

## PURITAN PROJECTIONS IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S "THE SCARLET LETTER" AND STEPHEN KING'S "CARRIE"

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### Abstract

It is considered that the Puritans that populated New England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century left a distinctive mark on the American culture. The article explores some projections of Puritan legacy in two American novels of different periods – Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974). After establishing a connection between the Puritan writings and gothic literature, the two novels are analyzed in terms of some Puritan projections, among which are the problem of guilt and the acceptance of an individual in the society. Some references regarding the idea of the witch and the interpretations it bears, especially in terms of the female identity, are also identified. Despite the different approach of the authors in terms of building their characters, those references are mostly used in a negative way, as an instrument of criticism and exposing inconvenient truths.

**Keywords:** Puritans, guilt, witch, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Stephen King, *Carrie*

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Stephen King and Nathaniel Hawthorne are authors related to the American gothic tradition – a genre usually associated with ‘the sublime, the ugly, the grotesque, the formless and, most recently, the abject’ (Grunenberg, 2016, p. 145). Relying on means that are sometimes appalling to the common taste, gothic art can afford the luxury to be honest about truths which are inconvenient, painful, or shocking. It can expose the darkest face of the past, as it ‘functions as kind of moral valve, releasing repressed memories and revealing the traumas that haunt American society throughout its history and presence’ (p. 146). Considering the dark episodes of violence in American history and the flagrant contradiction between this land of supposed innocence and the cruel ways of colonizing it, it is not surprising that ‘American fiction became bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, non-realistic, sadist and melodramatic - a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation’ (Fiedler, 1960, p. 29).

Edward J. Ingebretsen, S.J. (1996) has established a historical link between the gothic literary tradition and the religious writings of the Puritans in New England. The fearsome visions of gothic fiction are seen as memory projections of the horrendous visions of religious terror. Taking Ingebretsen’s idea as its starting point, the article sets out to explore some projections of Puritan legacy in the specific context of two American novels of different periods – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Stephen King’s *Carrie* (1974). Among these projections are the problem of guilt, the society’s rejection of an individual, the idea of the witch, and some gender issues. Those references are mainly traced in the development of different characters in the two novels – Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne, Carrie, and Margaret White. They are discussed in terms of their relation to Puritanism and the interpretations they bear.

The Puritans that populated New England during the colonial period are widely believed to have left a distinctive mark on the formation of the American culture. Deserting the supposedly corrupted Europe, they came to the newly found American continent in the hope of establishing a new civilized culture that would be purer than the old one. On the one hand, they held virtues that can be considered wholesome priorities in building a nation, like hard-work and education. On the other hand, however, they were a community of rigid religious rules almost fanatically obsessed with the Book of Revelation and the forthcoming Judgement Day. Their creed that sinners would be inevitably punished, and that crafty Satan was always stalking people in order to drag

them to hell led to events like the Salem witch trials (1692), when people were sentenced to death on accusations of witchcraft. Such violent acts appear to be in stark contrast to what the Bible preaches, as religion usually 'rejects any form of violence or aggressive and authoritative invasion in the world of the other until its total destruction'<sup>1</sup> (Filipov, 2017, p. 99). This dramatic historical episode has been turned into an enduring source of gothic inspiration and 'an American cultural metaphor' that 'has meanings that shift to suit contemporary realities' (Adams, 2008, p. 157). In his attempt to provide a 'collective portrait' of those accused of witchcraft John Demos defines 'the typical witch' as a middle-aged married female of lower social standing, frequently in conflict with her family, previously accused of crimes, 'abrasive in style, contentious in character—and stubbornly resilient in the face of adversity' (Demos, 2004, p. 93-94). Apparently, those deemed witches were usually women who did not obey male authority or social norms. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (1974) found outsiders among those who were 'unusually vulnerable' (p. 190) to accusations of witchcraft. Thus, the witch has become an epitome of alienation - the outcast, the marginal, the inability to fit in - and an embodiment of the 'community's rejection of itself' (Ingebretsen, 1996, p. 57). Furthermore, 'the use of Salem resembled the earliest incarnations of the metaphor as a warning about the dangers of public passions, fanaticism, and even backward beliefs that threatened national progress' (Adams, 2008, p. 150).

Despite their high ideals of purity and innocence, the Puritans seem to have been experts at evoking guilt, as illustrated by the line standing next to the first letter of the alphabet in the *New England Primer* - 'In Adam's Fall We Sinned All' (Edwards, 2000, p. 121), which makes it evident that the Puritan kids were introduced to the world of knowledge with the clear realization of their sinful nature - they were presumed guilty because of the Original sin. This implication was further enhanced by the portrayal of God as a judge and inquisitor, a higher institution that administered justice to the sinners and punished them. Unlike the peaceful Quakers, the Puritans rarely saw God as a forgiving friend or light. He was rather viewed as a vengeful dark entity that sooner or later would take His toll.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation from Bulgarian.

Puritan pastors were famous for striking fear in the hearts of their congregations. The projection of horror and fear is almost as typical of Puritan writings as it is of gothic fiction. Despite some obvious theological differences, the works of authors like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, for example, abound in horrific images that picture the Devil and the awaiting hell that everyone 'flatters himself that he shall escape it' (Edwards, 2000, p. 287). In his famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Jonathan Edwards strikes fear with warnings of God's wrath expressed in frightening images of the devils like 'greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, ...' (Ibid., p. 286). Referring to Edwards as 'proto-Gothic,' Ingebretsen ironically suggests that if he was a contemporary writer, 'he could give Stephen King some competition' (Ingebretsen, 1996, p. 103).

Denial of the self and horrific imagery are observed not only in the strictly religious writings of the period, but also in colonial poetry. The preacher and poet Edward Taylor wrote secretly about his sins:

My sin! My sin, my God, these cursed dregs,  
Green, yellow, blue-streaked poison hellish, rank,  
Bubs hatched in nature's nest on serpents' eggs,  
Yelp, chirp, and cry; they set my soul a-cramp.  
I frown, chide, strike, and fight them, mourn and cry  
To conquer them, but cannot them destroy. (Taylor, 2000, p. 175)

The vivid imagery and desperate mood of the stanza seem to project a lyric I that is severely polluted by sin, a commonly observed phenomenon in the works of various colonial poets and evidence that the poetry of the period was turned into an instrument of indoctrination, instruction, and not rarely, self-flagellation. From a psychological perspective such psychic tension could be considered dangerous for the mental health. Sigmund Freud even established a connection between the behavior of people with obsessional disorder and high religiosity claiming that: 'The sense of guilt of obsessional neurotics finds its counterpart in the protestations of pious people that they know at heart they are miserable sinners' (Freud, 1996, p. 215). He concludes that 'one might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of religion'. What the Puritans seem to have comprehended far before Freud is that 'complete backslidings into sin are more common among pious people than among

neurotics,' thus leading to the religious phenomenon of penance (p. 216). The fact that religious people inevitably tend to fall in the traps of temptation may be explained with the moral essence of religion, which is in contrast to the instincts of the human nature and it appears that the Puritans took advantage of this vulnerability turning it into a convenient way of manipulation.

By narrowing the focus of religion, breeding fear (frequently relying on demons and witches), and underscoring the superiority of their group, the Puritans preached obedience and stigmatized any form of Otherness. As Ingebretsen has pointed out: 'If the lands of New England were thought to be utopic and gracious, its wildernesses, conversely, were demonized – darkened, populated with demons (and later, their agents, the Indians, or "heretical" persons)' (p. xx). According to Sacvan Bercovitch (1991) the Puritans of New England 'invented' a myth, which 'had provided the culture with a useful, flexible, durable, and compelling fantasy of American identity' (p. 977-978). The American progress and dynamism, the pride to be American and the readiness to wage war against anything that is not (p. 978) seem to be partly rooted in the Puritan ideology and 'their success in making a dissenting faith the cornerstone of community' (p. 984). The idea of the superiority of one nation, especially in terms of religion, that found its expression in the doctrine of the Manifest Destiny, was essential in founding the US capitalist economy, as suggested by Aqeeli (2020). However, achieving prosperity by rejecting the Other can hardly be considered heroic or progressive and as literature could have the function of exposing the flaws of the society, it is not surprising that the roots of many demons that populate American fiction can be traced in the nation's history and Puritan projections are identified in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and in Stephen King's *Carrie*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived and worked a couple of centuries after the Salem witch trials, can be viewed as both a critic of Puritanism, on the one hand, and its inevitable heir, on the other. Considering the fact that he had Puritan ancestors and was one of the representatives of Dark Romanticism (a literary subgenre with a focus on human fallibility), it seems that he had never been too far away from the problem of sin and guilt and it is observable at the center of his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Supposedly based on evidence that the author found while working at the custom house, the book offers a bleak view of the past. As Leslie Fiedler (1960) suggested: 'At the heart of the

American past, in the parchment scroll which is our history, Hawthorne has discovered not an original innocence but a primal guilt – and he seeks to evoke that past not in nostalgia but terror’ (p. 510). Fiedler connected the novel to the Puritan past claiming that the very letter ‘A,’ which Hester Prynne was made to wear, might be considered indicative of “*Adam’s Fall*” rather than of *Adultery* (p. 497). This suggestion, which reveals only one of the many interpretations of the significance of the symbol, is in tune with the fact that guilt and not adultery seems to be the novel’s main preoccupation.

Traditionally *The Scarlet Letter* is termed a historical novel associated with Hawthorne’s uneasiness about his Puritan forefathers. It exposes and criticizes the Puritan creed and proposes a sort of literary confession of Hawthorne’s guilt on behalf of his Puritan ancestors, who persecuted Indians and Quakers and took part in the Salem witch trials. More recently, however, the historicism of the novel has been questioned at the expense of different aspects in its interpretation. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, for example, have observed that ‘Hawthorne erred with his dating, undercutting his own extensive attempt to establish the reality of his characters and their lives’ (Bloom, 2011, p. 63). According to David S. Reynolds the novel bears sensational rather than historical features, in other words, Hawthorne used literary elements which were considered attractive to the reading audience (‘a hypocritical preacher, a fallen woman, an illegitimate child, and a vindictive relative’) against the background of Puritan New England setting (Bloom, 2011, p. 58). Leslie Fiedler also doubts the historicism of the novel claiming that it is ‘dream-like rather than documentary, not at all the historical novel it has been often called – evoking the past as nightmare rather than fact’ (p. 498). Such narrative haziness might be interpreted as a highly personal approach to the past and it definitely gives a gothic touch to the story. *The Scarlet Letter* is about the past, but not the past of the cold and precise facts one can find in any historical novel. It is a personal gaze at the past, subjective and emotional. It is not the past as it was, but the past as how the author felt about it, not a journal, but an intimate revelation.

The new perspectives of literary criticism, however, cannot change the fact that the novel is inextricably bound to the Puritan heritage as it displays constant references to it. In its very first chapter, for example, the author problematizes the Puritan mindset by opposing their *purity* to their brutal way of imposing righteousness. The ideas of innocence and guilt clash on the very first pages of the book. The optimistic image of

America suggested by words as 'new colony,' 'Utopia,' 'human virtue,' 'happiness,' 'virgin soil,' 'youthful era' seem to be strikingly opposed to terms like 'sad-colored,' 'gray,' 'antique,' 'iron-work,' 'ugly edifice,' and 'unsightly vegetation' (Hawthorne, 1986, p. 45). The promise of the new land is confronted by the deadly symbols of the prison and the cemetery. What should be fresh, new and fertile is actually obsolete, morbid, and dead. However, the chain of gloomy images is abruptly interrupted in the end of the chapter by the appearance of a blooming rose-bush that offers an array of positive interpretations, but mainly, giving hope for the future. This imbalance in symbols according to Hyatt Howe Waggoner (1959) might be a way to imply 'that moral good will be less strongly felt than moral and natural evil' (pp. 5-6).

The novel seems to be imbued with guilt and one must agree with Fiedler that the focus of the book is not on sin, but rather on its aftermath, as the very carnal act of adultery is implied but not described in the narrative (pp. 497-498). The primary focus on guilt is one of the most obvious references to Puritanism in the novel, as it is related to the Puritan idea that people are damned sinners who will be punished accordingly. Guilt can be identified at different levels in the novel. One can speak of Hester Prynne's guilt of being unfaithful to her husband, Arthur Dimmesdale's secret guilt that torments his conscience, the stigmatizing symbol of guilt – the scarlet letter 'A,' and finally Hawthorne's own guilt because his ancestors were an essential part of this narrow-minded society.

Hawthorne's approach to the problem of guilt, however, differs significantly regarding the two main characters in the novel. While Hester Prynne silently bears the public symbol of shame on her chest, Arthur Dimmesdale chooses to suffer in secret. Frequently viewed as weak and unworthy, even 'too weak to be tragic' (Bloom, 2011, p. 9), Dimmesdale can be compared to a child. For Fiedler, he starts as 'child-like' and finishes as 'childish' (p. 499), and even in the act of adultery he seems to be 'more seduced than seducing' (p. 508). By stripping Dimmesdale of all typically male characteristics, Hawthorne turns him into 'an "emblem" of the fate of the American male' (Fiedler, p. 508). Thus, the character development of Arthur Dimmesdale can be considered a criticism of both - the Puritan and the man. The fact that Arthur does not take responsibility for his act underscores the inability of the male individual against the background of his female counterpart.

Dimmesdale is an impressive example of Hawthorne's exploration of the psychological effect of guilt on the Puritan mind. If one can claim that Hester's public punishment sets her free and she transforms her guilt into beauty by decorating and adorning its symbol, the letter, Arthur remains confined in the prison of his guilt because it remains secret. The character is trapped in the hypocrisy of preaching good sermons and being tormented by secret guilt at the same time. It might seem easy to call Dimmesdale weak and unworthy, but the real problem seems to be rooted in the working of the religious mind. The feeling of guilt is inextricably bound to the idea of the pure Christian, and if in Puritan terms sin is inevitable, then we are all destined to fall in the hands of guilt. The feeling of profound guilt, however, especially in its religious sense, seems to be typical only of those who are predisposed to feel it. James Gilligan (2003) finishes Freud's claim that 'no one feels guiltier than the saints' with the idea that 'no one is more innocent than the criminals' (p. 1172). At the essence of this statement one can find the implication that saints, unlike criminals, are *capable* of feeling guilt. Although the feeling of guilt involves the need for punishment, Dimmesdale never dares to expose himself, to confess publicly, until the end. Undoubtedly, a confession could liberate him, but Hawthorne seems to be more interested in the masochism the young preacher is willing to subject himself to because of his inability to confess. The author seems to demonize not Dimmesdale as a person, but the system that trains a mind to function in this manner – the hypocrisy of the character is indicative of the hypocrisy of the Puritan community. Dimmesdale's inability to purify himself from his guilt by the only logical way of confession and penance<sup>2</sup> and his supposed fear of punishment and shame are in obvious contradiction to being pious as 'pain and punishment increase feelings of shame but decrease feelings of guilt' (Gilligan, 2003, p. 1164), and consequently could liberate him from this devastating feeling.

By contrasting Dimmesdale's moral and psychological confinement to Hester's individual freedom, Hawthorne as if contrasts Puritanism to Romanticism being quite explicit on which one he favors. Feminist criticism tends to analyze 'the process whereby Hester subverts the laws of patriarchy and lives according to a law of her own' (Bloom, 2011, p. 66). Certainly, in the eyes of the Puritan society, Hester Prynne is guilty, if not guiltier than Dimmesdale because of her sex, but Hawthorne's approach to her guilt is

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<sup>2</sup> 'Confession is self-exposure or self-shaming. And penance is self-punishment' (Gilligan, 2003, p. 1164).



different as, unlike the young preacher, she does not show the inner need to suffer, to be punished or humiliated, she does not seem to be subdued to his intrapsychic tension. Thus her guilt can be interpreted as something that is thrust upon her rather than a deep and personal sensation. This is the guilt she is supposed to experience, but which obviously does not come from within. It is attached to her like the scarlet letter itself. Hester does not flee from New England because it 'had been the scene of her guilt' and it 'should be the scene of her earthly punishment' (Hawthorne, 1986, p. 73). However, it is clearly suggested that her guilt is rather a social construct, than a personal feeling by the statement that it was something 'she compelled herself to believe' being 'half a truth, and half self-delusion' (p. 73). Unlike remorseful Dimmesdale, Hester seems to be convinced by others that she is guilty. She bravely faces her punishment, willing to become a martyr in a society, in which 'there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it' (p. 76). Both Arthur and Hester seem to be prisoners of their guilt. But if he is a prisoner of his secret spiritual torture, she seems to be incarcerated in the constraints of a society that does not accept her. The fact that she would not flee from it only underscores her bravery and willingness to take responsibility contrasting Dimmesdale's lack of confidence. By putting a courageous and self-confident individual against the background of a cruel and narrow-minded society, Hawthorne makes it clear who should feel ashamed and guilty: 'The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering at it' (p. 53).

According to Paul Ricoeur (1968) 'the symbol of sin is at one at the same time the symbol of something negative (rupture, estrangement, absence, vanity) and the symbol of something positive (power, possession, captivity, alienation)' (p. 104). Thus, the material expression of Hester's sin and guilt, the scarlet letter, the same one, which has become an epitome of shame and disgrace in the American culture ever since, actually appears to reveal notions of female power, individuality, and resistance. After witnessing Hester's mercy, talent, and willingness to help, even the same Puritan society that condemned her becomes more lenient and 'many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength' (Hawthorne, 1986, p. 141).

Hester's strength, independence, and individuality demonstrate the potential of a female energy that was thought to be demonic and not rarely in those days labeled as witchcraft. Apparently, her mere sex stands as an opposition to the Puritan society, since God had created her a woman – a creature thought to be inferior to its male counterpart. Female power and energy were thought to be dangerous and condemning women for being witches was a way to limit it. Thus witches could be considered 'the natural byproduct of female subjugation' (Collar, 2017). By underscoring Dimmesdale's inadequacy turning him into a weak, even pathetic, character and representing Hester Prynne as a courageous and responsible heroine, Hawthorne questions the Puritan belief in the preeminence of one of the sexes. His clearly articulated suggestion of the divinity of the female nature reveals a belief in the female power in male-centered Puritanism: 'The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman' (Hawthorne, 1986, p. 228). Hawthorne's sympathy for women regarding the Puritan patriarchal subjugation is observable in his description of the women in need of Hester's help - 'in the recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion, - or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought – came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy!' (p. 227). Thus, the treatment and attitude to women and their place in the society can be considered another important aspect in the novel.

About a century after *The Scarlet Letter* was published, Stephen King wrote a novel about a telekinetic schoolgirl who, like Hester Prynne, does not fit into her community. Critical of the society and sometimes a dark visionary, King seems to be 'the inheritor of a set of preoccupations from America's literary past' (Magistrale & Blouin, 2021, p. 11). Although the author has been severely criticized for his portrayal of female characters, especially in his early works, *Carrie*, which in his own words 'is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality' (King, 1981, p. 198), is one of his most successful novels. The writer's uncertainty about the subject of the female nature, almost cost the publishing of the novel<sup>3</sup>. According to Erica Joan Dymond (2013), in *Carrie*, he 'frequently employs overtly masculine images in reference to his female characters' (p. 95). Despite such well-grounded claims regarding his use of gendered language, the portrayal of King's female

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<sup>3</sup> The manuscript was literally 'saved' by his wife from the trash bin.

protagonist suggests deep undercurrent meanings that, despite his immaturity, are related to serious social and gender issues.

*Carrie* has been associated with the genre of suburban gothic, which 'disturbs readers on a personal level' (Madden, 2017, p. 9) and deals with the 'xenophobia of small town America' (Strengell, 2005, p. 14). The typical of King 'gothic disruption' (Magistrale & Blouin, 2021, p. 12) arises mainly from the telekinetic ability of a molested female outsider. Madden relates Carrie to the abject regarding the scenes of her first menstruation (p. 14), for example, and the repeated associations of the girl with pigs (p. 17). A classic school outsider, who ultimately turns into a monster that serves justice by burning down the whole town of Chamberlain, Carrie seems to have become a witch (she uses her superpower in a malevolent way), and she is sometimes referred to as one even by her mother. Ingebretsen observes the relation between Hester Prynne and Carrie White:

Like Hawthorne's Hester, Carrie's fatal difference from other people is her knowledge and her vulnerability. She knows too much and disowns too little. Less possessed by demons than by her own dark self, Carrie's social sin – [...] - is, again like Hester's, the power she refuses to give over to society, and so she becomes, for all practical purposes, its witch – a word whose Old-English roots show traces to its cognate connection to "victim". (Ingebretsen, 1996, p. 60)

Both Carrie and Hester can be considered victims, but Carrie's victimization turns her into a dark instrument of revenge, which is her basic difference with Hester. While Hester is silently bearing her punishment, Carrie dares to confront her victimizers. The way in which Carrie uses her telekinesis against other people is reminiscent of the Puritans' fear and demonization of the female body. Menstruation has long been considered abject and feared (Madden, 2014, p. 14) and by relating the activation of the girl's superpower to her late first period, this power is 'inextricably bound to the most quintessentially abject dimension of her femaleness, reinforcing her association with that most abject spectre of American history: the witch' (p. 15). Carrie's passage to womanhood, which unleashes her telekinetic gift, turns her from a victim into a powerful Other that threatens the whole community (Ingebretsen, 1996, p. 61). King describes Carrie as a 'Woman, feeling her powers for the first time' (King, 1981, p. 198) and the capitalization in the word "Woman" above is quite suggestive of his point. Similar to *The*

*Scarlet Letter*, the woman stands against the background of a society that is guilty of treating her unjustly. Another typically female feature that Hester and Carrie share is that both of them are skilled in sewing.

Despite the characteristic that both women have in common, their images are radically opposing. One essential difference between Hester Prynne and Carrie White is that while Hester is punished because of her overt femininity (passion, beauty), Carrie is humiliated and ostracized because she does not conform to the norms of femininity in her society. Hester's mere figure is the exact opposite of Carrie. Described as 'lady-like,' 'a figure of perfect elegance,' with a beautiful face and 'abundant hair, so glossy that it threw the sunshine with a gleam' (Hawthorne, 1986, p. 50), this alleged sinner seems to be the quintessential beauty. For Ghasemi and Abbasi (2009) Hester's 'sin is rooted in the most perfect of all feelings: love,' and her religion is of the heart rather than of the head (p. 12). The fact that she has soon become a mother only adds the final sketch to the portrait of her blooming femininity. Hester is an epitome of womanhood, a *woman* in the full sense of the word, while Carrie, on the other hand, displays few purely feminine characteristics. Unlike her classmates, she does not wear make-up or date boys, which is why she is rigidly excluded from her social group.

[...], Carrie White is as much burdened by innocence as she is by the guilt of others. She is innocent of knowledge concerning her body's disruptive physicality (she thinks that tampons are for applying lipstick), guilty because she lives out her mother's pathological religious denials and her society's social repudiations. (Ingebretsen, 1996, p. 61)

Despite the striking difference in the image of the two female characters, they are both outcasts. In Carrie's case the problem of the outsider is linked to the problem of femininity as she seems to be isolated on her way to maturity from other females and is thus turned 'into an outsider to the feminine world' (Anastasova, 2019). Even when she appears beautiful in a formal dress and accompanied by popular Tommy Ross at the prom, she still cannot fit in and 'the ritual that could have effected this rebirth, the coronation of the King and Queen, turns out to be a ritual of humiliation' (Weller, 1992, p. 14). The Cinderella-like fairy tale ends in flames. *Carrie* might be a story of the hidden power, which every woman seems to possess, but it is also a story of how 'straying from

the groupthink results in the destruction of the individual' (Magistrale, 2010, p. 58). For Ingebreetsen, in the culminating moment of the novel, when Carrie is poured with pig's blood at the prom, she resembles Hester at the marketplace. The society punishes both of them as they fail to conform to its standards. However, unlike Hester, Carrie takes her revenge and turns into a monster, but speaking of guilt and innocence, here again one can hardly avoid the question of who is to blame, the monster, or the society that created it.

References to early New England Puritanism are observable in *Carrie*, especially in relation to the character of the girl's religiously fanatic mother, who sees the Devil everywhere, but mostly in her daughter. Having left the Baptist church because 'Baptists were doing the work of the Antichrist' (King, 1992, p. 344), Mrs. White relates to the Puritan's exclusiveness of other religions and prefers to practice religion at home. Her clothing, with prevailing black, also resembles the apparel of a Puritan. She even mentions the Black Man, a figure associated with Puritan tales, supposedly representing Satan. One of the most suggestive allusions to Puritanism, however, is her idea of God – an angry higher authority, chasing sinners in order to torture and punish them. It is not surprising that in the closet in which Margaret locks Carrie one can find 'Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*'. Margaret's pathologically distorted vision of religion and her fixation on the sinful nature of her daughter turns Carrie into 'the victim of her mother's religious mania'. By demonizing her female features and even calling her breasts "dirtypillows" Momma might be considered a worthy successor of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. She is as distressed over the blooming femininity of her only child as 17<sup>th</sup> century New England preachers were over those deemed witches. Margaret White is a person 'to whom fear, guilt, and faith are synonymous, and she brought her daughter up accordingly – to worship, to placate, and to fear an inscrutable, inescapable deity' (Ingebreetsen, 1996, p. 61). The deadly consequences of her attempts to raise her daughter as if they lived in the colonial period can be interpreted as a severe criticism of her obsolete means.

The representation of God in the White family is clearly one of the most direct references to Puritanism in the novel and His complete withdrawal in one of the final episodes, when Carrie is kneeling down to pray in the church after punishing her classmates, is indicative of her inability to rely on the deity she was disciplined to worship and fear: 'She prayed and there was no answer. No one was there – or if there was, He/It

was cowering from her. God had turned His face away, and why not? This horror was as much his doing as hers' (King, 1992, p. 416). The final sentence points out in a straightforward way to the Puritan belief that sinners are severely punished, and God shows no mercy. Whatever she has done was not without His help. The feeling of being abandoned by God together with the uncertainty which pronoun to use ("He/It") to refer to Him suggest the idea that the girl does not recognize this deity and her mother's cruel attempts to impose it on her daughter were to no avail. She feels empty and deprived of God's presence.

Margaret White's self-loathing for having conceived Carrie in carnal pleasure is successfully transferred to her daughter turning her into a miserable creature equally tormented at home and at school. Greg Weller (1992) sees Carrie as 'a young person lacking all sense of ego, of self,' who seems to be concerned with 'finding *anything* beyond the utter emptiness that is her soul' (p.13). Carrie's psyche seems to react with nightmares about Christ chasing her and states in which she feels 'so miserable, empty, bored, that the only way to fill that gaping whistling hole was to eat, and eat, and eat...' (King, 1992., p. 339). Such incidents are indicative of the character's mental state. As it has been mentioned above, James Gilligan (2003) has claimed that 'pain and punishment increase feelings of shame but decrease feelings of guilt' (p. 1164). However, Gilligan also has suggested that humiliation leads to violence and that 'the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation [...] and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride' (p. 1154). Thus, Gilligan's view about shame as the psychological reason for violence explains quite satisfactory the novel's finale. The severe and frequent punishment, torture, and humiliation stimulate aggression in Carrie and eventually the victim becomes a victimizer, the protagonist has been transformed into antagonist.

It is evident that both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen King had something to say about Puritanism and the two analyzed novels display clear references to it. It can be concluded that in both literary works those references are mostly used in a negative way, as an instrument of criticism and exposure of unpleasant truths such as female subjugation and bigotry. The problem of sin and guilt permeate the two stories and despite the different literary approach to each analyzed character (Dimmesdale's secret suffering, Hester's willingness to live in a society that has stigmatized her, the grotesque

caricature of religious extremism represented by Margaret, and Carrie's metamorphosis into a powerful revengeful being), the insights into the psychological effect of guilt reveal the destructive effects of religious constriction.

Another Puritan projection might be traced in the opposition of individuality to the community. Both Hester Prynne and Carrie White do not fit in their society because of their inability to conform to the collective. Both novels present a critical view of a society that refuses to accept the Other and Tony Magistrale's claim that *Carrie* as one of King's novels in which 'evil is represented in the community collective united with the malefic avatar — a monological merging of speech, thought, and action' (Magistrale, 2010, p. 59) can be considered valid for both analyzed works. The two outcast females are developed in a different way - Hester is turned into martyr and Carrie is transformed into antagonist, but both are deprived of happiness primarily because of their community's maltreatment.

By putting female characters against the society's norms both authors tend to manipulate the idea of the witch as a metaphor revealing truths about feminine power and male uncertainty. The general attitude to the two fictional women in the novels resembles the Puritans' approach to the alleged witches. Excluded from their society and made to suffer, the two characters find their inner power, which helps Hester survive and turns Carrie into a monster. The representation of Arthur Dimmesdale as weak and vulnerable and the complete absence of a male figure in Carrie's family, together with the focus on female power, are indicative of the authors' criticism of the disparagement of the female sex.

The two novels differ essentially in tone. While Hawthorne centered on the human drama behind his story of guilt and remorse turning it into a private tragedy, in King's work, some of the Puritan projections, like the absurdity of Margaret White's character, add a clearly humorous touch to his otherwise horrific tale. Certainly, it must be noted that the 20<sup>th</sup> century obviously allowed greater freedom of ideas, tastes, and literary experimentation than the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when echoes of Puritan voices were still audible. Although Hawthorne dealt with the times long gone before he was born, and King posed his book in the near future, both authors used Puritanism and its inherent antagonism to expose the society's flaws, ineptness, and inadequacy. *The Scarlet Letter* seems

anachronistic and *Carrie* - prophetic. For Hawthorne, it was important to share, King, probably appealed for a change. Finally, the fact that the two American narratives display unquestionable gothic elements is indicative of the idea that the 'gothic is particularly active where underlying moral ambiguities, ideological contradictions and social tensions fail to enter public discourse and therefore manifest themselves in other forms – literature, art, music and popular culture' (Grunenberg, 2016, p. 147).

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