

Southern New Hampshire University

Eclipsing the Patriarchy: The Power of Intergenerational Female Connection in Stephen King's

It, Carrie, Gerald's Game, and Dolores Claiborne

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Abstract

Using feminist and reader response theories to examine the ways in which American horror writer Stephen King creates strong female characters who break free from abusive patriarchal systems, this Thesis responds to critics of Stephen King's portrayals of women and to research by Amy Canfield, Erika Dymond, Maysaa Husam Jaber, and Erin Mercer. While recent scholarship has focused on King's female characters individually or on the pairing of a select few, this Thesis uses close reading and literary analysis to argue that King creates a network of strong intergenerational women who break free from patriarchal systems in his novels *It*, *Carrie*, *Gerald's Game*, and *Dolores Claiborne*. Applying feminist theory to King's characters Beverly Marsh, Carrie White, Jessie Burlingame, and Dolores Claiborne demonstrates how King uses intergenerational female connection to create powerful women characters who break free from patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: Stephen King, feminist theory, reader response, patriarchy, horror genre

Introduction

Despite the criticisms American master of horror Stephen King faces for his portrayal of female characters, his creations like Beverly Marsh (*It*), Carrie White (*Carrie*), Jessie Burlingame (*Gerald's Game*), and Dolores Claiborne (*Dolores Claiborne*) stand as intergenerational examples of defiant and resilient American women who navigate and dismantle oppressive patriarchal systems, thereby underlining the enduring strength of women amidst adversity. In novels such as *It*, *Carrie*, *Gerald's Game*, and *Dolores Claiborne*, King examines “larger issues of gender inequalities and power imbalances [through the lens] of the horror genre” (Canfield 397). As a result, although there are supernatural elements in each of these novels, King – a male writer – creates relatable female characters who exercise their agency to break free from realistic depictions of patriarchal abuse. For example, even in the case of King’s novel *It*, which largely centers on the male point of view, he creates a strong female character in Beverly Marsh. Beverly eventually stands up to her father and also exercises agency by establishing herself as an equal member amongst her trustworthy group of male peers, thereby proving herself to be more than just, as Hansen claims, “the prize for the hegemonic male of the group” (166). While Beverly, along with Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores, may not be the archetypal “badass” women who operate completely outside the realm of patriarchal oppression, they nevertheless stand as representatives of courageous women who are willing to make difficult choices – and, in some cases, even risk death – in order to escape patriarchal abuse. In the poem “Carrie,” author Claire C. Holland reinforces these four female characters’ strength in the midst of oppression when she writes, “I’d rather arm myself in blood than be a pretty statue to stare at,” thereby demonstrating how these women are willing to risk everything in order to be free (80). On the surface, Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores should not be strong enough to become

empowered within the confines of their repression, yet somehow they are; thus, it is their strength in the midst of patriarchal oppression that connects them to one another and to other marginalized women of all ages and time periods.

King, Feminism, and Society

Stephen King showcases women's struggles for rights in oppressive and abusive patriarchal societies in his novels *It*, *Carrie*, *Gerald's Game*, and *Dolores Claiborne*. In *It*, King "locates fear, hatred, and violence in a small American town, hence representing the structural function of white normative patriarchal ideology, through which even the most ordinary person might become a monster" (Mercer 316). King's fictional small town of Derry houses both human and supernatural monsters. One of Derry's human monsters is Al Marsh, Beverly's father. After enduring years of his abuse, Beverly finds the strength to escape from him and the harmful ideology he perpetuates about relationships between men and women. King's novel *Carrie* also features human and supernatural threats. In *Carrie*, the titular character discovers her telekinetic powers and finds the courage and strength to stand up to her mother and the bullies in her school. Although she ends up dying along with her oppressors, Carrie nevertheless exhibits the power to break free from an ongoing cycle of abuse. Like Beverly in *It* (1980) and Carrie in *Carrie* (1974), *Gerald's Game*'s Jessie and *Dolores Claiborne*'s Dolores also break free from patriarchal oppression and end abusive cycles, and in the process, demonstrate King's awareness of women's struggles throughout the decades during which he was writing these novels. As Canfield writes, "While awareness of wife-battering grew during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the subsequent 'backlash' during the conservative 1980s minimized societal response" (391). While anti-feminist rhetoric attempted to sweep the reality of domestic abuse under the rug and claim that incidences of "wife-battering" were a result of the feminist

movement itself, King – in his horror novels – did the opposite by shining a spotlight on the reality of domestic abuse and pointing to patriarchal oppression as the culprit.

King's *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, both published in the early 1990s, reveal the damaging effects that patriarchal societies have on all their members. Furthermore, in both of these novels, King highlights the resilience of women in these societies through his depictions of Jessie Burlingame and Dolores Claiborne, thereby demonstrating how horror “tropes and conventions [can be utilized to] create a lexicon of possible meanings by which to decode the past, present, and future” (Siodmak and Scannell 401). Like women in the early 1990s and their fictional counterparts in King's novels, women of today also face inequality and increasingly limited agency over their own bodies. As evidenced by current events in United States politics, including the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, America is still very much a patriarchal society that continually seeks to restrict the rights of women. As the fight for bodily autonomy and equal rights continues, today's women find strength and inspiration in the characters of Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores who, against all odds, break free from oppressive patriarchal systems.

“Kicking the Darkness Until It Bleeds”: King's Resilient Female Characters

With a female-centered point of view in mind, this project's argument focuses on an analysis of *It's* Beverly Marsh, *Carrie's* Carrie White, *Gerald's Game's* Jessie Burlingame, and *Dolores Claiborne's* titular character through the lenses of feminist and reader response theories. Feminist theory will be used to explore the ways in which King writes Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores as women who defy traditional gender expectations and cross generational boundaries in order to overcome abusive patriarchal oppression. Of particular relevance to this thesis are Julia Kristeva's theories of the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes, “Blood . . . [represents] a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection

where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together” (96). Blood, in both a literal and figurative sense, plays an important symbolic role in the empowerment of all four women represented in this paper. Additionally, Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* provides a theoretical framework for exploring how Carrie, Beverly, Jessie, and Dolores subvert strictly enforced patriarchal gender roles in order to break free from abusive systems and embrace their inner power. It is this power that Carrie’s mother and society, Beverly’s father and husband, Jessie’s father and husband, and Dolores’ husband fear, as Beauvoir writes that “woman . . . seems despicable and an enemy to man . . . because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him” (21). Hence, the oppressors in each novel included in this paper project this hostility onto the women they fear, thereby inflicting abuse upon them in an effort to limit or restrict their agency. However, these attempts ultimately prove futile in regard to Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores as they refuse to continue submitting to the patriarchal “codes . . . [that have been] established to keep [them] in a state of dependence” (Beauvoir 159). Furthermore, by applying feminist theory to the reading of these four women characters created by King, this project aims to “provide the opportunity to understand women and empathize with [them] as they go through the plight in their [lives]” (Ruta-Canayong 8032). Thus, the depictions of these strong women characters will not only serve as inspiration for women seeking to break free from patriarchal systems, but will also offer male horror readers an opportunity to gain an understanding of the ways in which patriarchal societies oppress women and, hopefully, create in them a desire to work alongside women and other marginalized communities in order to dismantle these oppressive societies that harm all of their members.

Additionally, literary response theory will also be utilized to demonstrate how – although they were created by male writer Stephen King – Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores embody

female empowerment despite the patriarchal opposition they face. This paper traces the female experience through various characters of different ages: preteen Beverly, teenaged Carrie, thirty-nine-year-old Jessie, and sixty-five-year-old Dolores, thereby offering women of different ages and experiences a greater opportunity to identify with and respond to at least one of these characters. As Rosenblatt writes in *Literature as Exploration*, reading is a “transaction[al] . . . relationship between the reader and the . . . text” (34-5). Furthermore, as Rosenblatt continues, literature “places [our problems] outside us, enables us to see them with a certain detachment and to understand our own situation and motivation more objectively” (40). Thus, women readers of all ages – bringing their own personal experiences and struggles in patriarchal societies to King’s novels *It*, *Carrie*, *Gerald’s Game*, and *Dolores Claiborne* – can identify with the struggles Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores face as they navigate and dismantle oppressive patriarchal systems. Furthermore, women readers are validated and inspired as they read about the courage embodied by each of these four women who fight back against patriarchal abuse and misogyny. While King does not shy away from describing the harsh realities of the oppression his female characters endure, he also places within each of their stories elements of empowerment and hope. As King’s son Joe Hill states, “It’s a basic misunderstanding of my dad’s work that he sells fear . . . I’ve always thought that my dad’s stories sold bravery, that they essentially were making an argument that, yeah, things might get really bad. But if you have some faith and a sense of humor . . . you can kick the darkness until it bleeds daylight” (*On Writing* 312). Reinforcing Hill’s description of his father’s work, King’s characters of Beverly Marsh, Carrie White, Jessie Burlingame, and Dolores Claiborne stand as examples of strong multigenerational women who fight patriarchal systems in order to free themselves and others from the darkness of oppression.

Multigenerational Connection: A New Perspective of King's Female Characters

When examining current scholarship on King's female characters, there are several recent articles that focus on female characters in film adaptations of King's works, which may or may not accurately reflect their depictions in King's novels. Additionally, though there are recent articles written about female characters in King's novels, many of these articles place King's female characters into stereotypical roles that fail to accurately depict their true natures. For example, in the article "Trauma, Horror, and the Female Serial Killer in Stephen King's *Carrie* and *Misery*," Jaber labels both Carrie White and *Misery*'s Annie Wilkes serial killers. Although – like Annie – Carrie does in fact kill a large number of people, Carrie's retaliation against her abusers symbolizes female empowerment in the midst of abuse and oppression. In fact, King – Carrie's creator – states, "Carrie is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality . . . writing the book in 1973 and only out of college three years, I was fully aware of what Women's Liberation implied for me and others of my sex" (*Danse Macabre* 171-172). In *Carrie*, King "draw[s] attention to the flawed ways in which suburban social hierarchies operate, [thereby] imploring readers to examine their own prejudices as well as the myriad anxieties that continue to grip the nation as a whole" (Madden 19). Thus, King's intent in writing *Carrie* is far different from his intent in writing *Misery*, and Carrie's motives for revenge are far different from Annie's. While it is misleading to place Carrie in the same category as *Misery*'s Annie Wilkes, the connections in Jaber's article between Carrie's traumatic experiences and her transgressive acts of retaliation support the argument that Carrie takes that which is meant to destroy her – the trauma she experiences at the hands of her oppressors – and turns it into something empowering instead – a complete

dismantling of every abusive system that tried to destroy her: her home, her school, her entire town.

When looking for recent scholarship that focuses specifically on King's novels included in this paper, there are a number of articles comparing *Gerald's Game's* Jessie to *Dolores Claiborne's* Dolores, as well as others that compare Dolores to the main female character in King's novel *Rose Madder*. For example, Ruta-Canayong's article "The Image of a Woman as a Wife in the Select Novels of Stephen King," which was published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2022, focuses on the spousal abuse endured by Dolores and Rose. In this article, Ruta-Canayong establishes King's novels *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder* as examples of King's use of "character development . . . as the dominant literary device to reveal the central message of the novel" (8031). While this project includes discussions of Dolores's character development in relation to female empowerment, it also explores the connection shared by Dolores and three women characters (other than Rose) who transcend barriers in order to break free from patriarchal systems.

Additionally, many recent articles written about feminism and horror in general feature discussions of modern films, such as Manuel Betancourt's "*Huesera, Clara Sola, and Medusa: Feminist Fables in Contemporary Latin American Horror*." In these modern films, "filmmakers are . . . consciously upending what horror has taught audiences to expect from female protagonists . . . the [female] characters in these films rework rigid ideas of victimhood" (87). While, as Betancourt claims, these contemporary films depict women who subvert oppressive patriarchal and religious systems, many women in King's classic texts – specifically, for this project's focus, Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores – also "rework rigid ideas of victimhood" in order to break free from patriarchal oppression. Reinforcing this argument is Dymond's

“Rethinking The Old Ball and Chain: A Progressive Examination of Wendy Torrance’s Character in Stephen King’s *The Shining*,” which was published in *The Explicator* in 2018. In this article, Dymond presents a view of King’s Wendy Torrance that conflicts with the view held by the scholarly majority. Dymond references *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* in which Steven Bruhm describes Wendy as “little more than a pair of walking talking breasts” (qtd. Dymond 36). Dymond, however, disagrees with Bruhm’s perspective, offering evidence to support her argument that King writes Wendy as a “strong, resilient, and liberated” female character (38). In her analysis of the character Wendy Torrance, Dymond demonstrates how King writes strong female characters who subvert patriarchal systems. Furthermore, many examinations of horror through the feminist lens have centered around the final girl trope, criticizing “slasher films [for their focus on] the killer’s perspective as he chases after either the female victim or the final girl” (Almwaka 4). However, King, in the novels that serve as the focus of this paper, provides readers with a point of view from the women characters, particularly in *Dolores Claiborne*, which is unique in that it is not only a first person point of view from Dolores’s perspective, but also in that she is the only character who speaks throughout the entire novel.

Beverly Marsh

In King’s *It*, female protagonist Beverly Marsh is afraid of crossing the threshold from childhood to womanhood. Her anxieties about womanhood are rooted in the abuse she experiences at the hands of her father, thus leading to her fear of all men as well as her fear of her own sexuality. As Beverly nears the time of her first menstrual cycle, her father repeatedly asks her if she is still his little girl, thereby causing Beverly to worry that she will somehow become “impure the day she might be able to procreate” (Beauvoir 167). Beverly’s father

projects his misogynistic views onto Beverly, which causes her to feel that she is dirty because she is a woman. Additionally, Beverly also fears womanhood because she realizes that her father's desire to maintain control over her body is motivated by sexual possessiveness and not by a natural fatherly desire to protect her. As such, she knows that once she becomes a woman, she will face another level of abuse from her father. For this reason, Pennywise, playing upon Beverly's greatest fear, chooses to terrify her through the symbolism of menstrual imagery. Alone in the bathroom, Beverly hears voices coming from the sink drain. When she leans closer to examine these strange voices, "a gout of blood suddenly belch[es] from the drain, splattering the sink and the mirror and the wallpaper . . . blood . . . blood everywhere" (*It* 379). Beverly's father, alerted by her screaming, rushes to the bathroom. However, rather than offering Beverly comfort and compassion, he instead traumatizes her even further. Although the blood is everywhere, he does not "see it" (*It* 379). Beverly, knowing she will be subject to abuse if she tries to explain the bloody bathroom to her father, instead tries to placate him by claiming that she got scared by a spider. Nevertheless, despite her attempts to avoid her father's abuse, Beverly still becomes the target of his violent anger.

In addition to the pain caused by her father's abuse, Beverly also experiences a great deal of confusion due to her father's irrational and unpredictable behavior. For example, while beating Beverly, her father repeats, "I worry about you . . . I worry about you a lot" (*It* 380). Once again, the connotation in his words reveals an unnatural possessiveness rather than genuine fatherly concern in his "worrying" about Beverly. Further adding to Beverly's trauma and confusion, her father swiftly shifts moods, abruptly switching from abusive to loving behavior. After beating Beverly, her father hugs her and "tuck[s] her in as he always [has] . . . kiss[ing] her forehead" (*It* 382). Thus, with actions such as these, Beverly's father continually adds to

Beverly's ongoing confusion about what it means to be loved by a man. As a result of this lingering confusion, the traumatic effects of her father's abuse follow Beverly into her adulthood, resulting in her marriage to the abusive Tom Rogan. Beverly's memories of her father cast a shadow over the remainder of her life, as she recalls "shapes of men, rules of men, desires of men . . . Tom, so like her father when he took off his shirt and stood slightly slumped in front of the bathroom to shave. Shapes of men" (*It* 382). Nevertheless, despite the abuse she endures at the hands of her father and Tom, Beverly overcomes her fears of womanhood and men. She stands up to her father and her husband, breaking free from their abuse and developing healthy relationships with the boys/men in the Losers' Club.

Following the bathroom incident and the subsequent abuse at the hands of her father, Beverly is left to face adolescence and the evil Pennywise without help until she finds the courage to tell her friends – the boys of the Losers' Club – what has transpired in her bathroom. By sharing this traumatic experience with a group of boys, Beverly exhibits great courage in refusing to allow the fear of boys/men that her father has perpetuated on her to keep her silent and isolated. When Beverly tells the boys about the blood, she sees "terror" on their faces, but not "disbelief" (*It* 391). The boys believe her even though they have not seen the blood for themselves at this point. This is a moment of healing for Beverly. She is willing to trust the boys, and, in turn, they show her what healthy and safe relationships look like. Rather than recoiling in fear or disgust, they offer to help Beverly clean up the blood-soaked bathroom. Once the boys enter Beverly's bathroom, not only do they see the blood, but they help her clean it, too. As the boys and Beverly clean the bathroom, the blood "[disappears] from the walls and the mirror and the porcelain basin, [and] Beverly [feels] her heart grow lighter and lighter" (*It* 393). In these moments, the boys send a message to Beverly. Their actions convey to Beverly that they will be

with her throughout the transition from childhood to adulthood. Unlike her father, they will not harm her, and they will not turn away from her in disgust. Thus, with this perspective, the blood comes to symbolize the beginning for Bev's healing. The boys' actions help Beverly see men and male/female relationships in a new light; therefore, this event signals the beginning of Beverly's stepping away from the mentality her abusive father has forced on her. Furthermore, in this scene, Beverly – through her own strength and the help of her male friends – begins to exhibit power over "It." Although Beverly will continue to experience terror at the hands of her father and Pennywise, this moment nevertheless serves as the beginning of her transformation into the strong young woman who stands up to her father and defeats Pennywise, and later, as an adult, the woman who eventually stands up to her abusive husband and returns to Derry to destroy Pennywise once and for all.

Beverly, after enduring her father's abuse for many years, finally manages to break free from him. She becomes the independent young woman that he feared she would, despite all of his attempts to keep this from happening. Beverly's father attempts to keep her under his complete control and submissive to him in every way, thereby demonstrating, as Beauvoir writes, that man, "afraid of woman . . . organize[s] her oppression" (88). Beverly's father forbids her to spend time with male peers. Once he discovers that she has, in fact, been spending time with a group of boys despite this rule, he automatically assumes this means she has been sexually involved with them. To further reinforce his control over Beverly, her father reacts to this discovery with verbal and physical abuse, going so far as to insist that she remove her pants so he can "see if [she is] intact" (*It* 866). Beverly, however, refuses to submit to this demand, instead fleeing from her father and her home. In doing so, Beverly not only physically escapes her father's abuse but also breaks free from the harmful views of women and sexuality that he

has put in her mind, which ultimately leads to her decision to unite all of the Losers' Club through an act of physical intimacy.

After defeating Pennywise, the preteens of the Losers' Club find their connection to one another weakening, which results in their being lost in the sewers. As King writes, "The fellowship was ending . . . it was ending and they were still in the dark. The Other had, through their friendship, perhaps been able to make them something more than children. But they were becoming children again" (*It* 1030). In order to escape the tunnels, the members of The Loser's Club must find a way to reconnect and, at the same time, cross the bridge from childhood to adulthood. As Beverly states, "I know how to bring us back together. And if we're not together we'll never get out" (*It* 1031). Hence, Beverly makes the conscious decision to be physically intimate with the other members of The Loser's Club, declaring, "'I have an idea'" [emphasis mine] (*It* 1030). At this point, because Beverly has formed safe and loving relationships with the other Losers' Club members, she no longer believes what her father told her about the "only" thing all boys/men want from girls/women. With the members of the Losers' Club, Beverly equates sex with connection and trust instead of equating it with fear and uncleanness. The boys in the Losers' Club exhibit the only loving male touch Beverly has encountered in her life, from their helping her clean the blood-drenched bathroom to these intimate moments in Derry's sewers. Furthermore, during these intimate acts, Beverly releases her fears about womanhood and discovers comfort and agency as a woman, as King writes, "she feels powerful: she feels a sense of triumph rise up strongly within her. Is this what her father was afraid of? Well he might be! There was power in this act, all right, a chain-breaking power that was blood-deep" (*It* 1037). Feeling empowered by her sexuality and her deeper connection to the other members of the Losers' Club through shared intimacy, Beverly separates her view of sex from her father's,

thereby subverting his harmful views about sex. Rather than continuing to fear her burgeoning womanhood and developing sexuality, Beverly now “seize[s]it” by exercising her agency through powerful acts of loving physical connection (Cixous 887). As a result, Beverly completely breaks free from her father’s power over her, thereby shattering her fear of womanhood as she begins to embrace rather than fear her sexual development.

As an adult, Beverly continues to face monsters in her life. The monsters that adult Beverly faces are embodied in three forms: the past with her father, the present with her abusive husband Tom, and the ongoing threat she faces from Pennywise. After marrying Tom, Beverly once again finds herself in an abusive relationship, thereby repeating her past cycle of abuse. However, by the novel’s end, Beverly defies Tom by returning to Derry and reuniting with the other members of the Losers’ Club. Coming together again in adulthood in order to defeat the forces of cosmic evil, Beverly and the other members of the Losers’ Club confront “their traumatic pasts and [bring] their hometown’s history to light . . . finally destroy[ing] the monster” (Mercer 317). After coming to terms with her past and defeating Pennywise, Beverly begins a healthy and loving relationship with fellow Losers’ Club member Ben. Ben has loved Beverly since childhood, as he so vividly illustrated in the poem he wrote for her when they were young: “Your hair is winter fire, / January embers. / My heart burns there, too” (*It* 182). Leaving behind her painful past with an abusive father and husband, Beverly looks toward a bright and hopeful future with a man who has earned her trust and is worthy of her love.

Carrie White

Like *It*’s Beverly, Carrie is in the process of crossing the threshold from childhood to womanhood. As Madden writes, Carrie “[inhabits a] . . . liminal space halfway between two clearly demarcated life stages” (Madden 16). In the opening of the novel, sixteen-year-old Carrie

is terrified when she starts her first menstrual cycle. Because she has no idea what is happening, she thinks that she is dying. At the same time, however, Carrie exhibits a strengthening of her telekinetic powers, thereby depicting the dichotomous nature of blood symbolism in the novel, as Beauvoir writes, “Menstrual blood embodies the essence of femininity, which is why its flow endangers woman herself, whose mana is thus materialized” (169). With the onset of menstruation, Carrie embodies both the fear and power associated with womanhood. King, reflecting on the symbolism of blood in *Carrie*, writes, “The blood in *Carrie* seemed more than just splatter to me. It seemed to *mean* something. That meaning wasn’t consciously created” (*On Writing* 199). Although King may not have initially set out to infuse the blood in *Carrie* with deeper symbolic meaning, once he began to explore the concept more deeply, he realized that “the significance of all that blood was hard to miss . . . [prompting him to] play with the idea, image, and emotional connotations of blood” (*On Writing* 199). One connotation of blood that King explores in the character of Carrie – as he also does with Beverly – is the connection between blood and womanhood. As King writes, “For young women [blood is] associated with reaching physical maturity and the ability to bear children” (*On Writing* 199). For Carrie, however, whose mother never explained menstruation to her, menstrual blood equals death. Carrie’s transition to womanhood – like Beverly’s – is tinged with horror and fear. Also, like Beverly, a large part of this fear is due to an abusive parent.

Carrie’s transition from childhood to adulthood through the symbol of menses and her newly awakened power threaten the hierarchical nature of her relationship with her mother Margaret. Hence, for Margaret, the onset of Carrie’s menses is not only a symbol of uncleanness, but also evidence that Carrie no longer “respect[s] borders, positions, [or] rules, [and, as a result] will disturb identity, system, [and] order” (Kristeva 4). Margaret knows that her

power over Carrie will be diminished once Carrie reaches womanhood. Therefore, it is not only Margaret's extreme religious beliefs about women's impurity that drive her abusive behavior toward Carrie, but it is also her fear of losing her authoritative hold over Carrie. Because of this fear, Margaret uses increasingly extreme measures to keep Carrie from embracing her awakening power. Nevertheless, after she gets her first period, Carrie defiantly stands up to her mother by refusing to go into the prayer closet and repent of her womanhood. She brazenly screams at Margaret, "You SUCK . . . you FUCK" (*Carrie* 70). Although Carrie is eventually "whirled into the closet headfirst" by Margaret, she later begins to "remember the fear in Momma's eyes [and thinks] she [knows] the reason why" (*Carrie* 71). At this point, Carrie begins to realize that she has the power within her to break free from her mother.

Margaret believes "feminine temptation [is] . . . the brimming flesh of sin's root and basic representation," telling Carrie that they must "pray to Jesus for [their] woman-weak, wicked, sinning souls" and making Carrie repeat statements such as "Eve was weak and loosed the raven on the world . . . and the raven was called Sin, and the first Sin was Intercourse" (Kristeva 126, *Carrie* 66). Carrie has endured this type of abuse from her mother for her entire life. As a child, Carrie is told by Margaret that "good girls don't . . . get breasts – [or, in Margaret's terminology] – dirtypillows" (*Carrie* 37). Nevertheless, the more Carrie embraces her power, the further she transgresses the boundaries of her mother's belief system. She begins to contemplate her body and her femininity in a newly enlightened way. Seeing herself in this new way, Carrie thinks "her legs [are] actually pretty . . . she could fix her hair [and] buy pantyhose and blue and green tights [and] make little skirts and dresses from Butterick and Simplicity patterns" (*Carrie* 51). After years of seeing her body as ugly and unclean, Carrie now views her body as "the promise of happiness, a work of art, a living statue; [hence, she longs to] . . . shape it, adorn it, display it"

(Beauvoir 657). As Carrie continues to bask in her newfound freedom by defiantly getting ready to attend the prom, Margaret continually tries to guilt Carrie into staying home through religious and misogynistic manipulation, stating, “I can see your dirty pillows. Everyone will. They’ll be looking at your body. The Book says – ” (*Carrie* 148). However, Carrie refuses to listen to any more of her mother’s tirade. Instead, Carrie cuts Margaret’s statement short with a bold reply: “Those are my breasts, Momma. Every woman has them” (148). Rather than submitting to Margaret’s authority and continuing to hide her body in shame, Carrie now embraces her womanhood and feels empowered by her burgeoning femininity.

Because of Margaret’s distorted theological views about the “sin” of sexual intercourse, she views Carrie as the embodiment of sin – a physical punishment for her participation in sexual acts. For this reason, Margaret’s initial plan is to kill Carrie as soon as she is born – an act which Margaret believes will cleanse her of her sin. However, because Margaret “fails” to follow through with killing newborn Carrie, she then spends the rest of her life rejecting the role of nurturing parent and becoming an abusive authoritarian. She indoctrinates Carrie with extremely misogynistic views and harmful religious beliefs. Margaret also physically assaults Carrie on numerous occasions, ultimately leading to the final confrontation that ends with her and Carrie’s deaths. When Carrie returns home from the prom, Margaret is prepared to follow through with killing her, stating, “I got a knife – this knife . . . and waited for you to come so I could make my sacrifice. But I was weak and backsliding. I took this knife in hand again when you were three, and I backslid again. So now the devil has come home” (*Carrie* 261). Although Carrie eventually dies from the stab wound Margaret inflicts on her, she first uses her powers to end her tormentor’s life. As Margaret dies, she prays, “Thy kingdom come . . . they will be done,” to

which Carrie boldly replies, “*My will, Momma*” (*Carrie* 263). With these words, Carrie clearly communicates that she is now in control of the situation.

Because Carrie’s abuse extends beyond the borders of her home, so, too, does her vengeance. Margaret’s abuse and harmful brand of religion lead to Carrie’s social awkwardness and isolation. Therefore, Carrie is unable to form friendships or participate in society in a healthy way, and her peers view her as an outcast. For this reason, Carrie is subjected to extensive bullying throughout her entire school career, as Madden writes, “each of the ways in which [Carrie] differs from her peers contributes to her status as witch and scapegoat” (13). The novel’s opening incident in the girls’ locker room is a continuation of the torment endured by Carrie over the course of several years. Her peers have taunted her since her early school years, as evidenced by the “graffiti scratched on a desk of the Barker Street Grammar School in Chamberlain: *Carrie White eats shit*” (*Carrie* 4). Carrie has long been viewed as an outcast, and her ignorance about menstruation fuels further torment from her peers, as Madden writes, “Carrie’s extremely public failure to keep her menstrual blood contained within the body breaks social taboos and undoubtedly contributes to her demarcation as an abject figure, further isolating her from her peers” (14). Feeling disgust rather than empathy for Carrie, the other girls in the locker room berate Carrie by throwing feminine hygiene products at her and chanting, “Plug it *up*, plug it *up*, plug it *up*” (*Carrie* 9). Thus, Carrie is ostracized from her peers even further by this incident, as each girl taunts her for her ignorance about menstruation and her failure to understand how to properly contain the flow of her menstrual blood.

Although all of the girls participate in Carrie’s locker room torment, Chris Hargensen is the ringleader and the first to taunt Carrie by yelling, “*Per-iod*” (*Carrie* 7). Chris’s bullying of Carrie goes beyond this moment, too. Because Chris refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing

and will not accept the alternate punishment for her actions, she is banned from attending the prom. Chris blames Carrie for the negative consequences of her own actions, so she seeks revenge by dumping a bucket of pig's blood on Carrie after Carrie is chosen as prom queen. However, this plan backfires on the entire town – not just on Chris, as Carrie turns the tables on all of her tormentors. No longer the victim, Carrie “has become a . . . monstrous hero . . . feminism . . . has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge” (Clover 4). After a lifetime spent being a victim, Carrie finally harnesses all of her power to retaliate against her oppressors, thereby transforming into an “uncontrollable female . . . endowed with unholy powers . . . [who] break[s] free of the margins to which [she has been] confined” (Madden 15). As Cixous explains, “When the ‘repressed’ of their culture and their society returns, it’s an explosive, utterly destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions” (Cixous 886). Hence, the level of Carrie’s retaliation can be viewed as equal to the level of the torment she has experienced. No longer cowering in fear, Carrie instead revels in her destructive nature. In her final moments, Carrie embraces the label of witch as it relates to feminine power. Rather than becoming, as Clover argues, the “devil’s portal” [as a result of] her pain and rage,” Carrie instead channels this pain and rage into a courageous, albeit deadly, destruction of the systems that have long oppressed and abused her (71). In overcoming her own internalized misogyny and fear of her abusers, Carrie becomes a catalyst for disrupting an abusive patriarchal society.

Jessie Burlingame

Written in the early 1990s, *Gerald’s Game* “reflect[s] the changing perceptions of domestic abuse, especially considered against the backdrop of the findings and criticisms of the

feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s” (Canfield 392). In this novel, King “examine[s] larger societal issues, such as abuse and anti-feminism” through the character and experiences of female protagonist Jessie Burlingame (Canfield 392). Molested by her father when she was ten-and-a-half, Jessie represses these memories until her husband behaves in a similarly abusive manner, thereby forcing Jessie to confront both her past and present abuse. When Jessie’s husband Gerald handcuffs her to a bed in their remote cabin and then refuses to remove the cuffs when she asks him to do so, Jessie kicks him in an attempt to stop him from raping her. As a result of being kicked, Gerald falls off the bed and then dies of a heart attack. Still handcuffed to the bed, Jessie must fight to break free from both the handcuffs and the trauma that has overshadowed her since the day of the eclipse during which her father molested her.

After Gerald’s death, Jessie begins to uncover repressed memories of abuse. Through a combination of internal voices and personas, Jessie confronts the long-lasting trauma that resulted from being molested by her father during that fateful eclipse. The first inkling of Jessie’s past trauma begins when Gerald refuses to remove the handcuffs, thereby putting Jessie in a vulnerable situation that reminds her of the helplessness she felt when she was molested by her father. The sensation of Gerald’s spit falling onto her stomach disgusts Jessie and evokes memories of a similar traumatic experience from her past. King writes:

The runner of drool fell off Gerald’s chin. It dangled for a moment, elongating, and then fell on her midriff, just above the navel. Something about this sensation was familiar, and she was swept by a horrible intense sensation of *déjà vu*. The room seemed to darken around her, as if the windows and skylight had been replaced with panes of smoked glass.” (*Gerald’s Game* 34)

Jessie's memory of her father's semen on her skin is triggered when Gerald's saliva drops onto her abdomen. She sees drool, but she thinks "spunk" (*Gerald's Game* 255). In this moment, Jessie recovers a memory of her father during the day of the eclipse, recalling "the hard thing pressed against her buttock . . . spasming, and some liquid was spreading there, soaking a hot spot through her pants" (*Gerald's Game* 219). Although this incident sharpens Jessie's memory of her father's molestation, it is evident that these memories have been lurking within Jessie's unconscious throughout her lifetime. She realizes that over the years since the abuse occurred, she has "*dreamed about the smoked glass . . . about how the sun went out . . . about the flat and tearful smell that was like minerals in well-water . . . about his hands*" (*Gerald's Game* 130). With this epiphany, Jessie finally sees how her life choices have been influenced "by what had happened during the final minute or so she had spent on her daddy's lap, looking at a vast round mole in the sky through two or three pieces of smoked glass" (*Gerald's Game* 243). This epiphany leads Jessie to ask herself, "When you finally kicked out – who were you kicking at? Was it Gerald?" (*Gerald's Game* 255). Thus, by finally coming to terms with her past, Jessie is able to break free from the hold both her father and Gerald have had on her.

In addition to freeing herself from the mental and emotional grip of her oppressors, Jessie also escapes the literal bondage of the handcuffs Gerald placed on her. In order to free herself, Jessie uses a shard of glass to pierce her wrist, thus mirroring the pain of confronting the past in order to free herself from it. Initially, the blood comes out slowly; however, once Jessie severs a bundle of her veins, it eventually begins to flow "like water from a tap which has been spun almost all the way open" (*Gerald's Game* 321). Yet, even with the increased blood flow, Jessie realizes that this act alone will not be enough to free her from the cuffs. Thus, she makes a brutal but necessary lifesaving decision. Although Jessie does not know about the medical term

“degloving,” she nevertheless performs this procedure on herself once she understands that she cannot “depend on blood alone to slide her free” (*Gerald’s Game* 321). King writes:

Just as [Jessie] was about to relax her aching arm, the cuff slid over the small protrusion which had held it for so long, flew off the ends of her fingers, and clacked against the bedpost. It all happened so fast that Jessie was at first unable to grasp that it had happened. Her hand no longer looked like the sort of equipment normally issued to human beings, but it was her hand, and it was free. *Free.* (*Gerald’s Game* 325)

The blood literally saves Jessie’s life, as her degloving allows her to break free from her handcuffs. At this point, she is also figuratively set free as she has finally confronted her traumatic past with her father – and her present with Gerald – and starts to come to terms with it all. She finds life, healing, and strength because she finally allows herself to acknowledge and experience the pain she has dealt with as a result of abuse. This visceral scene is “the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us” (Kristeva 210).

Jessie has been “confined to the narrow room in which [she’s] been given a deadly brainwashing,” both in the memories of her father and in her current situation of being literally handcuffed to a bedpost by her husband (Cixous 877). Nevertheless, as she breaks free from the handcuffs, Jessie demonstrates that, as Cixous continues, women can be “incarcerated, slow[ed] down . . . but for a time only” (877). Jessie’s days of incarceration at the hands of men are over as she emerges from the battle a free woman.

After freeing herself from the cuffs, as Jessie gulps water from the sink, she smells “the bland mineral smell which had haunted her over all the years since her father had molested her during the eclipse, but now it was all right; now it was not the smell of fear and shame but of

life” (*Gerald’s Game* 341). Hence, Jessie is once again willing to face the pain of opening wounds in order to heal them, as Kristeva writes, “The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments . . . it is an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (15). After Jessie escapes death, she emerges to embrace a new life, evident when she says, ““Out of my way, Gerald,”” and then kicks his dead body out of her path (*Gerald’s Game* 331). When Jessie frees herself from the handcuffs and the looming shadow of Gerald’s abuse, she also frees herself from misplaced guilt and internalized misogyny that has been building since she was molested by her father.

After molesting Jessie, her father makes excuses for his actions by telling Jessie that her mother “hasn’t been very . . . well, very affectionate lately [and] a man has . . . certain needs” (*Gerald’s Game* 246). Jessie’s father also gaslights Jessie into believing that her mother will blame her if she finds out about the molestation, thereby blackmailing Jessie into silence. Hearing her father blame her mother for his abuse and then believing her mother will blame her if she discovers what took place, preteen Jessie internalizes these misogynistic beliefs, and as a result, she blames herself for her father’s sexually abusive behavior towards her. Like Beverly, preteen Jessie fears womanhood as a result of her father’s abuse. After being molested by her father, Jessie thinks, “I never want boobs and curvy hips . . . If they make things like this happen, who would?” (*Gerald’s Game* 224). Yet, despite blaming herself for her father’s actions, there is nevertheless a part of Jessie that knows her father is responsible for his actions.

Even as a child, Jessie realizes her father “was the grownup, *he* was the one who had left that funny-smelling crud on the back of her underpants, *he* was the one who was supposed to be ashamed” (*Gerald’s Game* 245). Finally, after confronting her past trauma after Gerald’s death, adult Jessie completely understands that her father “manipulated her – first the apology, then the

tears, and finally the hat-trick: turning *his* problem into *her* problem” (*Gerald’s Game* 247). At the same time, Jessie also realizes that Gerald, too, has been manipulating and using her. King writes, “For [Gerald], Jessie Mahout Burlingame . . . was really not here at all. She had ceased to be here when the keys made their small, steely clicks in the locks of the handcuffs” (*Gerald’s Game* 17). Gerald views his wife Jessie as an object that merely exists for his pleasure. The level of Gerald’s objectification of Jessie is alarmingly evident when he refuses to remove the handcuffs at her request, thereby forcing her into a nonconsensual sex act. Jessie realizes “[Gerald] knew she wasn’t kidding about not wanting to go on with it. He knew, but he had chosen not to *know* he knew” (*Gerald’s Game* 30). Thus, Gerald’s actions reflect Beauvoir’s argument that men use “force to make [women] shoulder the consequences of [their] reluctant submission (651). Jessie’s reluctant resignation to silently submit to Gerald’s abuse is revealed through the words of “Goodwife Burlingame”: “*Let him do it, then. Just let him do it and it will be done*” (*Gerald’s Game* 20).

“Goodwife Burlingame” is the personification of Jessie’s internalized misogyny. Throughout Jessie’s lifetime, the Goodwife is “often the voice of blame, and almost always the voice of denial” (*Gerald’s Game* 216). Goodwife Burlingame reinforces Beauvoir’s claim that women are “taught to accept masculine authority [and] forego criticizing, examining, and judging for [themselves]” (640). Countering the voice of Goodwife Burlingame is the voice of Jessie’s strong feminist college roommate Ruth Neary. Jessie “hears” Ruth say, “If he’s dead, it’s his own damned fault” (*Gerald’s Game* 40). Ruth helps Jessie “kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” (Cixous 880). Eventually, Ruth’s voice starts to overpower Goodwife Burlingame’s. For example, when the voice of Goodwife Burlingame

accuses Jessie of murdering Gerald, Jessie says aloud – in Ruth’s voice – “bullshit” (*Gerald’s Game* 51).

After leaving the cabin, Jessie continues her journey of healing, stating, “I’m going to be okay. Not today, not tomorrow, and not next week, but eventually . . . survival is still an option, and . . . sometimes it even feels good . . . sometimes it feels like victory” (*Gerald’s Game* 444). By allowing painful memories of the past to resurface, Jessie “bears witness to a litany of horrors” (Siodmak and Scannell 399). In doing so, Jessie not only confronts her own trauma but also the trauma experienced by Carrie White and Dolores Claiborne. In a vision, Jessie sees her preteen self – known by the pet name Punkin given to her by her father – in the stocks with the words “FOR SEXUAL ENTICEMENT” nailed above her, while also simultaneously envisioning beside her younger self another girl in stocks who is “perhaps seventeen, and fat . . . [with a] complexion blotched with pimples” (*Gerald’s Game* 276). In the novel *Carrie*, King describes teenager Carrie White as “a chunky girl with pimples on her neck and back and buttocks” (5). Thus, the description of the other girl in Jessie’s vision fits the description of Carrie.

Further evidence suggests that this other girl is Carrie: “Jessie could now see the other girl as well – the fat one with the pimply skin. The fat girl hadn’t been as lucky as Punkin; there had been no escape for her, unless death itself was an escape in certain cases – a hypothesis Jessie had become quite willing to accept” (*Gerald’s Game* 302). Yet, despite the bleak circumstances Jessie find herself enduring, she is determined to keep fighting, telling herself that she does not want to end up like the other girl in her vision. Jessie hears the voice of Punkin willing her to confront the truth so she can finally break free from both her present situation and her past trauma. Additionally, Jessie is also connected to Dolores Claiborne through shared

trauma at the hands of abusive fathers and husbands and through their mutual visions of one another during the eclipse. During the eclipse, Jessie sees Dolores, also “in the path of the eclipse [and] on her knees, too” (*Gerald’s Game* 227). In Jessie’s vision, she also sees Dolores make her husband Joe “fall down the well” (*Gerald’s Game* 227). In order to free themselves and others from patriarchal oppression, both Jessie and Dolores embrace the power of the “bitch.” Jessie escapes her abuse through the empowering voices of Ruth and Punkin, who “could certainly be a bitch when she set her mind to it” (*Gerald’s Game* 339). Becoming a “bitch” is how Jessie survives her ordeal in the cabin, as Dolores Claiborne so eloquently states, “In the end, it’s the bitches of the world who abide” (*Dolores Claiborne* 312).

Dolores Claiborne

Dolores Claiborne’s “publication date coincide[s] with increased levels of reported domestic abuse as well as the nation’s growing counterattack against feminism” (Canfield 393). In this novel, King’s portrayal of the abused wife Dolores Claiborne “gave domestic abuse a face by acknowledging the pervasiveness of domestic violence . . . and provide[d] a social critique because [it] illustrate[s] how few options women possess when they [confront] domestic violence” (Canfield 398). Although the abuse Dolores endured at the hands of her husband was well known to the community, “no one intervened [including the police, because of their belief that] the home was private, and . . . what men do, specifically, in the home is no one’s business” (Canfield 395). Once Dolores fights back against Joe’s abuse, he shifts his focus to their daughter Selena. Like both Beverly’s and Jessie’s fathers, Dolores’s husband Joe sexually abuses his daughter. As Canfield writes, Joe’s focus on his daughter “quickly turned not only violent, but also sexual” (393). Thus, Dolores’s only chance to free her children and herself from Joe’s

abuse is to take matters into her own hands. Dolores cannot depend on the police force or her neighbors to help protect her or her children from Joe's abuse.

Even before killing Joe in order to protect her family and end the cycle of abuse, Dolores has already established a pattern of doing whatever is necessary to provide for her family. She takes on the "masculine" role of financially providing for her family, thereby demonstrating Butler's argument that "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo, [and, as such] in its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (520). At best, Joe is a weight that Dolores must carry, as she explains, "Joe St. George really wa'ant a man at all; he was a goddam millstone I wore around my neck" (*Dolores Claiborne* 6). Like *The Shining's* Wendy, Dolores is the "sole stabilizing force" of the family, dealing with a husband who is "a burden . . . [to] bear – sometimes literally" ("Rethinking the Old Ball and Chain: A Progressive Examination of Wendy Torrance's Character in Stephen King's *The Shining* 37-8). Dolores, in her marriage and in patriarchal society at large, is "integrated into the group governed by males, where [she occupies] a subordinate position" (Beauvoir 638). For example, although Dolores's name is on her children's savings accounts, Joe is able to take the money without her signature, thereby leaving Dolores without access to the funds. Thus, she and her children remain trapped in an abusive environment with no financial means to escape. When Dolores questions the banker about how Joe was able to take the money without her consent, she is told that the process was "perfectly legal . . . standard bank practice" (*Dolores Claiborne* 130). Yet, if the situation were reversed and Dolores had tried to access the money without Joe's consent, she knows that his consent would have been required. The patriarchal society in which Dolores exists infiltrates institutions such as the bank. Because of the overarching nature of patriarchy, Joe is viewed as "the man of

the house, and in charge” [while Dolores is viewed as merely] the little woman, and all *she* was in charge of was baseboards, toilet bowls, and chicken dinners on Sunday afternoons” (*Dolores Claiborne* 131). Legally speaking, Dolores has no recourse with which she can fight back against Joe. Thus, in order to free herself and her children from his abuse, Dolores must operate outside the legal system.

Feeling desperate, Dolores shares her burden with her employer Vera Donovan, which sets in motion the fateful events that take place during the coming eclipse. Dolores explains to Vera that her husband has taken the money from their children’s savings accounts and “is trying to screw his own daughter” (*Dolores Claiborne* 149). Because she lacks the financial means for her and her children to escape Joe’s abuse, Dolores can see no way out of her situation.

However, Vera offers Dolores a solution to her problem by suggesting that Dolores orchestrate an “accident” that will claim the life of her abusive husband. As Vera explains, “an accident is sometimes an unhappy woman’s best friend” (*Dolores Claiborne* 153). Empowered by Vera’s words, Dolores makes a conscious decision to do whatever it takes to ensure that Joe can no longer harm her or their children. She embraces the mantra that Vera so aptly communicates: “‘Sometimes you have to be a high-riding bitch to survive . . . sometimes being a bitch is all a woman has to hold onto’” (*Dolores Claiborne* 175). With Vera’s words in mind, Dolores lays out her plan for Joe’s “accident” to take place on the day of the eclipse.

On the day of the eclipse, as Dolores begins to set her plan in motion, she catches a vision of young Jessie from *Gerald’s Game* who – like Dolores’s daughter Selena – is a victim of her father’s sexual abuse. While making her confession to the authorities, Dolores recalls seeing a young girl whose “Daddy’s hand was on her leg, way up high. Higher’n it ought to’ve been, maybe” (*Dolores Claiborne* 191). Unlike Selena, Jessie cannot depend on her mother to rescue

her from her father's abuse. Dolores sees the danger Jessie faces when left alone with her father, while Jessie's own mother either does not see – or perhaps pretends not to see – the threat her husband poses to their daughter. Furthermore, Dolores is willing to do what Jessie's mother will not do – protect her daughter at all costs. Through shared trauma and visions, Dolores and Jessie are connected in their fight against patriarchal oppression. Even years later, their connection is still strong, as Dolores senses when adult Jessie is in trouble in the cabin, stating, "I thought of how it'd crossed my mind that the woman she'd grown into was in trouble. I wondered how she was n where she was, but I never once wondered *if* she was, if you see what I mean; I *knew* she was. *Is*. I have never doubted it" (*Dolores Claiborne* 284). Although their cries for help are silenced or ignored by the institutions and people who should have protected them, Dolores and Jessie nevertheless create their own shared system of female empowerment, thereby triumphing over patriarchal oppression and breaking abusive cycles.

Once Dolores kills Joe, she is "certain that her daughter is safe and Joe can no longer be an influence to her sons" (Ruta-Canayong 8038). Looked at in this way, Dolores ends not only the cycle of abuse in her present family, but also takes steps to reduce the likelihood that the cycle of abuse will be passed down to future generations of her family. As Dolores states, "Everything I did, I did for love . . . there's no bitch on earth like a mother frightened for her kids" (*Dolores Claiborne* 309). Thus, Dolores's love for her children propels her to act during the eclipse so that she can ensure a more hopeful future for each of them – her daughter in particular. It is fitting that Dolores's daughter is named Selena, which derives from the word "*selas*, meaning 'bright,' and is related to Selene – a name shared by the goddess of the moon in Greek Mythology" ("Selena"). In King's novel, because of Dolores's courageous actions, her

daughter Selena is rescued from an abusive father and, as such, represents hope for a brighter future.

Conclusion

In the novels *It*, *Carrie*, *Gerald's Game*, and *Dolores Claiborne*, King creates female characters who navigate and conquer the “abyssal dark” of patriarchal abuse (Siodmak and Scannell 401). Beverly Marsh, Carrie White, Jessie Burlingame, and Dolores Claiborne choose to fight back against the darkness of oppression, thereby echoing King’s words: “Be true, be brave, stand. All the rest is darkness” (*It* 1087). Although each of these works depicts women in horrific situations, King’s ultimate message is revealed through the resilience and strength of Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores as they break free from oppressive patriarchal systems. Defying the odds, these women exhibit the courage to transgress the boundaries of patriarchal oppression – even though doing so leads to bloody and painful personal sacrifices for each woman. Although Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores endure marginalization and abuse, they nevertheless serve as multigenerational examples of powerful women characters who break free from patriarchal oppression, thereby demonstrating in each subsequent novel King’s growth over the years as a male author writing a woman’s perspective. As Dymond explains, “For King, with personal maturity comes creative maturity. *Carrie*’s use of [gendered] language provides a glimpse of where King began – and an appreciation for the manner in which his work grows over the decades that follow” (“An Examination of the Use of Gendered Language in Stephen King’s *Carrie*” 98).

From his first novel *Carrie* (April 5, 1974) to his upcoming novel *Holly* (September 5, 2023), King continues to write strong female characters who inspire and strengthen readers in the midst of real-life adversity and oppression. Although there have been victories along the way, the

battle against patriarchal systems is ongoing, as Cixous explains, “If we are legion, it’s because the war of liberation has only made as yet a tiny breakthrough. But women are thronging to it” (892). Like Beverly, Carrie, Jessie, and Dolores, today’s women must continue to push back against the darkness of oppression in order to light the way for future generations of empowered women.

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