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Of Monsters and Mothers: Representations of Motherhood in 'Alien'

Released in 1979, director Ridley Scott's film *Alien* is renowned as one of the few science fiction films that surpasses most horror films in its power to terrify an audience. The film centers on the crew of the spaceship 'Nostromo', and how the introduction of an unknown alien life form wreaks havoc on the ship. The eponymous *Alien* individually murders each member of the crew, aside from the primary antagonist Ripley, who manages to escape. Interestingly, the film uses subtle representations of motherhood in order to create a truly scary effect. These representations are incredibly interesting to study, as they tie in to various existing archetypes surrounding motherhood and the concept of the 'monstrous feminine'.

In her essay 'Alien and the Monstrous Feminine', Barbara Creed discusses the various notions that surround motherhood. First, she writes about the "ancient archaic figure who gives birth to all living things" (Creed 131). Essentially, she discusses the great mother figures of the mythologies of different cultures—Gaia, Nu Kwa, Mother Earth (Creed 131). These characters embody the concept that mothers are nurturing, loving, and caring. Traditionally, stories, films, and other forms of material reiterate and r mothers in this nature.

However, there are many notable exceptions to this representation. For example, the primary antagonist in many Brothers Grimm stories are the evil step-mother, a character

completely devoid of the maternal warmth and nurturing character of the traditional mother. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Kali is worshipped as the mother of the universe. However, she is portrayed not as a loving generative figure, but as a monstrous, destructive force capable of destroying the universe at once. In fact, monstrous females are popular choices for evil, horrifying characters as they build on the primal fear of childbirth, pregnancy, and sex.

Alien builds on this representation by choosing to portray motherhood in a negative light, quite unlike the traditional representations of mothers. Motherhood in *Alien* is not the generative force of the traditional mother, but a destructive force that wreaks havoc in the universe the story is set in. Describing this phenomenon, Creed writes that "In horror films such as *Alien*, we are given a representation of the female genitals and the womb as uncanny—horrific objects of dread and fascination" (Creed 135). Interestingly, the film employs yonic symbolism as a means to develop an atmosphere of horror. Unlike the traditional phallic symbolism that represents power and dominance, phallic symbolism in *Alien* (such as the very obviously phallic looking alien that bursts out from Kane's stomach) is overpowered by the imagery that resembles the female body.

Why do these visual representations of the female body cause fear? "'Alien is a rape movie with male victims,' explains David McIntee, author of the *Alien* study *Beautiful Monsters*. 'And it also shows the consequences of that rape: the pregnancy and birth. It is a film that plays, very deliberately, with male fears of female reproduction'" (Brooks). The alien bursting out of Kane's chest, a very gruesome portrayal of male pregnancy, is very blatantly a reiteration of these fears. Creed describes a plethora of horrific maternal symbolism riddled in the film, writing about the toothed yonic mouth of the "oral-sadistic mother" that is the murderous alien

creature that slowly picks off each crew member (Creed 138). The escape shuttle, which Ripley makes her getaway from the unsafe *Nostromo* on, is reminiscent of a child exiting the womb. Even 'Mother', the ship's navigational computer system, turns out to be malevolent, leading the crew to their doom. According to Creed, these representations are the "phallic mother" whose mission is to "destroy all life", in line with the concept of the monstrous feminine (Creed 139). This symbolic imagery substantiates the monstrous feminine trope that is extremely evident throughout *Alien*.

Another striking aspect of *Alien* is the striking portrayal of childbirth and sex as a horrifying experience. In the article "Son of a Bitch': Feminism, Humanism, and Science in 'Alien.'", Kavanaugh describes the three prominent birth scenes in the film:

The first is the lingering exploration of the inner body of the spaceship--and the ship is the computer is Mother-- by the first-person camera that implicates the viewer as I/eye; this ends with a long tracking shot down the smooth, clean electronic corridor into an inner chamber, where six curiously unsexed bodies slowly come to life. The second birth scene--more a conception--involves two men and a woman collectively imaged as three clumsy spermlike figures entering the vaginal opening between the upstretched "legs" of an alien spaceship. Entering a corridor that exudes the ooze of biology, they establish an effective visual trope: the

confusion of organic and mechanical textures which gives the alien his camouflage [. . .]
Finally, the particularly horrifying confusion of the sexual gynecological with the
gastrointestinal is patched onto the life-death, male-female confusions as Kane dies in
agony enduring the forced "birth" of the razor-toothed phallic monster that gnaws its
way through his stomach into the light. (Kavanaugh 93).

Kavanaugh's description of these three 'births' clearly display how central the theme of
childbirth is to the film. This is especially evident in the third birth, where the phallic symbolism
of the 'born' alien combined with the grotesque blood and chest bursting embodies the fear of
childbirth. However, Creed notes that the "alien is more than a phallus; it is also coded as a
toothed vagina, the monstrous-feminine as the cannibalistic mother" (Creed 140). In fact, she
makes the very important point that *Alien* is largely an exploration of the maternal body as a
foreign object (Creed 140). The film essentially plays on many of the horrors we, as a society,
associate with childbirth, and by displaying births in unorthodox, strange ways, pulls audiences
out of their comfort zone into darker parts of the mind.

Alien is notable for its use of images that evoke horrific notions regarding motherhood
and pregnancy, and it is this very powerful utilization of these ideas that makes *Alien* a truly
terrifying film to watch. Extremely fascinating is its use of female dominance and power in a
genre that is almost entirely dominated by men. While *Alien* does portray motherhood and the
female body in a truly terrifying fashion, it also portrays a strong, leading female character
Ripley, who counters the horrific antagonistic monstrous-feminine powers. These recurring
themes make *Alien* an incredibly enlightening film to watch keeping sexuality and gender in
mind.

Bibliography

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