

The Origins of Horror: Violence and Religious Oppression in Stephen King's *Carrie*

Kurbonova Nilufar

PhD student, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Received: 31 December 2025; **Accepted:** 22 January 2026; **Published:** 27 February 2026

Abstract: This study explores Stephen King's novel *Carrie* as an early example of Gothic horror with supernatural elements, focusing on the themes of violence, religious oppression, and collective humiliation. The analysis emphasizes key literary devices, including the symbolism of blood, hyperbole and simile, which contribute to the projects of horror and reveal the ideological distinctiveness of the novel. Blood functions as a central motif representing otherness, guilt, power, and sacrifice, while hyperbole and comparisons intensify the emotional impact, fear, and tension experienced by the protagonist. The study also examines *Carrie's* transformation from a vulnerable, oppressed girl into a powerful figure, highlighting the psychological and physical dimensions of horror. By analyzing these devices, the research demonstrates how King employs Gothic and supernatural elements to critique social cruelty, religious fanaticism, and collective violence, offering a multi-layered understanding of fear, trauma, and human vulnerability.

Keywords: Stephen King, *Carrie*, Gothic horror, supernatural, symbolism, blood, hyperbole, Simile, violence, religious oppression, collective humiliation, poetics of horror, psychological transformation.

Introduction: Stephen King's novel *Carrie* was written at an early stage of the author's creative career. It may be classified as supernatural horror. The writer employs numerous expressive devices, but central among them are symbolism (particularly the symbol of blood), simile, and hyperbole, which occupy an important place in the poetics of the horrific and contribute to revealing the ideological distinctiveness of the novel.

Many well-known literary scholars have examined the novel from different perspectives. Considerable debate has arisen, first of all, around the image of the protagonist, whom some critics regard as a victim and others as an executioner. Thus, Stephen Bruhm, conducting a genre analysis of the work, argues for the necessity of considering the influence of Gothic literature on the horror genre. He maintains that in order to understand horror as a sociocultural phenomenon, Gothic narrative must be correlated with the "variety of contemporary fears," that is, placed

within a social context in order to determine which specific fears and anxieties Gothic fiction mitigates or intensifies. Referring to *Carrie*, Bruhm demonstrates that the author draws parallels with contemporary events (such as the Vietnam War) and equates the destructive force of *Carrie's* telekinetic abilities with that of an atomic bomb. The scholar explains in detail that the Gothic mode, through its appeal to the past, provides an opportunity to better comprehend the present, helping both individuals and society endure their deepest fears and recognize the value of life. Furthermore, many scholars have influenced the understanding of Gothic traditions in *Carrie*. For instance, David Punter argued that Gothic novels often explore fear, monsters, and repression—a framework that King adapts in *Carrie* to depict the psychological impact of bullying and religious fanaticism. Similarly, Rosemary Jackson observes that horror intensifies feelings of fear by connecting ordinary events with social situations. Clover's analysis of gender in horror

fiction helps explain Carrie's dual role as victim and avenger, reflecting the complex dynamics of female power, repression, and societal judgment within the narrative. Regarding the psychological effects of horror and the reader's emotional response, Noël Carroll suggests that horror operates by eliciting curiosity and fear simultaneously, a mechanism King employs in *Carrie*, particularly through the progressive buildup of telekinetic violence and public humiliation.

In our view, horror literature aims to awaken a sense of fear by transforming familiar phenomena into sources of anxiety and threat. By perceiving the world through the prism of horror, the reader gains access to the inner worlds of others, becoming convinced that the ordinary and the familiar conceal much that is unknown. Thus, the horror genre exposes our hidden fears while at the same time offering a peculiar satisfaction through contact with the dark side of life: "The good horror tale will dance its way to the center of your life and find the secret door to the room you believed no one but you knew of." ("The good horror tale will dance its way to the center of your life and find the secret door to the room you believed no one but you knew of ...").

Opinions regarding the genre of the novel *Carrie* are divided into two groups. Some scholars view *Carrie* as a Gothic novel, while others argue that it belongs to the horror genre, combining Gothic elements with the supernatural—a feature very characteristic of Stephen King's early work. The conclusion about the novel's connection with the Gothic genre has its basis, as Gothic novels are indeed characterized by settings (castles, cemeteries, abandoned houses, etc.) and atmospheres that are mysterious, potentially dangerous, and therefore highly captivating.

However, Anna Smith asserts that Gothic novels, as an earlier literary phenomenon, have evolved, and horror is closely connected with them. The scholar considers King's novel as a projection of the heroine's "inner monster," which manifests in moments when she is subjected to the mockery of her peers. She also concludes that the author's first novel, in terms of its genre features, should be classified as Gothic horror. We agree with these assertions and consider that the novel is indeed written in the genre of Gothic horror with elements of the supernatural. This is further supported by other studies in which Stephen King's novels are also analyzed from the perspective of their

belonging to the horror genre. For example, Williams Hughes traces how King was able to transform Gothic elements into the horror genre and popularize it through the novel *Carrie*: "Thereby, King was able to again popularize the Gothic genre for a mass readership."

METHOD

In this study, we examine literary devices, namely the symbolism of blood and hyperbole, as important means conveying the author's main idea. In the novel, *Carrie* becomes an outcast, a constant object of humiliation and mockery. In real life, many girls at a certain age experience similar treatment and find themselves in comparable situations.

The author describes in detail how *Carrie* hides in the school shower as blood runs down her legs while her classmates throw sanitary items at her and collectively begin to ridicule her; or how *Carrie*, drenched in pig's blood symbolizing humiliation, stands on stage during the prom. Since this detail (blood) becomes a recurring motif associated with the heroine, it can be argued that blood has special significance in the context of this work, associating with horror and fear and connecting with the main idea of the novel. Blood serves as a sign symbolizing otherness, guilt, power, and salvation, linking the events of this work with the Gothic tradition.

Exaggeration and comparisons in the novel also play a key role, acting as literary devices that enhance fear, tension, and the drama of the plot. Below, we examine the literary devices we have identified and their function in expressing the author's idea.

At the center of the narrative is the story of a high school girl experiencing changes typical for all girls during adolescence. *Carrie* comes from a very strict Christian family; her mother, Margaret White, is an extremely authoritarian and rigid woman. It can be assumed that *Carrie* experienced religious pressure from her mother, as well as cruelty. At times, her mother would lock her in a closet, forcing her to atone for her sins through prayer: "Margaret had then grasped her by one arm, marched her to the 'prayer closet' and flung her inside. 'Pray to Jesus for your soul,' she said. 'Go to your closet and pray.'" In this fragment, we can see how an ordinary closet becomes a symbol of violent suppression. We could even say that S. King uses the closet as an alternative to a dungeon, which

often serves as a setting in Gothic novels. This space is dark, frightening, and narrow; it suppresses the individual but does not in any way contribute to the spiritual purification that the mother speaks of. Margaret White, therefore, is simply a religious fanatic who has descended into cruelty and violence. She does not educate her daughter, does not communicate with her sincerely, and her orders to pray resemble a sentence for a sinner more than guidance capable of showing a path to salvation.

Carrie was constantly the target of ridicule from her classmates, and when, at the age of sixteen, she experiences menarche in the school girls' restroom, her classmates begin to mock her and throw sanitary pads at her to humiliate her. However, the heroine does not understand the reason for such treatment, which causes her to panic and scream. With assistance from a teacher, she begins to comprehend what is happening and, for the first time, notices her supernatural abilities. For example, Carrie starts to observe that events unfold according to her desires. She now realizes that, with such power, she can finally confront her mother and put an end to the violence in her family.

One of Carrie's tormentors, Sue Snell, who had also participated in the shower incident, begins to feel remorse for her actions. She decides to atone for her guilt by persuading her boyfriend, Tom Ross, to invite Carrie to the prom in her place. Carrie reluctantly agrees and again becomes the target of elaborate humiliation. When a bucket of pig's blood is poured on her, she realizes that the entire incident was premeditated and begins to take revenge on everyone present using her telekinetic abilities. Carrie locks everyone in the gymnasium and sets the school on fire. After her destructive rampage through the town, Carrie returns home and encounters her mother, who is convinced that the devil has possessed her daughter. Her mother stabs Carrie in the back, but the wounded Carrie stops her mother's heart using her extraordinary abilities. Having never known maternal affection or support, Carrie dies in Sue's arms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In our analysis, Carrie's telekinetic abilities are viewed as a destructive force. This force is linked to her blood, which we consider the central symbol revealing the main idea of the novel. Hyperbole and comparison are

treated in our analysis as literary devices that convey fear and horror and intensify these sensations. The main idea of the novel, we argue, lies in collective violence and religious oppression, which become the source of Carrie's personal tragedy. Below, we justify our point of view through an analysis of blood as a symbol and hyperbole, which serve to dramatize the plot and heighten the atmosphere of horror. It is important to note that the symbolism of blood in works of other genres has been examined by many foreign scholars. For example, Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed consider blood as a significant symbolic image in Gothic literature, where it represents human fate.

The novel's classification as Gothic horror allows a deeper exploration of Carrie's character and is crucial for our interpretation of the work, as female "impurity" and sinfulness are closely connected with rejection, otherness, and the symbolism of blood.

The first blood-related incident occurs in the school shower. Historically, women knew little about the cycles of the female reproductive system. Carrie is approaching a new stage of sexual development, but her mother refuses to explain it to her, considering menstruation a symbol of sin. This is why, as seen in the first part of the novel, the heroine experiences terror and begins to scream in fear, not understanding what is happening to her. Carrie's behavior in this case can be explained by her lack of knowledge about her cycle and by the absence of maternal guidance. However, despite her panic over the blood, Carrie manages to regain control. This can be interpreted as her mastery of a power she was previously unaware of.

The reader understands that in the shower scene, through her posture and movement, Carrie is depicted as alien among her classmates: "Carrie stood among them stolidly, a frog among swans." Through this metaphor, Carrie is compared to the other girls, appearing as a being foreign to their circle and defenseless. The visually perceived contrast between the heroine and the others conveys the atmosphere of isolation surrounding Carrie. Society does not accept her and seeks to push her out, leaving her suppressed and lonely among her classmates.

However, the calm situation changes dramatically when Carrie leaves the shower. At first, she does not notice what happens to Franson, then reacts to a

classmate's scream: "Carrie backed into the side of one of the four large shower compartments and slowly collapsed into a sitting position. Slow, helpless groans jerked out of her. Her eyes rolled with wet whiteness, like the eyes of a hog in the slaughtering pen." Carrie panics at the sight of blood. She plays a key role in the development of the plot conflict and is essential in conveying the author's intention. The menarche episode functions as a symbol of a life transition, namely the shift from childhood to adulthood, which also marks the onset of awareness of her supernatural power. It signals the beginning of liberation from shame, violence, and victimhood, and the transformation into an avenger of all injustices. S. King uses blood as a literary device to trace both the physical and spiritual development of the protagonist.

Carrie calms down only when the gym teacher, Miss Desjardin, runs in. In Carrie's life, Miss Desjardin functions as a maternal figure. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Miss Desjardin is able to soothe Carrie at the moment when she attempts to break free from her mother's pressure. She becomes free and independent through age and sexual maturation but is also able to liberate herself by rejecting her mother's religious beliefs. Carrie perceives blood as a sign of sin. She begins her path to maturity and self-awareness through her blood.

Thus, the "blood scene" in the school shower is a pivotal moment in which Carrie's telekinetic ability is revealed for the first time. In her desperation, Carrie causes a light bulb to explode: "There was a bright flash overhead, followed by a flashgun-like pop as a light bulb sizzled and went out." The first manifestation of Carrie's immense power occurs when the bulb breaks. Indeed, anomalous events had been mentioned earlier in the narrative, but these incidents occurred independently of Carrie's influence. With the onset of sexual maturity, she begins to control these seemingly random occurrences.

The next significant symbol is the blood at the prom, held in the school gymnasium, where pig's blood is poured on Carrie. The specification that it is pig's blood is particularly meaningful. In religion, blood is considered a symbol of impurity. Moreover, pigs are widely recognized as a forbidden animal. Therefore, dousing Carrie in pig's blood equates her with an animal and desecrates her dignity. This repeated public

humiliation is linked to her initial shower trauma, during which she experienced and internalized shame. This time, the attempt at psychological trauma is public, leaving Carrie no means of escape. Consequently, when she is drenched in pig's blood, she is condemned, prompting her ultimate transformation and use of her abilities for revenge.

The prom scene is premeditated by Carrie's classmates. All those involved in the shower incident are punished: they must attend detention with Miss Desjardin, or they will lose the right to participate in the spring prom. Chris Hargensen refuses to comply, is punished, and removed from the prom, motivating her to seek revenge on Carrie. However, Sue Snell regrets her treatment of Carrie during the shower incident. To atone, she convinces her boyfriend, Tom Ross, to invite Carrie to the prom in her place. Sue believes that arranging a pleasant prom experience will boost Carrie's confidence and earn her forgiveness: "...I still think I've got something to make up for."

After some persuasion, Carrie agrees. Meanwhile, Chris Hargensen decides to take revenge and gathers her friends, persuading them to participate in a terrible scheme. They place buckets of pig's blood above the stage designated for the prom king and queen and rig a mechanism to pour the blood onto their victims. Chris involves her friends in the prom committee to ensure that Carrie is chosen prom queen. Despite her mother's attempts to prevent her from attending, Carrie defies her wishes and goes to the prom.

Chris and Billy arrived at the prom, eagerly awaiting Carrie's appearance on stage. Once she stepped onto the stage, Chris pulled the rope, causing the buckets to descend. Blood drenched both Tommy and Carrie, with the majority of it spilling onto Carrie. The vindictiveness displayed by her classmates demonstrates the pleasure derived from witnessing another person's humiliation and reflects deep and complex processes in social psychology. Billy's shout, "Pig's blood for the pig," confirms that this episode should be interpreted as an act of revenge. The note-writer, Sue, conveys the full horror that Carrie experiences, portraying her panic through free indirect discourse: "...it was true, the final nightmare, she was red and dripping with it, they had drenched her in the very secretness of blood... The awful wet, coppery smell... [she] tasted the plump." In this fragment, the horror experienced by the heroine is

described in minute detail, including carefully rendered gustatory and olfactory sensations—the taste and smell of blood. King shows that the horror fills Carrie not only psychologically but also through the senses, engaging primal instincts. This moment represents the ultimate, boundary-breaking experience. After this incident, Carrie transforms into a powerful, destructive figure who no longer seeks merely to endure mockery but desires revenge.

“That’s blood...her mind. Momma had been right, after all. They had taken her again, gulled her again, made her the butt again.” Carrie then decides to leave the stage, while students and teachers attempt to understand what has occurred. Among the crowd, Carrie perceives only those mocking her, which leads her to assume that everyone in the audience is complicit. In reality, only a few attendees actively participated in the humiliation and found it amusing.

Subsequently, the protagonist subconsciously imitates her mother’s behavior, who was vengeful and capable of imposing pain and suffering on others. Carrie begins to laugh hysterically and resolves to punish her tormentors. At this moment, she returns to the prom, immediately locking all exits from the gymnasium. She activates the fire sprinklers, and one panicked student knocks over a microphone stand, causing many students to be electrocuted by the water on the floor. Furthermore, Carrie ignites a fire using her telekinetic powers and opens the hydrants to make extinguishing the flames impossible. All those present at the prom perish. At this point, Carrie, through her supernatural abilities, communicates to everyone that she caused the fire and has avenged her tormentors.

Upon returning home, Carrie experiences a renewed surge of rage and kills her mother, who had attempted to murder her and stabbed her in the shoulder: “Momma leaned forward, and the knife came down in a shining arc. Carrie, perhaps seeing out of the tail of her eye, jerked back, and instead of penetrating her back, the knife went into her shoulder to the hilt. Momma's feet tangled in the legs of her chair, and she collapsed in a sitting...She could taste blood, bright and slick, in the back of her throat.” This quote is also significant in conveying the novel’s central idea. Blood in the final episode functions as a symbol of sacrifice. Margaret White believes her daughter is possessed by the devil and decides to kill her and spill her blood to

atone for sin and cleanse her soul. We argue that S. King seeks to make horror tangible, conveying it not only through disgust, fear, and suffering but also through pain as a physiological experience. This scene constitutes the climax of the narrative, after which the conflict between the heroine and her surroundings is resolved. The blood spilled in this scene is the last, serving as a final symbol marking the conclusion of the conflict. Moreover, in this fragment, blood symbolizes the destruction of the self, her tragedy, and the loss of identity resulting from the loss of faith, family, and love.

It is important to note that exaggeration and comparison are also striking expressive devices in Stephen King’s novels, used to intensify the emotional impact on the reader. In the poetics of horror, hyperbole is, in our view, a critical subject of study. One feature of hyperbole in King’s prose is that he uses exaggeration consistently, gradually revealing the changes occurring in Carrie. Below, we consider key examples of comparison and hyperbole and their significance in heightening tension and fear in the novel.

Consider the following fragment: “Both of Carrie’s legs were smeared and splattered with it, as though she had waded through a river of blood.” This passage is important in analyzing the poetics of horror as it exemplifies hyperbole. Hyperbole conveys the extent of the heroine’s suffering, and the mention of a “river of blood”. intensifies the tension and fear in the narrative.

In another episode, where the heroine appears to experience a stroke, a vivid comparison is drawn between her face and a firetruck: “Her face went just as red as the side of a fire truck and she curled her hands into fists and whooped at the sky. She was shaking all over. I thought she was having a stroke.”. The comparison to a firetruck, with its red color, is symbolic. The color of the truck and the fire, associated with flames, are used to visualize anger, shame, and fear. The choice of a firetruck as a metaphor provokes psychological tension, symbolizing danger and urgency. The moment in which Carrie’s whole-body shakes, allegedly due to a stroke, exemplifies exaggeration. This overly intense depiction of her physical state emphasizes the psychologically tense atmosphere. Another function of this technique is to return to the

theme of humiliation and suffering, characteristic of the horror genre, which depicts the anguish and pain of the character.

In the following episode, Carrie's transformation from a weak, bullied girl into a strong, vengeful heroine is shown: "She had grown a little wary of the terrific strain using the power seemed to put on her heart and lungs and internal thermostat." Here, the author provides a direct characterization of the heroine's condition, intensifying emotional tension with epithets such as "terrific," "enormous," and "extraordinary." Carrie's telekinetic ability is portrayed not merely as a gift but also as a trial. For her fragile body and for the human organism in general, contact with the supernatural is a form of suffering. Thus, the narrative emphasizes the dramatic situation of the heroine, who experiences both psychological and physical pain.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, Stephen King's *Carrie* is a vivid example of Gothic horror with supernatural elements, which the author employed in his early work. In this novel, we have identified, analyzed, and substantiated the literary devices that play a crucial role in conveying the core ideas of the text. The significant devices in our study are symbol, comparison, and exaggeration (hyperbole), which form the poetics of horror. By examining the symbolism of blood, we established that this recurring micro-image creates multi-layered meaning, representing a complex set of associations including religious pressure, violence, and the heroine's physical and psychological transformation. Exaggeration and comparisons serve to depict pain, fear, and anger, enhancing the drama and tension of the narrative, which is characteristic of horror works. Thus, in *Carrie*, through an analysis of literary devices and techniques, we reveal the theme of collective violence and religious oppression as the source of the protagonist's personal tragedy.

REFERENCES

1. Bruhm, S. (2002). The contemporary Gothic: Why we need it. In J. E. Hogle (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (pp. 259–276). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Carroll N. *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. – New York: Routledge, 1990. – 223 p.
3. Clover C.J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender*

in the Modern Horror Film. – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. – 305 p.

4. Creed, B. (1993). Horror and the monstrous-femininity: An imaginary abjection. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (pp. 1–15). London; New York: Routledge.
5. Hughes, W., Punter, D., & Smith, A. (Eds.). (2013). *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (Vol. 1, pp. 104). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
6. Hughes, W., Punter, D., & Smith, A. (Eds.). (2013). *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (Vols. 1–2). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
7. Jackson R. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. – London: Routledge, 1981. – 260 p.
8. King, S. (1974). *Carrie*. New York: Doubleday.
9. King, S. (1983). *Danse Macabre*. New York: Berkley Books.
10. Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
11. Punter D. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. – London: Longman, 1996. – 732 p.
12. Saidov, U., Nigmatova, Z., & Shamsiyev, Sh. (2006). *Kutubxonashunoslik va bibliografiya atamalarining izohli lug'ati*. Toshkent: O'zbekiston faylasuflari milliy jamiyati.