

# “The Silence of the Lambs” (1991) by Will Mann



*Anthony Hopkins stars as Dr. Hannibal Lecter  
Photo courtesy MGM Home Entertainment*

Jonathan Demme’s “The Silence of the Lambs” is a masterfully made motion picture, summarizing our greatest fears as we watch a servant for the public good commune with the epitome of evil itself. One of only three films to win the so-called “Big Five” categories at the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor and Best Actress, its quality was just as apparent to audiences watching it for the first time when it was first released in 1991 as it is now. If anything, the estimation of the film has only grown and its profound influence can be seen throughout popular culture, from the rise of television police procedurals to the current trend of true-crime stories that feature serial killers.

The story of the film, based on the novel of the same name by Thomas Harris with a screenplay adaptation by Ted Tally, centers on the young FBI trainee Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster). She is assigned by her superior, Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn), to interview the captured serial killer Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). It is hoped that Lecter could provide insight into the recent string of killings committed by a serial murderer referred to as “Buffalo Bill.” Clarice takes the assignment, and her long trek down the corridor of prison cells feels like a descent into Hell. Finally, she reaches Lecter, who at first mocks her for her accent, yet can also be very polite and even arguably shows signs of compassion towards her later on.



*Jodie Foster in “The Silence of the Lambs” (1991) added to  
the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2011.*

It is the relationship between Clarice and Lecter that is the critical centerpiece of the entire film. Their scenes together have an underlying tension and feel very intimate, due in no small part to Demme’s focus on the actors’ eyes in particular. “A census taker once tried to test me,” Lecter tells Clarice during an iconic interaction. “I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti.” It is clear he is trying to intimidate her, but she does not budge. Lecter does provide some helpful clues in solving the mystery of Buffalo Bill, but demands Clarice tell him about her personal life, including the death of her father when she was a young girl, which she does begrudgingly.

Eventually, Buffalo Bill, real name Jame Gumb (Ted Levine), kidnaps Catherine Martin (Brooke Smith), the daughter of U.S. Senator Ruth Martin (Diane Baker). Catherine is held in Buffalo Bill's house of horrors, where he dismisses and dehumanizes his captive by calling her "it" and diabolically sews together a suit made from the flesh of his victims. In the climactic ending, it is Clarice alone against this monster of a man until she ultimately shoots and kills him in the dark.



*Based on the book by Thomas Harris, the film "The Silence of the Lambs" (1991) features Ted Levine as the evil Buffalo Bill. Photo still Orion Pictures.*

"The Silence of the Lambs" succeeds in so many ways, in no small part because it is somewhat of a morality play, but with nuance and far more villainous characters than people were used to seeing. The titular metaphor of Clarice wanting to stop the screaming of the lambs she saw as a young girl serves as her personal thesis to prevent suffering in the world. On the other hand, Buffalo Bill represents pure evil. Lecter serves as a mediator between the two, taking a genuine interest in Clarice all the while acting completely amorally, solely in his own self-interest, such as when he escapes a temporary prison built for him in Memphis.

The film is also undoubtedly a feminist text, as Clarice finds herself in a male-dominated world where she is taken for granted, but yet, she always proudly asserts herself. After Crawford asked that a local law enforcement official talk in private away from her, Clarice chastises him for it. "It matters, Mr. Crawford. Cops look at you to see how to act. It matters," she tells him. "Point taken," he responds.

While feminist interpretations and deep meditations on the nature of good and evil are certainly compelling in their own right, the film also very much wears its influences. It is a tight psychological thriller in the vein of Hitchcock, yet with more modern sensibilities. It is no holds barred in its depiction of gore, its images still captivate and frighten more than three decades after its release. Individual aspects also resonate, from Howard Shore's haunting, mesmerizing musical score for the film to the impressive editing by Craig McKay and cinematography by Tak Fujimoto. The climactic final confrontation between Clarice and Buffalo Bill succeeds not just because of the effective editing and tension of the scene, but because the viewer is naturally invested in Clarice.



Accolades and praises were showered upon it, and its impact has left a distinct fingerprint on the broader culture. It is anchored by the skillful performances of Foster and Hopkins in the lead roles. Hopkins visited prisons and studied serial killers in preparation, and claimed Lecter's voice was inspired by both Truman Capote and Katherine Hepburn. For her part, Foster spent time with actual FBI agents, including one who recommended a memorable scene in which Clarice breaks down in tears while standing near her car. Demme's adept direction and Tally's screenplay add a uniqueness that cannot be replicated. Further viewings disclose it to be a deeper film, revealing more insight, more going on, more to notice than initially realized. Like Lecter in the final scene of the film, we keep coming back to it and still finding ourselves asking "Well, Clarice, have the lambs stopped screaming?"

*Will Mann is a writer, film critic and consultant based in northern Virginia. He has a B.A. in English from The College of William & Mary and an M.F.A. in creative writing from George Mason University. He currently serves as Senior Entertainment Editor for the online publication "International Policy Digest," having previously served as a staff writer, editor, and webmaster for such publications as "Virginia Living" magazine, "The Virginia Informer," "The Piedmont," and "Phoebe."*

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