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Research Casebook

In 1974, Stephen King published his first novel, *Carrie*, and since then has been considered an icon of the horror fiction genre. King's worldwide fame and recognition has led to the creation of many literary criticism, contextual research, opinion articles, and general overviews, which provide even further analyses of King's work. Although *Carrie* is one of King's earlier works, there are still many useful sources for readers who wish to dive deeper into topics found within the novel. With this in mind, James Egan's "Apocalypticism in the Fiction of Stephen King" and Douglas Cowan's "America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King" serve as valuable sources for readers interested in further exploring the idea of religion in King's novel *Carrie*.

"Apocalypticism in the Fiction of Stephen King" serves as a source of literary criticism for college students and scholars who are interested in looking at *Carrie* through an apocalyptic lens to gain a deeper understanding of religion in the novel. James Egan, an English professor at The University of Akron, authored "Apocalypticism in the Fiction of Stephen King" and many other literary criticisms of King's work, making him a credible source for information. Egan's literary criticism explores the apocalyptic qualities in King's novels *Carrie*, *The Stand*, and *The Mist*. According to Egan, apocalyptic literature heavily focuses on religion, as the apocalypse deals with the end of the world, the destruction of life, and the investigation of heaven and hell. The main purpose of Egan's analysis is to examine the intersection of apocalypticism and religion within *Carrie* by focusing on literary elements such as setting, plot, characterization, and symbolism. Furthermore, Egan supports his claim that *Carrie* serves as an expression of King's vision of apocalypticism and religion through the use of direct quotes, explanations and reasoning connected to the novel, and a general understanding of both apocalyptic literature and religious texts to create a convincing analysis (Egan, p. 214-219).

When evaluating the quality and usefulness of "Apocalypticism in the Fiction of Stephen King," it is evident that Egan provides readers with an excellent analysis of *Carrie*. Throughout the essay, Egan provides strong evidence and an in-depth analysis of *Carrie*. Egan incorporates his outside knowledge of religious texts, such as St. John's Gospel, to point out the "Christian predictions of the 'Last Days'" (215), which are supposedly plagued by an apocalyptic nightmare of crises and catastrophe until the return of the Messiah. Egan masterfully relates this to the characterization of Margaret White and the final setting scenes of Chamberlain. For instance, Egan accurately characterizes Margaret White as a religious fanatic who has mania about the Last Days, which she fears will bring about the Day of Judgement. Egan emphasizes how Margaret constantly pushes her mania onto Carrie when she forces Carrie into the closet to pray for God's forgiveness of sins (218). According to Egan, the final setting of the novel also relates to the Last Days by depicting Chamberlain in flames. Egan equates this crisis to an apocalyptic holocaust because of all the death and destruction. Lastly, Egan craftily ties the setting and characterization back to the religious prediction of the Last Days by emphasizing the concept of the "destruction of an old world" (215) as well as all the crises and fear that ensue in *Carrie*. The strong connection between both literary elements within *Carrie* and outside religious texts demonstrates the true depth of Egan's analysis. Egan's use of literary elements such as

symbolism and plot further support his analysis. Throughout the article, Egan explains that water and fire serve as “Judaean-Christian symbols of cosmic catastrophe” (216), which he then applies to the plot. According to Egan, this directly relates to the scene where Carrie wreaks havoc during the prom by using her telekinetic abilities to set off the sprinkler systems and start electrical fires. Egan reflects on this point in the plot and emphasizes that the elements of water and fire serve as symbols of catastrophe. This analysis and connection are spot on. Carrie’s water and fire incident during prom clearly serves as a catalyst for the full-on destruction of Chamberlain. Overall, Egan’s literary criticism deserves an excellent mark because he is able to support his claim and provide his readers with a strong, convincing analysis of *Carrie*.

Douglas Cowan’s “America’s Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King” further explores the concept of religion in *Carrie* and adds new ideas to what Egan presents. Cowan’s work serves as a literary criticism that is geared toward college students and scholars who want to investigate the religious elements of King’s work. Both Cowan and his source are credible given the fact that Cowen received his doctorate in religious studies and also concentrated in the sociology of religion. Currently, Cowen works as a professor at Renison University College and University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. It is also important to note that this literary criticism being applied to *Carrie* is a shorter excerpt from Cowen’s book *America’s Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King*. Throughout Cowen’s literary criticism, he acknowledges both King’s religious imagination and push to get readers to grapple with religious ideas. Additionally, Cowen claims that *Carrie* aims to encourage readers to explore fundamental religious questions through the characterization and plot of the novel. This claim is further supported by quotes, explanations and reasoning, and Cowen’s academic background (Cowen, p. 91-93).

“America’s Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King” provides readers with a good analysis of *Carrie*. This source provides new insight into religious elements of *Carrie* by diving into fundamental religious questions, but it uses subpar evidence to support its claim when it comes to characterization and plot. For instance, Cowen accurately identifies fundamental religious questions brought up by *Carrie*, such as, “Is there a god, or some other god-like forces in the world?” and “What happens after [humans] die?” (91). Any reader of *Carrie* would agree that these are the broader religious questions that arise after reading the novel. However, Cowen fails to explain how the characterization and plot of the novel get readers to engage in these types of questions. In fact, Cowen only briefly mentions the idea that religious characters within *Carrie* demonstrate “what it means to believe—and of what [people] believe in” (92) throughout the climatic events in the plot. Cowen could have further elaborated on these points by diving deeper into Carrie White’s telekinetic abilities, which present as god-like forces in the novel. In addition, *Carrie* provides Cowen with the opportunity to expand even further on his analysis of religious characters and their beliefs. Overall, Cowen’s lack of support holds his analysis back from being excellent. Regardless of the fact, both literary criticisms are worthwhile sources for any reader of *Carrie* who would like to further explore the religious elements of the novel.

Work Cited

Egan, James. "Apocalypticism in the Fiction of Stephen King." *Extrapolation (Kent State University Press)*, vol. 25, no. 3, Fall 1984, pp. 214–227. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.3828/extr.1984.25.3.214. Accessed 1 April 2021.

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