

Review by Claire Buser
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Casebook Research for Stephen King's *Carrie*

Madden, Victoria. "We Found the Witch, May We Burn Her?: Suburban Gothic, Witch-Hunting, and Anxiety-Induced Conformity in Stephen King's *Carrie*." *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2017, pp. 7–20., doi:10.1111/jacc.12675.

"We Found the Witch, May We Burn Her?: Suburban Gothic, Witch-Hunting, and Anxiety-Induced Conformity in Stephen King's *Carrie*" by Victoria Madden is a reference source that highlights suburban social structures and what occurs when there is a discord in that social structure. This essay was first published in the *Journal of American Culture*, which functions to "combine[s] studies of American literature, history, and the arts, with studies of the popular, the taken-for-granted, and the ordinary pieces of American life, to produce analyses of American culture with a breadth and holism lacking in traditional American studies" (*Journal of American Culture*). Dr. Victoria Madden published this work in her first year of doctoral studies and now possesses a Ph.D. in English Literature focused on mid-century American gothic fiction at the University of Edinburgh. *Carrie* by Stephen King fits into the genre of suburban gothic, which Madden has specialized in. Suburban Gothic is "defined as a sub-genre of the wider American Gothic tradition which dramatizes anxieties arising from the mass urbanization of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations, and protagonists" (Madden 7).

The thesis of this paper is that suburban gothic novels shatter the perspective of the idyllic American suburban life because they represent the schisms in this picture perfect life; this is exemplified in *Carrie* with the namesake character constantly at odds with the society which poses a major threat. American suburbia is perfect, there is not a blade of grass out of place. There is a sameness in suburbia, "the American suburb has contributed towards a proliferating sense of placelessness and in turn the perceived homogenization of American life" (Madden 9). And within these picture perfect suburbs, anyone or anything that doesn't fit in is a problem and a threat. There is a mentality of "keeping up with the Joneses" and when someone cannot do this they are ostracized. The portion of this paper that focuses on *Carrie* highlights that Carrie's gender is essential to the depiction of her as a "witch" or "monster." Madden makes the point that "it appears that a witch is nothing more than a young woman who repudiates socially determined norms for her age group and gender" (Madden 13). Carrie embodies abjection which is defined as something that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Madden 13). Carrie's feminine qualities that she cannot handle, such as menstruation, put her at odds with other females in her school. At her core Carrie is depicted as a witch and "Witches [on the other hand] embody the ultimate male fear; uncontrollable females who, endowed with unholy powers, threaten to break free of the margins to which they must be confined" (Madden 15). Carrie is not only a threat because she is a female, but also because she possesses the TK gene which is genetically carried in women; Carrie again differs from her peers and doesn't fit the norm. "Carrie [thus] draws attention to both the folly of a rigid classificatory

system based on arbitrary exclusion as well as the dangers of abjectifying women and demonizing individuals perceived to have deviated from the norm” (Madden 19).

Madden effectively makes this point with direct quotes and references to the novel *Carrie* along with other researchers’ interpretations of the points brought forth in the novel as well as her perspective on the topic. A major point made in the paper is Carrie’s position as a “witch” and this is exemplified with a quote from Carol F. Karlsen, “only by understanding that the history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women... can we confront the deeply embedded feelings about women... we still live with witches in our culture, however much their shape may have changed over time” (Madden 13). Carrie’s reputation as part of the abject, the different, is presented almost immediately in the novel with her first menstruation, “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” (Madden 14). Madden utilizes various direct quotes from this scene in the novel to further her point of Carrie as an abject individual. King throughout the novel utilized a “Congressional” text as a means of explaining away the “Carrie White affair.” This serves as “an attempt to explain away the mysterious (feminine) supernatural through (male) “scientific” reason” (Madden 15), highlighting that Carrie as a female with a unique trait must be explained and dealt with. Madden makes the final point that “in pushing Carrie to her breaking point through repeated efforts to reduce and grind her down “to a uniform condition”, Chamberlain condemns itself to total effacement... the town is destroyed by the witch-hunt not the witch” (Madden 19).

Madden’s essay is very informative and effectively and succinctly relays her thesis. Even though this was written as part of Madden’s doctoral work it is a very legible piece of text that presents the information well. This is a dense piece of text, but not hard to read. The diction used is not too formal and any uncommon words are presented along with a definition, as seen with the word abject. This allows the reader to understand the point being made without Madden having to “dumb it down.” This text is broken up into defined sections that are all interrelated but not intermingled such as suburban gothic, American suburbia, transgressions from suburbia, and destruction of women defined as “witches.” All the sections tie together under the thesis but each has its place and they build upon each other until the final topic of *Carrie* is addressed with all of the knowledge previously amassed in the text.

Victoria Madden’s “We Found the Witch, May We Burn Her?: Suburban Gothic, Witch-Hunting, and Anxiety-Induced Conformity in Stephen King’s *Carrie*” delves deeply into picture perfect suburbia and how women who deviate from the norm are a threat to it. Utilizing Stephen King’s *Carrie* Madden exemplified how women are constantly painted as the deviant in suburbia by being inherently feminine, and even if being feminine is not directly the problem, everything wrong can always be tied back to a woman.

Works Cited

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