



Linnæus University

Sweden

Bachelor's Thesis

Damsel in Command

The Characterization of Beverly Marsh in *It*
and *It Chapter 2*

Author: Tove Almroth

Supervisor: Anne Holm

Examiner: [Niklas Salmose](#)

Term:

Subject: English Literature

Level: Bachelor

Course code: 20EN20E



Abstract

This essay analyzes the character of Beverly Marsh in Andrés Muschietti's *It* and *It Chapter*

2. By using previous research on women in horror, Beverly's character is dissected with regards to sexualization and agency. Both the films contrast the common trope of the weak sexualized woman in horror movies by staying away from over-sexualization and making Beverly an equal to her male counterparts.

Key words

Gender, Women in horror, Beverly Marsh, Andrés Muschietti, Stephen King, *It*, *It Chapter*

Two

Table of contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Women in Horror	8
3. Analyzing Beverly Marsh — Sexualization and Agency	16
3.1. <i>A Dirty Girl: The Sexualization of Beverly</i>	16
3.2. <i>The Only Girl in the Pack: Beverly and Agency</i>	27
4. Conclusion	36
5. Works Cited	38

1. Introduction

The image of the child-murdering supernatural being, Pennywise (or It), with its flaming orange hair and maniacal grin, has traumatized generations. Stemming from the mind of Stephen King, often hailed as “the King of horror”, the character Pennywise originates from the 1986 book *It* and has since been adapted to both the small and the big screen. While the monster is the most recognizable character from the book, miniseries and movies, the plot revolves around seven children and later adults, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Mike Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Ben Hanscom and Stanley Uris, who call themselves ‘The Losers Club’. The complex story is told in two parts, one when the group are children and the other when they are adults, and mainly takes place in Derry, Maine. It follows The Losers Club as they have to defeat the main antagonist It, once as children and again when it returns 27 years later (It returns every 27 years to kill and feed). Paralleling the characters’ journeys through puberty and adulthood, It, able to take on the fear of its chosen victim, brutally murders children and torments the town of Derry. The Losers Club are the only ones able to defeat It through their strong bond and love for each other.

Beverly Marsh is the only female member of The Losers Club, and thus the story’s only main female character. Stephen King has [previously](#) faced criticism regarding his handling of women characters, most notably for his debut novel *Carrie* (Stamp 331), though Beverly Marsh represents a blip in the trend of helpless females, being a female character who overcomes adversity (in the form of abusive partner and father and, of course, Pennywise).

This essay intends to focus on that “Beverly blip” by analyzing the character of Beverly Marsh as portrayed in the two recent films. The 1990 miniseries is significant, however the two recent movies are more culturally relevant, as they are newer and well-received in modern culture (Calfas; Rubin). The contents of the novel cannot be overlooked, as the novel is the source material for the films and *It* is one of King’s most recognizable novels; however, the films are the main focus of this essay.

Despite *It* and *It Chapter Two* (both movies directed by Andrés Muschietti), released in 2017 and 2019 respectively, being works of adaptation, adaptation theory will not be used; instead, a gender studies approach will focus on feminist film studies within the genre of horror. When necessary, the novel will be used as a point of comparison for Beverly’s characterization, but this will only be so as to illustrate certain points pertaining to her character in the films. Notions such as fidelity, differences in medium, and intertextuality will not be discussed, as they are not relevant to this particular discussion about women in horror. Since Beverly is the only main female character, she is constantly contrasted with the main male characters because of her gender. This is of special interest since *It* falls into the horror genre, a genre in which, as Barry Keith Grant puts it, gender is of the utmost importance, being, “like horror itself, both universal and historical, biological and cultural” (7).

Following the introduction, a brief but necessary review of previous works on the topic of women in horror will be given. Most importantly, the works of Carol J. Clover and Laura Mulvey will influence the theoretical lens through which Beverly in *It* and *It*

Chapter Two is viewed. Having established the theoretical framework, Beverly's character will be dissected in two parts: with regard to sexualization and as the only female member of the group. This section will further explore whether or not Beverly is nothing more than a sexual object stalling the story, as is common within the horror genre, and will touch on the fact that while she does not suffer greater violence than her equals, she does suffer from a specific form of violence: domestic. Beverly's abusive relationship with her father remains a constant source of terror for her and influences her later marriage with an equally abusive man, which has effects on her portrayal in the films. Considering that Beverly's gender is constantly setting her apart, either literally or figuratively, from the male characters, it is important to analyze whether this makes her out to be a "lesser" character than her male counterparts. Her gender might also boil her character down to "only" being a woman, with nothing else to distinguish her as an important character in the story, and this will be explored.

As a conclusion, this thesis will take the position that the characterization of Beverly Marsh in the two recent *It* movies is a positive blip in the trend of over-sexualized and helpless female characters in the horror genre.

2. Women in Horror

As Grant aptly put it in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, gender and horror cannot be avoided (7). While it is not the aim of this essay to define gender or horror, an analysis through the lens of gender studies cannot be performed without a brief note on the dominant description for contemporary feminist studies: *postfeminism*. In postfeminism, feminist discourse has established itself within the public sphere, but, according to Margaret Gallagher, it remains conservative (26). The editors of *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender* criticize dominant media commentators who “often claim that feminism largely has achieved its initial aims of equality between men and women” (Carter et al. 1). The image of feminism as “done” is not something shared by feminist scholars. William Brown, for example, writes that the idea that equality has been achieved confuses “equality with homogeneity” (56), and Gallagher states that a large portion of contemporary media discourse “explicitly equates empowerment with sexual assertiveness, buying power, and individual control” (27). Despite this, one thing remains: in the Western world, “feminist perspectives are now fundamentally part of any debate about women’s representation...” (Lumby 607). The Western world does not stand outside feminism, but rather it has been integrated into public dialogue about gender representation in media (Lumby 607). So, as media and gender theory are fundamentally intertwined, much room for new debates and concerns remains (Carter et al. 1).

Moving on to horror, the true subject of the genre is defined by influential theorist Robin Wood as “the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization *represses* or *oppresses*” (Grant 5). Accepting this to be true, where does that position women? Both Carol J. Clover and Laura Mulvey have been very influential within research on women in horror. We may start with Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, which marked the “importance of visual analysis to a feminist theory of culture and meaning” (Jones 3). Mulvey’s theory has its roots in psychoanalysis and from this essay comes the now well-known term “male gaze”. She writes: “[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 60). Writing of Mulvey’s “gaze”, Linda Williams summarizes the two ways in which the dominant male gaze masters the woman: either by endangerment through an active male character (sadistic voyeurism), or by pushing excessive aesthetic perfection onto her body (fetishistic overvaluation) (24).

What Mulvey showed was that female characters were presented for male visual pleasure (Cuklanz 36), and it is this spectacle that causes the female character to “freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation”, thus halting the development of the story (Mulvey 61). Emilio Audissino agrees with Mulvey, and writes: “[t]he female is introduced as a moment of sheer spectacle; she is there to offer the view of her body to the male gaze of the camera” (221). Thus, the female only represents a temporary stop to the narrative, which is set by the male. Perhaps most important to the discussion of Beverly’s role within the story is the notion that female characters function on two levels: “as erotic object for the characters within

the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator... with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (Mulvey 61). Again, returning to Audissino, women are reduced to passive objects for the active male hero’s desires (221). Many feminist scholars have considered the objectification of women in media to be another form of violence against women, as it encourages the public to think of women as less than human (Cuklanz 32).

Now we move on to Clover’s “Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film” (1992), which builds upon Mulvey’s psychoanalytically informed gaze: what Clover ascertains is that this gendered gaze is not as stable as originally thought, but that it is fluid and allows male audiences to identify with the opposite gender (Bragg, “What about the Boys?” 98). The most important character trope to “prove” this for Clover is the “Final Girl”. In short, the Final Girl is the protagonist of the film who survives the horrors she is put through. Intelligence, masculinity, and resourcefulness are some of the characteristics attributed to the Final Girl, but the most important one is that she is not sexually active (Clover 88). The character is made to be sympathetic so that the viewer roots for her as she fights the evil which terrorizes her (McGillvray 12). Beverly cannot be categorized as a Final Girl, for reasons which will be further discussed soon, but Clover’s work is more than just this particular trope. One example is of particular interest: the notion that emotions within horror are also gendered; while women are reduced to crying, cowering and begging, forceful anger belongs to male characters (Clover 98).

Concerning *It*, the most important part of Clover’s work is her concept of violence. According to Clover, the violence targeted at the victims is based on their gender.

While boys die because they make mistakes (i.e. boys choose “wrong” sex or get in the killer’s way), most female characters die simply because they are women. Girls can be killed for making mistakes too, but the *main female character* dies because she is female (Clover 83). In relation to violence against male versus female characters, Clover raises another major point: “[t]he death of a male is always swift... [t]he murders of women, on the other hand, are filmed at close range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length” (84). Clover’s assertion that most boys die because they make mistakes and most girls (always the main one) because they are female is situated within the horror subgenre “slasher” (88), a genre into which *It* admittedly does not fit. However, considering the amount of violence and number of gruesome murders that happen in *It*, discussion about violence is necessary. This is especially pertinent considering the *type* of violence Beverly is put through.

As a counter to Clover’s idea, the conclusion brought forth by Audissino regarding the film *The Final Girls* (2015) could also be applied to *It*; the conclusion that violence is “equal” in the sense that gruesome acts are performed without special treatment based on the gender of the victim (231). Similarly, in her discussion about the film *Martyrs* (2008), Maddi McGillvray states that the movie never “encourages viewers to relish or enjoy its painful scenes” (16). In *Martyrs*, the experiences of the two female leads are explored in a way which does not make a spectacle of their victimization; the film depicts “the very real psychological trauma that comes from being a victim of violence” (McGillvray 16). A quote pertaining to this film is relevant because the fear and violence to which Beverly is subjected in *It* is not because of her gender, it is to a purpose: “[a]lthough the women of these films may

start off vulnerable, they take charge of their situations while also complicating the nature of feminine identity” (McGillvray 20). Erin Mercer, writing in the article “The Difference Between World and Want: Adulthood and the Horrors of History in Stephen King’s *IT*”, states that It is “a shape-shifting entity capable of taking on the guise of whatever its victim fears most” (315). This lets author King and, in turn, director Muschietti explore the underlying structures of patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies present in America (Mercer 324). Furthermore, Mercer writes that facing their worst fears allows the victims to “exorcize their personal demons and those that haunt their hometown” (325-26).

We now come to sexualization, which Emma Renold et al. make a point of noting is something that has happened within the Anglophone West: while the modern moral panic as a reaction to sexual imagery in society (for example, moral panic such as indignation about the impact on children) uses the term “sexualization” freely, the concept itself has been challenged (3). Rosalind Gill concurs with this and writes that the term is too general, bringing intersectionality into the discussion (593). Nevertheless, this term can be useful for discussions such as these, as it exposes an “anthropological problem (intimacy) as a process of problematization” (Janssen 26) along with explaining how women and girls can come to internalize this sexually-objectifying gaze (Tolman et al. 72). Having stated this, it should be noted that the discussion of sexualizing Beverly as a child and as a woman does not deny her character’s sexual agency, nor confuse any sexual expression as evidence of this sexualization. These are two of the core effects that Renold et al. deem to be problematic within the discourse regarding sexualization (4).

Moreover, Renold et al. assert that contemporary discussions regarding children and sexuality lack “[t]he voices of children and how they make sense of their own lives and bodies are conspicuously absent” (4). Instead, the discussions are concerned with an idealized notion of childhood, in which children are innocent and shielded from the world (Kehliy and De Lappe 52). The construct of a completely innocent child is an inherently problematic idea (Gill 592), which does not keep children safe from the harm that can come from living in a sexualized culture (Jackson and Scott 50). Sara Bragg aptly describes this as the spectator becoming more sexualized, the more we insist on the innocent asexual child. She writes: “Describing images of children as pornographic or sexual, and interpreting them ‘through the eyes of a pedophile’, positions us at the potential pedophilic viewers we claim to abhor...” (“Shameless mums” 328). At the same time, the representation of sexuality in media matters to children and young people, as it is a tool for them to make sense of their own sexual identity (Jackson and Scott 50). Therefore, possible harmful representation of children and young people does matter. For adults, on the other hand, sexualization causes women to be perceived as objects; in other words, less than human (Tolman et al. 72). Therefore, it is important to analyze the potential sexualization of female characters (in this case, Beverly Marsh) to see what possible consequences might underline their characterization.

Previous research [within gender studies](#) on King’s work, both adaptations and his writings, has mostly focused on the characters of Carrie White and Wendy Torrance. When discussing the 1974 movie *Carrie*, Shelley Stamp suggests that the struggle between woman and monster is at the core of the film. Referencing theorist Linda Williams, she states that

female characters and the monster in question are analogous in horror (333). In *Carrie* “monstrosity is explicitly associated with menstruation and female sexuality” (Stamp 334). While the onset of puberty is something that is received with a degree of pride by young men (Byal 37), renowned feminist Simone de Beauvoir writes that “menstruation and the primary sexual encounters of women are an unexpected break from the ease of girlhood into the frightening prospects of womanhood” (Byal 37). In Beverly’s case, Mercer suggests that blood represents her deepest fear. She writes: “when her menstrual blood arrives there will be a new form of threat to face from her father” (323). As Beverly enters puberty and begins to become more womanly, her father’s attention becomes even more intense, which heightens her fear of him (Mercer 323).

Wendy Torrance is the main female character from another King classic, *The Shining* (1977). When adapting the novel *The Shining* for the big screen, director Stanley Kubrick felt that the kind of attractive woman King describes would not put up “so long with a self-indulgent and violent loser like Jack [her husband]” (Hornbeck 707). When discussing Wendy, Elizabeth Jean Hornbeck states that actress Shelley Duvall plays the character without any sex appeal (707). The operator and inventor of the Steadicam, Garrett Brown, even went so far as to describe Duvall’s looks as “abusable” (Hornbeck 708). Hornbeck establishes that the harmful stereotype that “women who are beaten stay with their abusers” is persistent in *The Shining* (697). What this stereotype does is to stigmatize abused women, who are implied to “allow” their abuse, either because they fail to defend themselves or even “deserve” their abuse. In reality, women who stay in abusive relationships do so “for a range of economic and

social reasons, not the least of which is the threat of further violence if they attempt to leave the abuser” (Hornbeck 698). Despite what reality looks like, some media representations of domestic violence have taken the side of the abuser and have perpetuated the “right” to blame the victim (Cuklanz 34). As for horror, Hornbeck states that the genre offers audiences, regardless of their gender, more intimate identification with the victims of the abuser (691).

The abusive and incestuous nature of the relationship between Beverly and her father is a constantly recurring theme within the films. Louise Flockhart references compulsory heterosexuality, which creates the fantasy in which a father protects his daughter until she is given, through marriage, to another man who, in turn, will protect her. This is used to exemplify how patriarchal structures “justify” incestuous child abuse, as the father has the right to overlook the “incest taboo and rape his daughter as long as he ultimately does give her away” (Flockhart 72), since the woman is merely an object. Flockhart writes that this hyperbole can be used to illustrate patriarchal oppression, as well as reveal fractures in the “normative structures of the family” (72). Lastly, there are also several characteristics shared by female victims across mainstream culture. Lisa M. Cuklanz writes that “female characters who are victims have usually been depicted as having little agency to help themselves, have few support networks or female friends and family, are often assisted by stronger and more competent males, and are frequently blamed, at least in part, for their own victimization” (33). As we shall see in both *It* movies, the female character overcomes this trope by owning her own actions, realizing her own agency.

3. Analyzing Beverly Marsh — Sexualization and Agency

Section 3.1 will analyze Beverly in the films, in terms of her sexualization by her environment (notably her peers, father and husband), and discuss how she copes and develops throughout the two films, with occasional contrasts and comparisons with the novel. It will also look at how Muschietti portrays this sexualization (and at times consciously makes attempts at mitigating it).

In Section 3.2, Beverly's role as the only girl in the gang is examined. Her emerging strength is charted, including a "blip" added to the film version of the story where she momentarily reverts to the "damsel in distress" trope by being kidnapped, before resuming her role as a strong protagonist. Her achieved self-determination is enhanced by the equality and mutual respect of her relationship with Ben.

3.1. A Dirty Girl: The Sexualization of Beverly

The first encounter with Beverly, played by Sophia Lillis, in the 2017 movie *It* takes place in the girls' bathroom, where Beverly is sitting in one of the stalls smoking, and three girls enter with the intention of bullying her. The main girl, Gretta, asks Beverly if she is alone in the stall, or if she has half of the guys in the school with her. Her deadpan reaction to the taunts of Gretta, shows that this is something she has endured before (*It* 00:12:07-00:12:23). This is the first example of the rumor in Derry that Beverly is a slut or, in other terms, is sleeping around

with a lot of boys. While it is not clear from where this rumor came, its persistence is strong enough even for the adults to have heard of it, exemplified by Eddie's mother, who does not want Eddie to touch her since she is a "dirty girl" (*It* 01:27:03-01:27:15). These rumors diegetically confirm that Beverly is seen by those who ostracize her as a sexual object, despite her young age.

Beverly herself is aware of the rumors surrounding her, as she discusses it with Bill, who defends her and says the Losers Club enjoy her company (*It* 01:02:42-01:03:48); and the persona of a "dirty girl" is something she, only once, uses to her advantage, as follows. Having just met Ben after he had been cut by the crazed bully Henry Bowers, Richie, Stan, Eddie and Bill are at the pharmacy to buy supplies in order to help him. Beverly is also at the pharmacy to buy menstrual products when she encounters the boys and decides to help them acquire the supplies they need, since they have no money to pay for them. In order to distract the pharmacist, Mr. Keene, Beverly flirts with him, telling him that his glasses make him look like Clark Kent and asking to try them on. With glee, Mr. Keene tells her she looks like Lois Lane, insinuating romantic tension between them. As Beverly is about to hand the glasses back to him, she purposely pushes a rack of cigarettes onto the floor as a diversion for the boys to steal the supplies, stealing a pack of cigarettes for herself while Mr. Keene is distracted (*It* 00:37:27-00:38:35). By using the sexual imbalance between her and Mr. Keene, embodying Mulvey's male gaze (60), she manages not only to help the boys, but to procure items for herself. She is actively taking power away from the staring Mr. Keene, as she uses his sexually-objectifying gaze to take power over the situation. One could see this as Beverly

having internalized this sexually-objectifying gaze (Tolman et al. 72), but as Renold et al. mentions, one must stay away from denying a character sexual agency (4): Beverly is merely aware of that others see her as a sexual being.

A scene showing the 2017 film's way of portraying Beverly as a female character is when the group, then consisting of herself, Ben, Bill, Richie, Eddie, and Stan, swim at the quarry. The scene begins with a shot of the boys standing on the edge of the cliff in their white underwear. Bill asks who will be the first to jump off the cliff into the water below and Beverly, having just arrived, answers that she will be the first. She takes off her dress in one swift movement and the boys admire her (*It* 00:42:32-00:43:09). Beverly taking off her dress and starting to run to the edge is shot in slow-motion, which could be seen as a way to get the viewer to focus on Beverly's underage body. However, what the audience is experiencing is the boys' admiration of Beverly. They are teenagers, at the onset of puberty, and they are not shielded from their sexualities. This might reinforce Bragg's statement that insisting upon the asexual child only further sexualizes the viewer ("Shameless mums" 328). However, the way Muschietti frames the shot of Beverly is arguably not intended to invoke sexual desire. What the boys see Beverly as is beautiful, not as a sexual object; this impression is reinforced by the next shot, where the boys follow after Beverly, jump in the water, and the audience is shown the group playing in the water as equals (*It* 00:43:09-00:44:22).

The next scene, is of particular interest for the discussion about sexualizing children. Beverly is sunbathing in her underwear, lying down on her towel wearing

sunglasses. All of the boys are staring at her with their mouths half open. As Beverly turns her head toward them, they all try to act like they were not staring at her (*It* 00:44:22-00:44:50). Gill previously stated that the notion of a completely innocent child is problematic (592) and here we see evidence of the boy's interest in Beverly. Beverly takes back the gaze from the boys, as they immediately look away when she looks back at them. She also takes the time to let her eyes linger on Bill (*It* 00:44:50-00:44:53), meaning that she is not without romantic or sexual feelings, therefore being equal to her peers.

One is left to wonder, though, if the lyrics of the music playing from the boombox are not slightly problematic. During a shot of Beverly lying down, the lyrics of the song go: "girls are scantily clad, showing body; a chick walks by, you wish you could sex her" (*It* 00:44:37-00:44:42). While the boys staring at Beverly is something happening within the story, these lyrics, bring a sexual aspect to Beverly's sunbathing. The lyrics of the song are a very small part of the film, which, other than that particular instance, does not non-diegetically sexualize Beverly as a child or as an adult. Had the overtly sexual lyrics played a greater part in the scene, it could have affected the way young people view their own sexual identities, as Jackson and Scott established (50). Moreover, the way Beverly is being portrayed in this scene is distinctly different from her portrayal in the novel. King repeatedly describes Beverly's underage body in a sexual manner, perhaps most notably in another chapter, the controversial sewer passage; when the group cannot find their way out of the sewers after their first battle with It, Beverly suggests that they strengthen their bond again by letting each of the boys take turns having intercourse with her (King 1303). King describes

the group sex in detail over six pages and it definitely sexualizes Beverly's underage body (1309-1315).

In *It Chapter 2*, where Beverly is now an adult, her appearance is not over-sexualized. She is not wearing more revealing clothes than her male counterparts and the camera does not focus excessively on her body. The only time she appears to be over-sexualized is in a painting, which will be touched upon later, hanging in her and her husband Tom's home, but since this painting is emblematic of the abusive nature of the relationship, it is merely another factor which rightfully demonizes Tom. Actually, the person who shows the most skin in the 2019 film is Stan, lying naked and dead in the bathtub after his suicide (*It Chapter Two* 00:16:52-00:17:55). While this is obviously not an attempt to sexualize Stan, it is an interesting point that Beverly, the sole female of the group, is not shown nude, as we might expect from the conventions of horror movies. In this particular case, Stan falls into the category of sadistic voyeurism previously described by Williams (24). While they are bathing in the quarry as adults at the end of the 2019 film, they all swim fully-clothed (*It Chapter Two* 02:28:54-02:32:06). This further strengthens the argument that Beverly is not over-sexualized in the films. As sexualization can cause female characters to appear less than human (Tolman et al. 72), steering away from this ensures that Beverly is a fleshed-out character.

The most important aspect of Beverly's relation to sexualization is her relationship with her father. Their tense relationship is apparent from the first scene in the 2017 film between the two. Having helped the boys at the pharmacy, Beverly tries to enter her home without her father noticing, because of the menstrual products she has stolen. Mr. Al

Marsh surprises Beverly by blocking the way to her room and taking her bag from her. In it, he finds the tampons, smiles, and grips her head, sniffing her hair and saying “Tell me you’re still my little girl”. With tears in her eyes, Beverly answers “Yes, daddy” and is then allowed to enter her room (*It* 00:40:45-00:41:30). This scene establishes two points: her father’s sexual desires are closely tied to her going through puberty, and are symbolized through her hair. As Byal stated, puberty is usually received with a degree of pride for young men (37), but for Beverly her period merely heightens the terror of her father. This can be compared to *Carrie* where, as Stamp put it, menstruation is directly linked to monstrosity (334).

The implied sexually violent tension between Beverly and her father reaches a blatantly violent peak when Beverly is trying to leave the house without her father noticing. Unbeknownst to her, he has found a postcard with a haiku which Ben anonymously wrote for her, and confronts her about her group of friends as well as the poem. Holding her hand obsessively, he says that he has heard rumors about her in town: “Sneaking around all summer long with a bunch of boys. The only girl in the pack.” She defends herself by explaining that they are just her friends (*It* 01:34:55-01:36:07). As ominous music grows louder, they share this dialogue:

MR. MARSH: I know what’s in boys’ minds when they look at you, Bevvie. I know all too well.

BEVERLY: My hand...

MR. MARSH: Are you doing womanly things down in the woods with those boys?

BEVERLY: No, no, no, nothing. You don't have to worry. I promise. (*It* 01:36:07-01:36:28)

Beverly finally breaks free when she rips her hand from her father's grip and a chase ensues, and even though Beverly is physically weaker than Mr. Marsh, she manages to overpower him by kicking him in the crotch as he is pinning her down to the floor, asking her if the other boys know she is his little girl. She runs to hide in the bathroom, where she fully overpowers her father by hitting him in the head with the heavy top of the toilet (*It* 01:36:28-01:37:57). It is telling of Beverly's own energy and agency that she takes the initiative to escape the threatened violence by returning that violence, contrasting with the classic domestic abuse trope as discussed by Cuklanz, where female characters are often depicted with little to no agency to help themselves (33).

Mr. Marsh is not made out to be a sympathetic character, as some abusers can be (Cuklanz 34). What is interesting is the addition of Beverly's mother's death. In the novel, her mother is alive (King 483), but in the films, as is confirmed in *It Chapter 2*, her mother has committed suicide. During a particularly distressing flashback, her father tells Beverly that her mother killed herself because she was embarrassed to be her mother. He says that she looks like her mother, but is nothing like her. After spraying Beverly and himself profusely with her mother's perfume, he says "You know that I would never hurt you. You know that, don't you?" The scene ends with Mr. Marsh asking Beverly if she will always be his little girl, to which she answers "Always". As the memory plays out, the camera cuts to Beverly as an adult, watching it (*It Chapter Two* 01:03:07-01:04:45). This adds some background to the

incestuous desires Mr. Marsh feels for his daughter. By stating that Beverly and her mother looked similar, the lust could be linked to Mr. Marsh's grief over the loss of his wife. Going back to what Flockhart wrote about compulsory heterosexuality and incest (72), Mr. Marsh could be transferring his notion of a relationship between a man and a woman from him and his wife, to him and Beverly. This obviously does not justify the abuse he puts Beverly through, nor his sexual desires for his daughter, nor does Muschietti, through the films, try to argue that it does — which he might have done, in another flashback sequence for example.

In the 2017 movie, Beverly's hair is the main symbol of the incestuous overtones of her relationship with her father, which is displayed in two scenes. The first one is when Beverly cuts her hair short. During the first interaction between Beverly and her father he plays with her hair, making her visibly uncomfortable. In the next scene an obviously distressed Beverly is standing by the bathroom sink with scissors lying on top of it. Distraught, she cuts the first lock of her hair; she says "This is what you did" and repeatedly cuts her hair (*It* 00:41:36-00:42:21). The connection between cutting her hair and wanting to avoid the unwanted sexual attention from her father is clear and could be seen as, returning to Grant referencing Robin Wood (5), Beverly trying to repress the traumatic experience of dealing with her father's desires. When the group meet at the quarry the next day, Bill tries to compliment her, but he stutters and Ben has to take over, saying that her hair is beautiful. This is a compliment Beverly does not know who to receive, since it is so closely tied to her father. She stiffly thanks Ben for the compliment and then looks down on the ground (*It*

00:45:31-00:45:41). For the boys, from that moment on, Beverly's hair is just a part of what she looks like; it does not affect their love for her, and it is not mentioned by the boys again.

The second instance happens the first time *It* terrorizes Beverly in the 2017 film. After the day spent at the quarry, Beverly notices the poem left by (unbeknownst to her) Ben. In order to read it in private, she goes to the bathroom, where her genuine happiness at reading the haiku is interrupted by eerie whispers coming from the drain. She quietly sneaks past her father, sleeping in the living room, to get measuring tape to investigate the noise. After a tense moment of seeing how far down she can get the measuring tape to go, hair suddenly comes out and grips her by the wrist. More hair follows, gripping her legs, neck, and face, pulling her face closer to the drain. A massive amount of blood sprays up from the drain, covering the entire bathroom in red and drenching Beverly from head to toe. The hair lets go of Beverly and she crawls back into the corner furthest away from the sink. As she is crying and cowering in the corner, her father enters. Because of the way *It's* powers work, Mr. Marsh cannot see the blood covering the bathroom and Beverly, so his reaction upon seeing his daughter so distressed is kneeling down in front of her and saying "Why'd you do this to your hair? Makes you look like a boy" (*It* 00:50:50-00:55:26). That is her father's only comment on her short hair and that imposes his own ideas of what femininity is supposed to be, in other words, that a girl is supposed to have long hair. While Beverly cutting her hair was a powerful statement on Beverly's part, it is still not enough to shield her from her father's sexual desires, as their next interaction is the aforementioned scene which leads to their physical fight.

As an adult in the 2019 film, Beverly's relationship with her husband Tom mirrors the one she had with her father. The first scene in which adult Beverly, played by Jessica Chastain, appears is where she is waking up from a nightmare and receiving a call from Mike. As Beverly is packing and getting ready to leave, she explains the meaning behind Mike's phone call. Tom says that she does not have to explain herself to him, and gives off the impression of being a loving husband. That changes as Tom's abusive side quickly surfaces when he wrongly suspects from the phone call that Beverly is on her way to have sex with another man (*It Chapter Two* 00:18:00-00:20:20).

In the exchange between them, Beverly tries to de-escalate the situation by kissing Tom and keeping her voice even, assuming the submissive position of the dynamic. Tom reacts by choking her and she breaks free from his grip by scratching his face; Tom ignores her immediate apology, and hits her with a leather belt (the marks left on her arms by the belt will be visible for the rest of the film). Tom then punches her in the face and she lands on her back on the bed. As he starts to take his shirt off, a sexual advance on Tom's part, Beverly seizes the opportunity, kicks him and smashes a picture frame into his face. When he is down on the ground, she grabs her bag and as she runs down the stairs Tom shouts after her "You're nothing without me! You know that right. Tell me I'm wrong" (*It Chapter Two* 00:20:20-00:21:07)

At this point, the camera reveals a huge painting of Bev and Tom hanging on the wall above the stairs. In the painting, Bev is sitting in a chair wearing a very low-cut dress that shows her cleavage. Tom looms over her, a hand on her shoulder, and he is standing in

the shadows (*It Chapter Two* 00:20:56-00:21:01), implying a fixity to the sexually violent and abusive situation in an otherwise opulent and respectable-seeming home.

Like her father, Tom is not made out to be sympathetic to the audience; the mention of Beverly perhaps having previously cheated on Tom is something which can be easily attributed to Tom's own paranoia, and most likely did not happen. In the novel, the abusive nature of Beverly and Tom's relationship is discussed in greater detail, and the connection between her father and Tom is made explicit as Beverly leaves him. King writes: "Time after time she had seen herself leaving him, leaving Tom's tyranny as she had left that of her father..." (142). [The film only mentions Tom once more, a change from his more major involvement in the plot of the novel, ending with his violent death at the hands of It \(King 1353\).](#) Within the context of *It Chapter Two* Beverly flourishes as a character and it allows for a more intimate identification with a domestic abuse victim, which Hornbeck stated was often the case with the horror genre (691).

One quote from the novel shines a different light on her father's sexual desires: that It influenced her father enough to bring his desires to the forefront of his mind. King writes: "It might only have used the tools that had been there just lying around waiting to be picked up" (1096). In the 2017 film, the connection between Mr. Marsh and It is subtly revealed by the first shot of the home being that of a clown. The atmosphere of the scene is clearly meant to be threatening, as it is set in the poorly lit run-down apartment where Beverly and her father live. Furthermore, the tv-program in the background has a woman talking about the sewers and how it is a fun place to play in. This show is the same one which will later

influence the bully Henry Bowers to murder his own father. Mr. Marsh appears in front of Beverly as though he has been waiting for her return and the scene is accompanied by menacing music (*It* 00:40:45-00:41:30). During a later encounter with It in 2019's *It Chapter 2*, It taunts Beverly by saying, in a distorted voice: "I was always daddy's little girl. What about you? Are you still his little girl, Beverly?" (*It Chapter Two* 01:07:50-01:08:02), which harks back to the violence we have seen from Mr. Marsh.

3.2. The Only Girl in the Pack: Beverly and Agency

In the 2017 film, Beverly is kidnapped by It, temporarily reducing her to a "damsel in distress" (*It* 01:39:29-01:42:16). In Audissino's terms, Beverly becomes a "helpless girl who is abducted by some monster and has to be saved by the fearless male hero" (222). This is a major shift from the novel, where Beverly is not kidnapped, but is naturally with the group when they go to face It for the first time (King 1186).

Clover asserts that the main female lead is often killed for being female (83), and one gets the feeling this is why Beverly was chosen to be kidnapped. Bill is the leader of the group and Mike is the one who will stay in Derry and eventually bring them back, making them viable options for the kidnapping. It could be because of Beverly's previous attack on It in its lair, a house on Neibolt Street; or that she is somewhat the "heart" of the group. Both Bill and Ben have a crush on Beverly, and the others love her too as friends. Beverly is the

one who understands that they have to fight *It* together, in their argument about putting their lives at risk after the battle in Neibolt Street (*It* 01:27:48-01:29:13).

It is worth mentioning that in the 2017 film, up until the point when she is kidnapped, Beverly proves herself to be equally as active as the boys. This is also true of her taking all the initiatives after the kidnapping, making the abduction a "reverse blip" in the film's own (intended) reversal of the common "damsel in distress" motif. For example, during the rock fight between the Losers and their bullies, Beverly is the one who throws the first rock at the main bully, Henry Bowers, saving Mike from Henry's violence. Before the fight erupts, Henry taunts Beverly, grabbing his crotch, saying "You losers are trying too hard. She'll do you. You just gotta ask nicely - like I did", causing Ben to scream with rage and ignite the real fight (*It* 01:05:59-01:06:21). While at first glance this might be seen as Ben taking over the active role that Beverly had as she threw the first rock, her engagement in the rest of the fight dismisses that thought. Ben's decision to defend Beverly is motivated by his own crush on her, not her lack of ability to fend for herself (*It* 01:06:21-01:07:03).

There are several other times where Beverly is shown to be equally as brave or braver than the rest of the boys; most importantly in the 2017 film during their first visit to the entrance to *It*'s lair in the house on Neibolt Street. Bill intends to go inside to defeat *It* alone, but the others follow him and they discuss what to do outside the house. Stan says they should have someone keep watch and Beverly is the only one who does not volunteer to stay outside. Interestingly enough, though, Beverly is not part of the trio, consisting of Eddie, Richie, and Bill, who actually enter the house. Richie mentions that they drew straws in order to decide

who went inside the house, but since Beverly actively wanted to join Bill, it makes little sense as to why she is not among the first to explore it (*It* 01:14:58-01:17:13). Bill, Richie, and Eddie find themselves in the empty kitchen of the house after having been tormented by It; before the creature turns its attention away from the hurt Eddie to attack Richie and Bill, Beverly saves the pair by shoving an iron pole through its eye (*It* 01:25:33-01:25:40). This is a heroic moment, showing how strong Beverly is and that she is as equally capable of using her strengths as the rest of the group. We can contrast this with the novel, where Beverly's heroic moment is somewhat overshadowed by King's description of how Beverly's blouse pops open as she shoots It with a silver ball from a slingshot (1054). King goes to great lengths to describe Beverly's undeveloped breasts (1056), which reduces this otherwise powerful moment on Beverly's part to an excuse to sexualize her further.

When the boys find the lair where Beverly has been kidnapped, Ben is the one who gently pulls her down from the air and tries to bring her back to consciousness, saying her name and shaking her; however, he gets no reaction. In his desperation, he gives her a hug and then kisses her. While the other boys lightheartedly exclaim their disgust, the kiss works and Beverly is brought back. Her first words, "January embers", refer back to the haiku Ben wrote her. He answers with the next line, "My heart burns there too", before Richie and Mike join the pair in a hug (*It* 01:52:52-01:54:23).

Having Beverly brought back from the deadlights by a kiss adds to the trope of the "damsel in distress". This kiss also somewhat halts the progression of the plot. As Mulvey writes, the purpose of a female character is often to "freeze the flow of action in moments of

erotic contemplation” (61). Although this tender kiss can hardly be defined as erotic, it is a narrative pause for Ben to save Beverly; an active male character saving a passive female character.

This is immediately dispelled, however, by Beverly taking command of the situation during the final battle. They all, Beverly included, fight It physically using rods, chains or their own bodies. All the while, It is transforming and adapting its face to match the fears of each person whom it is fighting, and in Beverly’s case she is confronted with her father’s face. It smiles at her and says “Hey Bevvie. Are you still my little -”, but before it can finish, she shoves a rod down its throat (interesting as a sexually-toned violent moment on the part of Beverly, incidentally). This *coup de grace* causes It to cower back into the well from which it came, thus it is Beverly who delivers the final blow. As it retreats and suffers, Bill says “That’s why you didn’t kill Beverly. ‘Cause she wasn’t afraid. And we aren’t either.” (*It* 01:59:49-02:01:38).

It can be established that, apart from being kidnapped, Beverly suffers an equal amount of violence as the rest of the group, but there is a slight difference in the nature of the violence Beverly endures. The torture It puts her through is connected to the sexual desires of her own father. During physical fights with It, there is little to no difference in the way she suffers alongside her peers, but having Pennywise manifest itself through her father’s desires impacts her character differently. Mercer states that Beverly’s fear of her father’s sexual interest in her manifests itself as blood (323). As stated above, Beverly has tried to confront this fear by cutting her hair, and It, in turn, uses hair and blood during its first time terrorizing

Beverly. However, the second movie brings closure to Beverly's trauma. When the group are degrading It to death, it changes its face to Beverly's father for a moment, but gets no reaction from anyone in the group (*It Chapter Two* 02:23:23-02:23:27). This symbolizes that It has lost its power over them and that Beverly has overcome the trauma from her relationship with her father.

In the 2019 movie, while they are collecting their artifacts in order to perform a ritual which Mike has told them they need to enact in order to defeat Pennywise, Beverly's scene is no different from that of the other Losers. It contains equally as much horror and is equally as important to the narrative as the others'. The scene does not slow down the action, nor stop the narrative in order for Beverly to be used as an erotic object. To find her artifact, Beverly goes to her father's old apartment; a clearly traumatic place for Beverly to return to. The woman now living there is Mrs. Kersh, and she invites Beverly to have a look around the apartment. Behind a loose board in her old room, Beverly finds that her secret stash is still there: her necklace, a pack of old cigarettes and the postcard with Ben's poem on it. The scene reaches its climax as Mrs. Kersh transforms into a twisted version of an old lady; gray hair standing up from its head, exaggerated facial features, and, most importantly, it is now nude (*It Chapter Two* 01:08:09-01:08:23).

It is interesting that It chooses to manifest itself as an old lady for Beverly, since, as Stamp asserted, female characters and the monsters of horror are often analogous (333). Taking the novel into account, it is revealed, near the end of the book, that Its final physical form is female (King 1270), while It in the films appears as its clown ego

“Pennywise” and is referred to by the pronouns he/him. The only exceptions are once here as the old lady and for one moment when It presents as Beverly towards Ben (*It Chapter Two* 01:22:13-01:24:04).

Returning back to the 2019 film where Beverly’s strength manifests itself as anger, and is also revealed to be transferable, if Beverly wishes to bestow it. Her strength as anger appears throughout one scene when, on the stairs before the door to the house on Neibolt Street, she reacts to Bill’s attempted heroism at demanding to go it alone, ”but I can’t ask you to do this”, by picking up a pole and saying sternly: “Well, we’re not asking you either” (*It Chapter Two* 01:48:38-01:48:48), once again proving her agency in taking control of her own decisions. When they enter the house, It separates the group so that Beverly, Mike, and Ben are together in one room. Beverly reacts to a reflected image of It carving ”Home at last” into Ben’s stomach by smashing the mirror with her pole, baring her teeth in anger. Her action saves Ben and they discover nothing was carved into his flesh (*It Chapter Two* 01:50:22-01:51:50). This scene forms a stark contrast to the inaction and terror of Eddie in the other room, where the spider-legged head of Stan is attacking Richie. Ben is the one who finally stabs the head, saving Richie, but it was Eddie’s non-action that created the situation in the first place (*It Chapter Two* 01:52:55-01:53:41). Before entering the lair, Eddie has a breakdown and Beverly offers him her pole. She says “Hey, here. Take it. It kills monsters.” Eddie asks if it does and Bev says that it does as long as you believe in it (*It Chapter Two* 01:57:59-01:59:02). Beverly transfers some of her strength to Eddie in the form of the pole, which he later uses to save Richie (*It Chapter Two* 02:18:16-02:18:50). Instead of being the

classic version of a crying and cowering woman, which Clover mentions (98), Beverly actively uses her strength to help Eddie fight his demons.

The relationship between Beverly and Ben deserves some attention, especially as the final battle of the 2019 film has resonance with what we have just discussed about Beverly's assumption and dispensation of her power. This relationship is shown to define Ben as much as it does Beverly. The haiku he writes for her is constantly recurring and something very important for both of them. To perform the ritual they believe will defeat It for good, Mike instructs the others to collect artifacts to burn while in Its lair. Beverly's artifact is the postcard with the haiku from Ben on it, meaning that it is connected to Ben. This is not problematic (which would be the case if Beverly's artifact was defined by love and Ben's was something material to the fight, say, the club he intended to hurt It with in the 2017 film (*It* 01:55:53-01:56:22)), since Ben's artifact is the page from his yearbook which Beverly signed, showing that he is as much in love with her as she is with him; there is an equality of feeling in the choice of their artifacts.

In the final battle, the members of the Losers Club are separated and transported by It to defining moments in their respective past lives. Ben is thrown into their old clubhouse, as Beverly falls through a void to the bathroom cubicle she was in at the beginning of the first movie. Beverly desperately tries to open the door to get out of the cubicle when there is heavy knocking on the door; faces from Beverly's past with Pennywise's yellow eyes taunt her and try to get into the cubicle, while soil starts to fill the clubhouse, burying Ben alive. Pennywise tells Ben that he will die alone, this being his greatest fear (*It Chapter Two*

02:12:45-02:12:59). The terror both Ben and Beverly feel is matched by the other and the intensity of each scene is equal.

As soil fills the clubhouse and blood fills the cubicle, it seems Ben can hear Beverly's despair and the banging of the door. In an effort to save her, Ben shouts that he loves her. At the same time, enough blood has filled the cubicle for Beverly to begin to struggle to keep her head above the surface. Pennywise is now wearing her father's face, repeatedly shouting the question "Are you still my little girl?" Beverly musters strength enough from hearing Ben's voice to kick the door shut, severing the four fingers that her father had managed to slip inside the stall, as she says "Not anymore". However, she immediately loses her grip and falls in the blood again. With his last bit of strength, Ben screams the haiku he wrote for her at the top of his lungs, which gives her the power to finally kick the door open, only to see Ben sinking into the dirt. With massive access of strength, she reaches down and grabs his wrist, pulling him up from the dirt and falling back into its lair (*It Chapter Two* 02:12:14-02:15:24). Beverly and Ben have given each other the strength to hold on, and ultimately it is Beverly who saves them both. Here, Beverly is the active character, saving Ben, as opposed to during her kidnapping where she was the damsel in distress.

After the final victorious battle with It, the survivors return to the quarry in which they swam as children — significant as this was the location where the group (apart from Mike) first formed — and again, Beverly is the first to jump off the cliff into the water (*It Chapter Two* 02:28:54-02:29:30). The conclusion to Beverly's story is that she has found peace with herself and, incidentally, a good man who loves her. We see evidence of this

fulfillment during the final scene of the movie, when the audience is shown what has become of the Losers. The scene is narrated by Stan, reading his letter which was sent posthumously to the Losers; as Stan says “And if you find someone worth holding on to, never ever let them go”, Ben and Beverly appear together on a boat with a dog. Beverly says she had the most beautiful dream, and the final shot of their scene is that of a smiling Beverly (*It Chapter Two* 02:36:36-02:36:50). As McGillvray wrote about the female characters in the film *Martyrs*, Beverly has grown to take charge of her situation (20).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to analyze [the character of Beverly Marsh](#) in Andrés Muschietti's *It* and *It Chapter 2*. By using previous research on the topic of women in horror, along with research done on the works of Stephen King, a "Beverly blip" has been identified, a contrast to the "damsel in distress" trope. Unlike the scrutiny given to two of King's most notable female characters, Carrie White and Wendy Torrance, there has been a significant lack of exploration done on Beverly Marsh, the only main female character in *It*. By paying close attention to both the diegetic and non-diegetic events that affect Beverly as a character, some conclusions have been drawn as follows: In general, this thesis concludes that the characterization of Beverly Marsh in the two recent *It* movies is a positive blip in the trend of over-sexualized and helpless female characters in the horror genre.

In particular, in Section 3.1, we have discussed the sexualization of Beverly by her peers in school, by the community of Derry and by her father and husband, and contrasted this with the perception of her friends in the Losers Club as an unsexualized, beloved and beautiful equal. The films portray her as a person who combats the hostile sexual perceptions of her environment and wins her sexuality for herself, swimming against the common trope of the helpless female character in horror movies. It is noted that Muschietti's portrayal contributes much to this delivery of the Beverly character to the audience of the films, fighting somewhat against the source material of the book.

Furthermore, Section 3.2 has analyzed Beverly's growing role as chief protagonist in the struggle, both against her past and against the more physical danger of Pennywise. It has been noted that, apart from one moment where lip-service has been paid to the "damsel in distress" trope by the addition of a kidnapping scene into the plot of the first film, the curve of her increasing initiative and strength is seen to be almost uninterrupted, to the point where towards the end of the final film, she is able to grant strength and power to others. We also touch upon the emergence of her ability to love and be loved in equal measure, despite the traumas of her childhood and marriage.

Stephen King's works and the adaptations based upon them are always a fruitful base for analyses, since they offer multi-faceted and vast plots and characters to be explored. In the future, a close-reading of Beverly Marsh focusing only on the novel *It* would be desirable, as little to no previous research has been carried out on this very important King female character. Another character worthy of dissection is Mike Hanlon, as he is the only black character of the group. Critical race theory with a specific focus on the Magical Negro trope could be used to place Mike Hanlon amongst King's relatively limited repertoire of black characters. A further avenue of study might be the occurrence and character of female monsters in printed and visual media; the novel *It* reveals the creature to be female, while the two films took it upon themselves to portray It as male.

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