her own life too.

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59 See, for example, the Chinese American novels discussed in Arfaoui 2006.

60 Yergensen 2024b.

61 Hayton 2013, 173.

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## Filmography

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- HALLOWEEN (David Gordon Green, US 2018).
- HALLOWEEN ENDS (David Gordon Green, US 2022).
- HALLOWEEN KILLS (David Gordon Green, US 2021).