

Red Monsters and Mythic Villains: Redefining Menstruation and Girlhood in *Carrie* and *Turning Red*

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Abstract: Beliefs surrounding menstruation and myth are woven together in two films prevalent in the world of adolescent media: Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and Domee Shi's *Turning Red* (2022). Carrie's experience with menstruation highlights the harm of period stigma, specifically with an emphasis on religious myths surrounding menstruation. These myths prevent Carrie from having the proper education of her body but also redefines menstruation as the core of her villainy- accenting the societal anxieties about female bodily autonomy and power. Myth flows within *Turning Red*'s fantasy plot, as the main mythic element is the women of the Mei's family turning into giant red pandas—a metaphor for puberty. Transformation is portrayed as a burden but also a source of empowerment, as Mei finds community within her friends, family, and herself. A push for a stronger and safer community for menstruators and young girls lies at the core of this discussion, calling for positive representation of menstruation for all gender identities. Through the characters of Carrie and Mei, menstruation and girlhood are emphasized as experiences that not only need but demand a positive and educated community. In other words, as Mei Lee states "I'm thirteen! Deal with it!" (*Turning Red*).

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When Meilin Lee (Rosalie Chiang) screams out the line "I'm a gross red monster!" in the film *Turning Red* (Domee Shi, 2022), she enters a conversation that spans much farther and wider than audiences could imagine. This conversation takes place within a specific ideology of girlhood in which young girls are taught that the changing of their bodies will make them grotesque. Menstruation is offered as the catalyst for this monstrous change within *Turning Red* as the fear of puberty is used to propel the film's plot. The use of horror tropes to portray the transformation from girlhood to adolescence that menstruation signals is best highlighted by examining *Turning Red* in conversation with the explicit horror of *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976). Both films offer a unique outlook on the marginalization of girlhood and menstruation through the terror triggered by the girl's transforming body. While *Carrie* reinforces menstrual myths, *Turning Red* reframes them yet the two still emphasize the ramifications of myths surrounding menstruation—whether stemming from religion, family, or society. As Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) and Meilin (called Mei for short) mirror each other through experiences with the "beastly" transformations of their bodies, menstruation becomes a playground for discussions of why powerful menstruating bodies are deemed monstrous. Ultimately, both

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Carrie and Mei gain power by becoming menstruating teenage girls – though Carrie succumbs to this power, while Mei is able to harness it.

Within the horror genre classic *Carrie*, the first instance of fear and shock enters the film as Carrie White starts her period for the first time. The connection between horror and menstruation continues throughout the film, as a constant symbol of Carrie's turn into both victimhood and villainy. Experiencing this change places both Carrie and Mei into the "victim" and "villain" categories. Indeed, both films portray periods as an attack on the young, innocent girls; this attack becomes a catalyst for what turns them both into "monsters". Both characters are shown in this villainous light for most of their films. Girlhood is also under attack through this association between bodily transformation and terror, as young girls viewing these films are being presented with the idea that girlhood might equal monstrosity. Menstruation is not an unattachable experience of girlhood, as many girls and women do not experience periods—but transformation is an unattachable experience of girlhood. A beastly portrayal of change in girlhood can produce negative beliefs surrounding any feature of girlhood whether it simply be the heightening of emotions. This ultimately tells audiences that girlhood is something not only to fear but something to detest. Once Carrie has experienced her first transformation in the film she continues to transform until ultimately, she becomes a bloody, murderous demon. Mei, however, gets to work through the experiences and emotions she feels—which should be unsurprising to audiences as this is a Disney PIXAR film. Transformation is portrayed as a burden for Mei but also a source of empowerment, as Mei finds community within her friends, family, and herself.

The topic of community is at the very core of the conversation that occurs when putting these two films together on menstruation and girlhood— more specifically the immense need for community. It's no secret that menstruation is a topic that in the past has been held secret or ignored within both the media and societal discourse. A prime example is Judy Blume's 1970 girlhood-forward novel titled *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. The novel was banned for "General filth. Explicit sex and reproduction. Menstruation, choosing a religion" (Curry 34). When menstruation is ignored or misrepresented, it directly harms the physical and mental health of those who menstruate. In a world where menstruation representation, like Blume's novel, is often labeled unnecessary or improper for consumption, it is imperative that people who menstruate find a strong understanding of menstruation to gain a strong understanding of themselves. It is the exclusion or misrepresentation of menstruation from discourse that maintains the cycle of harm to the physical and mental state of menstruators, from the minute they miss out on the information they so vitally need and well into their older years.

Community, in its most basic definition, is a group of people who inhabit the same space, or all have a specific characteristic in common. The larger connotation of community on the topic of menstruation is that we live in a menstruating world, a simple notion often left unsaid. The menstrual community features every person who menstruates, illuminating that the issues surrounding menstruation discourse does not solely affect girls and women but trans and nonbinary individuals as well. The menstrual community, however, cannot only include those who menstruate—it must include everyone regardless of menstrual identity. When

living in a menstruating world, everyone becomes part of this community and must educate themselves on what menstruation is to ensure a safe environment for all.

Menstruation education is a form of protection for menstruators, a way of preserving the health of the mind and body. The lack of education becomes a problem not just for the menstruator, but for the larger understanding of menstruation and of girlhood. A study on adolescent girls and knowledge of menstruation found, “that only 24% of study participants knew about menstruation before attaining menarche” (Shrestha 3)—“menarche” being the first occurrence of menstruation. When there is such a large gap between the knowledge of menstruation and the actual experience of menstruation, the middle is subject to patriarchal jargon and abusive beliefs or myths surrounding periods. For Carrie and Mei, these myths come in the form of religious beliefs and generational metamorphosis. The lack of an educated community helps trigger the terror that ensues in both *Carrie* and *Turning Red*, both beginning with the first glimpse of a period.

First Period “Scare”

Within the first minute of *Carrie*, it is made clear to audiences that Carrie is unpopular at her school and is heavily bullied. The first glimpse we see of Carrie occurs during a girls’ P.E. class in which she misses a play during the volleyball game, and her teammates angrily yell at her. We see her quietly take the bullying, even when a teammate hits her on the head with a hat which indicates that this bullying is common for Carrie. The first few minutes of the movie places Carrie into an already uncontrollable and violent environment, leading her to seek refuge after the P.E. class. We see Carrie next as the group of girls are in the locker room changing and cleaning off. The camera shot moves slowly as it pans around the group of teenage girls and the tone is set with a soft piano scoring. Once the camera reaches Carrie, we see her taking a shower alone. She is now separated from the harsh bullying earlier experienced, metaphorically washing off the cruel words that came from her peers. There is a major sense of peacefulness and calm as audiences see Carrie able to take a breath in safety; However, only until Carrie reaches down her body and discovers blood on her hands. Real horror has now entered the film, disrupting the brief moment of peace and safety.

What was once a graceful and almost angelic scene has now turned into a shocking and explicit display of panic for both Carrie and the audience. As Carrie fanatically searches and screams for help, she is only met by the taunting and abuse of her classmates. The other girls in the locker room start mocking and throwing sanitary products at Carrie, yelling “Plug it up! Plug it up!” (*Carrie* 00:05:08-00:05:12). Carrie’s reaction to finding the blood on her hands shows that she is extremely undereducated about menstruation. As the other girls immediately conclude that Carrie had started her period; Carrie thinks she was badly hurt or injured. This sets up Carrie as a victim to her own body, as we come to find that Carrie’s injury is the natural occurrence of the menstrual cycle. Scholar Shelley Lindsey compares Carrie’s shower scene to the infamous shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s classic horror film *Psycho* (1960)—a psychological horror movie featuring the brutal murder of a young woman while in the shower. *Psycho*’s shower scene has been referenced throughout pop culture and is considered the most memorable moment of the movie. Lindsey argues that “we associate

Carrie's menstruation with a bloody attack, with blood flowing from an inflicted wound" (Lindsey 35). The comparison between *Psycho* and *Carrie* is perhaps the perfect way to display how menstruation is being represented in this scene. As *Psycho*'s Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is viciously stabbed to death in the shower, *Carrie* is shown in the exact same placement as Marion but with her pain coming from within. It's also important to note that *Psycho* and *Carrie* are both extremely well-known open displays of the naked female body in media. In their most natural and exposed forms, both females have pain inflicted upon them, and appear as "victims". When menstruation is associated with horror, it pushes the idea that menstruation is some atrocious and horrid attack against the body that robs those who menstruate of control over their own body.

The *Carrie* shower scene was meant to invoke these unpleasant feelings of fear and agony. Actress Sissy Spacek shares in an interview about the scene, "I went to [director] Brian De Palma and said: 'Tell me about this scene, what is it like?' And he turns to me and he says: 'It's like getting hit by a Mack truck'" (Keller, "*Carrie's* Shower Scene"). This scene was about invoking brutal harm onto the character of *Carrie*—which creates two outcomes. The first is that *Carrie* becomes victimized by her own body, which implies that people who menstruate are victims of their own bodies—this idea directly harms the way they view themselves. Menstruation is a natural occurrence and that word "natural" when used in a negative light can teach young girls and young menstruators that they are natural victims—destined to have pain and harm inflicted upon them. The second outcome follows the same idea: menstruation comes from within the body. Just as young menstruators can believe they are natural victims, it's more plausible that they come to believe they are natural villains. In the shower scene, what is the cause of harm for *Carrie*? Her period.

Menstruation enters *Turning Red* perhaps in an opposite way than it does in *Carrie*. Instead of a visual display of menstruation, audiences are shown a discussion of periods first. Rather than starting her period, Mei has woken up as a giant red panda and doesn't realize it until she looks in the bathroom mirror. Shocked at her own reflection, Mei screams and causes her mother to come running to the bathroom door in panic. Mei's mother, Ming Lee (Sandra Oh), tries to assess the situation from the other side of the door—asking Mei the big question, "Did the red peony bloom?" (*Turning Red*, 00:17:10-00:17:13). This question is a euphemistic way of asking Mei if she has started her period, with floral imagery often used to avoid openly describing body parts specifically for women. Mei, confused and in a state of panic, responds with a hesitant "Maybe?" (*Turning Red*, 00:17:15-00:17:16) which causes her mother to spring into action and burst through the door. To hide her new appearance, Mei rushes into the shower with the curtain blocking her body. Thus, Mei has landed within the same setting as *Carrie* when she started her period.

Though Mei does not reach down and find blood on her hands, she is still experiencing a major transformation with the key color of this transformation being red. As she hides within the shower, Mei is not only within the same physical setting as *Carrie* in her transformation scene but also in the same emotional state. Mei is in immense distress as she tries to grasp the idea that she is now a giant red panda with red fur and sharp teeth. We see the emotional state of distress shown through Mei's dialogue and actions. Her mov-

ing into the shower to hide from her mother signifies a sense of shame that Mei feels about her body, hiding from the one person who could probably help her most. Within the course of the two minutes, Mei experiences various types of emotions: from confusion to panic, fear, sadness, anger, and back to sadness. We hear Mei cry in the shower and out of fear yell angrily at her mother as she tries to provide Mei with support. This signifies the quick emotional transformations that her new body pushes out of her, but it also stands in for the emotional fluctuations that can come with a menstrual cycle. The combination of fast-moving emotions varying from sadness to anger is associated with the hormonal side of menstruation, which is often ridiculed and used against young girls or women expressing any kind of emotion. It's fairly common to hear the phrase "oh, she's on her period" when a woman expresses any kind of emotion or anger, whether said in a calm way or not. This is an example of how aspects of menstruation are used to demean women and those who menstruate, which in turn causes menstruators to think of themselves the way Mei describes herself within the scene.

After lashing out at her mother, Mei bursts into tears and exclaims the previously quoted line "I'm a gross red monster!" (*Turning Red*, 00:17:42-00:17:47). Mei uses the word "gross" to describe her new state, which has connotations of repulsiveness. It's a commonly used word, but it's an extremely harsh one to call oneself—especially coming from a young girl. However, labeling oneself "gross" is part of the same trajectory from victimization into villainy earlier discussed that is produced by the stigma society places on periods. The word "gross" in this line falls into that victimization category and the word "monster" falls into the villainy category. Mei has found herself victim to her own body and in the same vein a villain to her community (and perhaps herself).

Portraying menstruation as the catalyst for becoming a villain is where the effects of period myths unveil themselves. As Carrie reacts to reaching menarche (the first occurrence of the menstrual cycle) in a confused and shocked state, it's clear that she has been uneducated and miseducated about puberty and menstruation. It should also be noted that the other young girls in the *Carrie* shower scene are also miseducated about menstruation as they see that Carrie doesn't know she started her period and that entices them to bully her more harshly. Carrie is obviously without community in her experience with girlhood and menstruation, but it seems the other girls in this scene are as well. For Carrie, however, audiences come to learn that the reason for her miseducation on puberty and menstruation stems from her mother's relationship with religion.

Religious Discourses in *Carrie*

We see throughout the film that Carrie's mother, Margaret (Piper Laurie), uses Christianity as a way to control and punish Carrie. She uses Christianity as a means to abuse Carrie, to keep her sheltered from the world intellectually and emotionally—as well as physically as we see her mother lock in her a closet as punishment for sinning. The religious aspects of the film mirror the representation of menstruation in the film, as we have already first associated horror with menstruation from the shower scene and thus the bloody horror that follows carries the trace of that connection. The association of an "evil" menstruation that comes

from repressive religion appears in the film distinctly when Carrie has returned home after starting her period. Her mother receives a call from the school about what happened that day, and this unleashes an abusive reaction. Margaret begins citing religious beliefs surrounding Eve from the Bible, repeating the phrase “Eve was weak” (*Carrie*, 00:15:05-00:15:07) and forcing Carrie to do the same. Speaking as if she is performing a sermon or an exorcism, Margaret reads out the line “And the Lord visited Eve with a curse. The curse was the curse of blood” (*Carrie*, 00:15:16-00:15:20). The crying and frightened Carrie replies to her mother from the floor with “You should have told me, Mama” (*Carrie*, 00:15:20-00:15:22). There are a significant number of reasons why this interaction is abusive to the existence of menstruation—all of them, however, create the impression that periods are something wicked and evil.

Analyzing each of the above quotes in the given order, Margaret has already set the tone of the discussion as inherently harmful and misogynistic. By claiming that Eve was “weak,” she reiterates the patriarchal belief that all women are inadequate and lesser beings—as Eve was the first woman in the Bible, all women after her are cursed to the same fate. Eve’s punishment for being weak is stated as the “curse of blood”: menstruation. This religious belief claims that the menstrual cycle is a form of punishment, something given to produce shame and discipline. Through these beliefs, menstruation is portrayed as something that imprisons its victims—telling every person who menstruates that they have done something bad to deserve this punishment. As stated earlier, when menstruation is equated to horror, the characters within the film and the viewing audience are encouraged to believe that menstruators have evil “naturally” within them. Not only is the curse given as punishment, but it is given by the Lord—it is given by the creator of the universe. It’s a heavy penalty to bear; the natural process of menstruation has been portrayed as the “natural” result of shame and sin. However, when Carrie reaches out to her mother, she breaks this extreme portrayal of menstrual shame by asking the basic yet important question of why her mother didn’t just tell her about periods. Perhaps the traumatic events that happened earlier in the day by Carrie’s classmates wouldn’t have occurred if Carrie was aware of menstruation prior, but most definitely Carrie would have not experienced the terror that she felt in relation to her own body. Margaret ignores Carrie’s questions and pleas, emphasizing that she is using religious beliefs not only to denigrate girlhood and menstruation, but directly and most urgently to harm her own daughter.

Continuing the discussion of how patriarchal religious beliefs affect women and those who menstruate, the biblical Book of Leviticus states that “When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening” (*English Standard Version*, Leviticus.15:25). There are four key words in this verse: discharge, blood, impurity, and unclean. The first two words are fluids that come from the body, and the latter two words are false descriptors. To equate menstruation with filth is an extremely harmful belief to share not only to those who menstruate but to those who do not menstruate. It warps the understanding of menstruation into something bad and foul—it’s exactly what causes people like Mei to use the word “gross” to describe their own body. The idea of being “unclean” is echoed in the shower scene from *Carrie*, as Carrie was washing herself when she noticed the blood from her period, pushing the idea that the innocent and pure Carrie

experienced menstruation and was now transformed into someone impure and unclean.

The verse from Leviticus also produces the effect of making menstruation not only something for the menstruator to fear, but for everyone around them to fear as well. The verse states that if one touches a woman in “menstrual impurity,” they will also become unclean. Not only is the natural occurrence of menstruation in the body being shamed, but menstruation is figured as so evil that it spreads its impurity and sin just by touch. This idea portrays the menstruating female character as a villain- she is not only spreading her evil to you, but she is also doing it due to her own biology. An article from the *International Human Rights Law Review* argues that “In Christianity, menstrual taboos were a major reason to keep women from positions of authority” (Anthony 297). The depiction of menstruation from the Bible has been used to shame those who menstruate, and to justify discrimination against women. Because if a menstruating woman comes into power—if you let her win prom queen – she’s going to use her telekinetic powers to kill us all.

After the prom night from hell, where a vengeful Carrie slaughters her high school classmates, the film ends with a nightmare that Carrie’s classmate Sue (Amy Irving) has of visiting Carrie’s grave. The scene is shot similarly to the beginning of the shower scene, slow paced with a soft white haze frame. We see Sue wearing a long flowy white dress carrying a bouquet of flowers as she slowly walks to Carrie’s grave as an almost hopeful-toned score plays. When Sue kneels down to place the flowers on the grave, we receive a better view of what is written on the gravestone: “Carrie White burns in Hell” (*Carrie*, 01:35:11). The camera focuses on Sue’s tears, the gorgeous flowers, and her hands slowly placing them down- until the entire scene flips into horror as Carrie’s bloody hand reaches from under the ground and grabs Sue. The horror in the film *Carrie* begins and ends with the image of a young girl’s bloody hand. Blood is of course the major symbol throughout the film, perhaps most popularly known from the prom scene where Carrie has pig’s blood poured on her as she wins Prom Queen. However, the image of her single bloody hand is a direct reference to where blood first enters the film- Carrie starting her period. Both scenes are set up identically, with a serene and peaceful start and a shocking move into horror. The scene also reinforces the religious beliefs that surround the narrative of the film. Carrie is buried with a “For Sale” sign broken and made into a cross, with the “Carrie White burns in Hell” graffiti in large red letters (*Carrie*, 01:35:11). The phrase references biblical Hell, as the people of the town believe that Carrie was so evil that she now burns in a fiery separation from God. However, as Carrie is seemingly coming back from the dead in the nightmare, she not only has been rejected from a Christian heaven, but also from a Christian hell. Using the color white in this scene also references biblical elements, as white is often regarded as a color that symbolizes innocence and purity. In the scene, Sue wears a long white dress and becomes a representation of Christian hope and virtue. Just as the naked and bare Carrie experienced her first period in the shower, the red bloody hand disrupts the peace and faith of the world. From start to finish, this film conveys the message that at the core of the horror portrayed stands a menstruating girl.

Placing the visual and contextual example of a menstruating girl as the main source of evil in a horror film leads us into a larger discussion of the male gaze vs. female gaze in portrayals of menstruation and

girlhood. The first and most explicit example of the male gaze in *Carrie* appears within the opening shower scene: young naked minor girls standing around the locker room and the nude Carrie White washing her body. What occurs from this portrayal is that viewers are positioned as voyeurs. We are not meant to align ourselves with Carrie, nor are we positioned as bystanders; instead we are encouraged to feel as if we are spying on Carrie (and the other young girls). Voyeurism becomes a crucial element in the private and vulnerable scenes of *Carrie*, such as the shower scene—However, the audience stays within this visual framework even in the pivotal scene of the film in which Carrie reaches her full power.

The prom night from hell features Carrie in her most demonic glory as she uses her telekinetic powers to slaughter her classmates and school staff. Audiences are given a much different view of Carrie than how she was introduced, instead of an innocent and clean young girl she becomes a violent and hellbent demon drenched in pig's blood. She is no longer a pleasurable object of the male gaze, yet she is still presented under a patriarchal form of voyeurism. Scholar Saoirse McAllorum argues that “Carrie may drive the plot of the film but the camera remains to be male and subsequently encouraged to eroticize” (20). The eroticization of Carrie appears throughout the prom scene, one example being when the pig's blood is poured on her and the camera replays the shot three times—signaling to the audience to take full attention to the humiliated and degraded young girl. The presence of the male gaze during scenes of menstrual representation in *Carrie* mimics the way that Christian myths surrounding menstruation have been used or manipulated to condemn female power. In a discussion about menstruation in the horror genre, scholar Erika M. Thomas states “our fear of Carrie represents society's fear and resistance to the women's liberation movement and the potential powers that can be held by women” (Thomas 6). Recalling the earlier mentioned quote from Sissy Spacek, not only was violence against women the moving force of the horror in *Carrie* but the switch from innocent girl to murderous demon reinforced the idea that women have evil naturally within them. A tag line featured in a promotional poster for *Carrie* states “if only they knew she had the power,” which implies that the blood-soaked evil enchantress was always lurking the halls of that high school—and if they had controlled her more effectively, she would not have risen to power. In every shot of the horror film, Carrie White is an object, and audiences are encouraged to erotize and fear her. Similarly, the effect of creating a voyeuristic audience viewing menstrual scenes is that menstruation becomes a source of fear. Once menstrual blood arrives on screen, it becomes an omen of danger and villainy: this portrayal teaches young menstruators that it will do the same for them.

Myth in *Turning Red*

This idea echoes within *Turning Red* even with myth taking a different stance within the plot starting when Mei's mother discovers that Mei has not started her period like she believed but has experienced her first transformation into a giant red panda. With reluctance, Ming shares with Mei that the transformation into a red panda is something passed down through their family. The myth given in this scene is that Mei's ancestor named Sun Yee had a strong connection to red pandas, so much so that she asked the gods to change her into one. The gods granted the wish as a way for Sun Yee to protect her children and herself, as

her home was in wartime Korea and Sun Yee was left solely responsible to protect her family. Sun Yee was able to harness her emotions and turn into a giant red panda that could shield and defend. Ming explains to Mei, “Sun Yee passed this gift to her daughters, for when they came of age. And they passed it to theirs. But overtime, our family chose to come to a new world. And what was a blessing became...an inconvenience” (*Turning Red*, 00:27:57-00:28:13). The myth taking place here is set within the boundaries of girlhood or coming of age, the red panda transformation occurs once the young girl in Mei’s family has reached a certain age (presumably preteen/teen as we later find out Ming transformed as a young teenager). However, the larger discussion that this myth produces is intimately tied to girlhood and menstruation, as the myth is a metaphor for puberty.

Puberty was the main focus of the film *Turning Red* when it was being pitched within Disney Pixar. Director Domee Shi, explains “We use the red panda in this movie as an adorable metaphor for the scary, unadorable, awkward, and cringy changes we go through during this age” (Reif, “13 Going on Panda: *Turning Red*”). The myth featured in *Turning Red* exists only within the film, yet the effect of the myth illustrates how narratives surrounding puberty affect our understanding of menstruation. The entire film features an open discussion about the hardships and beauty of puberty. Though Mei didn’t actually start her period, menstruation is still following the same journey that the topic of puberty follows in this film. Before we are even given the idea of Mei’s generational transformation, the word “period” enters the space and therefore creates a specific association between Mei’s transformation and menstruation—which is proven with Mei’s instant response to Ming’s explanation about their ancestor Sun Yee.

In a fit of anger, Mei screams out “Are you serious?? It’s a curse!” (*Turning Red*, 00:28:15-00:28:22). The use of the word “curse” here reinstates the idea of victimization vs. villainy. Being cursed means that one has done something wrong to deserve a form of punishment. Thus, Mei is a victim of this curse but is also heavily being portrayed as a monstrous villain during the delivery of the line. As she moves through the question “Are you serious?” (*Turning Red*, 00:28:15-00:28:20), her voice rises from low to a powerful scream and her body rises in anger. She physically becomes bigger as her eyes light up neon red and she lunges with claws grabbing towards the painting of Sun Yee while screaming “It’s a curse!” (*Turning Red*, 00:28:20-00:28:22). As the scene plays on, multiple similarities are created to the scene in *Carrie* where Carrie and her mother have their first interaction after Carrie starts her period. Continuing Mei’s fit of rage, she yells at the painting of Sun Yee “You cursed us! It’s all your fault!” (*Turning Red*, 00:28:22-00:28:25). The word curse appears within the *Carrie* scene as Maragret yells at Carrie about the “curse of blood”. Similarly, the idea of menstruation or rather puberty being a curse comes from an ancestral woman in both films. For Carrie, the curse of menstruation comes from Eve which is reinforced in the scene as Carrie’s mother chants that Eve was weak and sinned. Though Ming does not present the myth in this manner, Mei exclaims to Sun Yee that she is the reason that their family is cursed to become red pandas. This action disempowers both Eve and Sun Yee as women with the immense power to create and protect family lines. It also heavily stigmatizes menstruation, as yet again menstruation is equated with punishment and shame.

The negative portrayal of the transition between girlhood and adolescence is cemented by Mei's mother as she tries to comfort the angered Mei. She tells Mei that there is a cure for the red panda transformation. Stating that there is a "cure" to this change insinuates that the change is something bad, something harmful to the body and in need of remedying. Ming continues by explaining that the cure comes in the form of a ritual in which Mei will need to lock away her ability to transform into the red panda forever. She then tells Mei, "There is a darkness to the panda, Mei-Mei. You only have one chance to banish it, and you cannot fail. Otherwise, you'll never be free" (*Turning Red*, 00:29:17-00:29:29). As Ming shares, Mei looks into her mother's eyes with a fearful look which later turns into understanding and hope as she believes what her mother has told her. However unintended, what Ming has said to Mei is harmful, as she explicitly equates the red panda to danger and imprisonment. She has not only added immense pressure to Mei but has convinced her that this transformation is a curse.

Though the premise of this scene is Mei's mother educating her about the transformation her body is currently going through, Mei is still experiencing some of the frustration and anger that Carrie felt when she asked her mother why she didn't tell her about periods. Still moving through her anger, Mei exclaims to her mother "Why didn't you warn me!" in which Ming responds "I thought I had more time" (*Turning Red*, 00:28:42-00:28:43). Mei's mother believed she was protecting Mei by not sharing about the familial curse. However, she was only protecting herself as we later are shown in the film that Ming's experience with transforming into the red panda was extremely traumatizing. Though well-intentioned, Ming's secrecy resulted in Mei being introduced to the changes to her body and mind in a shocking traumatic way. The initial experience with the transformation is negative, which fuels Mei's understanding of this new process as negative. The red panda along with its connotations have now been labeled a "curse" - which is the main issue that Mei must process during the course of the film's plot.

Menstrual Communities

As Mei tries to find a way to banish the red panda, she discovers she can return to her human body once she is able to regulate her emotions. Early in this discovery process, she realizes that the quickest and most efficient way to calm down is to think of her friend group. Mei pictures her friends hugging and laughing together and is able to return to her human state almost instantly. Her community of friends helps her feel grounded, but they don't completely take away her ability to transform— which is a good thing. It proves that Mei doesn't need a cure for her new phase in life, which is why she experiences conflict before the ceremony that will rid her of the red panda. Mei's father (Orion Lee) comes to speak with her before the ceremony to offer her comfort and perhaps a better understanding of what the red panda represents. To Mei's surprise, he tells her of how massive Ming's red panda was when she was young. He emphasizes that Ming was incredible in that state, she was strong and powerful. Mei's facial expression shows her wonder at this new outlook on the red panda (and her mother), but she quickly changes her mood to sadness and responds, "But I'm a monster" (*Turning Red*, 01:05:07-01:05:10). Her father sighs before sharing one of the strongest lines in the film, "People have all kinds of sides to them, Mei. And some sides are messy. The point isn't to push the bad

stuff away, it's to make room for it. Live with it" (*Turning Red*, 01:05:12-01:05:29). Mei has internalized that the parts of the red panda that are scary in turn make her a monster. There's an important distinction to be made in her father's response— he doesn't immediately tell her that she isn't a monster. Rather he recognizes that it's the belief that she cannot be imperfect that makes her believe that harmful idea about herself. The message he delivers to Mei is that she can and should embrace every side of herself, and that the bad parts don't make someone bad.

This message allows the film to reframe negative portrayals of the changes menstruation brings, challenging the idea that menstruators are red monsters and that girlhood's end will change a girl into a mythic villain. While the association of horror and terror with these experiences is harmful, *Turning Red* suggests that the answer is not to hide the unfortunate parts of menstruation and girlhood away. Experiencing any kind of change can be scary and confusing—these adjectives describe both menstruation and girlhood for a character like Mei. To embrace all sides of something creates the means to fully understand it and understanding leads to empowerment. The call for an educated community is founded within the belief that understanding an experience that is universal yet varied makes room—it creates a space for people to understand their lives in their entirety. When a safe and accepting environment for menstruation is created, the body and mind in return become safe and accepted. We see this represented by Mei coming to terms with her transformation and welcoming all sides of herself.

At the end of *Turning Red*, Mei has decided to keep her red panda which means she can continue transforming into and out of her human body. The final lines of the film are narrated by Mei, "Sometimes I miss how things were, but nothing stays the same forever. We've all got an inner beast. We've all got a messy, loud, weird part of ourselves hidden away and a lot of us never let it out. But I did. How about you?" (*Turning Red*, 01:28:40-01:28:56). Transformation is here figured as something inevitable, but that change can be for the better. Mei still uses the language of beast or monster, but she uses it not to villainize people but to show that "bad" sides do not make someone inherently bad. In fact, Mei claims that embracing the beastly side of her is what empowered her. Throughout the comparison of Carrie White and Mei Lee, power has been displayed as something that both girls have within them that causes others to fear them. While both characters have a full power moment in their films, Carrie's display of power is an action of anger and self-defense whereas Mei is able to channel and embrace her power. As Mei embraces this newfound power within this scene, the film also celebrates Mei's supportive community. When Mei narrates the last sentences of the film, the camera focuses on a photo hung up in the Lee family's temple. The frame holds a photograph featuring panda Mei, her friends, her family, and Mei's favorite boyband members- it's also signed by the members. The photograph represents the strength of community that Mei has developed through coming to terms with the new stage of her life. Having all of these people in the same photograph (that is also signed by the boyband members) was not something imaginable at the beginning of the film, but as Mei found herself, she found her community.

While *Carrie's* representations of menstruation and girlhood are cloaked and restrained by the male gaze, perhaps what sets *Turning Red* free is director Domee Shi's determination to place her own girlhood into

the film and emphasize the importance of having various communities. In an interview about the film, Shi shares,

I was definitely Mei when I was 13, and I still identify with her now. I was that good little mama's girl who one day, BOOM, puberty hit. I was bigger, hairier, more emotional, and fighting with my mom almost every day. And making the movie was a reason to go back in time and unpack what was happening.

(Yuen, "Turning Red Explores Uncharted Animated Waters")

Turning Red is filled with different facets of girlhood (and womanhood), all coming from experience—as the film production states the production team was mostly made up of women. The point is not to say that men or non-menstruating people cannot make films about menstruation or girlhood; but rather to say it's the community behind representation that makes good representation good. The presence of community and education in *Turning Red* is what separates Carrie White's ending from Meilin Lee's ending. Carrie was never told that experiencing menstruation and girlhood does not make her a villain, and that the myths surrounding these topics do not define her. The tag line featured in the promotional poster of *Turning Red* states, "growing up is beastly". Though similar to the way *Carrie's* poster connects girlhood to the monstrous, the *Turning Red* tag line moves to empower its audience by embracing the entirety of this transitional period. At the core of *Turning Red* is a declaration that an educated community creates an empowered community for a menstrual and girlhood forward world.

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