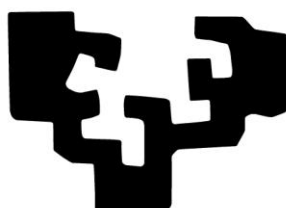


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TESIS DOCTORAL

**TEEN-AGE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN
STEPHEN KING: A GENDERED VIEW**

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INTRODUCTION

For four decades, Stephen King has been creating worlds that are enthusiastically visited by literally millions of readers. He is, undoubtedly, one of the most recognizable writers of American fiction. However, it is this recognition, this popularity that has in the past stifled King's acceptance in the academia. Many scholars repudiate Stephen King as a pulp fiction writer regurgitating only one kind of story for cheap thrills with an impossible, superhuman, and often annoying, regularity. On the other hand, other critics maintain that "Anything so popular for so long merits attention, whether it is Stephen King, The Beatles, the Ford Mustang, or William Shakespeare" (Davis 8). Nowadays icons of a globalized world culture, The Beatles and William Shakespeare were once common. Yes, even William Shakespeare was to an extent dismissed by the intellectual elites of his times as popular "junk," but we come to learn that, in literature as in life, time puts things in their proper place and that "popular items of one generation become the classic items of the next" (Davis 9).

Now, only time will tell whether King's works will endure long enough to be considered iconic or classic, but two things are evident: Stephen King is highly popular, and he is widely read outside the academic world. The fact is that there is an apparently insuperable breach between Stephen King and academics, between popular and high culture. Maybe, the ambivalent personification of this rupture, of this scornful definition of popular as something "suitable for ordinary people rather than experts" (mcmillandictionary.com) is critic Harold Bloom who, despite defining Stephen King as "a sociological phenomenon, an image of the death of the Literate Reader" ("Introduction" 3) or despising him as an "immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis," ("Dumbing Down American Readers") has published to date with Chelsea House three editions of collected essays about King's fiction for which he has both edited and written Introductions; this suggests at least that he appreciates King's undeniable marketability, if not his significance as an American literary figure.

Anthony Magistrale suspects that Bloom's point is to relegate King's place in American popular culture to an ephemeral commodity of our disposable epoch that carries no real significance beyond its moment in time and certainly not worthy of being

recognized as literature (“Why Stephen King Still Matters” 355). For him, this would explain why Professor Bloom was so incensed when Stephen King won the National Book Awards’ annual Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2003. However, if Stephen King will only be remembered as a sociological phenomenon, there are other, more insightful ways of interpreting him sociologically. His novels and stories are not merely cheap thrills to consume fast but, as Anthony Magistrale himself points out elsewhere, at the heart of his best work there is “a deep-seated awareness of the very real anxieties about how Americans live and where are we going, as nation and individuals” (*America's Storyteller* ix).

These anxieties are expressed in Gothic terms because Stephen King has been pigeonholed as a master in horror literature, but his best stories transcend this genre to overlap others. In fact, this dissertation is not merely the study of a literary genre, but a way to offer a sociologically relevant discourse analyzing Stephen King's fiction. A starting point for this analysis would be to acknowledge that, much to Harold Bloom's distress and desperation, Stephen King embodies the birth of the Non-Literate Reader because his books are so compelling that they have attracted people who normally do not read much of anything, let alone thousand-page novels. Particularly, teenagers devour his books with passion.

Maybe, this is so because the majority of his early production, the one which gave him fame and money, and the one this dissertation will be focused on, is crowded with teenagers and children they can identify with ... or not. Since *Carrie* reached the bookstores in 1974 to the mid - 1980s, Stephen King has published twelve novels with infants and bags of hormones in their pages: *Carrie*, *Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *The Stand*, *Firestarter*, *Cujo*, *Pet Sematary*, *Christine*, *Cycle of the Werewolf*, *It*, *The Eyes of the Dragon* and the collaborative experiment *The Talisman* with Peter Straub. Apart from this, other narratives by King such as *The Dead Zone* and *The Dark Half*, several collections of short stories such as *Night Shift* or *Skeleton Crew*, collections of novellas like *Different Seasons*, with stories such as “The Body” or “Apt Pupil,” a seminal essay about horror where he gives his personal opinion concerning how the genre works, *Danse Macabre*, his fictions have been translated into motion pictures that have made him omnipresent in American popular culture and society; and if the American literary market were not saturated enough by his pen, he published several novels using the pseudonym of Richard Bachman, such as *Rage*, *The Long Walk*, *The Running Man*,

Roadwork and *Thinner* which became instant hits ... once people knew Stephen King was behind the pseudonym.

The writer could have died of success, but this was not the case. Encouraged by feminist critics who labeled him as unable to write a believable female character from sixteen to sixty-four – famous literal words asseverated by King critic Chelsea Quinn Yarbro (“Cinderella's Revenge” 9) – he embarked in a different period in his writing in the 1990s approaching strong and believable women. Novels such as *Misery*, *Dolores Claiborne*, *Gerald's Game* or *Rose Madder* are hugely appreciated by scholars of gender studies. He combined this trend with his most usual fantastic stories publishing *The Green Mile* or *Desperation*, another Bachman book, *The Regulators* and collections of short stories such as *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* and *Hearts in Atlantis*, or another collection of novellas, *Four Past Midnight*, until an accident in 1999 almost killed and moved him away from writing. In the first decade of the twentieth-first century, he resumed work completing his anxiously desired and critically praised saga of *The Dark Tower* with the novels *Cell*, *Lissey's Story*, *Under the Dome* and the collection of short stories *Everything is Eventual* acquiring certain literary relevance. Meanwhile, his fructiferous collaboration with Peter Straub came up with *The Black Hotel*. His most noteworthy book in the last five years is *11/22/63*, which brings back the earlier narratives combined with a fine craft of writing. In addition, he has published the collection of short stories *Full Dark, No Stars* and continues using the name of Richard Bachman (*Blaze*), while his essay on the craftsmanship of writing titled simply *On Writing* has become essential to understand his profession and vocation.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, his prolific production does not match his critical reception. Due to his huge popularity, mainly in his early career, a bunch of brave scholars began to pay attention to his works and books of criticism such as the seminal *The Art of Darkness* (1984) by Douglas Winter appeared. The collection of academic articles *The Gothic World of Stephen King* (1987) by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray Browne remains essential to analyze some of the early productions of the author, and critics and scholars such as Anthony Magistrale, Michael Collings or Heidi Strengell have researched King's literary production in depth. When the Stephen King's boom returned to normal, the criticism of his work remained relatively regular. One of the highlights in criticism of the Stephen King *oeuvre* is the collection of academic articles about gender studies in Stephen King's fiction contained in the volume

Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women (1998) edited by Kathleen Lant, from which several articles have been reprinted in different collections of essays, including those by Harold Bloom. In fact, seminal academic articles are re-edited once and again for the use of literary scholars and students. With the main focus in his early career, it is not a surprise that his more recent literary production is still out of sight. Particularly, King's much praised *Dark Tower* saga has a little recent niche of scholarship inaugurated by Robin Furth and her *The Dark Tower: the Complete Concordance* (2006).

This lack of serious attention from the academe is not shared by students at the university, who have researched the work of Stephen King with tenacity. It is not a secret that the majority of the main characters in Stephen King's canon are male, and this fact has not gone unnoticed by gender scholars. However, when analyzing the main contributions, most of them seem to be relegated to seminal individual works. Particularly, *The Shining* (1977) in "From Big Sticks to Talking Sticks: Family, Work and Masculinity in Stephen King's *The Shining*" (2000) by Stephen Davenport, and *Misery* (1987) in "Your Legs Must Be Singing Grand Opera: Masculinity, Masochism and Stephen King's *Misery*" (2002) by Douglas Keeseey; Kathleen Ann Sullivan has analyzed the construction of masculinity in the works of Stephen King and Peter Straub in *Suffering Men / Male Suffering: the Construction of Masculinity in the Works of Stephen King and Peter Straub* (2000) sticking exclusively to "The Body" (1982) and "It" (1986). His feminine characters have stimulated controversy, and their meaning and depth are the focus of several studies. The aim of this dissertation is to open the discussion about gender in Stephen King's fiction. Since there are children in almost every major story by King, it seems relevant to choose stories with teenagers as main characters driving the plot and see how they reflect gender because, as it has been previously mentioned, King's canon appeals to teenagers. In fact, the whole study is nothing less than a gendered view of the construction of teen-age identity in the literary fiction of Stephen King. In this particular vision, the concept of power is fundamental.

The stories approached in this dissertation have been chosen taking into consideration a few reasons. To begin with, although it is true that most of the children and teenagers in Stephen King's production are boys, there are also girls. *Carrie* (1974) was the first published novel by King, and for me, it is the starting point to begin the dissertation because the following statement by Kathleen Ann Sullivan is worthy of

analysis: King's fiction is the unintended consequence of 1970s feminism ("Bookish Boys"). Maybe, the notion of power seems relevant to prove Sullivan's statement. Other reason considering the election of the primary bibliography for the research is the fact that Stephen King has written in several formats, including short stories and novellas. Therefore, those formats deserve scrutiny and, at least one of them should be included in the analysis. Finally, the main characters of these stories drive the plot, they are not secondary, and being teenagers, their ages range from 12 to 18. Criteria exclude from the analysis almost all the early novels by Stephen King including *Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *The Stand*, *Firestarter*, *Cujo* or *Pet Sematary*, among others.

Trying to insightfully interpret him sociologically, I have chosen stories that allow the construction of a discourse about masculinity in his fiction. If his production is the unintended consequence of 1970s feminism, what is the author's answer to this movement? How is masculinity reflected in his fiction? If there is an internal discourse about masculinity, is this discourse appropriate for the teenagers who devour his books? Are there any deviations in that discourse? Are these deviations desirable? His novels do not live in a vacuum, and they are the product of his times, which are ours. What this dissertation tries to prove is that the very real anxieties about how Americans live and where they are going as individuals and nation are gendered in nature.

The first chapter in this dissertation analyzes *Carrie* (1974) in depth. In "Origins and Antecedents in Fact and Fiction," the literary Gothic roots of the character are traced while, at the same time, it is explained where its true origins are. "Feminine Powers Unleashed" approaches the novel from a psychoanalytical, feminist point of view considering the text as an amalgamation of feminist anxieties about power and gender. Masculinity concepts become relevant to explain the behavior of the main characters, teenage girls attracted to the apparently great freedoms enjoyed by boys. From a sociological point of view, the story reproduces a patriarchal system to which the characters try to conform. As a matter of fact, *Carrie* shows how patriarchy works for women and girls.

The second chapter takes into consideration *Christine* (1983) as a late mirror of the previously analyzed novel. "Technology Made Flesh: the Human Machine" looks for the possible science fictional roots of the story, while "Consuming Masculine Powers" talks about masculinity and power. The story explains how patriarchy works for men and boys. Under the premises of the work of Warren Farrell, the myth of male power is

put in a quandary. The novel demolishes the myth of the self-made man, essential in American culture, and explains how and why the disposability of masculinity perpetuates patriarchy. In short, *Christine* is a metaphor about the lack of male power.

The third chapter considers “The Body” (1982) a reboot of the study. In “Assimilating Death and Legacy,” the novella included in the collection *Different Seasons* brings to the surface American cultural demons, and provides a mythological context to the loss of American (male) innocence and to the perpetual crisis of masculinity American men seem to suffer since the raise of feminism in the 1960s. A realistic coming of age narrative, the story tries to exorcize culturally constructed (gendered) malaises of American society through a cathartic experience that allows American readers to assimilate a historical and cultural legacy they seem to ignore. Moreover, it provides an explanation to the current rejection of certain hegemonic discourses of gender; to the moment when being a lonely, tough and dominant man became a curse instead of a blessing.

The fourth chapter goes deep into the realms of fantasy for a better understanding of *The Talisman* (1984), the collaboration between Stephen King and Peter Straub. The novel, a Gothic quest, “faces (American) reality as it is”; it reveals the backroom of the Reagan Era, and how the origins of the crisis of masculinity Americans seem to suffer were culturally constructed and battled during those years. In fact, the journey the main character, Jack Sawyer, embarks on becomes an attempt to even out the unbalance of the feminine principle in an American society rotten with racism, homophobia and sexism. The boy, an updated incarnation of the old modern myth of the American Adam, begins “the Hero's journey” proposed by Joseph Campbell innocent, and he finally turns into an idealized new alternative to the harmful, hegemonic models of masculinity Americans praise for a magical while. Of course, as we see this myth “through a glass darkly,” the experience for the boy is more traumatic than fulfilling.

The last chapter of the study takes into consideration *It* (1986), a pseudo-farewell to the horror genre and to everything Stephen King has to say about children and teenagers. The novel gives a fairy talesque closure and answer to the culturally constructed crisis of masculinity produced by the raise of feminism during the Reagan years with a bunch of kids “Defeating Fear; Cha(lle)nging Patriarchy,” trying to kill a protean, ambiguous monster which represents the worst traits of patriarchy and becomes the villain of a cultural American war. The kids, flawed heroes of a democratic myth made up in the 1950s, defeat It twice, both as children and adults. However, the happy

ending hides a poignant message about current American society and its dystopian future.

Since the rise of feminism in the 1970s, a cultural and perpetual crisis of masculinity disrupts the evolution and maturity of Americans. The novels of Stephen King tell how American society works, show its malaises and reflect teenage individuals trying to deal with issues of gender and power. However, in spite of multiple threats and uncertainties, there is room inside the author's characters for improvement and evolution.

Chapter One: *Carrie*

CARRIE INTO PERSPECTIVE: ORIGINS AND ANTECEDENTS IN FACT AND FICTION

Carrie (1974) was the first novel published by Stephen King. It supposed the meteoric starting point of his career as *bestsellers'* author and American pop culture icon. With an uncertain and complicated origin,¹ the story of Carrietta White was an unexpected success for his creator and it can be considered the cornerstone over which the writer builds his particular vision of what it does mean to be an American (masculine) child and teenager.

Paradoxically, it is not by chance that his first literary journey is the story of a girl who suffers bullying at school. Beyond mere literary opportunism, there are many different factors that contributed to the publication of the book and its subsequent rise to fame. In fact, the novel emerges in the proper breeding ground to make a deep impression among readers. The 1970s decade was a very convulse one in more than a sense. Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal or the oil crisis shattered the placid vision the United States had about itself. In plain loss of innocence as a nation and as a world superpower, American horror fiction found a way to articulate all the anxieties this country was suffering by offering a radically different vision of what until that moment had been acceptable. The main child characters who terrify the easy and *bourgeois* lives of their parents in such novels as *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) by Ira Levin, *The Other* (1971) by Thomas Tryon, *The Exorcist* (1971) by William Peter Blatty or *The Omen* (1976) by David Seltzer make a disturbing and perverse portray of childhood and adolescence as a real threat to the adult world. As Sobchack clearly states, from the early to mid-1970s and coincident with bourgeois society's negative response to the youth movements and drug culture of the late 60s and early 1970s, generic emphasis was on the child not as a terrorized victim, but as cannibalistic, monstrous, selfish, sexual. The child was figured as an alien force that threatened both its family and all adult authority that would keep in its place -

¹ After many rejections from publishers, Stephen King was desperate and did not have any original ideas for writing. The author decided to work on a short story called *Carrie*. He thought the opening scene in the shower room unrealistic, so he threw the pages into the wastebasket. Luckily, his wife Tabitha retrieved them and urged him to continue. (S. Russell 7; King, *On Writing* 68)

oppressed and at home (178). Furthermore, this trend also helped horror literature to enter the mainstream.

Prior to these novels horror literature was continuously available on the shelves, but it was in a way *ghettoized*, that is, only specialized audiences tasted it. The cinema opened the door of this minor genre to wide audiences, as almost all the novels mentioned before became very successful movies: *Rosemary's Baby* (1969) by Roman Polanski, *The Exorcist* (1973) by William Friedkin or *The Omen* (1976) by Richard Donner. Particularly, the screen adaptation of *The Exorcist* is very relevant, as its astounding hit (including an Oscar for best adapted screenplay) stimulated movie production and made horror more attractive to publishers. From that moment onwards, horror motifs and archetypes were to be found everywhere.

This Gothic revival and *boom* of the 1970s had extremely important consequences, being the most important one the fact that these series of novels and films perpetuated the tendency in American mass media to stigmatize and trivialize adolescence as an unimportant period in vital development. Teenagers seem to be individuals without any moral or ethical code. The banality of different cinematographic sagas like *Porky's* or *Friday the 13th* the following decade proved it right. The hedonism and consumerism of the 80s influenced the representation of teenagers as superficial people even in more critically acclaimed films such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) by John Hughes or *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) by Amy Heckerling, which in 2005 was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant” (Dirks).

A similar tendency could be found in bookstores. The 1980s supposed a return to romance books for teenagers following the hard-edged realism of the 1970s. The adolescent lives portrayed in the romances of the 1980s replicated the already unreal lives found in the forties and fifties' version, a pattern mass-produced for a not so new target: teens. Actually, what the teenagers “wanted in the eighties was what their parents had already been demanding – and getting – for a decade or more: genre romances and formulaic bodice-ripper-of-the-month gothic paperbacks” (Cart 38).

Both Gothic and romance novels offered escape from life's cares and woes, even when these formulas sold stereotypes appropriate for the conservative nostalgic climate of the Reagan era. The sugary mass-market paperback series appearing at the rate of one new title per month reached its climax in 1985 when *Perfect Summer*, the super edition under the rubric Sweet Valley High created by Francine Pascal became the first novel

addressed to teenagers in reaching the *New York Times* paperback best-sellers list. Apart from Stephen King, horror and science fiction found a place within teenagers' minds with *Slumber Party* (1985) by Christopher Pike, R.L. Stine's *Blind Date* (1987) or *Ender's Game* (1985) by Orson Scott Card.

In fact, it is very useful to define and offer a brief history of what literature for teenagers is because my point is that, although Stephen King is a prolific author who may be writing about adult themes and tropes, his literary production (at least his early fiction, the one we are dealing with in this analysis) can be considered as young adult literature. For Donelson and Nilsen, literature for teenagers started in the United States in the nineteenth century with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain and *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott. The founders of this genre, so to speak, attacked the audience from two very different perspectives: the domestic female life and the adventurous male life². Male adolescents' rebellions seem to gain them certain degree of autonomy that women have always been denied, and this tendency has not disappeared. However, in England the so called young adult books started even earlier because nineteenth century literature presents several early examples that appealed to young readers (Garland 6): *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) by Johann David Wyss; *Waverley* (1814) by Sir Walter Scott; *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1860) by Charles Dickens; *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) by Alexandre Dumas; *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) by Thomas Hughes; *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll; *Kidnapped* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson; *The Jungle Book* (1894) by Rudyard Kipling and *Moonfleet* (1898) by J. Meade Falkner are but a few examples.

But if we assume all these novels were originally intended for an adult audience, then they would not be literature for teenagers. In the United States, in fact, this badly called genre possesses a well-defined and narrower nature. Simply, young adult literature is fiction written, published and marketed for teenagers. According to this definition, young adult literature started in the twentieth century, when adolescence became a separate state of being due to the work of psychologist and educationalist Stanley Hall and thanks to his classic two volume massive work with that name of 1904. After his work, adolescence became a process of turmoil, stress, and storm rather

² Hilton and Nikolajeva contrast these different perspectives in that, whereas Alcott presents a powerful sentimental ideology of the family as the idyllic locus of adolescence grow and accentuates the strong family bonds and loyalty among women, Twain writes the first Western novel of adolescence in its intensive search for identity (3, 4).

than a static concept like “boy” or “girl.” However, this drastic change did not translate into fiction for the young. What is more, the sentimental tradition of writing about children for children just stretched to include the teen years. *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) by Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Ann of Green Gables* (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery or *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912) by Jean Webster are three classic novels of the American realist canon that justify this statement.

There are three novels that can be considered as turning points inside the genre in the United States: *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) by Maureen Daly, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J. D. Salinger and *The Outsiders* (1967) by S. E. Hinton. Daly's novel of first love was published for adults, and it gave rise to countless teen romances in the Forties and Fifties that captured the reader's imagination, introducing the *clichés* of the awkward first kiss, the embarrassing introduction to the parents, the romantic and unreal moonlit boat rides, teenage jealousy and concerns about being sexually precocious. Salinger's masterpiece was also intended for an adult audience, but his Holden Caulfield changed the popular image of children and their actual experiences in a post-World War II period where McCarthyism limited open political expression. Holden's frank, foul and stream-of-consciousness language and image evoked the specter of real juvenile delinquents and his alienation mirrored iconic movie stars as Marlon Brando and James Dean. The 1960s and the 1970s mark the end of childhood (and, by extension of adolescence) as a protected and innocent realm. Books portray bleak children and teenagers, and adults are incompetent, absent, negligent, or outright evil. S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* is the first book written by a teenager for teenagers and so, it inaugurates the young literature canon according to the limited definition offered above. This coming of age novel portrays gang violence, a topic that was beyond the pale a few years earlier.

According to Mickenberg, “By the late 1970s children's literature had become more relevant to the actual lives of children and to the problems facing society, and more representative of ethnic, racial, religious and even sexual diversity. This shift has not only kept children reading books [...] it has also drawn adult readers to books written for children and adolescents” (874). It can be, therefore, inferred that the 1970s saw an “adult-eration” of children fiction with novels such as the anonymously authored *Go Ask Alice* (1971) and Hinton's second novel *Rumble Fish* (1975), both dealing with, among other themes, drug abuse; Alice Childress's *A Hero ain't Nothing but a Sandwich* (1973) tells the story of a thirteen-year-old drug dealer, and Rosa Guy's *Ruby* (1976)

deals with homosexuality. But, perhaps, the magnificent three of the decade are Robert Cormier, Judy Blume and Lois Duncan. Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) portrays the public and secret life of a Catholic school, where newcomer Jerry rebels against (and ultimately succumbs to) the bizarre rituals of his peers and the expectations of the school's administration by selling chocolates as a fundraiser. The deterministic view of Cormier we find in this and other titles such as *I am the Cheese* (1977) made the author a distinctive voice inside the genre, taking his readers into a continuous heart of darkness. Duncan is best known for her suspense novel *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1973), where bad actions kept in secret (specifically, a hit and run accident) have unexpected and deadly consequences. And, finally, Judy Blume in *Forever* (1975) shows teenagers having sex, enjoying it, and not getting punished for it (or getting married). Blume wrote novels of teenage anxiety and explored issues of gender and sexuality in a period when such issues were generally frowned upon for open discussion.

Cart observes that the 1970s was the first Golden Age of Young Adult Literature, but it soon degenerated into a bunch of derivative novels whose importance resided in the topic (very often, a social, religious or ethical concern) rather than the telling, and whose literary values were diminished by critics. He explains the fast degeneration in these terms: "Think of it this way, and you'll understand the problem with the problem novel: it is to young adult literature what soap opera is to legitimate drama" (32). In a decade full of traumatic happenings that changed America and its citizens, adolescents suffered an overdose of dark realism.

Stephen King and the horror genre just exploded expressing the anxieties, differences and turmoil of the generational gap both parents and teens were suffering in a more graphic, frightening way. If horror was for adults, it soon found a new audience after entering the mainstream. Teenagers devour Stephen King's books, and just the fact that it is so transforms his literature (or at least, the novels we are dealing with) into young adult literature for me. The aforementioned definition is old fashioned and biased. In fact, Pam Cole argues that young adult literature is "what young adults *choose* to read and not what they are *coerced* to read" (50). According to this definition, any book young adults read of their own free will is young adult literature.

While in the 1990s adolescents were lost souls avoiding responsibility, fighting for popularity or looking for their first sexual intercourse in the cinema with comedies such as *Clueless* (1995) by Amy Heckerling or *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998) by Deborah

Kaplan, horror refreshed old *clichés* of previous decades only to self-consciously carry them on in cult classic *Scream* (1996) by Wes Craven and the cleverness of its sequels, and the portrait of wasted teen lives in *Kids* (1995) by Larry Clark made noise and generated controversy because of its exploitative tone. Literature for teenagers expanded its realm and horror, science fiction and fantasy exploded this decade with R. L. Stine and his *Goosebumps* series, starting with *Welcome to Dead House* in 1992, and teen romantic triangles and vampires fed the *Vampire Diaries* of L. J. Smith in her first instalment, *The Awakening* (1991). Phillip Pullman published the first novel of his trilogy *His Dark Materials*, *Northern Lights* in 1995, and J. K. Rowling became instantly rich when *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) reached the shelves. More recently, *Mean Girls* (2004) by Mark Waters or *Superbad* (2007) by Greg Mottola, but overall, the recreational hormonal debauchery of the *American Pie* saga go on stereotyping puberty at the movies, while the *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) by Stephanie Meyer, *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins or the *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013) by Veronica Roth have proved that young adult literature is living a second Golden Age, and that young adult literature is not only for teenagers anymore, but adults are relying on these stories. It does not make any difference to approach the question in a humorous, chilling or provocative way. Teenagers are a menace to the *status quo*, a transgressor element in a constant changing society in which to mature and to grow up is really difficult, and literature and the media reflect this period in a more serious way than it could be expected on the surface. What is more important, there is a reason to include Stephen King and the novels we are dealing with in this analysis in the young adult literature canon. As Mickenberg puts it, “we are in a new “Golden Age,” one in which, once again, adults and children are reading many of the same books, but in which an innocent protected world is no longer available – and perhaps it is not even attractive – to either” (874).

To grow up and mature has always been complex at any time, but the horror and dark realist cycle of the late 60s and 1970s established the path that is being followed still today. Stephen King, with his absolutely cinematic style and language,³ took a significant role in this initial wave, as his *opera prima* became a *sleeper* film. *Carrie* (1976) was directed by Brian de Palma and it changed the life of the author forever. The

³ Posing as a mass media shaman, King textualizes aural, visual, and kinetic sensations, alludes to icons from films, television and advertising, and narrates in a voice that readers experience rather than read. He literalizes the notion of the text as a body and the body as text. (Badley, “Flesh Made Word” 12)

sale of the paperback rights for the book let him give up his previous jobs and concentrate completely on writing. But regardless of its circumstances, the story of the girl whose first menstruation unleashes her latent psychic powers is the product of a horror and science fiction literary tradition and some pseudo-scientific knowledge well rooted in the nineteenth century.

The literature of terror, whose primary purpose is to stimulate strong feelings of fear, has its origins in the *Gothic novel* emerging at the end of the eighteenth century in England as a strong counterpart to the Enlightenment. Novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole or *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis built a genre that achieved its transgressor aim subverting the classical values so appreciated at that time. Namely, Greece and Rome are no longer the reference, as gothic novels extol the Middle Ages. No more harmony, order or reason; just chaos and obscurity. Instead of moral certainty, there is only evil and confusion in these novels. The stories of haunted castles, sinister monks, unexplained and brutal acts and weak and pure heroines transform in the nineteenth century into much more psychological tales because of the coming of Romanticism. This cultural movement fights the aesthetic premises of Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment. Romantic literature, whose forerunners were Young or McPherson in England, or Diderot and Rousseau in France, stems from German subjectivism and its concept of genius and theories about language, poetry and history developed by Hermann and Herder among others. Romanticism and the Gothic merge to strengthen the importance of the individual in authors such as Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth or Coleridge in England or E.T.A. Hoffmann in Germany. Thus, abstract concepts such as consciousness, imagination or freedom acquire transcendence, though in a very dark, naturalistic way. The alienation of the individual becomes a key element for these novels, whose source of evil is the individual's own reactions to what is happening. *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) by Charles Robert Maturin and *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) by James Hogg are the last Gothic novels *per se*. After this period, "gothic does not go away, but migrates into other forms and media or undergoes severe recrudescence" (Miles 60).

The scientific revolution during the nineteenth century smoothed the way for the birth of science fiction. *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818, rev. 1830) by Mary Shelley is the monster which transforms science into fantasy for the general

public.⁴ In this novel, physician Victor Frankenstein is trying to give life to inert matter. He is playing to be God, as he nonetheless desires to create a human being. He is not ethically aware of what he is doing, so when the creation is born, the doctor gets rid of his experiment becoming himself a more monstrous being than the monster itself. But although at the beginning of the story Victor's baby becomes a victim of the environment, it turns into victimizer when it starts a bloody revenge against its "father." The story questions the limits of knowledge and its ethics and it is a mirror to the fear felt because of the vertiginous advance of science due to the rationalistic doctrine applied to all disciplines. When this cultural background jumps to America, the Gothic genre gets a new and fresh life.

Some scholars, however, insist on claiming that it is impossible for the American Gothic to break its ties with Europe. Thus, David Punter's assertion that "American gothic is a refraction of English," and that "it has a level interposed between present and past, a historical Europe, a mythologized Old World" (Punter, *Literature of Terror* 165). The fact is that there is no historical past for the United States when the genre arrives in America, but the gothic will find a new *locus* in the American everyday life of Indians, wild landscapes and the Puritan character and legacy. In addition, science and progress are likewise present in literature and society. Actually, the first American author who blends both genres (gothic and science fiction) is literary master Edgar Allan Poe. It is in his work, based on current scientific knowledge of his age, where a first glimpse to the powers of Carietta White is given.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is not the first American gothic writer, an honor that Charles Brockden Brown deserves. However, his stories of morbid introversion mark the decisive break between the Gothic of Otranto and the later psychological horror of the nineteenth century. He remains a rationalist, because his tales show the human mind in a "continuous revulsion of disintegration" (Lawrence 70). Stripped of American distinctive elements in his *oeuvre*, the author renews the traditional European settings transforming them into symbolist motifs of deranged and twisted minds. With an eye on the popular taste of his readers, he develops a pioneering interest in electricity, hypnotism and telepathy which will influence science fiction in the second half of the twentieth century. Poe's short stories catalogued as science fiction are always fixed in a

⁴ Brian Aldiss argues that "Science fiction was born from the gothic mode, and is hardly free of it now. Nor is the distance between the two modes great. The gothic emphasis was on the distant and the unearthly" (qtd. in Roberts, *Science Fiction* 42).

machine going “off the map.” Journeys are not only through the sea or through the air - as in “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfall” (1835) or “A Descent into the Maelström” (1841) – but in the tales about mesmerism there is a displacement towards the realms of death. Like ships or balloons, reason for Poe is a tool which allows man to go through his existence.

Mesmerism, known nowadays as hypnotism, is a special psychological state with certain physiological attributes. It looks like sleepiness on the surface, as the individual works on a consciousness level different from the ordinary one. This state improves reception and the hypnotized pays attention uniquely to the hypnotizer, reacting automatically to the sometimes apparently contradictory suggestions. The history of hypnotism is as old as magic or medicine, but it became a scientific concept in the last decades of the eighteenth century thanks to the work of Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734 – 1815), whose therapeutic system, known as mesmerism, is the forerunner to the modern practice of hypnotism. Doctor Mesmer got his PhD at the University of Vienna in 1766 with a thesis about the influence of the planets on the human body, in which he plagiarizes the research of British physician Richard Mead. In this dissertation, it is suggested that the attraction of the gravitational force has an influence over human health because of an invisible fluid which can be found in the body. This fluid acts according to the laws of magnetism. Mesmer's theories were very successful because of the growing fascination with electricity at the time. Scientific knowledge of this matter was provided by Michael Faraday, who made highly important discoveries on electromagnetism.

With the advent of science, soon a distinction was made between *natural philosophers* (later called scientists in 1834) and other philosophers. Mesmer influenced these natural philosophers in a very decisive way. The words hypnotism and hypnosis applied to the Mesmer doctrine were coined by English physician James Braid. Edgar Allan Poe reflected his thoughts on mesmerism and telepathy in “Mesmeric Revelations” (1844), “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” (1844) and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845); these short stories are useful to explain his cosmology, the bizarre essay *Eureka* (1848). John Tresch explains this essay using a technological analogy: Cosmos is a mega-machine whose elements adapt themselves to each other. Each cause has an effect. Man builds some tools to adapt to the universe; these tools would constitute a micro-machine. Human tools are not perfect in comparison to the universe, which is perfect because God created it. Reality is a flawed version of the

infinite cosmos. There is a distance between cosmos reality and its human representations saved partially by reason, science, and knowledge. Between God and man appears a new nature which connects material reality to consciousness, thought and existence. Poe refers to it as spirituality.

By the 1850s mesmerism was dated, but changing attitudes towards religion renewed the interest in mesmeric trances. Mesmerism became the foundation to the spiritualist movement, whose followers claimed they could contact the dead. Modern spiritualism seems to be an American phenomenon, but similar episodes can be found in every culture. In Poe's lifetime, the controversial figure of Daniel Douglas Home was at the height of his career. This Scottish medium arrived in the United States in the 1840s and soon became famous because he could levitate furniture and even himself. His abilities were never proved, but he can be considered as the first real life Carrie. Fraudulent mediums flourished through the nineteenth century and, hoping to gain respectability for spiritualism, the Society for Psychic Research was founded in London in 1882. Its early research involved testing mediums and others who controlled psychic gifts, but it was not until R.A. Fisher developed statistical methods to study psychic events that parapsychology got some respect.

The best known experiments in parapsychology were those conducted by J. B. Rhine at Duke University in 1927. He used ordinary people instead of gifted ones and years later he published the results of his experiments in two influential books: *Extra Sensory Perception* (1934) and *New Frontiers of the Mind* (1937). He also helped to found the *Journal of Parapsychology* in 1937, still active today. These experiments inspired the United States government to conduct a few investigations on parapsychology, being the most remarkable Project Stargate. It was conducted by the CIA and the Defense Department in the 1970s and early 80s involving remote viewing, where the test subject can see telepathically a scene from far away. Of course, none of these experiments or projects has yielded any results.

It is not until the turn of the nineteenth century that the first antecedents in fiction of *Carrie* are given. Victorian Gothic in England exposed all the anxieties of a critical *fin de siècle*. England was an imperial power in decline, threatened by new players in the field such as Germany or the United States. The morality of the imperial mission was questioned once and again and the growing unrest in the colonies destabilized the balance. At home, traditional middle class values and family structures were disintegrating, challenged by the emergence of such figures as the “New Woman” or the

homosexual. Gothic novels of the time often featured women in peril who found salvation through psychic means. One of the major works that contributed to the new image of the woman as a threat to the patriarchal structures of the time was *The Great God Pan* (1894) by Arthur Machen. The crimes of beautiful but sinister Helen Vaughan are a mirror to all the fears of the age. One of the many monstrous females with a desire for power in Gothic fiction of the time, Helen embodies not only anxieties about the decline of the middle classes in general, but also about the breakdown of middle class gender ideology. The demands of the New Woman aggravated such fears, and Gothic texts of the time produced powerful and sexually aggressive females as alien or monstrous, setting them in opposition to the “pure” woman in an attempt to stabilize gendered identity (Punter and Byron 40). But also very popular were lost-race novels describing hidden tribes possessing extraordinary mental powers. A very powerful novel which links the Gothic genre to this interest in foreign lands is *She* (1898) by Henry Ridder Haggard. The author of *King's Solomon Mines* (1895) turns the empire into a supernatural scenario where Africa appears as a “lost world” full of savages invested with powers and reigned by the She of the title, an Egyptian priestess two thousand years old whose primary aim is to rule the world. The novel is narrated by Horace Ludwig Holly, an adventurer whose physical aspect reminds of a simian, raising the question of the savagery of Great Britain and imperialism. It seems that the priestess has been waiting for the arrival of the reincarnation of her former lover in the skin of Holly's companion in the adventure, Leo. Although at the end those plans to dominate humanity never come to reality, the failure with the death of She leaves Holly and Leo as shells of broken manhood. According to Punter and Byron (122), it would be impossible to ignore the fact that Haggard, just as he was an apologist of sorts for empire, was even more an apologist for patriarchy; in his fiction all the age-old Gothic doubts about the frightening power of women are laid bare in almost embarrassingly simple fashion.

American literature did not avoid the trend and there were some exaggerated imitations such as *Thyra: a Romance of the Polar Pit* (1900) by Robert Ames Bennett. In the twentieth century, Sax Rohmer wrote some tales of evil Asian villains depicting good and bad characters with psychic powers, beginning with the most famous of all yellow peril novels, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913). However, it is in the science-fiction magazines of the 1930s and 1940s that extra sensory perception reached its climax. Maybe, the story which helped to popularize mutants with superhuman mental

powers was *Slan* (1946) by A. E. Van Vogt. This novel tells the odyssey of a mutant genius to end the war between humans and his mutant race, known as the slans. The 1950s, with the Cold War, the threat to American individualism posed by Communism and the fear to the atomic bomb increased the number of novels about extrasensory perception, being the most influential in subsequent decades *Children of the Atom* (1954) by Wilmar Shiras. The novel deals with children with extraordinary intelligence and mental powers who try to remain hidden among average students. A pervasive sense of paranoia is articulated through several alien invasion narratives in literature and film, being the typical product an edgy mixture of horror and science fiction where human society is challenged by some kind of alien force with the power of controlling minds. Perhaps, the most representative narratives of the time are the novels *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955) by Jack Finney and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) by John Wyndham. Later to become cult classic movies, – *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) by Don Siegel and *Village of the Damned* (1960) by Wolf Rilla – these narratives offer a chilling commentary on social conformity.

With *Carrie*, Stephen King blended both horror and science fiction traditions to write an apparently conventional story of teen alienation which turned into a shocking horror epic with multiple readings. Among all these, a feminist and psychoanalytical point of view would be useful to analyze what it does mean to be a teenager for Stephen King. The author seems to reject the feminist movement in this novel, a fact that turned him in a misogynist unable to offer compelling feminine characters according to some critics. My point is that the novel is an amalgamation of feminist anxieties about the inability of women to control the tremendous powers they have, a fact that will help Stephen King to re-imagine masculine adolescence.

FEMININE POWERS UNLEASHED: *CARRIE*, A REPRESENTATION OF FEMINIST ANXIETIES

Carrie has a whole horror and science fiction tradition behind itself, a very long-lived one. Specifically, science fiction has usually offered utopic and dystopian visions about what it is to come in the future for mankind.⁵ However the overwhelming changes American society suffered the last century have changed the perspective inside the genre and its true purpose. Science fiction is no more a genre about the future, but the future is here and now. Our present is revealing in front of us in symbolic fictions which let us reconsider our world. Reading science fiction allows us “the symbolic expression of what it is to be black, female or otherwise marginalized” (Roberts, *Science Fiction* 30). It seems that the genre has become a tool to construct identity and roles.

In Stephen King's fiction, Carrie White is the only teenage girl with a main role in a universe full of main masculine characters. Although the novel was published in 1974, its conception is clearly influenced by the previous decade. Anthony Magistrale, analyzing the writer's fiction, asserts that “his critics of institutions, his ideology suggest his commitment to the radical politics of the sixties” (Thompson, Voller and Frank 221). The 1960s in the United States was the age of drugs and sexual freedom, hippie time. Scientists saw in LSD a drug with the power to expand the mind. In biological terms, this substance was able to arouse latent psychic powers. In a crazy race to prove that human intelligence was at the same level than any alien one, scholars believed in the possibility that those powers were there waiting to be released through any traumatic experience. On the other hand, a possible way to awake those powers was achieved by acquiring numerous sexual experiences, as it was believed that sexual intercourse developed a high energy capable of unleashing them.

Precisely, sex and sexuality (both its gender and social construction) have always been a key point in Gothicism. Some of the earlier Stephen King's narratives are a *compendium* of the origins of the human being and all the experiences that condition

⁵ Talking about the science fiction tradition, its putative father Hugo Gersbank wrote: “By “scientifiction” I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision... Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading... They supply knowledge... New inventions pictured for us in the scientifiction of today are not all impossible of realization tomorrow”. (qtd. in Tresch 115)

him as a social being through gender differentiation; that is, sexual differentiation. The 1960s saw the rise of second wave feminism with its focus on *de facto* inequalities, legal inequalities, sexual freedom without the threat of pregnancy, family or the workplace. *Carrie* seems to be the base of a fiction seen as an unintended consequence of the 1970s feminism.

In his meditation on horror fiction and film, *Danse Macabre*, the author indicates that feminism dismays him: “I was fully aware of what woman's liberation implied for me and others of my sex... the book [*Carrie*] is, in its more adult implications, an uneasy masculine shrinking from the future of female equality” (King, *Danse Macabre* 180). In a quite explicit manner, the threat of feminism invokes female monstrosity for King. Carietta White is the impersonation of some feminist anxieties about sex, family or the workplace (in this case, high school) seen in the novel not through Carrie herself – a scapegoat who transforms herself from zero to bitch following the simplistic generalization of Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* – but in her relationship with family and peers. If *Carrie* is read in general terms by some scholars as an antifeminist manifesto, from the point of view of the horror genre, the novel talks about the absence of the father and about “the woman's role as modern Eve... a narrow view of womanhood ... that has helped to sustain the general distance which continues to exist between men and women” (Magistrale, *Moral Voyages* 51). The story, a gothic adolescence reform novel about a dark Cinderella who does not survive the prom, reminds us that payback (against patriarchy) is a bitch.

Carrie White is a sixteen year old socially inept girl in the small town of Chamberlain, New England. A loser, a pariah, a joke, someone who “eats shit” (King, *Carrie* 4), she is apparently harmless. However, it is not a coincidence that the awakening of Carrie's psychic gift is linked to her first period: menstrual cycle and telekinesis are seen throughout the novel as a taboo, something that must be hidden. In fact, it is the patriarchal society's attempt to repress female sexuality that causes the eruption of Carrie's superpowers. The point here is that this crucial experience for woman usually “suffered” in a private way, becomes a public spectacle in the case of the poor girl. It is her first time, something weird for her age, and her crazy religious fanatic mother has not told her anything about this natural process. But what increases even more her trauma is her schoolmates' reaction to the scene:

Then the laughter, disgusted, contemptuous, horrified, seemed to rise and bloom into something jagged and ugly, and the girls were bombarding her with tampons and sanitary napkins, some from purses, some from a broken dispenser on the wall. They flew like snow and the chant became: "Plug it up, plug it up, plug it- (8)

The girls in the shower room react with disgust when exposed to their own bodies, turning natural cycles into something unfeminine and unnatural. But it is the destructive use of these powers by Carrie in response to some visceral attacks what drives the plot, turning an innocent girl into an angel of destruction who devastates the city in a hormonal apocalyptic reaction of rage. Or, in Cixous' terms, the girl has become a hysteric, and therefore she must be destroyed. Because all these girls' repudiation (and even her mother's) symbolize a wider community's fear and rejection of woman, who must become ideologically powerless. And that can only be achieved either by ennobling and feminizing her or by debasing her. Edward Ingebretsen gives a clue of what Carrie's fate is, linking the girl to the American canonical memories of the Salem witch trials telling that "she is a convenient token for the community's intense strategies of repudiation; she embodies social self-hate. She is the foreign witch woman among the innocents, and her unchallenged presence is a powerful threat to their purity" (290). However, none of the feminine characters in the novel are pure. Ironically, Carrie is the most innocent of them all, since the rest are trapped between what they really are and what is expected from them by patriarchal society. Or, in Friedan's terms, "the strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we are trying to conform" (9): the image of wife and mother.

Tomboys: Of Bad and Horrible Mothers.

The first scene in the novel influences the evolution of the story in a very deterministic way, as well as the relationship of Carrie with the rest of the characters, a global representation of the female archetype which torments her development as she attempts to find her identity. Specifically, the girl is totally blocked as she does not have a proper exit from the maternal semiotic into the patriarchal symbolic order. Carrie seems to revive in her adolescence the primary rejection of the mother suggested by

Julia Kristeva in her Freudian theory. On the other hand, she lacks a father figure, paralleling her mother's life. Margaret White is unable to reconcile her natural desires and social conventions. Her father was "killed in a barroom shooting incident" (61) in his night spot and Margaret turned into religion for consolation and as a throwing weapon against her mother, who replaced her father with another man "living in sin" (61) with him. In keeping with certain fundamentalist attitudes against the body, she sees all sex as belonging to the "kingdom of whoredoms and pestilences" (57). In her limited and distorted religious point of view, "Eve was weak and loosed the raven on the world... and the raven was called Sin, and the first Sin was Intercourse" (56). That is, sex is sinful and any female desire is a temptation to be fought, something her mother did not achieve. While Margaret and her husband Ralph are giving in to their biological needs, Ralph runs away and dies in an accident "when a steel girder fell out of a carrying sling on a housing - project job in Portland" (13). It seems that both of them are unable to reconcile natural and religious urges, but to believe in her husband's purity and to remain sinless, Margaret denies the fact that they ever had intercourse and avoids any responsibility for the child growing inside her: "Mrs. White believed, from her fifth month on, that she had a "cancer of the womanly parts" and would soon join her husband in heaven" (15). Mrs. White takes care of her child and she adopts a crazy representative, symbolic, masculine role. The fear that someday Carrie could give way to sexual desire makes Margaret repress knowledge of female nature. Although after the shower room incident Carrie tries to explain to her mother that she was guilty for not having told her anything about menstruation, Margaret sees it as a sin, something Carrie could have repressed. And as Carrie starts to show interest in boys and uses her superpowers to break down her mother's strict barriers, Margaret asserts her independence becoming an extreme version of patriarchal religious ideal. She just finds some false relief in her identification with the masculine role, something that increases Carrie's shame and her rejection to everything feminine and motherly. The girl's attempt to shock her mother into an acknowledgement of her female nature, then, can only be heard as a blasphemy from the point of view of a body fearing fundamentalist: "You FUCK! Carrie screamed. (there there o there it's out how else do you think she got you o god o good)" (59). The absence of a real father to cling to is substituted in the novel by a grotesque image of God, a God "frozen in a [...] muscle-straining rictus of pain, mouth drawn down in a groaning curve... the eyes were turned up in a medieval expression of slanted agony" (40). In her living room, in the wardrobe "below a hideous

blue bulb that was always lit, was Derrault's conception of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*" (56). The teen lives trapped between a dying Christianity and the hidden center of Calvinist metaphysics: power and authority. God usurps the father, and there is no alternative for Carrie into the (masculine) symbolic order.

Unfortunately for Carrie, Miss Desjardin is not her real mother. The first time we see her, the gym teacher, she is described as follows: "Her shorts were blinding white, her legs not too curved but striking in her unobtrusive muscularity. A silver whistle, won in college archery competition, hung around her neck" (5). When we see her at the prom, she is "dressed in a glimmering silver sheath, a perfect complement to her blonde hair which was up. A simple pendant hung around her neck" (157). Miss Desjardin is Artemis or Diana, the virginal goddess, the patroness of childbearing. In this role, she is present when Carrie reaches puberty and her psychic power is born. But more importantly, she adopts a maternal attitude towards Carrie, even when she reacts with "a pucker of disgust" (11) at the scene. When she understands the implications of the situation because of Carrie's ignorance, "Pity and self-shame met in her and mixed uneasily" (13). She adopts a maternal attitude towards the other girls too because she punishes them because of their actions. Her ambivalent feelings between her true nature as a woman and her social role as teacher of patriarchal values is expressed when she discusses the punishment with the principal: "I understand how those girls felt. The whole thing just made me want to take the girl and *shake* her. Maybe there's some kind of instinct about menstruation that makes women want to snarl" (21). As a punishment, she wants all the girls who took an active role in the grotesque mockery of Carrie out of the prom. But all she gets is a week's detention in the gym. Those who do not attend the detention will be out of the prom. She remarks when talking to the girls: "Unfortunately, Ewen is completely staffed by men in its administration wing. I don't believe they have any real conception of how utterly nasty what you did was" (65). She is in a position of power and she understands the whole situation, but she remains neutral in what respects to Carrie until the night of the prom, when she fulfills the role of mother as comforter and reassurer, something Carrie's mother, Margaret, cannot do for obvious reasons:

"I remember my own prom," Desjardin said softly, "I was two inches taller than the boy I went with when I was in my heels. He gave me a corsage that clashed with my gown. The tailpipe was broken on his car and the engine made ... oh, an awful

racket. But I've never had a date like it, ever again." She looked at Carrie. "Is it like that for you?"(158)

However, teachers cannot replace the family in the sentimental education. Miss Desjardin's role as a good surrogate mother can be seen as an excess of her authority. In fact, Carrie is unable to forget the episode in the shower room as well as to forgive those who witnessed it, including Miss Desjardin. The gym teacher is the impersonation of the false, paternalistic face of the system. The last time we know about her is in a letter sent to the principal after she survives the apocalyptic night of the prom. She quits her job full of remorse, something the principal also does. In the end, patriarchal society is to blame for Carrie's revenge.

Tomboys, Part II: Perfect Partners, the Good Girl and the Bitch Goddess.

The characters of Susan Snell and Christine Hargensen are the dynamic forces that set in motion the main events in the novel. Both girls take part in the cruel joke to Carrie, being Chris and her gang the instigators. However, it is their different reaction to the consequences of this despicable act, together with the differences in the relationship with their respective boyfriends what defines them and their role in the female archetype. When Carrie is humiliated, Sue gets carried away by the situation:

Sue was throwing [tampons] too, throwing and chanting with the rest, not really sure what she was doing – a charm had occurred to her mind and it glowed there like neon: there's no harm in it really no harm – It was still flashing and glowing, reassuringly, when Carrie suddenly began to howl. (8)

After having sex with her boyfriend, she “felt low and melancholy, and her thoughts turned to Carrie in this light. A wave of remorse caught her with all emotional guards down” (46). In an attempt to clean her soul, she confesses to her boyfriend about the shower room scene. Analyzing the whole situation, Sue realizes that she and the rest of girls have taken part unconsciously in a social ritual of exclusion where women find their place projecting their unacceptable traits onto a scapegoat, Carrie. To find her place in patriarchal society, she must oppress undesirable females like Carrie and conform to the image of her that men desire, to the role of collaborator with the patriarchal system:

The word she was avoiding was expressed *To Conform*, in the infinitive, and it conjured up miserable images of hair rollers, long afternoons in front of the ironing board in front of the soap operas while hubby was off busting heavies in an anonymous Office, ... of pills in circular yellow cases without number to ensure against having to move out of the misses' sizes before it became absolutely necessary and against the intrusion of repulsive little strangers who shat in their pants and screamed for help at two in the morning. (47-48)

Sue comes to realize that, in bullying Carrie, she is losing her independence as a female individual. Her social popularity costs a high price: "And having something she had always longed for – a sense of place, of security, of status – she found that it carried uneasiness with it like a darker sister" (47).

For her own sake as well as Carrie's, her primary aim will become to reintegrate femaleness back into the social body before it resurfaces in a destructive way. Her first step is to reintroduce a female awareness of the body in her relationship with Tommy Ross. At the beginning, she reflects about her relationship in a superficial way ("they fit together walking... she could look at their reflection in a store window and think, *There goes a handsome couple*"), but then she realizes that having sex to gain social advancement is not true love, but an unfeeling act: "The idea that she had let him fuck her (do you have to say it that way yes this time I do) simply because he was Popular. (47). Only when Tommy stops trying to score, and Sue stops being the model she thinks he wants her to be, and they share their doubts about the future, they really make love finding a mutual recognition of their humanity.

Her second step is more unrealistic, as she renounces to go to the prom asking Tommy to take Carrie in her place. This apparently generous action giving Carrie the opportunity to be accepted hides more egotistical purposes: to free herself from guilt and to gain certain independence claiming her ability to live without social affirmation. However, in the end, Sue's growing awareness of the consequences of her actions and the effect they have had on Carrie and on her own place in the world does not go unnoticed. At certain point in the novel, Christine Hargensen accuses her of being "Joan of Arc" (77) and tells her to go away. Even Sue herself recognizes what type of reaction her actions will generate: "she would never be quite the same golden girl in the eyes of her mates. She had done an ungovernable, dangerous thing – she had broken cover and shown her face" (110). Nevertheless, it is clear that something has changed inside Susan Snell, her wisdom owed to Carrie White, and she, in turn, wants to change Carrie. On discussing her decision to quit the prom, she tells Tommy:

But hardly *anybody* ever finds out that their action has really, actually, hurt other people! People don't get better, they just get smarter. When you get smarter you don't stop pulling the wings off flies, you just think of better reasons for doing it. Lots of kids say they feel sorry for Carrie White – mostly girls – and that's a laugh – but I bet none of them understand what's like to *be* Carrie White, every second of every day. And they don't really care ... But someone ought to try and be sorry in a way that counts ... in a way that means something. (86)

Thomas Ross, Sue's male counterpart, is an Apollo figure: both athlete and scholar. He is a baseball player and a poet. But more important, he seems to possess innately those qualities that Sue only gains through an intense personal struggle. He “appears to be something of a rarity: a socially conscious young man” (93). Tommy's social conscience leads him to participate in Sue's transformation and the attempted transformation of Carrie, putting Sue's and the other girls' actions into some sort of perspective. Accepting Sue's proposal, he shows his regard for Sue and his masculinity in facing social censure because of his dating the outcast in high school.

If Susan Snell undergoes a transformation through the novel towards a more mature attitude, Christine Hargensen experiences quite the reverse. She is a manipulator, both of her entourage and, most successfully, of men. Chris's assault on Carrie (and her refusal to atone the harm by doing the gym exercises set as punishment) has taken her off the prom. She is excluded from her position of power as the (for sure) next Queen of the Prom, and she is alienated from her former group of friends, who will attend the quintessential teen rite of passage because they submitted to the penance. Her conformist reaction against Carrie seems to be a sign of her deep insecurity about fitting in, as well as an indication of a female independence fighting to surface. Chris has channeled all her nonconformist rage into being a standard of standardized womanhood.

Like Sue, Chris finds that packaging herself for male consumption makes her socially attractive to men. But the sex is also programmed, a simulacrum of feeling between gender stereotypes. She demonstrates an almost witch-like power to bind men to her will, transforming them, Circe-like, into animals:

Her boys had been clever marionettes with clear, pimple-free faces and parents with connections and country-club memberships ... they began by treating her with patronizing good fellowship ... and always ended up trotting after her with panting doglike lust. If they trotted long enough and spent enough in the process, she usually let them go to bed with her. (133)

Chris is the embodiment of Margaret White's vision, but having stereotyped herself, she can only attract stereotypes. All these men love her only for her image, an image that they had her create only to reinforce the image of themselves; Chris' passivity during intercourse made these men more virile. The fact that she later achieved her own climax as “a single loop of memory” (133), shows her isolation in a conformist world and her desire for personal fulfillment.

It is not a surprise then, that Chris is attracted to William Nolan. Looking for a real feeling, Billy's “old, dark” 1950s car promises delivery from the false light of the new, “machine-stamped, anonymous” (134) 1970s vehicles of her boyfriends. Chris' nostalgia is for a genuineness she has never known, a passionate individuality that will bring her own; however, as just “the first [lover] she could not dance and dandle at her whim” (133), Billy seems to be more than just a stereotype. Unlike her yuppie boyfriends, the boy seems to be at home with physical labor, fluids and the body. And what is more, fast-driving Billy gleefully faces death and enjoys getting his hands dirty. As Chris tells him “Feel me all over. Get me dirty” (136), Billy's unrepressed lust and the memory of their “sudden brush with death” in the car make Chris feel that at last she has broken her conformism, therefore her repression of natural instinct.

Chris' effect on Billy is undeniable. Principal Grayle notes that “Chris Hargensen has him [Billy] tied around her finger” (104). But Billy's own admission of control by Chris is more revealing. She plans to revenge on Carrie because all her misfortune after being dropped out of the prom by making her queen and showering her in blood, pig's blood. As Billy goes to kill the pig to obtain the blood for Carrie's ritual humiliation, he realizes that he is doing it “for Chris Hargensen, just as everything was for Chris, and had been since the day she swept down from her college-course Olympus and made herself vulnerable to him. He would have done murder for her, and more” (117).

In the end, Billy's sexist traits are stereotypical. Billy's pride in making things with his own hands is tainted with vengefulness. His father failed in the gas station business, and after running away in disgrace, he was replaced in his mother's affections by a man called Brucie. His violent sex with Chris is a way to getting back at her rich father and all the men with their “plump, glistening daddies' cars” whom he blames for the societal failure of his own father. In a broader sense, his association with Chris is a fantasy of being accepted in the same society that rejected his father and his way to revenge on that society, and on his mother. By dumping the blood on Carrie, he is impersonating all his frustrations on her. And, moreover, his interest in Chris is as superficial as her

behavior seems to be. Billy is a walking stereotype scapegoating women for what goes wrong in a man's world.

Even if Billy is the perfect match for Chris, it seems that she is not ready to lose her position in society for him. In the end, she finds her inability to control him more a threat than a funny game, and she plans to deny her sexuality as a punishment for his independence: "When this is over you're going to get it buddy maybe you'll go to bed with lover's nuts tonight" (165). He wants to rape her as he has understood that his nightmare of rejection has been fulfilled: "When this was over he was going to have her until every other time she'd been had was like two pumps with a fag's little finger" (170). Temporarily they are channeling their hatred of society, each other and themselves onto Carrie and their plan to scapegoat her again in front of everybody. Chris and Billy's sexual encounters are animalistic and they illustrate the type of savage sexuality that Margaret White imagines her daughter and Tommy Ross are engaged in. While the town of Chamberlain burns, Chris and Billy are in a motel starting their mating rite: "they stared at each other, panting, glaring" (221). In a mutual violent sexual play, "she punched him, a surprisingly hard punch that landed on his cheek." Billy reaches her, "butting her in the stomach like a goat" and whispers some love words in her ear recalling the evening earlier adventure:

I would have done it to you, you know that? I woulda dumped it all over your fuckin squash. You know it? Huh? Know it? Pig blood for pigs, right? Right on your motherfuckin squash.

Chris provokes Billy calling him "creepy little one-nut low-cock dinkless wonder." The foreplay done, "they descend into a red, thrashing unconsciousness" (222).

Comparing both male counterparts, Billy Nolan plays Dionysus to Thomas Ross's Apollo. He represents a dark force, whose source of power is his car. The boy clearly grasps the demonic symbiosis between a boy and his car:

But the car: the car fed him power and glory from its own mystic lines of force. It made him someone to be reckoned with, someone with mana. It was not by accident that he had done most of his balling in the back seat. The car was his slave and his god. It gave and it could take away. (142)

It is the car which takes away Billy and Chris' life, when control of it is relinquished to Carrie: "the car sprang forward like some old and terrible man-eater. And Billy felt his car turn traitor, come alive, slither in his hands" (229). Prefiguring *Christine* (King,

1983) in some ten years, masculinity is destroyed when subjugated to the negative side of the feminine archetype. Thus, Tommy Ross's death is also unavoidable the night of the prom; despite their differences, both boys are means to an end, victims of a feminine struggle to conform.

There is an intriguing dynamic between the two couples. Whereas Sue was at first reluctant to let her true feelings come out, and she was prompted into action by Tommy, Chris begins to doubt about what she is about to do to Carrie and Billy incites her into pulling the rope that will release the bucket of blood telling her that she “talks too fuckin much.” Both girls put forces into motion they cannot control, but whereas Sue, as the embodiment of Wisdom, attains wisdom, Chris, the bitch Goddess, is destroyed by the forces she seeks to control.

Cinderella's Apocalyptic Revenge: Kill the Mother and Run Away.

The basic story found in the fairy tale of *Cinderella* seems quite clearly to provide part of the skeleton of King's novel, the roles of this dark version very clear: Carrie is Cinderella, Thomas Ross is Prince Charming, Susan Snell is the fairy godmother, Margaret White is the cruel (step) mother and Christine Hargensen is the evil stepsister. However the clue of the whole novel remains the initial scene, where the feminine body becomes open and vulnerable. Carrie's body is itself the prime source of her power and mystery, and her blood flow symbolizes the various metaphysical uncertainties against which the community must arm itself. “White” evokes a tradition in American letters in which whiteness and inscrutability are two points of a triangle, being the third one the futility of interpretation – a theme central to the metaphysical works of Poe or Melville. White suggests the word witch, and both words are cognates of “knowledge.” The girl's fatal difference with others is that she knows too much. She cannot conform to the social dictates of her community because she has not been educated in the social literacy that could help her in her situation, her social sin being her inability to cede her power to other girls or to the adults. Carrie's passage to biological maturity means that her powers are not easy to manage, either personally or socially.

Initially, Carrie White is the ugly duckling in her high school. She is only concerned with finding anything beyond the utter emptiness that is her soul. She looks herself in the mirror and sees only ugliness and then a void:

She caught a glimpse of her own face in a tiny mirror [...] She hated her face, her dull, stupid, bovine face, the vapid eyes, the red, shiny pimples, the nests of blackheads. She hated her face most of all. The reflection was suddenly split by a jagged, silvery crack. The mirror fell on the floor and shattered at her feet, leaving only the plastic ring to stare at her like a blind eye. (44)

After all the laughter, the jokes or the abuse, the night of the prom seems to be a good opportunity for her. The promenade is the signal event that confirms a teenager's sense of self-worth, popularity and power. The gym is transformed into a wonderful and strange magic place where a despised teenager could be transformed into a new complete full individual. However, as Cinderella's illusion stops at twelve, Carrie's sense of self-reliance ends when she is again ritually exposed in front of her peers. In this ritual scene of defilement up, the feminine body becomes again a subject of abjection in Julia Kristeva's sense, recalling the source of feminine power (menstrual blood) metaphorically. Again, what should remain secret becomes revealed:

Someone began to laugh, a solitary, affrighted hyena sound, and she *did* open her eyes, opened them to see who it was and it was true, the final nightmare, she was red and dripping with it, they had drenched her in the very secretness of blood, in front of all of them and her thought (oh ... I ... COVERED ... with it) was covered a ghastly purple with her revulsion and her shame. She could smell herself and it was the *stink* of blood, the awful wet, coppery smell ... she ... felt the soft pattern of tampons and napkins against her skin as voices exhorted her to plug it UP, tasted the plump, fulsome bitterness of horror. They had finally given her the shower they wanted. (189)

This is a scene that provokes revulsion, disgust to the readers. We are taking part in the rite of abjection of the feminine body. We assist to the monstrous transformation of Carrie, who reverts again to the initial frog-like state of the opening passage in the novel.

If at the beginning the menstrual blood causes nausea and horror to the spectators in the shower room, this time it is Carrie herself who tastes the horror. Carrie is what Cixous calls the hysteric, a theatrical body with memories from the past, whose feminine nature is exposed. As a metaphor, the body provides a convenient social cypher, an object to control. Traditionally, it has been the case of feminine bodies. At this point politics and religion coincide. The body is the soul guarantor and control of the body means domestication of the soul. As a witch, Carrie is both victim and expiation; transgressor and exemplary subject of the law; an ungovernable "Other,"

messenger of a dark god. She turns from virgin into Cinderella only to become a dark destroying witch who causes havoc in the entire town of Chamberlain.

Towards the end of the novel, after having annihilated Chamberlain with her telekinetic powers, she makes a last, desperate appeal to God/the masculine/the symbolic in the Congregational Church. In her agony, before returning home, Carrie understands the emptiness at the center of religious practice, where she finds nothing: “No one was there – or if there was, He/It was cowering from her. God had turned His face away [...] This horror was as much His doings as hers” (208). If she wants to come to terms with the abjected mother figure, there is only one thing to do: Carrie and her mother must destroy each other in order to end an intolerable relationship in which each perceives the other as the most damaging aspect of herself.

Carrie's natural interest in sex is a threat to Margaret's sense of her own purity: if she cannot protect her daughter from female desires, she must protect herself to ensure her own salvation in a male heaven: “It says in the Lord's book: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. Your father did the Lord's work” (101). The nightmare vision of Margaret as the insane embodiment of patriarchal religious ideal of motherhood greets Carrie when she returns home. She projects onto Carrie the disgust/need she felt for her own mother, but she has moved beyond any possibility of help at the peak scene in the novel, in which she murders the girl with the same knife with which she had cut the umbilical cord at the time of Carrie's birth. In the end, the mother commits the very rape and murder from which she had hoped to save her daughter, now turned into the nightmarish vision of the outside world Margaret always feared.

A weakened Carrie has time enough to stop her mother's heart giving her a gift: “What you always wanted. Darkness. And whatever God lives there” (219). Maybe, the All-powerful God of love has a nemesis somewhere. If that would be the case, for the community or for Margaret it is not important. There is not any difference between both of them anymore. A community that poses terror as the proof of the Divine does not understand love or the Divine but as a variety of fear. Margaret's desire comes true: she is dispossessed of her evil physical body to be spiritually pure in heaven.

In the end, Carrie provokes the death of her mother before running away to die alone in an anonymous parking lot. We participate in her death as a shocked Sue senses “an essence of Carrie, a gestalt, muted now, not strident” (237). It is when Carrie reaches Sue's mind and “They shared the awful totality of perfect knowledge” (239), in that joining, two human beings learn a lot about each other:

Books throw open, flashes of experience, marginal notations in all the hieroglyphs of emotion, more complex than the Rosetta Stone. Looking. Finding more than Sue herself had suspected – love for Tommy, jealousy, selfishness, a need to subjugate him to her will on the matter of taking Carrie, disgust for Carrie herself, hate for Miss Desjardin, hate for herself. (240)

What is most striking about this death scene is the way in which the mother, not the father, is presented as the ground of all meaning and being. Susan Snell is overcome by her sense of Carrie's need of her mother. The mother seems to be as important as the father in the mastery of the (masculine) symbolic order and the immersion in the feminine semiotic, in Kristeva's terms:

(momma would be alive i killed my momma i want her o it hurts my chest my shoulder o o o i want my momma) And there was no way to finish that thought, nothing to complete it with [...] And then the light was gone, and the last conscious thought had been (momma i'm sorry where) and it broke up and Sue was tuned in only on the blank idiot frequency of the physical nerve endings that would take hours to die. (241)

Carrie White becomes the impersonation not only of a witch or a feminized scapegoat, but on the metaphysical Puritan tradition of Jonathan Edwards she is the scourge of a vengeful God, a perfect weapon to fight an ambiguous society.

The Consumption of Femininity

“If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You begin from the ground up” (Rich, *Blood, Breath and Poetry* 158). These words could serve to illustrate what Stephen King seems to show us in the novel. He is giving the power to woman, although he emphasizes its destructive potentiality when used without control in order to express the fear and the insecure future for both men and women that would be produced if the equality proposed by feminism would not come to terms; that is, if patriarchy is substituted by a radical feminism. Literally, feminine power (sexuality) clashes with the traditional patriarchal values and roles associated to women: mothers, wives, and daughters. And the result is the apocalypse.

A bit of exaggeration in a newcomer novelist, (at that moment) *Carrie* is the mirror to a changing society where woman gets more and more prominent and children have become aliens to their parents. So if you are a girl in the road for womanhood, you are a timing bomb. Women have acquired voice in society and culture through men, or at least that seems to be the case for feminism. However, in turning Carrie from victim to victimizer, Stephen King does not defend a sexist posture. He is offering us a traditional gothic point of view: in this genre, woman has always been represented either as a victim of men and masculine social and religious institutions, or as a sexual temptress, a threat to patriarchy. The former trend, called *Female Gothic*, was initiated with the work of Ann Radcliffe; whereas the latter, called *Male Gothic*, has in Matthew Gregory Lewis and his monk a strong representative.⁶ The fragile gothic heroine was always pure in some sense, and she has evolved from a figure dependent on a man to be saved to independent and strong women who take care of themselves more recently. Stephen King offered in this novel a shifting female character; a prosecuted and truly oppressed heroine who turns dangerous when she is given some freedom. Generally, those figures with a sign of autonomy have been considered a threat to society.

That is the fear of women the gothic genre usually expresses. Woman, as the Other in a binary relationship has always been relegated to the margins of society. Woman is to nature what man is to culture. Woman is the mother, the nurturer of life, while man is the brains and the hard work. Of course, all this thinking has evolved as roles in society have changed. The 1970s saw the beginning of the consequences of this change and *Carrie* is no more than the reflection of that. Young women like Susan Snell and Christine Hargensen were conscious of the power they had, while at the same time they were trying to fit into a rigid patriarchal society whose roots had not changed. The behavior of all feminine characters in the novel could be considered as what Judith Halberstam refers as *tomboyism*, or “a natural desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys.” When puberty begins, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl. According to Halberstam, “It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity” (6). Susan Snell and Christine Hargensen suffer to restrain the power they have, that is, their natural (sexual) instinct. It is worth noting that both of

⁶ The female Gothic of Ann Radcliffe and others deals with the explained supernatural, and focuses on the persecution of the powerless heroine by patriarchal powers ending with marriage and closure. The male Gothic, by contrast, utilizes a full-blooded and ironic mode which views female sexuality as monstrous and other, which ends with the death of its protagonist (Poplawski 363).

them are using this feminine power for their own profit. Their aim is to get social status (Susan) or to maintain it while they just have some fun (Christine). The perspective of the future scares the hell out of them: Susan fears the consequences of her raising the social scale through pairing with the right partner (Thomas Ross). She will be a slave of her own image till she gets a position in society, a status, a secure place. If she gets what she desires, though, she will not get more independence, but more responsibilities; traditional responsibilities, by the way. On the other hand, Christine knows exactly what she must do to maintain her position in society. She is aware of the tremendous power she exerts upon men, including her stiff father. But this seems not to fulfill her. Billy Nolan would be her perfect match if she would be ready for a change, a change that could arrive with the raising of Cinderella Carrie White.

The change does not arrive. Or, it could be said that everything changes to remain the same. The agent of change is Carrie White, the most powerless among the powerless. Her body, at the onset of womanhood, is a threat both to men and women. For men Carrie could become a temptation. In fact, the allusion to Galatea when Tommy picks Carrie up at home to go to the prom reveals her change. Tommy sees Carrie with different eyes for the first time. In fact, it seems that he falls in love with her at this time in the novel.

But mostly, Carrie is a threat to women. The girl becomes a new enemy in the fight for a place in society, patriarchal society. As women (girls, in this case) construct their identity through their relationship (biological or of another type) with men, Stephen King is not revealing us anything new: women are the sustainers and preservers of patriarchal society and values. So, in order to be a real change, the society as we know it with its misogynous traits must disappear. But not all women and men are prepared to deal with the uncertainty and insecurity those changes could bring. They are more secure with what they know: tradition. In this way women become the worst enemy for women, something Helene Cixous reflects in *The Newly Born Woman*:

Women haven't had eyes for themselves [...] Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized. Woman is disgusted by woman and fears her. They [men] have committed the greatest crime against women, insidiously and violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense power against themselves, to do the male's dirty work. (68)

In the end, Stephen King approaches femininity taking it as a social construction of gender. All feminine characters in the novel become a sight from a male point of view. In Laura Mulvey's words,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is style accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-atness (19).

And Sandra Lee Bartky adds the true dimension in which women seem to live nowadays:

In the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality, woman must make herself object and prey for the man: it is for him that these eyes are limpid pools, this cheek baby-smooth. In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another, an anonymous patriarchal Other (72).

This is true for all the feminine main characters in the novel. Susan Snell and Christine Hargensen live under the gaze of boys, and particularly their boyfriends. And, in a society where religious cult has been substituted by body cult, Margaret and Carrie as the socially rejected are gazed by THE patriarchal Other: God. Thus, as the embodiment of normalcy, even of ugliness in a world that worships perfection and beauty, Carrie becomes the ultimate show: the representation of everything that an empty society repudiates. Thus, Carrie must be destroyed.

But in her destruction, what is being destroyed is feminine nature, all those traits hidden by women to become the spectacle for males under which they must live. To be a complete human being, women should be seen from multiple points of view: social, sexual, religious. Stephen King offers us the complete gaze embodied in different characters, and metaphorically summing them up in Carrie; but only to destroy them, because in the end they are male stereotypes of patriarchy. Stephen King dismays feminism in *Danse Macabre* because the movement seems to rebel against what we know as society without offering a new model. But this model will only be possible if woman becomes full and she is able to control the powers she has, something Carrie is unable to do. If we take into account the characteristics Roberta Seelinger Trites argues

that define adolescent reform novels like those of Alcott and Twain, maybe we could find the true agent of change in the novel:

Adolescent reform novels share several characteristics. The protagonist is an ethical character who transcends his or her society by some form of self-reliance. He or she lives in a society that is demonstrably less ethical than s/he. The society's need to improve their values is made evident either by depicted flaws in the culture or by the character falsely repressed by it. If the protagonist experiences growth – and s/he usually does – that growth provides a commentary as to how that society itself might also grow. And the character's growth is a sign that the society can, indeed, potentially change. Ultimately, these texts articulate direct genesis of social justice: the growth that the characters experience in the story leads to at least one or more person's ability to live in the world more justly. (144)

Stephen King uses all these characteristics to offer the gothic version of an adolescent reform novel where social justice is achieved through apocalyptic revenge. In destroying patriarchal feminine archetypes, the apparent subject of change (Carrie) is also destroyed. But after the wreckage, the blood, the carnage we find the character of Susan Snell becoming a full individual through a final telekinetic spiritual bonding with Carrie. Maybe in a bit shocking way, she matures after having passed through the similar (but less traumatic) process that Carrie suffered. She is the proof that society can change, only if all feminine repressed traits are restored. She is the future agent of change, only if she learns the lesson, because Carrie does not go unnoticed: she gets impressed on the collective unconscious through the different excerpts from novels, reports and scientific entries inside the novel. However, the horrible and truthful essence of her story is lost. Carrie becomes a myth, a blurry encapsulated image of herself; she becomes a statistic inside scientific research. According to James Egan, the novel illustrates the most pervasive and dangerous aspect of science and technology: the technological and scientific world view. Technology cannot control Carrie as she destroys the town with her powers, as well as science cannot explain her behavior after the fact: “Technology and the scientific method have an arrogance about the unknown [...] The White commission perpetuates the delusion that a parapsychological power such as Carrie's cannot exist [...] the technoscientific world view has dismissed metaphysical moral realities in order to make life more manageable” (Egan 211). In the end, the ultimate weapon against patriarchy is only treated as an exception, a misread and isolated case of study. The fact that this is not true, as the appearance of a new telekinetic girl suggests, implies that the rebellion feminism proposes only will be possible if social traditional ideas, roles, and behaviors change, something which is

impossible through violence and if the issue is not approached as a collective affair involving both men and women. Those changes Stephen King feared are still fighting to surface in our society nowadays, and what they seemed to bring was a masculine cultural apocalypse in America. If men would be able to change the traditional hegemonic roles they have always engaged in, some of whose traits seem to be harmful, there would be room for change. But if in *Carrie* the author shows how the patriarchal system quashes any sign of feminine individual power and rebellion revealing the fundamental role women perform in that repression, in *Christine* we assist to another kind of crushing, that of the so much idealized masculine power.

Chapter Two: *Christine*

TECHNOLOGY MADE FLESH: THE HUMAN MACHINE

Christine (1983) is the Gothic love story of a teenager with his haunted, come to life vintage car. It certainly shows the interest in technology Stephen King has developed throughout his career and the effect it has upon mankind, a motif characteristic of science fiction. In fact, most critics read the novel as part of a larger group of stories that deal with the victimization of society by machines. The texts usually cited are the short stories *The Mangler* (1972), *Trucks* (1973) and *The Word Processor of the Gods* (1983), culminating in the novels *Christine* and, more recently, *From a Buick 8* (2002) and *Cell* (2006). Actually, most science fiction stories either celebrate or repudiate technological advances and new inventions to make our life easier and more comfortable. In fact, within Science Fiction, technology is often an unproblematic positive force, serving as the principal (or only) determining agent for progress, even resulting in the ultimate transcendence of human limits – whether that means the physical limits of planet Earth or *human biology*, or the temporal limits of mundane time and mortality (Luckhurst 5).

The familiarity of this technology in our everyday life is what the Gothic takes advantage of in order to turn science, progress and technology into something *uncanny*, unfamiliar and threatening, something to be afraid of. Readers are both secure and uncertain when confronted to machines because things may not be as they appear on the surface, because a piece of technology directly embodies difference and the capacity oneself has to put into the Other's place. In other words, machines are both friends and foes.

It is this rage against the machine(s) that the Gothic genre exploits without any sign of shame. Talking about contemporary Gothic fiction, Steven Bruhm asserts that it circles around a particular nexus, namely, the problem of assimilating social anxieties into a personal narrative that in some ways connects the Gothic protagonist to the reader or the spectator. Furthermore, he adds, “What becomes more marked in the

contemporary Gothic is the protagonists' and the viewers' compulsive return to certain fixations, obsessions and blockages” (261).

It may not be by chance that Stephen King himself, in his nonfictional *Danse Macabre* places the contemporary Gothic within a number of current anxieties, being one of them political and historical. The Second World War, the Cold War and the space race gave rise to a particular kind of horror in the 1940s and 1950s where otherness had to be fought. Other anxieties include the technological explosion during the second half of the twentieth century and the previously commented ideological revolution of the 1960s that has assaulted the ideological supremacy of traditional values where straight white males ostensibly control the public sphere. And finally, the furthest blow to Euro-American culture: the boycott against Christianity as that which should define values and ethics in culture. In the middle of this secular chaos, where personal and social values are in continuous dispute, both Gothic and Science Fiction appeal to achieve a connection to the reader, becoming a physical one in both cases. In a statement that could be applied to both disciplines, Adam Roberts contends that “in most cases technology works in science fiction either directly or obliquely to collapse together the machine and the organic [...] The technological trappings of SF include within them the eruption of the body [...] into the otherwise alienating discourse of the machine” (Roberts, *Science Fiction* 148). In Gothic literature and Science Fiction, then, machines are alive and generally gendered.

Most common machines in Science Fiction and Gothic are robots and spaceships. To begin with, the presence of and interest in creating artificial people is recurrent in ancient mythology. One Jewish legend speaks of the Golem, an animated anthropomorphic being, created entirely from inanimate matter. Its earliest stories date to Judaism. In the Talmud Adam was initially created as a mud golem, a characteristic that will accompany its subsequent representations. The change from myth to literary motif occurs during Romanticism, and as H.P. Lovecraft shows, apocalyptic literature and the Jewish *kabbalah* fed in the darkness by ancient Oriental magic is a recursive motif in supernatural literature (28-32). The *kabbalah*, so recurrent in the Middle-Ages, is a philosophical system that explains the universe as an emanation from deity, and it implies the existence of weird spiritual reigns that can be gained access to through secret charms. Its ritual is linked to mystical interpretations of the Ancient Testament, and it confers an esoteric meaning to each letter in the alphabet. This fact grants Hebraic

letters a special spell inside popular magic literature. As Massimo Izzi analyzes (207-209), there are many different versions of the myth, until Gustav Meyrink publishes *Der Golem* (1915) and popularizes the most famous one, that of Rabi Löw of Prague, whose actual name is Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1513-1609). According to this version of the story, the Rabi created a Golem to protect the Jewish community in the Josefov neighborhood against anti-Semitic attacks. When the Golem grew up too much, it became too dangerous and violent. Thus, the Rabi decided to destroy it changing the first letter in the word “Emeth” (truth) to spell the word “meth” (death). This pun is essential to understand the myth, as creation is a divine task and imitation can derive in idolatry. In a mystical formal level, the Golem and Adam are the same. In the novel by Meyrink, the Golem personifies the modern human automata, which rigorously creates modern society against its will.

Going even backwards in time, in Ovid's epic poem “Metamorphoses,” we find the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Pygmalion, a sculptor living in the island of Cyprus was looking for his ideal woman. However, the man was tired because he could not find an appropriate partner. He started to build statues representing his ideal image of femininity, but once he did it so well that he fell in love with the statue. After praying to the goddess Aphrodite, his sculpture is transformed into a real woman. This plot lets literature explore the relationship between the author and his *oeuvre*, from inversions of the myth where the work of art causes death to its muse as *The Oval Portrait* (1842) by Edgar Allan Poe to stage plays such as *Pygmalion* (1913) by Bernard Shaw, which involves the transformation of a common lady into a woman.

The first automaton in Gothic literature is that of the short story *Der Sandmann* (1815) by E.T.A. Hoffmann. In this story, the hero apparently falls in love with Olympia, a woman whom he believes to be human, but who in fact turns out to be a very sophisticated doll. He is unable to see her body dismembered in pieces, a fact that drives him mad and will provoke his death. This is the story Sigmund Freud used to explain his concept of the *uncanny*, something that becomes weird in its familiarity. Three years later, in 1818, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* was published. This already mentioned novel has surpassed genre borders and its main character has become a cultural icon. The story of the most famous artificial being in history is the first narrative in popular literature where the question of human limits and the use of the human body to investigate, create and rebuild are raised. In fact, the stress in that novel – and many of its adaptations since – is on the horror of the creature's *artificiality*, the

monstrous ways in which human reproduction has been replaced by a seemingly mechanical substitute, an automaton manufactured from multi-racial fragments, as Hogle contends (156). Another example is provided by Edgar Allan Poe's essay *Maelzel's Chess Player* (1836) in which he tries to expose the fraudulent automaton chess player called The Turk, invented by Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1769. Further instances are presented in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) where the household of the future includes domestic automata, and *L'Eve Future* (1886), a French symbolist science fiction novel by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, which describes Hadaly, the ideal artificial woman while at the same time criticizes the excesses of technological advance impersonating them in Thomas Alba Edison. This novel is best known, however, because for the first time the term "android" is used. The term *robot* is coined in the play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920) by the Czech dramatist Karel Capek. The word has heavy connotations of slavery, as it means servitude and it is a direct reference to the low workers who lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1848. In the play, robots are massively produced and sold as a low cost handwork to free men from work. In the end, these robots acquire some human traits and a horror spreads: that of robots conquering the world. As the term developed, it became to mean a "self-contained, maybe remote controlled artificial device that mimics the actions and possibly, the appearance of a human being" (Seed 59).

Once robots become a recurrent motif in writing throughout the twentieth century, a pervasive anxiety recurs through literature: that of human beings losing their position of power. Displacement and replication are the most common fears in robot narratives. A classic example is *Metropolis* (1926) by Thea Von Harbou, where a replica of the main character, Maria, is built; if Hadaly and Olympia were built to substitute woman and eradicate her dangers, Futura is their dark reverse. A vehicle for vengeance, a weapon brought back from the death to turn the mechanized world to ashes. In Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) organic androids designed to work in Martian colonies run away looking for a decayed Earth after World War Terminus. As the main character, Rick Deckart, a replicas hunter, pursues them working for the San Francisco police department, he starts to question once and again their supposed non-humanity. In a world already mechanized in many aspects from page one, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between andys and human originals. In 1972 Ira Levin wrote *The Stepford Wives*, the story of a feminine strong character among submissive and conformist wives, who in the end turn out to be androids. Her final submission to

“perfection,” that is, to patriarchal rules and conventions follows the path of Gothic literature. It seems that misogyny found an ally in both science fiction and horror.

Isaac Asimov hated this negative tendency of what he called the “Frankenstein complex,” namely, robots attacking and going against its creators and he tried to offer readers more positive visions of robots from the 1940s onwards, particularly in his collection of short stories *I, Robot* (1950), where the writer mentions for the first time his three laws of robotics for a friendly coexistence between humans and machines. These laws keep robots from hurting humans and the nexus of the short stories is the investigation of several cases of malfunctioning and the character of Dr. Susan Calvin. He extended his positive vision of robots to four more novels: *The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1957), *The Robots of Dawn* (1983) and *Robots and Empire* (1985). In the world inside these novels, humanity is divided between spacers, whose use of robots has provided them with many technological advances and terrestrials, who have renounced to the use of robots and have isolated themselves in cities known as the caves of steel. Before the saga starts, a war takes place between them and the spacers win. They, as the descendants of the first space settlers, restrict the life of terrestrials imposing some hard laws. Under these circumstances, a human detective, Elijah Baley, and R. Daniel Olivaw, a spacer robot join together to solve some mysteries, becoming friends in the process. Without the contribution of Asimov, maybe robots nowadays could only be compared to Gothic creatures as Dracula or the Werewolf. However, his wider vision provided robots with a much more complex scope.

The link between human and machine becomes more and more blurred as human creatures are built from machines. Phillip K. Dick and his androids are a precursor to what nowadays is called a cyborg (a being with both biological and artificial parts). Other exponents are *Cyborg* (1972) by Martin Caidin, where the damaged parts of a soldier are replaced by technological devices and the short story “The Bicentennial Man” (1976) by Asimov, the story of a very human cyborg who wishes to be recognized as one of our race, so he fights to obtain its humanity in a legitimate way. However, the SF masterpiece where humans and machines merge is *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson. The cornerstone of cyberpunk literature, the novel tells the story of Case, a brilliant hacker with bio-implants who betrays his criminal partners. His gift is stolen via surgery and he must be involved again in criminal acts in order to recover his life. The story takes place in a dystopian future, where cyberspace blurs the frontier between reality and *virtual* reality because the brain is directly linked to a computer system.

Cyberpunk shows a dark world under the dominion of computer networks in which multinationals rule replacing governments. The main characters in cyberpunk novels are anti-heroes (being Case the prototype) of ambiguous morality fighting a totalitarian technological system, with *1984* (1948) by George Orwell a clear influence. In these cyber-worlds, the body is more metaphorical than real, as “it is no longer simply the repository of the soul; it has become a cyborg body, one element in an endless interface of bio-technologies” (Bukatman 98).⁷ In our society of information and mass-media, the body, the self is not only technology made flesh, but technology *replacing* flesh (and humanity).

Metaphorical Vehicles: From Spaceships to Cars and Beyond.

If technology has replaced flesh and humanity in science fiction and horror, it is to reflect *our* loss of humanity. The rational is substituted by the corporeal and the technological replaces the organic to reflect human beings as mere inert puppets. In this sense, computers, spaceships or cars become *extensions* of the human being. They become metaphorical vehicles with a life of their own.

Cyberspace and computers aside, spaceships and cars are other major symbols of progress in literature. In fact, a spaceship is a more sophisticated, futuristic version of a car. The point is that spaceships (and cars) can be a mere prop to go from point A to point B or, as it happens in literature and other media, they are symbols of reification in the Marxist sense of the word. In a simple way, the raise of things to the status of living objects that have power over us. Consider the combination of the human and the technological in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* (1969), whose main character is Helva, a cyborg who works as a spaceship or the ship characters in Iain M. Banks *Culture* novels, who can choose their own name (and that name is a reflection of their personality). Or the Discovery in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), whose Artificial Intelligence computer Hal goes mad and crosses over from the territory of the machine to the realm of the human turning on us and expressing its (paranoid) character. To put another example, at the end of the *Confluence* novels by Paul McCauley, *Shrine of the Stars* (1999), when the organic technological world known as

⁷ On cyberpunk and how *Neuromancer* represents the ultimate blurring between human and machine, see Cartwright and Baker 254-260.

Confluence disintegrates, it is revealed that in essence it was a conglomeration of giant spaceships that fall apart again in voyages to reoccupy the galaxy. In the end, as Gwyneth Jones explains,

The spaceship is an alternative, contained world in itself [...] Whatever shape the vessel takes, it will be the *locus* for a drama of human relationships [...] The spaceship, forging its lonely way through a vast, inimical ocean, becomes a world like this one: a vulnerable and yet demanding closed environment. (165)

The spaceship as an alternative, contained world is no more than the science fictional evolution of the car, a pervasive symbol of wealth, power and status in American literature throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

When Henry Ford started producing the Ford T model in 1908, the car turned from a luxury item into a more accessible object of common use. In a few years, cars were everywhere and they contributed to maintain the myth of Americans as a nomadic people, of America as a vast land of opportunities symbolized in the new roads and highways that little by little proliferated throughout the country. The culture of American mobility pervaded the American character with the car as its main totem, to the point that the automobile stands as an icon of American genius and ingenuity, an image of freedom and individuality. But whereas the car has become a species of myth in its own style, American literature in the twentieth and the twenty-first century has tended to subvert this positive image offering open critiques to the naive vision Americans have of the automobile.

In his outstanding literary analysis of the influence of the car in twentieth and twenty-first century American literature, Shelby Smoak asserts that

American fiction [...] disrupts cultural perceptions of the car [...] American fiction questions what American really buy when they purchase cars. Ultimately, twentieth century American fiction subverts cultural perceptions of the automobile and questions its value within American culture. (4)

From Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918) or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) or Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), three recurring paradigms dominate the representation of the automobile in twentieth century American literature. First, the car is represented as a dynamic site of violence, a place where characters experience violence. The car technology is publicly destructive, via automotive injury and fatality, expressing a doubt

about the integration of the car into American society. Then, literature produces an image that the automobile facilitates sacredness by offering a means for escape or by providing the car religious associations to question the high esteem Americans give to the car. Lastly, the car is represented as a site of consumption, an object of exchange or an item that facilitates further consumption.

Stephen King takes advantage of this American tradition and its paradigms to offer a chilling narrative about the dark side of masculinity, about how women bring (and sometimes destroy) manhood and how the myth of the car with its violence, sacredness and consumption chains and misguides the psychological and physical evolution of men. In this case, the destruction of poor teenage nerd Arnold Cunningham is tied to the pervasiveness of his evil 1958 Plymouth Fury, a proof that the myth of the car has fatally contributed to the association of masculinity with possession to the point that what you own possesses you. If the car is represented as a site of consumption, in the novel *Christine* we are attending the consumption of masculinity.

***CHRISTINE* INTO PERSPECTIVE: CONSUMING MASCULINE POWERS**

“Body by Plymouth, Soul by Satan.” This tagline of the teaser trailer for the theatrical release of *Christine* (1983) by John Carpenter shows what seems to be the true nature of the Plymouth Fury Arnold Cunningham purchases as his first car. Its name alone suggests chaos and mayhem, but the fact that its feminine nature presents the American character as “hard, stoic and a killer” (Lawrence 68) is even more frightening and revealing.

Christine, Arnie's “first love” (King, *Christine* 1), acts through the novel as a catalyzer to strengthen Arnie's position and status, but among other symbols, the over the top automobile stands for the representation of Arnie's (and everyman's) masculinity. That is, possessing qualities or characteristics considered typical of or appropriate to a man. While it may be influenced by biological factors, masculinity is also culturally constructed. As such, masculinity is not restricted to men and can, in fact, be female when women display behavior, traits and physical attributes that are considered masculine in a given historical and social context (Reeser 11-13). In the

seminal book *Manhood in America*, critic Michael Kimmel makes the claim that manhood is homosocial in the sense that men need to prove themselves to each other, not to women. In fact, he concludes that definitions of manliness have evolved in response to women movements. Simply, when women act, men react. The novel *Christine* (1983) can be read as a reaction towards the second wave feminism, but a deeper insight at the text tells us about what it means to be a man in America, about the fact that masculinity is something that must be constantly proven and about the consequences of that continuous challenge.

Manhood in America. The Patrician, the Artisan and the Entrepreneur

According to David Leverenz, who develops similar ideas to Kimmel, three ideologies of manhood have ruled the construction of masculinity in America. The patrician paradigm, which sustained relatively small colonial elites, expresses manhood as property ownership, patriarchy and republican ideals of citizenship. The artisan paradigm, expressing the values of a much larger producing class, defines manhood as freedom and pride of craft. And at mid-nineteenth century, a new ideal manhood emerged with the raise of the bourgeois middle class. For the so called “self-made man,” manhood is based exclusively on hard work and entrepreneurial competition. The basis for American individualism, its ethic of hard work, self-control and material rewards rested on the presumption that everyone could be successful.

Although Leverenz applies his theoretical paradigms to the American *Renaissance*, it is clear that these capitalist ideologies remain useful to explain the apparently eternal crisis of masculinity men seem to suffer. Since women entered the work place and market place and left the house, men live in a limbo where they have lost their male generative powers. All of us have a penis, but none of us possess the symbolic phallus. Jacques Lacan's essay *The Significance of the Phallus* (1958) articulates the difference between *being* the phallus and *having* the phallus. Men are positioned as men insofar as they are

seen to *have* the phallus. Women, not having the phallus, are seen to *be* the phallus. The symbolic phallus is the concept of being the ultimate man, and having this is compared to having the divine gift of God.

In the United States, the primary battlefield is economic competition. In such a competitive world, where men come to measure their worth primarily through their work, the greatest fear is to be shamed or humiliated by other men. Manhood functions to transform fears of vulnerability or inadequacy into a desire for dominance. As a defensive strategy in competitive situations, manhood can be undeniably inspiring. The problem develops when manhood comes to feel like one's whole self. Then an ideology designed to manage and master fear becomes a way of intensifying and burying fear that generates a monstrous need to dominate.

Stephen King seems to be aware of these idealizations of manhood, and he offers in the novel *Christine* his particular vision of the fall of the whole system of manly beliefs. The story, along with *Carrie*, seems to be a reflection of Leverenz's consideration that

Manhood begins as a battlefield code, to make men think twice before turning and running, as any sensible man would do. Womanhood begins as a domestic code, centered on child rearing. As collective fictions, these codes function ideologically, representing a particular group's prescriptions of behavior as if the norms were both natural and universal. They serve to invigorate yet also to constrain the individual will for the benefit of the group... The great paradox of manhood and of womanhood... is that what can be socially functional can also be personally dysfunctional. Men get killed; women get stifled. (73)

In *Christine*, an all American teenager receives the ultimate phallus only to become dominated by it. The fall of Arnold Cunningham represents the inadequacy of particular idealizations of manhood to reality. A man, Stephen King seems to tell us, is something more than his material goods and social privileges. Not all men fit well into the battlefield of manhood. Not all men fit well into the ideal of manhood, but every man tries to escape the constraints of this ideal; even if that means to die. Even if that means to reconsider our roles as men in society, something the Gothic as a transgressor genre allows us to do.

When Having the Phallus is not Enough: the Failure of the Self-Made Man

The character of Arnold Cunningham in the novel suffers feelings of inadequacy and frustration over his position in high school society:

He was a loser, you know. Every high school has to have at least two; it's like a national law [...] Everyone's dumping ground [...] he was a natural out. He was out with the jocks... out with the high school intellectuals [...] out with the druggies... out with the macho pegged –jeans-and-Lucky-Strikes group... and he was out with the girls. (1-2)

As Dennis Guilder's description of his friend shows, Arnold Cunningham is exactly the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. However, the only quality Dennis emphasizes about him reminds us of the artisan paradigm, freedom and pride of craft: “Arnie was smart, but his brains didn't go naturally to any one thing [...] unless it was automotive mechanics [...] When it came to cars, the kid was some kind of a goofy born natural” (1-2). The fact that he battles his parents to get to automobile courses is a sign of that pride. Paradoxically, it is Arnie's only friend Dennis who stands for the real standard man. He is the football team star, a womanizer whose perspectives of a bright future are taken for granted. He owns a Plymouth Duster and he has been Arnie's protector since they know each other. To a certain point, he represents the patrician paradigm.

Arnold must buy a car and obtain a girlfriend in order to become an autonomous male gaining sexual and social power, and divorcing himself from overprotective parents and friend. That means to work hard and enter competition; that means to become a self-made man, the idealized paradigm of middle class America. However, when Christine steps in, Arnie gets his phallus but loses everything else. However, he is not the only loser in the novel as the battlefield of manhood blurs and constraints individuals to the point that nobody wins.

When Arnie purchases the car to his owner Roland Lebay, the narrative of a man coming to power is complicated by his relationships with other men, by the car and by the girlfriend, Leigh Cabot. Across the bodies of Christine and Leigh, the anxieties, jealousies and desires of other men are exchanged or expurgated. Dennis begins the novel: “This is the story of a lover's triangle, I suppose you'd say – Arnie Cunningham, Leigh Cabot, and, of course, Christine” (1). However, this is the obvious triangle in a novel where every relationship becomes triangulated, being the most usual apex the

1958 Plymouth Fury. In the following lines the mechanisms that engine the disempowerment of the American self-made man will be revealed through the analysis of the personal relationships in the novel.

Arnie, Leigh and Christine: Cars and Girls as Consuming Goods.

Arnie's relationship with Christine begins as any teenager's fascination with newfound freedom and power behind the wheel of a first automobile, but it quickly becomes a frightening, self-sacrificing obsession as the vintage car begins to exhibit abnormal powers. From the moment Arnie sees Christine beaten and battered in Lebay's yard, his mind is under her control: "I saw that car – and I felt such an *attraction* to it [...] I can't explain it very well even to myself" (40). But the sale takes Arnie from rags to riches, transforming the stereotypical weird nerd into the most popular guy at school. He gains confidence and stands on his own against his parents and the school bullies. He even dates the hot new girl at school, Leigh Cabot, because the car gets him a new different image. The problem is that the new image is artificial and soon his newly found happiness will turn into a nightmare.

The artificiality of that image has a sense in the battlefield of manhood, where heterosexuality as a homosocial transaction of patriarchal culture is bound to traffic in women. Sedgwick defines it as "the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for cementing the bonds of men with men" (25-26). Dennis and Arnie's friendship is only a part of a complex web of relationships, of men circulating cars and women among themselves. Lebay sells Christine to Arnie; Dennis steals Arnie's girlfriend. Even Arnie admits that the primary reason he asks Leigh out is his jealousy in imagining her with other men (244). It seems that he asks her out not because of herself, but because she is desired by other men.

Christine works in the story as a sexual substitute for Arnie of a jealous, feminine nature. Poor Arnie falls in love with a car, but this object exert a level of control over him that is identical in its oppressiveness to a destructive human sexual relationship. Christine's gradual dominance over Arnie is expressed once and again in sexual imagery. Dennis comments on how quickly Arnie is ravished: "he had been like a man who meets a showgirl, indulges in a whirlwind courtship, and ends up with a hangover

and a new wife on Monday morning. It had been [...] well [...] like love at first sight” (88). The boy responds to his car on a highly charged sexual level, perhaps being the best example of this sexual affinity the day in which he is forced to push Christine back to Darnell's garage after he has the car broken into:

... he had pushed her until the sweat ran off him in rivers and his heart thudded like a runaway horse in his chest and his back cried out for mercy; he had pushed her, his body pumping as if in some hellish consummation; he had pushed her, and inside the odometer ran backward, and some fifty feet beyond the door his back began to really throb, and he kept pushing, muscling it along on the flat, slashed tires... He reached Christine and flung himself inside, shuddering and panting... feeling the calm slowly wash through him like a soothing balm. He touched the steering wheel, let his hands slip down it, tracing its delicious curve. (483)

While behind the wheel, Arnie comes back to the pristine world of 1950s America, viewing life through her “eyes,” eyes that distort reality. The car acts as a selfish lover, draining his psychological, emotional and financial bank accounts by placing demands on his time and energy. His life revolves around her as he spends countless hours in Will Darnell's garage putting her into perfection. In fact, all the hard work seems to have a reward, as Arnie's physicality is improved as the car seems to improve. He seems stronger and more attractive as his acne face disappears, but the American ideal that hard work and competition means going up in society is a fake as Christine regenerates itself and splits up the potential relationship between Leigh and Arnie, who, in his transformation, exaggerates his heterosexual credentials.

Leigh Cabot, as the newcomer in Libertyville, stands for everybody's Madonna in high school, but falls for Arnie in what seems to be a true love. At a point in the novel, Leigh feels that she could “complete” Arnie. However, as it has been earlier pointed out, Arnie's feelings are of a different kind. The boy is torn between his love for Christine and his love for Leigh and Dennis. Being the car a symbol of autonomy and Leigh a symbol of security and newly acquired status, it is not a surprise that Leigh sees the car as a rival. The girl sees the relationship of Arnie with Christine as a “disturbing parody of the act of love” (291).

That cars are women is no new metaphor, but Leigh questions this association of gender and cars, even as she reinforces it. She tells Arnie that cars are girls. When Leigh asks Arnie “which you love more,” he says, “I thought girls were supposed to be jealous of other girls. Not cars.” She answers, “Cars are girls. Didn't you know that? (289) Stephen King adds:

Cars are girls, she had said. She hadn't been thinking of what she was saying; it had just popped out of her mouth. And it certainly wasn't always true; she didn't think of her family sedan as having any particular gender; it was just a Ford. (290)

Arnie does not understand the symbolism, but Christine is a girl. Leigh tells Arnie that she cannot make out with him in the car because, as she later tells to herself, “it was like making love inside the body of her rival,” a “perversion.” To ride in Christine is to be “swallowed” (291) in her. Not only does Leigh recognize that cars are girls and that their rivalry is a sexual rivalry, but Christine may emblemize for Leigh her own disempowerment, especially because her dreams about gender and power inevitably turn to cars and driving, to being forced as a child to ask for dolls for Christmas rather than the red racing car she really wanted because it was a “boy toy” (303).

The fact that Leigh asks Arnie “which” he does love more implies that the metaphor is reversible. In the novel, women are like cars, objects of exchange among men, trophies for the winner in the battlefield of manhood. This is made perfectly clear when another triangle is analyzed, the topical lovers' triangle.

Arnie, Leigh and Dennis: a Matter of Survival.

On the surface, Christine is nothing but a vintage car, but she has the ability to think, kill, destroy and possess. She is the ultimate killing machine and Arnie is her pawn. She ruthlessly kills the bullies that defile them both and, in a fit of jealous rage, attempts to murder Leigh, breaking the first lovers' triangle and facilitating the transition to the beginning of a new triangle, the one in which the best friend “steps in” (333).

While Leigh falls for Arnie in the first place, she will turn to Dennis when troubles come. Dennis attends the relationship between them from the outside, through all the gossiping in high school. It is interesting the vision of that relationship in the sense that girls ask themselves what is that Leigh has seen in Arnie the loser, and boys are only worried about whether Arnie has scored. Meanwhile, Dennis feels a mixture of joy and envy for Arnie throughout the narration since from the very beginning he feels lust for Leigh (233). The football team star is portrayed as a womanizer looking for sex. His relationships with women are reduced to trying to have sex before the Prom, albeit not in a rude manner. Even for Arnie, he is assumed to be sexually experienced. His image is that of an experienced but balanced and not promiscuous jock till Leigh enters the

equation. From that moment onwards, the girl is again objectified. Dennis, madly in love with her, compares Leigh to a new car: "Like that long-ago Plymouth that had rolled out of Detroit on a carrier in 1957, she was, in a sense, still under warranty" (637). He notes elsewhere that "Leigh Cabot didn't have any rust on her rocker panels" (210).

After Christine attempts to murder Leigh, both she and Dennis team up to destroy the Plymouth Fury and the relationship between them becomes tighter to the point that both are romantically involved while Arnie tries in vain a reconciliation unaware of the breaking point that the incident with Christine has supposed to his relationship with both of them. Leigh and Dennis fear the transformation of their friend from a shy nerd into a cocky arrogant, but their primeval fear is Christine and her menace of perpetual doom. As a matter of survival, Leigh transforms from Madonna into helper in one of the last scenes of the novel, where Dennis crushes Christine inside of Darnell's garage, with a sewage truck named Petunia. If a powerful car symbolizes the transition from adolescent powerlessness to adult men's sexual power, or, in other words, the car is a sign of male power, when that power dominates and swallows everything, a bigger phallus is needed. Dennis, as the impersonation of the balanced and experienced man, "masters" the powerful sex drive Christine comes to represent with a truck. And, if the possession of desirable women enhances the position of a young man among the other men, then, like any other valuable object, women can be traded or given away. In fact, Dennis and Leigh do not end the story together, as Leigh marries a "Nice fellow. Drove a Honda Civic. No problems there" (743).

Arnie, Christine and Lebay: the Father (Literally) Usurps the Son.

Arnold's relationship with his parents is complicated for obvious reasons. As a bellicose teenager looking for his place in society, he rejects his wimpy father and castrating mother. Michael Cunningham is a mournful, vegetarian history professor that mopes around in cutoffs playing a recorder. Regina Cunningham is an English teacher whose only purpose is to smash any sign of teenage rebellion. Christine, the 1958 Plymouth Fury, represents for Arnie the mobility and competitiveness the self-made man requires in order to achieve his goals. However, for the parents the car is only the

first sign of independence in a perfect submissive son who they think will obey their will. When Arnie, influenced by the strength and determination his new acquisition has provided, questions his own future, everything goes nuts. Obsessed with the car, Arnie's grades fall and he even considers not going to university, to his parents' disappointment.

Arnie adopts in the novel an alternative father (or father in law): Roland D. Lebay, the old man who sells him Christine. The transaction of feminized property occurs in a chapter entitled "Arnie Gets Married." When Arnie and Dennis stop to look at the car, Dennis thinks of Lebay as "a very old pimp huckstering a very young boy" (47). Arnie, later in the novel, recalls the transaction as a marriage in a used car lot, Darnell the best man, Christine the bride, and Lebay rising to give away the bride (479). This powerful image brings us marriage as a form of traffic in women and reinforces Lebay's role as a (negative) surrogate father.

Lebay's story is one of frustration about his life and obsession with Christine. In this sense, his story parallels Arnie's to the point of replication. When Roland Lebay purchases Christine, it becomes his first and only love. An acquaintance says of him that "my brother was not a good man. I believe the only thing he ever truly loved in his whole life was that Plymouth Fury your friend has purchased" (133). In fact, there seems not to be anything remarkable in his life besides his purchase of the car. Illiterate and a soldier during World War II, Lebay keeps inveighing against the "shitters" in the world, a word he uses referring to his superiors in the army implying anal rape as an expression of power and, ostensibly to his frustration of not getting any higher in society. Christine brings him a new life and a wife and daughter, but not real status or power. His is such an obsession that when his daughter dies inside the car choking with a hamburger, he doesn't feel any pity for her, but resignation. This death and the posterior suicide of his wife inside Christine recalls the incident between Leigh and Arnie, when Leigh almost dies inside Christine choking with a hamburger too. It is not a coincidence, as it is suggested that the car has asked Lebay a sacrifice in order to maintain her cult.

In his kind of werewolf transformation from a sensible man into a frustrated pimp, it is Lebay's signature word that Arnie adopts. Because shit becomes literally an item of exchange and a marker of aggression when the town scumbags destroy Christine after an incident at school and defecate on her dashboard (318). After this execrable act, the killings begin. Since both Arnie and Lebay's stories are paralleled to the point of replication, the old man returns after his death as a ghost to inhabit both the car and

Arnie's body, eternalizing the car as a site of violence. When Christine smashes the first of the boys, Moochie Welch, he is metaphorized as shit to be scraped out with a shovel, implying the fact that he was the one who defecated on Christine (387). Arnie pretends to be unaffected about the vandalistic destruction of his car, telling to himself and the police investigator that "Shit wipes off" (385), but shit keeps coming back as Christine becomes everybody's prostitute, her warmth interior being home to the dissolving apparitional bodies of those who damaged or bothered both Arnie and the car.

The ghost in the car becomes the ghost in the machine and Arnie's body gives birth to his own violent father. At a point in the novel, the ghost of Lebay appears in the car besides Arnie. When the kid takes a look, he sees an aged version of himself, "This version of himself and Roland D. Lebay could have been son and father: the resemblance was that great" (485). When Lebay begins to take over, Arnie's face "roils" (680), his body convulses "as if a basket of snakes had been dumped inside his clothes" (681). Arnie's language and his body, even a characteristic back injury, gradually replicate Lebay. The signature of Arnie becomes that of Roland D. Lebay indicating the importance of the father's name, because if Christine is Arnie's phallus, his sense of power, it is only because it is bestowed by Lebay, who represents the perverse law of patriarchy that structures the narrative.

Jacques Lacan argued that in the son's mind, the father's body represents the law, and that the role of the father's body is to break the attachment the son feels to the mother and by extension his own. In the battle against the perverse father, Arnold loses his attachments, both masculine and feminine, his sense of wealthy masculinity and even his life. He dies trying to escape this perverse ideal of masculinity. Appropriately enough, his death happens in a suspicious car accident, while Dennis smashes Christine to nothingness. Ironically, Arnie had left Christine in Darnell's garage to make a trip with his mother in order to recover information about universities. As it is suggested that Lebay tries to take control over Arnie one last time, it seems that, in the end, the perverse father literally *breaks* the attachment the son feels to the mother and to his own in a definitive way. In the fierce battle of manhood, the one who cannot master his fear of being dominated, is destroyed and becomes powerless to the eyes of women and other men. That is how homophobia and misogyny continue its dynamics, as the analysis of the last triangulated relationship will show.

Arnie, Christine and Dennis: Avoiding the Gay Side of Things.

Christine is, on the surface, a narrative of boyhood friends sexually and socially growing apart. Dennis remarks this point when he says he feels like someone whose best friend has married a “high-riding dyed-in-the-wool bitch. You don't like the bitch and [...] the bitch doesn't like you, so you just close the door on that room of your friendship. When the thing is done, you either let go of the subject... or you find your friend letting go of you, usually with the bitch's enthusiastic approval” (100). However, as Dennis himself says of such an interpretation, “it ignored the hard facts, but it was comfortable” (655). Those hard “facts” are, of course, a sentient car and a ghost; it allows Dennis and Leigh carry on with their lives. However, that interpretation ignores the homosocial system of the novel, in which the sexualized car suggests that women are consuming goods and the ghost comes to represent a father taking over the son's body and supplying a woman's body to his son; a homosocial system where women's bodies and cars' sacredness are desecrated.

What seems more important, the heterosexual narrative allows Dennis to ignore the sexual anxieties at work in his relationship with Arnie. When Dennis asks himself, after Christine begins to monopolize Arnie's time: “Was I jealous?” (96), the answer is an elicited yes. When Dennis's new cheerleader girlfriend wants him to take her to a local make-out spot, he admits that “I should maybe have been thinking about the promise of her breast, but instead I found myself thinking about Arnie” (121). In the narrative of the romantic triangles, it is the bond between male rivals which is being delineated. When Dennis attempts to comfort Leigh, “stepping in” the relationship between Arnie and the girl, “I saw all too clearly what comforting her could lead to. Arnie was between us – and part of myself was, too. I had known him for a long time. A long good time” (572). The relationship of Arnie and Dennis takes a certain precedence and preference over those with Christine and Leigh, being one Arnie's new masculinity and the other the object of their rivalry in the battlefield of manhood. Because when woman or car are erased of the equation, what remains is a homosexual panic when the affection between men starts to become eroticized.

Arnie is repeatedly feminized in the novel, being his body and psyche marked as feminine. The bullies call him “Cuntface” (110), but it is Dennis himself who goes on feminizing his friend. He protects Arnie at school and makes fun on Arnie as having a

“queer-looking face” (40) and a hysterical smile. At one point in the novel, when Arnie starts crying, Dennis hugs him:

I knew what to do. Reluctantly, not wanting to, I slid across the seat and put my arms around him and held him. I could feel his face, hot and fevered, mashed against my chest. We sat that way for maybe five minutes, and then I drove him to his house and dropped him off. After that I went home myself. Neither of us talked about it later, me holding him like that. No one came along the sidewalk and saw us parked at the curb. I suppose if someone had, we would have looked like a couple of queers. I sat there and held him and loved him the best I could and wondered how come it had to be that I was Arnie Cunningham's only friend, because right then, believe me, I didn't want to be his friend. (79)

This scene between Arnie and Dennis is marked by a homosexual panic, a scene of tenderness and disgust which denotes the homophobic tension of the text. He doesn't want to be Arnie's friend because of the fear that to others – and perhaps to Arnie and himself – it will seem that he really wants to be Arnie's lover. The irruption of Christine avoids the gay side of things putting all the elements in the novel in their proper place; more exactly, Christianity and the perverse side of its patriarchal law. Cars and women, not embraces.

The car becomes the impersonation of an excessive masculinity that delineates but does not help to escape the constraints of the idealized self-made man and his characteristics: autonomy and self-control. Tempered, balanced Dennis, being the representation of the ideal man to certain extent, has the ability to reject what Christine comes to represent at first sight and to master it almost at the end of the novel. However, at that point, he is not in better position than Arnie. The car becomes the first barrier in their relationship and it lets them enter the heterosexual battlefield of competition where the homosexual panic transforms into male aggressiveness. The fact that Dennis keeps on having nightmares about Christine lunging out at him, “her grille snarling like an open mouth full of chrome teeth, her headlights glaring” (89) suggests that he is not free of losing control and falling down into the same trap than Arnie. Properly enough, when Arnie catches Leigh and Dennis cheating on him, the boy categorizes his friend as another “shitter” (657). Finally, Dennis succumbs to his “manliness” destroying any possibility of recovering Arnie's friendship. And what is worse, it is Christine who avoids a proper relationship between Dennis and Leigh, but this time merged into the remembrance of Lebay. A proper relationship between the sexes is cursed from generation to generation because of the constrained moral of a

capitalist patriarchal law that tells people how to behave and who to be with repressing natural feelings, instincts and values, although not urges.

Christine, feminine name of Latin and Greek origin derived from the word Christ or Messiah, becomes in this novel a demoniacal follower of Christ – a repository of male aggressiveness and the dark reverse of Christian patriarchal law. The car represents the mask of masculinity, a mask featured to achieve the ultimate Holy Grail: women. This mask is the result of some stereotypes and clichés about men with whom the entire masculine genre must live with. First of all, Dennis Guilder is the impersonation of some of the values a man must have in order to become a decent individual. A mixture of a genteel patriarch and artisan, Dennis seems to be independent, virtuous, stalwart and yes, even loyal to his friends. In fact, he does not become involved with Leigh until her relationship with Arnie is completely broken. He embodies love, kindness, duty, compassion and deep involvement with his family. Arnold Cunningham seems to have, at least, the same artisan virtues such as pride of craft, the fact that he is unafraid of work and, by the wrong means, certain sense of self-reliance. Both of them become competitive, mobile and aggressive in business, deriving their identity from their activities in the social sphere, measured by accumulated wealth or social status, by geographic and social mobility. While for Dennis all these values are taken from granted since the very beginning, Arnie depends on the 1958 Plymouth Fury to achieve them. But, in the case of Arnie, to have the phallus is not enough. Dennis attends the destruction of his friend, who is unable to master the pervasive assumption popularized by sexual education that men are hormonally driven and they need to release their powerful sex drive. However, Dennis himself, although being naturally the right candidate to become the self-made man, fails in a way too. The failure of the self-made man is evident because something more than an external phallus or natural virtues are needed to get real power and status; something inherent to the individual, something that allows the individual to make a difference in society; a kind of genius, if you will, but also self-control and balance.

Dennis is out of the story for the most part due to a football accident that almost leaves him handicapped and dispossesses him of his taken for granted future. Christine, the car, is present when the fatal setback occurs reminding the fact that although sports are a way to channel male aggressiveness, it is this same male aggressiveness that sometimes leaves individuals without a chance, and in Dennis' case, a permanent limp. Present day Dennis tells that “I made the transition from adolescence to manhood –

whatever that is – somehow”. He remarks that “I’ve got a college degree in which the ink is almost dry; [...] I’ve been teaching high school history [...] I’m single, but there are a few interesting ladies in my life” (745). Although he followed the path everyman is expected to follow, he is nowadays an average young adult who has not mastered his sexual drive, allergic to compromise and, what is worse, an individual without any special gift that allows him to make a difference. He is a high school teacher, a job stereotypically destined to all those who are not masters of their craftsmanship. He is, in a way, about to replicate Michael and Regina Cunningham. Both Arnie and he see for themselves that the ideal of middle class self-made man is just that, an ideal. In the end, Dennis reflects the mediocrity of middle class America, and in our globalized world, of Western capitalistic culture middle class, where the only way to solve problems is to buy or exchange anything, be it women or cars.

The Novel as a Response to Feminism: Masculinity, the Disposable Genre.

In the myth of the American Adam, the male is seen as an innocent man who transcends the past and is able to start a new life in the American Eden Garden, a new, unexplored land of opportunities which provides him the tools to become a different, more experienced individual through his interaction with a pure, virginal nature. However, the Gothic genre has signaled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents, and in *Christine* Adam tramples the American deteriorated garden with an infernal feminine machine that works as a ghost haunting the present of the novel trying to recover an idealized but false past: the America of the 1950s.

Present day Dennis has two recurring nightmares that do not allow him to forget what happened to Arnie. In one of them, the figure of rotten Roland Lebay usurps Arnold in his coffin and raises to touch him one last time repeating a sentence that corrupts the myth of a virginal, pure nature. Talking about Christine, he says that “Brand-new, she was. Had the smell of a brand-new car, and that’s about the finest smell in the world [...] Except maybe for pussy” (11). This is a metaphor that represents not only the obsession of man with technology and sex, but the narrow vision of woman as modern Eve, temptation. Except that Christine is a car. So, the other nightmare

acquires relevance to explain the true eerie nature of the vehicle. He dreams of Christine, “the voice from the radio is the voice of Richie Valens, killed long ago in a plane crash with Buddy Holly and J. P. Richardson, the Big Bopper [...] as Christine suddenly lunges towards me [...] I see there is a vanity plate on the front – a grinning white skull on a dead black field. Imprinted over the skull are the words ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE” (747). The dream only replicates the fact that Christine's radio only plays oldies from the fifties and its odometer keeps on running backwards as if trying to recover the feelings of its first love, Roland Lebay, and a past where gasoline was cheap and Elvis was still the King. The 1950s in the US mark the definite entrance of the adolescence into the market, and the last truly romance with the automobile. The decade is the last time where a pure edenic America lived quietly before the convulse 1960s. The country was a spotless garden where adolescents had the sensation through their newly acquired freedom represented in the Cadillacs or Plymouths that a bright future was ahead of them, in the unending roads of the country. However, James Dean and his myth are there to show the reverse of that reality, a function that Christine carries out in the novel. The motto “Live fast, die young and leave a nice body” turns into a hellish nightmare of teen car accidents, teen smashed bodies and meaningless, broken or humdrum adult lives. And it is because, actually, as the novel tells us, the freedom of the adolescent was never there in the first place. The independence of the individual becomes warped or chained because of the anxiety about his entrance in the social world. Social institutions and presumptions about gendered constructions constrain the individual to the point that nobody fits well into manhood because this is a changing notion. Dennis Guilder has become an average man, but this fact does not imply any happiness about it, or any deep meaning. He is just another American Adam testing the falseness of the myths. He is no Adam, nor a self-made man making it on his own. At least, he has been modeled through his experiences, through his choices, and overall, through certain anxieties that surround and affect him symbolized by the car.

What is more important, Christine, the infernal machine, is a ghost of the past haunting the present to remember Americans that the 1950s was the decade of rock and roll or teenage rebellion and freedom, but it also brought them McCarthyism, the Cold War and its latent paranoia or the launching of the first atomic submarine. And over all, a bunch of racial and gender anxieties and problems that exploded in the following

decades giving birth to a society in which homophobia and misogyny have become a tool to structure social and gender relationships.

The 1958 Plymouth Fury seems to reflect all the fears men had when Feminism thrived. Stephen King plays in the novel with the American larger ideal of masculinity, what Marc Feigen Fasteau called “The Male Machine”:

The male machine is a special kind of being, different from women, children and men who don't measure up. He is functional, designed mainly for work. He is programed to tackle jobs, override obstacles, attack problems, overcome difficulties and always seize the offensive... His relationship with other male machines is one of respect but not intimacy; it is difficult for him to connect his internal circuits to those of others. (1)

Both Arnold Cunningham and Dennis Guilder represent that ideal, and both are in the end overwhelmed by it; even Dennis, the football hero, the womanizer. He is the obvious stereotype of the male machine, a performance of masculinity that represents masculine power through socially sanctioned violence, although the writer gets to portray the kid as a human being. Arnold Cunningham is the opposite of his friend, a sensible man with inner qualities that becomes a male machine in part because of his new car and virtues and, on the other hand, because he loses his capacity to “connect his internal circuits to those of others.” One way or another, the development of the story is ready to express all the fears that feminism raised in men, as both kids succumb to the “façade of strength” that is “the weakness of men” in opposition to the “façade of weakness” that is “the strength of women” (Farrell, *Male Power* 13).

The Gothic fiction deals with themes of rebellion, transgression (moral, social or scientific) or the overcoming of oppressive societal norms. It is the opinion of many critics, however, that in the end the social and moral established order is simply restored, being those who have rebelled against an unfair establishment or a societal evil like patriarchy punished with death or damnation. Stephen King transgresses the normative structures of this genre, where the Gothic heroine is prosecuted and tested putting all narrative (male) subjects into a reactive rather than proactive position. This “feminized” masculinity can be either a tool to protest against the gender hierarchy or a way to reproduce it. In the case of *Christine*, the novel articulated and anticipated many if not all the masculine anxieties that have been the object of analysis by the Men Rights Movement since its beginning at the end of the 1980s.

The fact that Western industrialized societies had privileged the experiences of men over those of women became an excuse for the raising of feminism. However, when women left the margin of society and became the center, the notion of privilege and power changed. While feminists claimed to suffer the experience of male power, critics such as Warren Farrell challenged the belief that men even had power with a shift into its definition. Farrell defined power as “control over one's life” claiming that both masculinity and femininity had no power but performing roles: women's role was to raise children; men's role was to raise money (*Male Power* 48). He explains that all societies that have survived, have survived based on their ability to prepare their sons to be disposable, in war and at work – and therefore, as dads. That is because historically both sexes were disposable in the service of survival (women risked death in childbirth; men risked death at war), but while women were biologically disposable, men's disposability required socialization. This successful socialization meant rewarding boys with social bribes of approval: being labeled as “heroes,” promoting them or securing them the love of women to perpetuate the cycle. Power came to mean for men the feeling of being obligated to earn money someone else spends while they die sooner.

Farrell insists that men and women need to make an evolutionary shift from a focus merely on survival to a focus on a proper balance between survival and fulfillment. While women's movement has re-socialized girls to achieve this goal, no one has re-socialized boys to balance the situation. Stephen King remains on the edge of that gap to reflect the unbalance through a demonic 1958 Plymouth Fury, a *belle dame sans merci* that comes to represent the fact that women *do* have power as Farrell defines it; that is, the apparent success of the feminist movement gave women the possibility to control their reproductive, social or economic lives while men go on preparing to become disposable and looking for traditional rewards such as becoming heroes, promotions or the love of women.

Arnie Cunningham becomes disposable from the very beginning since his socialization is not successful at all. Sure, Christine “promotes” him at school and secures at least at the beginning the love of Leigh Cabot, but he merges with his car to become a male machine and makes the wrong choice. Precisely, it is this false reflection of power what destroys him, because he is unable to perceive himself as powerless and he does not recognize what the obsession with the car has done to him: while working in the car, he gains confidence and secures a female (real) body, that of Leigh's. However, the fact that Christine regenerates herself makes Arnie disposable at work and

the story soon deviates into an inverted triangle where Arnie's power is exposed as an illusion in the face of the female power to create, consume and control. As Farrell points out, "the Female Western is the battle between the good and evil methods of getting the men who perform best" (*Why Men* 73), and Leigh and Christine fight for being Arnie's trophy. What could be perceived as an ideal situation from a male point of view (Arnie having both his whore and his Madonna), becomes a threat to his power because both female figures wish to complete, change him. The boy overcomes the fear to be rejected by women thanks to the car, but he succumbs to what Farrell calls the Superman expectation: "the fear we are merely Clark Kents who won't be accepted unless we are a Superman" (*Why Men* 94). When given the chance, he chooses survival (Christine) over fulfillment (Leigh) and ends isolated from everybody and devoured by the car, a vagina *dentata* driven by the ghost of Lebay.

Dennis Guilder is the natural male machine of the novel, although in the end he is in the same reactive position than Arnie. He is confident, experienced and he has no fear of rejection since his privileged position allows him easy access to women. However, he suffers the same Superman expectation than Arnie and both friends seem to reflect the male tendency to protect women characteristic of Western civilization.⁸ It is this tendency which makes him the official "hero" of the novel, as it is presumed that women appreciate and look for that protection, security. But, as Roland Lebay's relative tells Dennis, "love is the enemy" (133). It seems that no matter what kind of love, since it is love what destroys all relationships. Both Dennis and Arnie deny their mutual love, because as good male machines they are, their relationship must be one of respect but not intimacy. Leigh falls from Arnie because, as the sensible man he is, could be the right choice to make a commitment, but the relationship is stranded due to Arnie's inability to acknowledge his true vulnerability, what Farrell calls "the whining side," the helpless side of men.⁹ From Arnie's point of view, Leigh is to blame for not going any further in their relationship, as he does not understand that Christine is a threat for her. And things get worse when he discovers Dennis and Leigh cheating on him, because he not only reinforces his helpless side blaming her, but the little respect or sense of love

⁸ The more chauvinist the country, the more it protects women. And therefore the more it limits women. Like the United States, Italy, Spain... give women options without obligations. These countries are, therefore, still male chauvinists. The degree to which a country is emancipated is the degree to which it frees men from the obligation to protect women and socializes women to equally protect men (Farrell, *Male Power* 136).

⁹ I didn't realize it wasn't just sexual desires that make a man vulnerable in a world that treats sex as dirty. Little makes a man more vulnerable than "whining" (when whining means blaming a woman) in a world that says he is powerful and she is vulnerable (Farrell, *Why Men* xxvii)

he could feel for Dennis disappears. The only sense of intimacy Arnie achieves is provided by his car, and this sense of intimacy is artificial. In the end, Arnie becomes disposable without being ready to become disposable.

The same could be said for Dennis. Arnie becomes disposable for Leigh, as he is not ready to protect her from Christine. Leigh turns to Dennis for protection and consolation, and Dennis fits the role being labeled as the “hero” and destroying the car in the process. The car witnesses Dennis' accident in the stadium, where the boy is stripped of his status and masculinity mask. Dennis himself hints the possibility that Christine is responsible for the event and it can be said that Dennis becomes disposable for Christine because the right provider for the car is Arnie, a more insecure, malleable character. However, the most devastating event for men according to Farrell is the loss of love, and Dennis becomes in the end disposable for Leigh because for Farrell the equivalent of a woman being treated as a sex object is a man being treated as a success object. Christine dispossesses Dennis of his success, and he fears he will lose love. The less a man is willing to give up a sex object, the more he'll be trapped into becoming a success object. Dennis talks about his relationship with Leigh in these terms: “I craved her in a way you continue to crave some substance on which you have no more physical dependency [...] candy, tobacco, Coca-Cola. I carried a torch for her, but I'm afraid I carried it self-consciously and dropped it with an almost unseemly haste” (742). The fact that it is Lebay's face what they keep on seeing in each other when they make love implies that patriarchy separates them. Because in patriarchy, while commitment means for women not only achieving security and a family circle but the fantasy that someone else will earn enough to pay for them, for men commitment means to achieve his primary need: intimacy, while giving up his primary fantasy: sex with other women; but only if the traditional roles of both sexes are to be maintained, something it does happen at the end. Leigh chooses a successful IBM customer as a husband, and she leaves college. Dennis remains single, a sign of his immaturity according to the standards of patriarchy, where “a single woman who supports herself is called a career woman, while a single man who supports himself is called a playboy [...] Ironically, a woman who commits and becomes financially dependent is considered more mature than a man who does not commit but is financially independent” (Farrell *Why Men* 154). Farrell explains that what makes a teenage boy's anxiety so overwhelming is that teenage boy's socialization is the demand to perform without the resources to perform. Not only are his risks many, but his failure many (*Male Power* 167). Stephen King shows in

Christine how the surviving technique of the male machine (that is, becoming disposable for societal purposes) is not a valid method if equality between the sexes is looked for. If fulfillment rather than survival is what both sexes require in a society where feminism gave women the opportunity to control their own lives, patriarchy should provide different definitions of masculinity to allow men achieve the same goal women got. However, the figure of Roland D. Lebay appears in the novel to remind that patriarchy is a rigid structure, and that its rules, presumptions and prejudices are not easy to change, and probably won't.

If Arnie is promoted by Christine and Dennis becomes the hero because of her, Roland D. Lebay secures the love of Christine returning from the realm of death as a ghost that haunts both past and present. He prepared himself to be disposable at war, but nobody prepared him to become disposable *after* war. Roland's fear is that of being dominated, that of being subjugated to authority and he represents the worst traits of patriarchy, something that makes him powerless before women and men alike. Roland's "unending fury" (749) is felt even after the story finishes, as the excuse Dennis finds to tell his story is the fact that he reads in the newspaper the news of a boy, Sandy Galton, the only survivor of the town scumbags, being mysteriously run over in an open air cinema. Nobody has prepared men to become disposable in a society whose rules and expectations told them that everyone could be successful and become a self-made man. This frustration translates into violence, but not that stylized and idealized violence of westerns or movies, but a dirty, amoral violence fed by misogyny and homophobia to maintain the structure of patriarchy, a system that both subjugates men and women.

In *Christine*, Stephen King delineates how patriarchy works for men. Although these social, religious and cultural rules give them a sense of power, in the end masculine individuals are also powerless. The main characters in the novel are trying to conform to what it is expected from them, to fit the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, which is defined by Raewyn Connell as the pattern that allow men's dominance over women to continue. The ideals of manhood espoused by the dominant masculinity suggested a number of characteristics that men are encouraged to internalize in their own personal codes, including violence and aggression, stoicism, courage, competitiveness and success. This hegemonic concept is embodied in the novel by Christine, a car that becomes a symbol of male power, but at the same time the symbol of men's destruction. Male power resides in fantasy, as its hegemonic model imposes an ideal set of traits which stipulates that a man can never be unfeminine enough, while fully achieving

hegemonic masculinity becomes an unattainable ideal because the feminine pole is an unavoidable, necessary, welcomed and sometimes scary side of human beings, as the sentient killer car reminds the reader.

In the following chapter, Stephen King begins in “The Body” to look for healthier channels of power and a meaningful American identity, one that could encompass both genres. In the story, the large shadow of hegemonic masculinity glides again over the main characters, and it will be the business of the hero, an individual who gets to master both the masculine and feminine poles of the individual, to exorcize the demons of an American culture that has always relied its rationale on violence, stoicism and fantasy.

Chapter Three: “The Body”

ASSIMILATING DEATH AND LEGACY

When Stephen King published the collection of novellas *Different Seasons* in 1982, he was tired of being the King of Horror. In fact, none of the stories included are Gothic or contain supernatural events. The book was a big surprise for readers and critics alike, who waited for the ultimate thrill from the Master of the Macabre. Curiosity, in fact, is what gave the book its awesome reception. The author offered four different stories that developed mundane topics that had nothing to do with castles, vampires, monsters or crypts. However, as an exchange, the author proved that his stories were worth reading, and, what is more important, that he possesses a sixth sense to reflect human condition. The most remarkable fact about the collection is that three of these stories turned into Hollywood films. “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption,” “Apt Pupil” and “The Body” were adapted to the big screen in *Stand by Me* (1986) by Rob Reiner, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) by Frank Darabont and *Apt Pupil* (1998) by Brian Singer. The remaining story, “The Breathing Method,” was turned into an experimental film for class by Rob Reiner when he was at cinema school, something that reinforces the previously commented idea about the cinematic style of the writer.

“The Body” (1982) plays a key role in our discussion about gender construction because if *Carrie* (1974) warned us against radical feminism and showed how girls live trapped in gender constructions, *Christine* (1983) revealed that technology and biology have different speed and that boys too are slaves to their gender. “The Body,” in spite of being published a year prior to *Christine*, can be read as a try of freeing all the chains exposed in the aforementioned novels. The story is a nostalgic coming of age of its main character, Gordon Lachance, as well as an exercise of criticism to the dominant concept of masculinity that has prevailed over American culture since it was created:

that of the rude cowboy whose inability to connect with other people isolates him from civilization and peers alike.

The story takes the reader to 1960, a time when the United States still had a bright future and white America had not suffered the defeats of gender equalities, the threats of race equality or the traumatic experiences that have undermined its supremacy, if that supremacy was there in the first place. A period, Robert Bly comments, where the vision of what a man is was crystal clear: “The Fifties man was supposed to like football, be aggressive, stick up for the United States, never cry, and always provide.” He adds, however, that “Receptive space or intimate space was missing in this image of a man. The personality lacked some sense of flow” (Bly 2). The product of a concrete age of American supremacy in the world, this idealization of man has been spread throughout the world and has damaged the image man has about himself, something we have previously analyzed in *Christine*. Stephen King seems to be aware of this, and, although in the story of Gordon Lachance we come back to a nostalgic time and place where the word “man” had a meaning, a deep read suggests that the author is questioning that meaning not only in the persona of its main character, but also in the title itself and in the time the book was published.

“The Body” expresses men's fear and rejection of hegemonic models of gender since the raise of feminism questioned their taken for granted privileges. The novella is a *bildungsroman* for its main character, twelve years old Gordie, as well as an analogy of the state of masculinity during the 1980s, where the concept and the term itself were in constant questioning. A period of constant questioning too is adolescence, where the maturing individual is modeled through a number of experiences, an external and /or internal journey that transforms the person and provides the traveler with a tool that could change his or her society. America is the rebellious teenager, impatient with the authority of its European parents and eager to create its own character founded on a different set of values and priorities. However, as Gordie's journey shows, in the United States the change was never that easy. The idea of the United States as a nation, as a body politic, was sustained by the belief that America was the new Eden where all those English political refugees the Puritans first, and all the subsequent waves of immigrants later could find a new beginning, the chance to fulfill the American Dream. American literature is full of journeys, sometimes to nowhere, in which the individual seeks for knowledge through formative but tragic experiences that provoke an internal change.

For Barrio Marco, the definitive challenge of American literature has been to reach the deepest abyss of the individual (208), and Stephen King is not outside this tradition. Stephen King's journeys, as almost any American one, are *denitiations* or extrications from institutional structures (family, society or the country) in which the individual steps into the wilderness looking for himself or a meaning in life, but rarely what the individual achieves has any effect on society as a whole. In fact, the relevance of "The Body" resides in that, in spite of the triumph of Gordon Lachance, white masculinity as a concept remains nowadays questioned, visible, and exposed just as poor Ray Brower's corpse in the story. The opposite to normative masculinity is Gordon Lachance, but his success as a writer does not erase the unease of modern American man, who is constantly seeking for an intimate space, a flow and a role since all revolutions risked his stability as the main provider. Stephen King proposes an alternative to the fifties man through a sensitive individual, capable of nurturing, but fighting if necessary, others and Otherness. The model still remains useful in an age in constant change where no concept is rigid nor lasting.

Gordon Lachance, King of the Outcasts

From Friday afternoon until Sunday morning at the end of August 1960, Gordon Lachance undergoes a series of trials that bring him to identity both as a young man and as a writer. Following the pattern of the monomyth,¹⁰ Gordie joins a credible adventure to assimilate death and legacy.

The legacy is a barren one, as Castle Rock in rural Maine seems to be a wasteland. In the hottest summer since 1907, no garden has produced a crop and the soil is lifeless. Lack of vitality overwhelms Gordie's father too, metaphorical ruler of this land and a timorous man who looks "sad, tired and used. He was [...] old enough to be my grandfather" (King, *Different Seasons* 309). His powerlessness is analogous to the situation in his realm, a ruined garden where he spends time "making useless rainbows

¹⁰ "The Mythic Journey in The Body" by Arthur Biddle is a useful essay that analyzes in deep the hero's journey in the novella, and it is the core of this analysis of the story

in the air” (328). Gordie's mother reinforces the sterility, as she has suffered alternating periods of fertility and impotency. After a series of miscarriages, she was told she would never have a child; five years later, Dennis is born. Ten years later, when she was forty two, Gordie came into the world as “a special delivery from God” (309).

However, the special delivery from God lives ignored by his parents; they always favored his older brother Dennis. When the latter dies in a jeep accident, the withdrawal is even harder to the point that Gordie feels like the main character in *The Invisible Man*:

I did a book report in high school on this novel called *The Invisible Man*... This *Invisible Man* is about a Negro. Nobody ever notices him at all unless he fucks up. People look right through him. When he talks, nobody answers... Once I got into it, I ate that book up like it was a John D. McDonald, because that cat Ralph Ellison was writing about *me* (310)

When his father notices the kid at all, it is to attack his friends as “a thief and two feeb” and to categorize him as a social misfit (309). As the Prince and future King of the outcasts, Gordon suffers parental indifference, but his situation is way better than that of his friends, who, unlike him, are white trash of the wrong side of the city.

Each of the four main characters in the story has been severely abused. Vern Tessio lives in absolute terror of his older brother, and his parents appear unable to protect him from daily beatings. Teddy Duchamp's ears have been horribly mutilated, the result of his father pressing his head against the side of a woodstove. In fact, Teddy's father, a lunatic soldier who disembarked at Normandy, ends his days confined in a mental asylum. Duchamp suffers his own psychological instability; the kid is obsessed with taking risks that endanger his own life – dodging trains and trucks at the very last moment. Chris Chambers' life is the most miserable of them all. Regularly beaten by his drunken father, and coming from a broken family with no status, the boy tries to confront and overcome this dysfunctional legacy in stoic silence, something that gives him the appearance of a tough guy.

All of them spend their summer time in a tree house, a sort of surrogate intimate space that gives them the opportunity to play or perform masculinity, or what they understand to be a man is: “Besides playing cards, the club was a good place to go and smoke cigarettes and look at girly books” (294). They are imitating the fifties model

man on the surface, that aggressive rebel James Dean or Marlon Brando popularized and that was considered both glamorous and dangerous¹¹. At least Vern Tessio and Chris Chambers are mirroring their older brothers, Billy Tessio and *Eyeball* Chambers, a pair of scroungers that belong to the gang of Ace Merrill, a teen psychopath that enjoys torturing people. Ace and his group have already embodied the “one-sidedness” and “isolation” of the fifties man vision Robert Bly fears (2), as they are flesh machines feeding on the feelings, fears and emotions of others.

This bunch of kids is the product of the diminishment and belittlement of the father figure that, according to Robert Bly, parallels the increasing power of women the critic links both symbolically and historically to the killing of kings, who “act as a magnet and rearranges human molecules” or “affect our feelings and actions the way a magnet arranges tiny flakes of iron.” Likewise, in a similar manner, Linda Badley and Kathleen Sullivan consider the absence of the father as an autobiographical issue central to Stephen King's narrative (“Viewing the Body” 45 and *Suffering Men* 29-57) and his paternal figures are either absent or weak in almost all his novels.¹² However, this is only the excuse of the author to subvert, as a Gothic writer he is, cultural, social or literary conventions.

It is not a coincidence that the novella starts in 1960. Kenneth Millard reminds us that contemporary coming of age fictions try to situate the protagonist in relation to historical contexts or points of origin by which individuals come to understand themselves as having been conditioned. However, they maintain an adult vision of adolescence with all its consequences.¹³ Gordon, his friends and his enemies are the representation of a post-modern idea of history, “homeostatic, relative rather than objective and linear” (Badley “Sin Eater” 108) and the embodiment of this relativity is Gordon himself, a writer recollecting his childhood and, to a point, rewriting it because he is the King of the outcasts, the magnet arranging human molecules.

¹¹ According to Henry Giroux, the body for youth has been one of the principal terrains for multiple forms of resistance, and the body as a potent marker of youthful resistance served to set youth off from the adult world. Many adults responded with trepidation to the youth resistance of the 1950s, and Hollywood and other conduits of media culture capitalized on such fears by constructing youth as both a social threat and a lucrative market. Redefining teen culture as both separate and in opposition to adult society, youth became the embodiment of alienation, anger and potential danger. Hollywood provided a new youth market with romantic images of anti-heroes such as James Dean and Marlon Brando to both identify with and emulate.

¹² See the comments about the families of Carrie White or Arnold Cunningham elsewhere. *The Talisman* and *It* are no exception either.

¹³ Adolescence, youth, innocence: they become an idealized fictional category which literary writers can use to give a particular urgency to representations of subjectivity and socialization that highlight their own social and political anxieties (Millard 13).

“You guys want to go see a dead body?” (299). Vern Tessio's invitation sounds the call to adventure by bringing the news of the discovery of the body of a boy missing for three days who has been struck and killed by a train. Ray Brower's corpse is the medium that will allow Gordon recollect this experience and rewrite his childhood, and to a certain extent, American history as an embodiment of Stephen King himself. Because Ray Brower's dead corpse symbolizes the American body politic at a crucial moment: 1960, a time before a whole generation of men was lost to the Vietnam War and masculinity could still be stereotyped as “aggressive, stick up for the United States, never cry and always provide” (Bly 2).

The Bodies in “The Body”: Tough Guys, Soft Guys and the American Body Politic

In a world organized around destructive patriarchal values, Gordon and his friends will search the dead body of Ray Brower for selfish reasons, at least at the very beginning. Finding the dead corpse for them means notoriety, as they think that they will be on the news; again, indifference is at the bottom of the question, this time at a social level. If you are not on the media, you do not exist. That was the case for masculinity, at least till the 1980s. Masculinity was always there, but no one paid attention to it because it was taken for granted and the rest of cultural gender movements were created to react against it (feminism) or as an extension of it (black, queer movements). In the 1980s, the male body became an object to be gazed at, to be *seen*, finding itself in the same reactive position the feminine body had always been, and acquiring a symbolical political meaning. In Jeffords' words:

The Reagan era was an era of bodies. From the anxieties about Reagan's age and the appearance of cancerous spots on his nose; to the profitable craze in aerobics and exercise; to the molding of a former Mr. Universe into the biggest box-office draw of the decade; to the conservative agenda to outlaw abortion; to the identification of values through an emphasis on drug use, sexuality and child-bearing; to the thematized aggression against

persons with AIDS – these articulations of bodies constituted the imaginary of the Reagan agenda and the site of its materialization. (24)

In 1980, actor turned politician Ronald Reagan reached the White House defeating James Carter with his image of rude, strong and assertive cowboy. He was the man in charge, the leader that would bring the United States back its strength and privileged position in the world after the turbulences of the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam war and the submissive and soft years of the Carter administration with the oil crisis and the hostages in Iran. Allied with Hollywood, Reagan perpetuated the image of a strong and healthy male body in the iconic characters of Rambo or Rocky, normative male bodies that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty and courage in opposition to “soft” bodies containing sexually transmitted diseases, laziness or immorality. Stalinist president Leonid Brezhnev and the Soviet Union became the Empire of Evil and the Cold War reemerged in Reagan's foreign policies. At home, neoliberalism was implanted in an image based economy, where Reagan's motto “the state is the enemy” propelled liberal economic policies that increased the differences between classes. The white American became the hard body in contrast with women and black people, whose rights were diminished, as they were considered part of the “soft” American body. However, not all white Americans were Rocky or Rambo, and the nucleus of the hard body Ronald Reagan promoted was the embodiment of a minor white and rich group opposed to the majority of the country – white and other ethnic people – who could not afford to get all the characteristics a tough Reaganist man must have: competitive, sport-minded and athletic, never wavering or uncertain, strong and aggressive, powerful and not feminine (Jeffords 35). As a consequence of these conservative politics, the welfare state soon became a part of the “soft” body in the American body politics and, by the end of his second term in office, Ronald Reagan's United States had become the first debtor country in the world, destroying the healthy image he tried to impose when he reached government and raising the negative vision of the United States as an interfering country in the world with its interventionist politics, something that following Republican presidents of the country perpetuated.

Reagan's politics tried to erase a painful age in American history, providing the regular American citizen with a false sense of notoriety, health, and wealth. During the Reagan era, popular culture became the mechanism to identify and establish the relationship between people and the state, through the articulation of that state as the

unified national body of masculine character. Popular discourses of militarism, patriotism, individualism, family values and religious beliefs articulated both the individual and the nation to the point that the Reagan presidency nationalized the body equating individual actions with national actions. The reverse of this position meant that individual failings were to be seen as causes for national downfall, something that allows Reagan not only to justify his critique to Jimmy Carter, but to find an excuse to attack single mothers, substance users, homosexuals and welfare recipients.

According to Jeffords, in 1982 – the year we first saw the iconic character of John Rambo when the film *First Blood* appeared – the cultural concept of hard body that came to define the Reagan policies was not yet solidified, because people were still worried and traumatized by the Vietnam war and the hostages crisis in Iran. However, Stephen King seems to be aware of the situation and in “The Body” draws it perfectly anticipating all the anxieties of an all-American citizen subjugated to the policies Reagan had started to apply. Reagan, as Gordie's father in the novella, was making useless rainbows in the air to reactivate American economy and confidence. The problem is that the reactivation of that American economy and confidence had collateral damages in all the individuals that were not included in the definition of what Reaganomics understood as a hard healthy body. King takes death out of the closet to give voice to all those white Americans who were not able to be tough Reaganites and, who, in the end, were the majority because of the constriction of its definition. The dead body of Ray Brower represents the true state of the American body politics in 1982: a whole generation was lost, the U.S. had lost its innocence and his privileged position in the world because of a soft policy in foreign affairs, and the barren legacy of a strong economic crisis was killing the American spirit. In fact, as the body became the new temple, the realization of its finite nature was a shocking one for the age of bodybuilding, *Terminator* and *Flashdance*. Both Gordie and his friends, and Ace Merrill and his gang will look for Ray's corpse because they want to be on the news, because they want to be a part of that American masculine unified national body exposed in the media: a fragile, small, weak and tiny corpse at the moment rotten by the worms of a lost war and innocence. In order to go ahead, to fully develop as a hard body nation, that soft American body had to be exposed first to be properly buried later. In other words, as the Reagan presidency nationalized the body equating individual actions with national actions, both Gordon Lachance and the United States needed a cathartic experience to assimilate death and legacy. Because if the United States as a nation

needed to assimilate the death of a whole generation to the Vietnam war and the legacy of a foreign policy that had destroyed the confidence of Americans in their country, Gordon must assimilate death in order to be alive.

As a result of the parental indifference he suffers, Gordie fears his brother's ghost, which he is sure that lurks in Denny's closet. In his dreams, Denny's bloody corpse screams at him: "It should have been you, Gordon. It should have been you" (313). Lachance feels guilty for being alive, and subconsciously he feels responsible for his brother's death and his parents' grief. The kid experiences a deep crisis of identity, because his very being is called into question. If no one acknowledges your presence, do you really exist? When Vern tells the story about his brother's discovery of the body, Gordon is the first one to empathize with the dead boy: "I felt a little sick, imagining that kid so far away from home, scared to death" (304). He needs to view the body of Ray Brower to be sure it is not he himself who has died and, just as we all need to do, he must acknowledge the existence of death in life.

So Gordie and his friends' quest for Ray Brower turns into a confrontation between soft guys and tough guys (Merrill's gang) with mythical proportions because existence at various levels is being put into question: at a personal level, Gordon inner personality; at a social level, a barren and infertile legacy. Finally, at a political level, masculinity and the way to deal with it is questioned. It is a crash between the two sides of a same coin, that American body politic that dominates the world and rules the lives of millions, Americans and not: the soft, polite, sensitive and reactive individual versus the proactive, aggressive, strong, powerful and competitive guy Reagan's policies advocated to overcome a difficult time of guilt and loss. "The Body" depicts the fall from innocence for both Gordon and the United States. However, at the same time, it is a relative, nostalgic and subjective way to give some kind of justice to a critical, painful and decisive period in American history. And in a more general sense, it is the quintessential story of how to mature and learn to grow up. Because the first step to grow up and mature is to assimilate the legacy oneself receives and the existence of death as an important part of life.

Four Buddies Looking for their Destiny: Departure and First Steps.

In their odyssey to view the remains of Ray Brower, the four children in the novella are in flight from their community and homes. In accepting the call to adventure Vern proposes, Gordon, accompanied by Chris, Teddy and Vern himself, enters on a quest that, unlike their existence in Castle Rock, is relevant and confirming: “We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going” (339). They sense intuitively the importance of the journey ahead, although they do not prepare it in deep. Mainly, they scheme some stories to cover their absence. They leave at noon. Older Gordon, sitting at his computer twenty years later, reflects: “I’ll never forget that moment, no matter how old I get” (332).

The boys walk through the afternoon heat until they reach the town dump, the limit of their known world. It functions as what Campbell calls the threshold in the monomyth, a place they must penetrate to find the source of their power to develop, to move forward. A threat to the boys' welfare, the junkyard of America, “filled with all the American things that get empty, wear out, or just don't work anymore” (336), is patrolled by Milo Pressman, the dump keeper, and his dog from hell, Chopper. Similarly to Cerberus, the watchdog of the underworld encountered by Aeneas, Chopper is “the most feared and least seen dog in Castle Rock” (337). It was said that Chopper was trained to attack specific parts of the body, a command every boy feared to hear: “Chopper! Sic! Balls” (337). The command expresses the boys' paramount fear, that of emasculation. Symbolically emasculated by their town and families, and obsessed by being “queer” or a “pussy,” the command seems to be a logical addition to feed that fear. As he races for the fence and safety, Gordon does not see the dog but perceives him as a hound of hell, “shaking the earth, blurting fire out of one distended nostril and ice out of the other, dripping sulphur from his jaws” (345). It is only when Gordon has crossed the dump and has scaled the fence to a place of safety that he realizes that Chopper is no hound from hell, but an ordinary mongrel. For Gordon (and extensively the rest of them), this passage is “My first lesson in the vast difference between myth and reality” (346).

However, the experience at the dump allows Gordon to go beyond ordinary existence in Castle Rock to new possibilities. Once the threshold/dump is gained, the adventurers move into new tests and territories. Gordon and his friends have completed

the first phase of the rite of passage in the hero's journey: separation from the known world. They will pass more severe tests, but only Gordon, as the singular hero of this adventure, will be tested alone, because he is the chosen one challenged to relieve the symbolical deficiencies of self and society through an act of initiation.

Mature Gordon, who is the narrator of the story, defines the rites of passage as “the magic corridor where change happens.” “Our corridor” he goes on, “was those twin rails, and we walked between them, just hoping along toward whatever this was supposed to mean” (402). The four boys understand that the enterprise they have engaged in is one of mythical proportions, but the symbolism of that “magic corridor” turns into a very real threat when the boys must cross a railroad trestle over the Castle River.

Chris exposes the challenge as a test of masculinity: “Any pussies here?” (357). All of them accept the trial reluctantly, and Chris and Teddy lead the way followed by Vern, with Gordon far behind, closing the line. When Gordon is halfway across the trestle, and he stops to calm down, “that was when I had my first and last psychic flash” (358). He realizes that the train is coming, and that he will be killed if he does not reach the other side. For him, time stops. He involuntarily urinates, as terror paralyzes him: “An image of Ray Brower, dreadfully mangled and thrown into a ditch somewhere like a ripped-open laundry bag, reeled before my eyes” (359). The thought of *becoming* Ray Brower breaks the paralysis and Gordon crosses the trestle like “a boy in underwater slow motion” (360). When the four boys finally find a place to recover, Gordon admits his fear: “I was fucking petrified” (363). He does not see the train, as much as he did not see Chopper during the pursuit, but the experience again allows him to humanize all those mythic enemies he finds along his way: Chopper, the train, the fate that took Dennis away, and as we shall see later on, the gang of bigger boys led by Ace Merrill. Twice he has survived to the confrontation with the worst fears of his subconscious, but the next test will be the most important of them all: Gordon is touched by death.

A Bad Night Dreaming: Gordon's Rebirth

When the group is a mile beyond the trestle, they make camp for the night. After having supper and a manly cigarette, they lie on their bedrolls talking about cars, teachers, baseball. Teddy talks about witnessing a drowning at White's Beach. They don't talk about Ray Brower, but Gordon thinks about him, "so alone and defenseless... If something wanted to eat on him, it would. His mother wasn't there to stop that from happening" (387). A boy must leave the comforting bosom of the mother if he wants to mature, but Gordon only feels the pain of that separation and the danger to which it exposes him; he does not yet understand that the break could give him power and freedom.

When Gordon finally falls asleep, he and Denny are bodysurfing. The dream is interrupted as he awakens and he hears a drawn-out unearthly scream. Everyone is awoken now and speculating about the source. Gordie falls asleep again and he dreams of swimming, this time with Chris at White's Beach, recollecting the scene Teddy had told earlier. As the boys are swimming, one of their teachers floats over in a raft and orders Chris to recite Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." He begins to recite and goes underwater; then he rises again, pleading with Gordon to help him, and finally sinks.

Looking into the clear water I could see two bloated, naked corpses holding his ankles. One was Vern and the other was Teddy, and their open eyes were as blank and pupilless as the eyes of Greek statues. Their small pre-pubescent penises floated limply up from their distended bellies like albino strands of kelp. Chris's head broke water again. He held one hand up limply to me and voiced a screaming, womanish cry that rose and rose, ululating in the hot summer air. I looked wildly toward the beach but nobody had heard. The lifeguard [...] just went on smiling down at a girl in a red bathing suit. (391)

As Chris drowns, he implores Gordon's help one last time. "But instead of diving down and trying to save him, I stroked madly for the shore" (391). However, before he can reach it, Gordie feels a "soft, rotted, implacable hand" pulling him down. Teddy's grip on his leg awakens him to end a bad night dreaming; it is time for him to stand his tour of guard duty.

The dream again links Gordon with Ray Brower, the child victim of forces larger than himself. The corpses of Vern and Teddy are a reminder of Chris's earlier statement that "your friends drag you down [...] They are like drowning guys that are holding

onto your legs. You can't save them. You can only drown with them” (384); their small penises reflect their physical immaturity and Gordon's fears about his sexual adequacy. And their corpses also foreshadow their death at an early age. Even Chris will be murdered when he is twenty four years old, but Gordon could not have foreseen that. Chris's imploring figure reflects his reliance on Gordie, both as a friend in the 1960s present and as future mentor in high school. Instead of trying to save Chris, Gordon looks to the adult world for help, but that world, embodied in the figure of the lifeguard, ignores them, just as the adult world of Castle Rock ignores its kids. This nightmare symbolizes the first stage of Gordie's sea journey, a perilous journey where the hero leaves behind the upper world of light to confront his own death.

The rest of the night Gordie passes in and out of consciousness, until he awakens to discover that dawn has arrived. He is savoring his solitude when he discovers that a deer is looking at him less than thirty feet away. The sight overwhelms him: “My heart went up into my throat [...] I couldn't have moved if I had wanted to” (393). When he perceives the deer looking “serenely” at him, Gordie projects into her being, as if some part of him has moved out of his body and looks at that twelve year old standing there. The doe confidently crosses the tracks and feeds: “She didn't look back at me and didn't need to” (393). They coexist in perfect harmony till an approaching train frightens her off. In fact, Gordie declares, “What I was looking at was some kind of gift, something given with a carelessness that was appalling” (393). At this point, it should be taken into account the various possibilities the choice of this animal conveys. In Udo Becker's *Encyclopedia of Symbols*, the doe represents the maternal aspect of womanliness, a figure that embodies the feminine (84). The deer is Gordon's soul, which he had not known before. Although the boy does not understand it, he intuits its importance: “for me it was the best part of the trip, the cleanest part, and it was the moment I found myself returning to, almost helplessly, when there was trouble in my life” (394). Gordon is ready to confront the rest of the tests, as his soul is awakened. When Gordie returns to the camp, he does not tell his friends about the episode because it is a private, really important affair.

A final obstacle stands between the boys and the object of their quest, the corpse of Ray Brower. It is a displaced surrogate dragon that guards the treasure. The leeches they encounter at the beaver pond function as this surrogate mythical figure. Gordie's dreams have anticipated this swim. When the four boys emerge from the pond, they discover their bodies covered with bloodsuckers. As they are taking turns to pull the creatures up

their corpses, Gordon sees “the grand-daddy of them all clinging to my testicles, its body swelled to four times its normal size” (397). Frightened, Gordon cannot bear to touch the leech, and he implores Chris to remove it. However, Chris cannot help. Gordon must kill the dragon himself: “I reached down again and picked it off and it burst between my fingers. My own blood run ran across my palm and inner wrist in a warm flood. I began to cry” (397). Although Gordie has killed the leech, he himself is wounded. Gordie faints, and falls to the ground as if dead. The wound is symbolically fatal, as Gordon must die in order to be reborn to a higher mode of personality. In the end, Gordie establishes an ego consciousness independent from his parents.

“The Body,” a Cold War Western

We abandon the story here, before Gordon and his friends find the corpse, to reformulate it. Vietnam War, several political scandals and a huge economic crisis divided American society, and Ronald Reagan resorted to the American myth of the West in order to reactivate American economy and confidence. He was frequently photographed on his California hilltop ranch in his white Stetson, jeans and cowboy boots, the lone avenger standing tall and heavily armed against the howling savages. Critic David Fenimore compares Ronald Reagan to spiritual antecedent Zane Grey, pulp fiction Westerns writer, and his conclusion is revealing. Speaking of Grey, Fenimore concludes that

We now know that this champion of Victorian values led a private life more akin to that of a Middle Eastern patriarch, just as we realize Reagan's folksiness and geniality masked a murderous foreign policy and a placid indifference to human suffering reminiscent of a Saddam Hussein. (63)

It is easy to understand why Reagan turned to the image of the cowboy, as this figure and the frontier thesis in which it was placed constructed the American national identity. In fact, he was not the first president to invoke “the Western heritage” as the history of the American West is the history of the construction and exportation of an idea, as well as of its assimilation and perpetuation through time and location.

After Frederick Jackson Turner first delivered his frontier thesis in a speech to the American Historical Association during the Chicago World Fair in 1893, the idea of the American West as a void, uncivilized, timeless land, whose humanization and civilization was essential for the development of democracy emerged and was defined as a malleable concept, eager to be transformed and provided with the meaning and idiosyncrasy it lacked. The force of the myth was born at the end of the nineteenth century when the ideas on which America was founded clashed with how the country had developed and what it had become. One of these ideas was the struggle for a new society with a special mission which began with the Puritan's drive to escape the “cyclic rise and fall of all previous societies in history” (Murdoch 17) by promising God to keep the newly established society simple and pure. The other idea was that of an empty continent, an imagined, dreamed, literary West as a land of freedom and opportunity.

But, by the end of the nineteenth century, the land was over, the cattle drives were over, and America had developed into an industrial economy. Many Americans were longing for another America where life was simple, pure and free and where one could escape the problematic country moving West – or what the West was thought to be. However, the West no longer existed. Those who conquered and tamed the West only did so by working hard, taking risks, and accepting sacrifices. And, in the middle of this turmoil, the cowboy became the suffering protagonist of this conquest due to his elevation into an inspiring, dramatic and romantic tale.

The overworked, badly paid, agrarian wage laborer with a slim likelihood of having a regular social and family life became an epic hero with chivalric knight characteristics due to the work of novelists Zane Grey, Owen Wister or William Von Tilburg Clark in the early twentieth century. According to Murdoch, the myth of the West and the cowboy “proved a marketable commodity in the most market-oriented society in the world” (118) and this market perpetuated and reinforced the idea for decades.

American politicians have come back once and again to the myth of the West in order to overcome difficult periods in American history because the idea of a pure edenic America where American identity was forged has survived in the American collective unconscious time enough to even colonize the rest of the world. As Ronald Reagan demonstrated, the myth was appropriated, in the name of self-reliant individualism, by those who for their own motives were defending *laissez-faire* and remained to be invoked by those who claimed the nation's health rested on roll-back of the power of government. From this point of view, “The Body” acquires a deep political

reading, as author Stephen King shares the enthusiasm for the most American of genres with cowboy president Reagan. In an old interview for *Playboy* magazine, the author talks about his Turnerian vision of the world:

I view the world with what is essentially an old fashioned frontier vision. I believe that people can master their own destiny and confront and overcome tremendous odds. I'm convinced that there exist absolute values of good and evil warring for supremacy in this universe – which is, of course, a basically religious viewpoint. (Underwood and Miller 53)

However, the image of the West both Reagan and Stephen King long for has nothing to do with the actual West, not even with the literary one. That image is rooted deeply in Hollywood Westerns.

Richard Slotkin argues that the image of the gunfighter, for whom formalized killing was a calling and even an art, is a reflection of Cold War era ideas about professionalism and violence and not the mores of the Old West (*Gunfighter Nation*, 384). In fact, this figure emerges when the archetypal hero of *Shane* – both the novel by Jack Schaefer (1949) and the film by George Stevens (1953) – reverberated in the public persona of the elected president, soon martyr of the nation, John Fitzgerald Kennedy (McVeigh 156). Just as the Cold War and the myth of the West reemerged during Ronald Reagan presidency, “The Body” can be read as a Cold War Western where that Cold War vision is reproduced to criticize the use of the myth by President Reagan.

Cowboys without Hats, Pioneers without Land

It is how citizens *see* themselves and how they *see* those against whom they define themselves that determines national self-perception. In this sense, the Cold War era established a dangerous precedent that Ronald Reagan reproduced thirty years later to uplift American traditional values and beliefs. However, this upraising was not altruistic at all, and it obeyed egotistical capitalistic neoliberal purposes.

The three Westerns that define the Cold War era are a mirror of how citizens saw themselves and those against whom they defined themselves. According to Stephen McVeigh, *The Gunfighter* (1950), *Shane* (1953) and *High Noon* (1953) reflected the apocalyptic impact of the atom bomb on Americans' experience of lived time, as well as

the stultifying effects of the Soviet threat and the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction on citizens' everyday existence. Leaving Indians aside, the white American other becomes the less visible threat in these Westerns. America had been infiltrated by Communism and it was really difficult to differentiate the good Americans from the bad ones. The simple, pure, agrarian, black and white vision of the myth of the West apparently fixed the problem.

McVeigh establishes a link between these Westerns' plots and the American political agenda, being Jimmy Ringo of *The Gunfighter* an incarnation of conformist, conservative long running President Eisenhower and Shane the incarnation of youth, vital, fresh and game changer newcomer Kennedy. Whereas Ringo is unable to escape his troubled dark past and is constantly challenged until he loses and finally dies, Shane's altruism allows him to choose a side, defend it and leave the town after successfully completing his mission.

Thirty years later, however, Kennedy was dead and the story was about to repeat itself. Ronald Reagan, the tough “town marshal” defeated soft “Yeoman farmer” James Carter, and he appealed again to the myth of the West to reactivate American economy, but his was a twisted and distorted subversive vision of the myth, where “Reagan as cowboy (symbol of individualism) blends easily with Reagan as deregulator and protector of Big Business (symbol of Communalism)” and the result is a wild neoliberal economic policy where the rich “are given the controls to get richer” and the common man “receives individualism rather than *achieving* it” (Rushing 26) Stephen King comes back in “The Body” to a nostalgic timeless era of cowboys without hats and pioneers without land to offer a critical response to that political situation.

Gordon Lachance will become a writer, but in a more relative than linear 1960, he could have been easily stereotyped as a yeoman soft farmer, just as some of his friends. According to Smith, the Western yeoman was the hero of the myth in mid-nineteenth century, when the mythical agricultural West was still “The Garden of the World”:

The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow (Nash Smith 123)

Gordie's natural lack of identity matches and mirrors that of the pioneers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century who seemed “to balance on the threshold between

civilization and wilderness, crossing over to one side or the other [...] for feelings of guilt” (Paredes 144). The lack of vitality in his father's realm and the dead corpse of Ray Brower symbolize the foundational myth of American identity and values, an agrarian myth wrecked and smashed by the train of capitalism.

The neoliberal motto of “the state is the enemy” Reagan championed and the savage capitalism it produced are mirrored in the tale by the institutionalized adult paternalistic figures that cheat and try to take advantage of the kids. The shopkeeper that tries to trick Gordon overcharging him when the kid is buying food in order to accomplish the whole journey and the teacher who fools Chris taking advantage of his well-known bad reputation are but two examples. For Gordon and his friends, abandoning civilization (whose Western representation could be that treehouse that symbolizes the town saloon where the rugged cowboys went to smoke, gamble and have sex with prostitutes) and entering the wilderness is a means to recover Ray Brower's corpse, a symbol of their lost agrarian identity rooted in the land. Gordon, Vern and Teddy are pioneers without land, outsider agrarian frontier men whose truly mythical purpose has been swallowed by the fangs of neoliberal capitalism and progress.

Ace Merrill and his gang are the last threat Gordon and his friends must confront in order to recover their true identity. However, they pose the biggest threat of the novella for them, because they represent the dark side of the cowboy archetype, their natural replacement in the American subconscious in the myth of the West and a natural evolution to the Cold War heroic and altruistic Shane after the Kennedy assassination in 1963 and the Vietnam war perverted the myth of the West to such an extent that a more practical anti-hero appeared in the character Clint Eastwood developed in all his Westerns:

In the *Man with No Name*, there appeared a character that made sense to the times: not moral or emotional, not altruistic but self-centered, not heroic but adept at violence. Eastwood's no name was in many ways a Shane that a disenchanting nation could believe in. (McVeigh 173)

They represent the perversion of the romantic literary West knight, the tough outlaw cowboy who became a folk hero at a time where “authority was arbitrary” and “law might serve interest, not justice” (Murdoch 3). In other words, Ace and his gang represent the consequences of supporting Reagan's policies, as well as those conformist

forces that impeded progress during the Cold War, a time where America's pervasive and still prevailing paranoia was that your fellow man could be your worst enemy.

In order to overcome this final threat, the figure of Chris Chambers becomes vital. In a Western with cowboys without hats, Chris Chambers comes into the shoes of archetypal Western hero Shane, fulfilling its many roles as teacher, diplomat, mediator and even father figure for his friends. He is characterized as the individual who makes “the best peace” and is able to get the other boys to compromise and apologize to each other. Gordon says “Chris was good at it. He was tough enough to be good at it” (351). However, as it has been said elsewhere, this ruggedness is the result of stoic suffering under physical abuse rather than bravery. The mysterious origin of Shane differs from the well-known origins of Chris. He belongs to the Chambers, the family of losers in the town of Castle Rock. The boy refuses to become hardened or become a criminal like his older brother, *Eyeball* Chambers, who terrorizes the younger boys. On the other hand, his fathering role reminds to that of Shane with Joey in the film, especially with Gordon. The first time Chris gives solace to one of the boys occurs when Milo Pressman, the dump keeper who enjoys setting his dog on the boys, insults Teddy's father calling him crazy. Teddy's initial response is anger, followed by a hysterical weeping and then a crying that leave Gordon and Vern uncomfortable and nervous. Chris calms him down and eventually rocks him talking in “soothing cadences that were almost a lullaby” (352). When Vern and Gordon have the traumatic experience at the train trestle, Chris comforts both of them. The evening before they camp, Chris' close relationship with Gordon allows him to make an explicit critique of bad patriarchs noting the elder's Lachance rejection of his son. Chris says “I wish to fuck I *was* your father [...] kids lose everything unless somebody looks out for them” (381). The fathering role includes that of teacher who knows about life, because Chris encourages Gordon to develop his skills as a writer and to go to university, where others will appreciate his gift better than Teddy, Vern and himself, those friends that “drag you down” (384). Finally Chris, in his Shane role, encourages and sees amused how Gordon is “shooting up Castle Rock” (330) with the gun Chris' father possesses; the pistol is the fundamental cowboy tool but, as in the *Shane* film, it will be the last resource they turn to at the crucial final duel in the Royal.

Rather than a story of brave, empowered men we are dealing here with less than stereotypically masculine kids. Everything in the story revolves around their fear, a fear epitomized in Gordon's rejection of becoming a writer, something he perceives as queer.

One of his responses is to write a story, *Stud City*, about a hyper-masculine alter ego named Chico. Chico also has a dead brother and lacks a meaningful relationship with his father, but he is successful with women and emotionally self-contained. Mature Gordon, however, acknowledges that his actual personality has nothing to do with his alter ego. Chris stands as the only meaningful masculine alternative to all the masculine roles in Stephen King story and to Ronald Reagan in real life. Ronald Reagan, the cowboy deregulator turns into Chris Chambers, father and mother, Shane-like altruistic cowboy who, for the good of the community and his friends, is about to save the day.

Saving the Day, but not Life: The Archetype that Never Transcended the Myth

After a long series of events, the four boys are about to find Ray Brower's corpse. Chris, Vern, Teddy and Gordon leave the trestle road and penetrate into the Royal river road in apparently full communion. Both Chris and Gordon have been greatly changed by the experience, Chris the Shane-like cowboy and war chief of the tribe accepting his role, and Gordon the yeoman farmer being fully reconciled with nature after his epiphany with the deer. Their strong friendship in the story is a sign that American identity is complete and ready to overcome any task. Ray Brower's dead corpse symbolizes their reward, because after a long journey they are about to understand the dark side of the idealistic principles and values that founded the United States.

When Vern spots Ray Brower's pale white hand sticking out of the underbrush, the skies open, dropping a downpour. "It was as if we were being rebuked for our discovery, and it was frightening" (407). They are being rebuked because in discovering Ray Brower's corpse, they have discovered the fallacy of the myth of the West, the founder of American identity: the United States, one of the youngest countries in the world, the melting-pot of several identities, has no real tangible identity. And if it had, it is one built on death and violence, an identity wrecked and smashed by the true train of capitalism. However, the rain ends with the drought of the land and the consequences for the life of the community of Gordon's long journey have already begun.

On a personal level, Gordon finally transmutes death from an abstraction to a concretion; he understands death is a denial of life. On the sight of Ray Brower, what

makes an impression on Gordon is not the ants and beetles that crawl over his body, but the fact that Ray's feet are bare. They find his sneakers several feet away: "The train had knocked him out of his Keds just as it had knocked the life out of his body" (408). He then reflects on what death means for a twelve year old, all the ordinary things he wouldn't get to do.

When Ace Merrill, *Eyeball* Chambers, and their gang arrive to claim the body as their prize, the apparently full communion of the kids is broken. Teddy and Vern reject the opportunity to break from the codes and values of their society when they abandon Chris and Gordie in their confrontation. Gordon senses the unfairness of the situation because, as the supporters of Reagan policies and conformist forces during the Cold War tried to do when America was supposedly threatened, the older boys are taking advantage of the situation "as if their easy way was the right way, the only way. They had come in cars" (410). When Ace orders Gordon to be sensible and relinquish the body to his gang, the kid's response is full of pride and courage: "Suck my fat one, you cheap dime-store hood" (412). Of course, this answer is about to bring some violent and unpleasant consequences for everybody involved in the story.

Enraged, Ace starts toward him intending to break both his arms, and the figure of Chris *Shane* Chambers appears, the soul of the American myth as D. H. Lawrence saw it: "hard, stoic and a killer" (Lawrence, 68). Firing the gun first into the air and then at Ace's feet, Chris drives off the usurpers. However, Ace's final statement is kind of prophetic: "We'll get you [...] We're not going to *forget* it, if that's what you are thinking. This is big time, baby" (416). In Westerns, violence has always been a part of the American character, a way to express masculinity. Slotkin argues that a historical culture of violence has shaped the American character. By building on the theoretical constructs of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, he concludes that the frontier was not so much a "regeneration" of democratic principles as it was one of violence. If in a relative rather than linear 1960, Portland and the journey the kids start would be one of pioneers and cowboys through an expanding frontier looking for regeneration through violence, the final duel at the Royal means "condemnation through violence" for poor Chris. In the confrontation, Ace leaves because he is disarmed, not defenseless; he allows the younger kids "receive" their individualism, the younger kids do not achieve it. Chris has saved the day, just as altruistic heroic *Shane* does in the film and Kennedy was apparently about to do if he would have not been assassinated. But Ace, as a representation of all the conformist and conservative forces that proclaimed Reagan

and supported Eisenhower many years before, plays the part of Jimmy Ringo in *The Gunfighter* (1950) to teach Chris a lesson.

In the film, the notorious gunfighter is trying to avoid the trouble that goes with his reputation as the fastest draw in the West. However, when young cocky guy Eddie provokes an argument and draws on him, Ringo has no choice but to kill him. The brothers of the deceased want revenge, and Ringo leaves the area disarming them. Later, he stops at the town of Cayenne in order to see his wife, who lives at the town with other name to avoid the reputation of his long not-seen husband. While waiting, he has to deal with wannabe gunfighter Bromley, who is trying to make a name. Sheriff Strett, an old friend of Ringo, alerts Ringo's wife, Peggy. However, the woman does not believe that Ringo has changed, and the gunfighter keeps on waiting. He waits too much, and the brothers of the deceased arrive in town. Although Sheriff Strett and his deputies prevent the brothers' revenge, Bromley takes his chance and shoots Ringo on the back. Word spreads that Bromley had shot Ringo, but before dying, the gunfighter tells the sheriff to change the story saying that he, rather than Bromley, drew first. Ringo also informs his killer that he will soon know how it feels to have every hotshot two-bit gunfighter out to get *him* in turn.

Chris needs desperately to leave Castle Rock and his “bad” reputation to make a name in other place. But just as Ringo does with Bromley, Ace is just perpetuating that reputation. Chambers, as Bromley, will become a magnet for trouble: he will soon discover that notoriety, especially as a gunfighter, is more a curse than a privilege which will follow him wherever he goes. However, both Gordon and Chris have declared their independence from the adult world's tyrannical premise that the weak must always remain subordinate to the strong. Although they are severely beaten for their rebellion, this act inspires the development of their bond of friendship until it becomes an alternative to their corrupted community,

We both dated through high school, but no girl ever came between us. Does that sound like we went faggot? It would have to most of our old friends, Vern and Teddy included. But it was only survival. We were clinging to each other in deep water. I've explained about Chris, I think; my reasons for clinging to him were less definable. His desire to get away from Castle Rock and out of the mill's shadow seemed to me to be my best part, and I could not just leave him to sink or swim on his own. If he had drowned, that part of me would have drowned with him, I think. (435)

Ray Brower's corpse parallels Teddy and Vern's own moral deaths, because upon returning from the journey, they proceed to follow the bloody footsteps of the older boys entering the eternal cycle of violence the American Myth of the West has provoked.

When the casts came off, and the bruises healed, Vern and Teddy just drifted away. They had discovered a whole new group of contemporaries that they could lord it over. Most of them were real wets – scabby, scrubby little fifth-grade assholes – but Vern and Teddy kept bringing them to the treehouse, ordering them around, strutting like Nazi generals. (432)

In contrast, Gordon's successful job of tutoring Chris so that both could attend college is an unselfish act that momentarily breaks that same restrictive cycle of violence,

Chris enrolled in the college courses in his second year of junior high – he and I both knew that if he waited any longer it would be too late; he would never catch up. Everyone jawed at him about it; his parents, who thought he was putting on airs, his friends, most of whom dismissed him as a pussy, the guidance counsellor, who didn't believe he could do the work, and most of all the teachers, who didn't approve of this duck-tailed, leather-jacketed, engineer-booted apparition who had materialized without warning in their classrooms. (433)

But, as Ace has taught Chris, the American character that the myth of the West created is nothing but a curse. The gunfighter, the boy that makes the best peace, turns into a lawyer, but his true hard and stoic nature remains. In fact, just as Kennedy, the incarnation of archetypal cowboy hero Shane, did not survive, Chris dies a violent, senseless death:

Near the end of 1971, Chris went into a Chicken Delight in Portland to get a three-piece Snack Bucket. Just ahead of him, two men started arguing about which one had been first in line. One of them pulled a knife. Chris, who had always been the best of us at making peace, stepped between them and was stabbed in the throat. [...] Chris died almost instantly. (435).

Vern and Teddy also die, and their deaths are meaningless but also the product of their own recklessness and apathy. Vern is killed in a house fire provoked by a cigarette after a long drunken party. It is hinted that he could have been responsible (432) just as Teddy dies in a car crash taking with him the lives of others. Chris' death is more painful because he dies trying to save the day again. However, as Gordon finally

understands, death is a part of life and archetypes, even those of foundational myths, cannot transcend their myths. Deaths can be heroic, meaningless or sudden, but life goes on. It only matters what you do with your lifetime.

Chris' death has a meaning in an allegorical level, though. His decease represents the failure of the traditional myth of white America, oblique and biased, in providing solutions to a shifting, changing world:

The failure of writers and critics to recognize and deal with the real mythological heritage of their time and people has consequences that go beyond the success or failure of their literary works. A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics and their institutions. (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 5)

Those who do not know their history, those who do not learn from their mistakes, are condemned to repeat them. That is the case of the United States as nation and world superpower symbolized in the character of the cowboy. It is not a coincidence, then, that the only survivor at the end of the whole story, apart from Gordon himself, is Ace Merrill:

The '52 Ford had become a '77 Ford station wagon. A faded bumper-sticker said REAGAN/BUSH 1980. His hair was mowed into a crewcut and he'd gotten fat. The sharp, handsome features I remembered were buried in an avalanche of flesh. ... I was standing on the corner of Main and Carbine and he glanced at me as I waited to cross. There was no sign of recognition on the face of this thirty – two – year old man who had broken my nose in another dimension of time. (436).

He represents the American white regular citizen, to whom the story is addressed. The regular American citizen who does not achieve his individualism, but receives it. The American citizen that does try to make a name, but survives undetected and suffers the decisions of others who play with the myth of an agrarian American identity to propel a policy that increases the differences between classes and races and is not able to provide a job nor a meaning to the lives of these individuals. A capitalist country that has destroyed, abused, neglected or forgotten the majority of its citizens to support an idea of the West that symbolizes the policies and character of a country increasingly hated in the larger world, cutting fences and forcing its cows through (Jones and Wills 114). Ace is the regular American citizen unaware of his myths, the man who continues living by them though the world around him changes and demands changes. In short, Ace is the

regular American citizen who bullies and is bullied by his country, an individual who longs for a nostalgic America where life was simple and pure. In one last word, Ace is a conformist:

I watched him wheel the Ford wagon into the dirt parking lot beside the Mellow Tiger, get out, hitch at his pants, and walk inside. I could imagine the brief wedge of country-western as he opened the door, the brief sour whiff of Knick and Gansett on draft, the welcoming shouts of the other regulars as he closed the door and placed his large ass on the same stool which had probably held him up for at least three hours every day of his life – except Sundays – since he was twenty one ... *So that's what Ace is now.* (436).

Let's Go Back to Childhood!: Assimilating Death and (Lack of) Legacy

There is a question that has not been answered yet: what's up with Ray Brower? After the confrontation Gordon and friend(s) versus Ace and his gang, everybody comes back home without claiming the reward. An anonymous call to tell where the body is solves the situation. This ending reminds of Cold War Mutual Assured Destruction Policy, the doctrine of military strategy in which a full-scale use of weapons of mass destruction by two opposing sides would cause the complete annihilation of both the attacker and the defender. It is based on the theory of deterrence, where the threat of using strong weapons against the enemy prevents the enemy's use of those same weapons. In this strategy, once armed, none of the sides involved has any incentive to begin a conflict or disarm. Ace and his gang, and Gordon and his friends coexist in the same habitat without initiating a conflict again; Ace and his gang beat the brains off of Gordon and his friends until exhaustion, and Gordon and his friends survive the beatings to go on living. It is a false, tense peace, as was that which the United States and the Soviet Union shared.

Nobody claims Ray Brower's corpse at the end because America has not a real identity. In fact, Paredes considers that this lack of identity is what characterizes “the current American way of thinking and living” (144). The myth of the West provided young America with a made up identity based on the optimistic idea of the West as a land of freedom, economic success and opportunity, but as Patricia Nelson Limerick points out, Turner's frontier thesis forgets that the cowboy never lived alone: Native Americans, Women, Hispanics and African Americans are an important part of the

story. On the other hand, the shining myth hides a dark side of broken dreams, victimized people and a spoiled environment:

This tale has unquestionable power and influence but bears little resemblance to the events of the Western past. The myth has the undeniable charm of simplicity. Simplicity, alas, is the only quality that can be found in the actual story of the American West. (Nelson Limerick 323)

Gordon, the mature writer, has a chance to assimilate death and legacy in a country where people behave as if they would not have any identity. But he owns this assimilation in part to his profession. As the embodiment of Stephen King, Gordon rewrites history/his life to give social justice and a meaning to his life-span and to the personal development of those surrounding him. Because Gordon, the writer, parallels Gordon the kid and the rest of Americans in that he lives as if he would not have an identity. As Gordie the kid tells his story, Gordon the mature narrator indicates his dissatisfaction with both his vocation as a writer (he wonders “if there is really a point” to what he is doing) and with life in general (436). He announces his loneliness by plaintively stating “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, did you? (341). His three friends are now dead, and although he is married and financially successful as a writer, he is lonely and alienated, longing for connection with other males.

Gordon is quite explicit of what he misses in his life. The novella begins with this paragraph:

The most important things are the hardest to say ... [they] lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried when you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear. (293)

What is lost for Gordon is intimacy with other males, male friendship as an adult. Cultural prohibitions on explicit expressions of male affection eschew his expression of male love, and he writes about his childhood to recover that meaningful period of his life where homophobia was latent, but it was still possible to connect with other males in an intimate way.

However, Gordon is unable to transcend a fear we have previously analyzed in *Christine*, the fear that male emotion and intimacy be perceived as homosexuality. Gordon and Chris' friendship cannot last because cultural homophobia poses a tangible threat to that male subject's need. Their friendship is characterized by mutual telepathic understanding. It is Chris who better understands Gordon, that the fact of sharing the "gift" his brother gave him, a secret method of shuffling cards, would be like "giving away a piece of Dennis" (305). And it is Chris who knows how things are with Gordie's family, a situation that Gordon finds both exhilarating and "scary" (381). It is his identification with Chris which explains Gordon's relationship with him when both attend high school. But, at the end, Gordon and Chris drift apart because if the relationship would be verbalized, it would lose its strength and it would become a taboo. After the adventure of looking for Ray Brower finishes, and Chris disappears alone along the street like the cowboy that has saved the day, Gordon reflects this thought saying:

I wanted to say something more to Chris and didn't know how to... Even if I'd known the right thing to say, I probably couldn't have said it. Speech destroys the function of love, I think – that's a hell of a thing for a writer to say, I guess, but I believe it to be true ... Love has teeth; they bite; the wounds never close. No word, no combination of words, can close those love bites. It's the other way around, that's the joke. If those wounds dry up, the words die with them. (426).

Words do harm, but for Gordon they mean healing. Gordon is the shaman healing his community *malaisies* expressing them. And coming back to the summer where he was twelve is a way of assimilating the fact that his friends are dead remembering the time when he understood what death is, and to explain how and why he came to differentiate of his friends through writing. He offers an optimistic alternative story to remind people that, in order to survive a world where motion has replaced direction and cannibalism has replaced love (the adult world), everyone should return to a period of time simpler and purer, that of childhood, to remember what was that moved us. A time where prejudices were there, but everything had a meaning. An age when, as Ray Brower's dead corpse symbolizes in the story, male bonding was sincere, special and pure. Because when Gordon, Vern, Teddy and Chris look for the remains of Ray Brower, the kid represents their innocence, their true friendship that is about to lose. Gordon, as a writer, has the power to recover the innocence of childhood and of a barren legacy

everybody should assimilate. According to Magistrale, the writer's job in Stephen King's fiction is "to reassert selfhood and independence in the midst of conforming behavior and self-destruction" (*America's Storyteller*, 71). Gordon offers himself as a cemetery of male bonds in the story, a role he accepts when he tells the story of Lard Ass Hogan, the outcast, to the *communitas* of his friends, who are also catalogued as that, outcasts. And in offering this story of maturation, Stephen King, impersonated in Gordon Lachance, gives the *communitas* of readers a chance to assimilate death and legacy through an exercise of criticism of that same legacy.

In "The Body" the author draws a story where the nihilistic rejection of the afterlife in the finality of a dead child and the sobering acceptance that neither God nor fate governs the course of human existence become a reflection of mental sanity in an indifferent, ill world. Gordon Lachance turns into a healthy alternative to the hegemonic model of masculinity that American society prioritized at the time the story was written and keeps on relying upon: the tough frontiersman. Forced to confront life without any support or understanding, the kid is able to exorcise the demons of a society that is unable to come to terms with its mythical fantastical origins; a traumatized society that, after the Vietnam War, seemed to fall resoundingly from innocence but did not learn from the experience. The answer of American politicians to a crisis seems to repeat once and again: be tough, be stoic, be a killer, because chance is what rules the world. The problem with that position is that it generates more problems than it seems to resolve. The American hegemonic discourse replicates violence once and again, and it only works temporarily, as the eventual victory of Gordon and his friends in the story shows. Stephen King places subordinated masculinities in the center of his stories as healthy alternatives to a hegemonic discourse that originates the societal malaises of American society, a patriarchal system whose individuals seem to live without any sense of community and ignoring the consequences of their actions. Gordon the writer takes the initiative to construct a mature identity healing and awakening American consciences: death is final and what is important is what you are able to do with your life in response to others. Individuals alone are powerless, but the writer in Stephen King's stories has a power: the power to heal personal and collective wounds hoping to learn from experience and not repeating the same mistakes. The writer reveals the bitter-sweet experience of growing up, asserting selfhood and independence in the midst of conforming behavior and self-destruction, discovering a world that can be both horrendous and wondrous. The first step into maturity is to find your own voice, and

Gordon finally realizes that understanding the self requires understanding the past. His journey is personal, and retrieving the past he comes to terms with his feelings of guilt for being alive: Gordon digests the experience of death and dying, and the readers with him. In *The Talisman*, Stephen King follows healing the American psyche exploring the cultural origins of American society to offer an explanation to the characteristics of the American self. The main character, Jack Sawyer, embodies the American hegemonic discourse of masculinity in order to fall from innocence into experience, but at the same time, the boy can be seen as an idealized alternative to the tough American character.

Chapter Four: *The Talisman*

FACING REALITY AS IT IS

In the novella “The Body” (1982), Stephen King drew a model of masculinity very akin to teenagers: a sensitive, smart individual facing the problems of assimilating the existence of death as a part of life and the lack of a proper conscience of national identity which blurs with the necessity of constructing one's own identity. The author solved the question by offering us the character of Gordon Lachance, an adult who reaches maturity, assimilates death and the lack of a proper legacy through the cathartic experience of writing – re-writing – his childhood and providing a sense to his life and that of those surrounding him. The story could be considered as the first step in Stephen King's (re)construction of American identity. If *Carrie* (1974) showed a kind of destruction and consumption of feminine identity, *Christine* (1983) seems to do exactly the same for the masculine role. These masculine and feminine roles are normative; they refer to the traditional domestic vision of women as daughters, mothers and girlfriends and to the traditional masculine roles of providers. The main character in *The Body* is a different kind of provider: as a writer, he provides his readers with a proper sense of identity, a character to root for, to identify with in a time and place where popular culture was restricting itself to a concrete and narrow concept of national and individual identity promoted by politics. When Stephen King and Peter Straub co-wrote *The Talisman* (1984), they gave a new step forward in the construction of an alternative American identity. To understand that death is a part of life and that heritage must be assimilated (be it invented or real) is not enough to become a full individual. The following natural stage would be to adapt to reality creating a new different set of moral codes of one's own. The purpose is to face reality as it is and not as others want it to be.

However, when both writers decided to collaborate, everybody expected a masterfully written horror story. Peter Straub (b. 1943) is a renowned horror writer best known for his novel *Ghost Story* (1979) and short stories “Julia” (1975) and “If You Could See me Now” (1977). The reunion of these two personalities was a matter of

time, because both shared similar visions, knowledge and a true friendship.¹⁴ What broke out, though, surprised readers, divided critics and started a long and fruitful relationship that was about to culminate with *The Talisman* as the non – planned first installment of a trilogy, being *Black House* (2001) the middle volume together with a third part not yet sketched.

The novel marks a departure from what Stephen King had previously written but the fact that, by the time it was published Stephen King was already a landmark horror writer who was saturating the literary market, was detrimental to the critical reception of the book.¹⁵ The quasi-cosmic, picaresque journey of twelve-year-old Jack Sawyer – across America on foot, “flipping” (jumping) in and out of a parallel universe called “the Territories” – in quest of a magical talisman that will save his widowed mother (a former B movie star) from dying of cancer is the product of a collaborative experience,¹⁶ and the mythic foundations of the story and the inspirations from other famous authors have been numerous commented on. Particularly, some reviews emphasize the connection of the story to the work of Mark Twain, being *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) the precedents on which the story is dependent.¹⁷ Although most of the story takes place in the America of the 1980s, the inclusion of a magical, medieval world such as that of the Territories with its so-called “twinners” – alter egos of the inhabitants of America – and its multiple Gothic overtones make the novel an interesting amalgamation of literary genres and influences. *Kirkus Reviews* comments that “this grandiose meandering saga – echoing Oz, Alice, and Huck Finn – is sure to reach a massive audience” (kirkusreviews.com). The fact that the book combines the settings of a world of fantasy and of modern day America, as well as openly taking inspiration from literature of the past, is a perfect excuse to look into the literary roots of the novel. *The Talisman* is one

¹⁴ Talking about *Ghost Story*, Crow remarks that Straub “possesses a deep scholarly knowledge of American literature and popular culture” (173), something which is also true for Stephen King. In fact, in an interview for *People* magazine, Stephen King explains why they collaborated in these terms: “I was curious to see the result. Working together was like that ad where one guy says, “You got chocolate on my peanut butter,” and the other guy says, “you got peanut butter on my chocolate,” and they end up saying, “Hey, This tastes pretty good!” (Small) found on the Internet in <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20089786,00.html> May the 3rd, 2014.

¹⁵ On the issue of the critical reception to *The Talisman* see Collings, *Many Facets* 126-130.

¹⁶ As King comments in the same interview for *People* magazine: “we wrote the beginning and the ending together. Peter put on some jazz in his office, and I wrote for a while as he read magazines. When I was done, he'd pick it up where I had left off. For the rest of the book, we divided the work” (Small).

¹⁷ See, for example, Wiater, Golden and Wagner 67; Collings, *Many Facets* 136 or the *People* magazine interview.

of those stories that appeal to young readers, a coming of age, Gothic, fantastic fiction built around the foundations of the Anglo-American tradition of literature for children. There is an implicit message for adults, tough: in the corpus of this thesis, *The Talisman* recreates the American mythical origins of the dominant traditional masculinity, while at the same time stands for the quest of a new alternative masculinity and shows the difficulties to achieve that ideal goal. In summary, Stephen King is showing us reality and dominant traditional masculinity as they are (a rigid, disrupting concept opposing feminism) and how they should be (a conciliatory, flexible concept derivative from feminism). While the roots for the stereotypes of dominant traditional masculinity reach back to the nineteenth century, the origins of the confrontation between both feminism and masculinities are much more recent: the America of Ronald Reagan and its mythical masculine realm.

Fantasy for Dummies: Definition and Rules.

Literary fantasy is a very malleable and difficult to define genre, but critics agree that it is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery or magic – a sense of possibility beyond our ordinary, material and predictable world.¹⁸ Its realm contains a lot of other more concise and less vague genres, such as the Gothic or Science Fiction. As Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James put it, “Fantasy is not so much a mansion, as a row of terraced houses... There are shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal *décor* can differ wildly” (“Introduction” 1). However while that internal design may differ wildly, there is a basic brick that supports the whole complex: imagination.

Imagination and fantasy are the tools we use to sort out and recreate a magical universe of fantastic beings, incredible situations and wonderful dreams. All creative masterpieces needed great doses of imagination and fantasy to transcend time, without that necessarily meaning social deformation, scientific mythomania or historical falseness. Our fears and prejudices are the only barriers to this magical world. There is

¹⁸ Manlove (*Modern Fantasy* 1); Irwin 4 and Todorov 25. They agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible, whereas Science Fiction may be about the unlikely, but it is grounded on the scientifically possible

an overspread idea that imagination is a children's thing, but reality itself measures imagination and, totally or partially, reality is reflected in fantasy. Imagination feeds from human experience, from what has been lived and experimented:

The fantastic or mythical is a mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences, but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of "commenting on life," can add to it. (C. S. Lewis, 38)

Fantasy unlocks the imagination, and allows children and grown-ups alike to enter wonderful, impossible worlds. In fact, critic Richard Mathews reminds us of the importance of children literature in the development of the genre known as fantasy:

The interface between children's literature and adult fantasy is a fruitful continuum that has led many younger readers into adult fantasy and that has helped preserve childhood's pure delight in imagination well into adulthood for many readers and writers of fantasy. (17-18)

Perhaps more than any other literary genre, fantasy appeals to both adult and child blurring the limits between adult and children literature, and Brian Attebery gives us the reason why:

The best fantasies perform the trick of investing the familiar with enough touches of the unreal – heightened color, heroic action, unexpected transformations, and dislocations in time – to evoke a sense of longing to the reader, a nostalgia for the *never was*." (12).

That "never was" implies that the world(s) fantasy presents us is/are a lost, more meaningful and powerful time(s), in contrast to our ordinary world, which is represented to a lesser or greater degree as a degraded version of the fantasy land. While children evoke the fantasy land as an alternative reality where they can develop their personalities and capabilities, adults find in the magical impossible realms of fantasy a reminder of a more meaningful, powerful and lost time: childhood.

The fantasy literary genre traces its roots to the folktales, legends and myths of other people. However, traditional tales belong to the oral tradition passed from generation to generation by word, whereas modern fantasy stories come from the imagination of known authors transmitted through writing. Both folktales and fantasies contain fantastical elements, but folktales are always set in a familiar world; they have stock characters, conventional plots and traditional motifs, while writers of fantasy create a

new world with something unusual and its own possibilities. Therefore, fantasy's settings, characters and plots are much more complex than those of folktales.

In order to relocate *The Talisman* within the Anglo-American fantastic tradition, there are two key critics who will provide the elements to achieve that goal. David L. Russell offers the characteristics a story must have to be a literary fantasy of quality:

What makes good fantasy?

1. The fantasy element is fresh and original.
2. The characters are engaging and believable; the protagonist possesses a clearly defined (and perhaps complex) personality and exhibits growth during the course of the story
3. The fantasy or secondary world, if there is one, is vividly and convincingly described – regardless of how fantastical it may be.
4. The primary world, if it is included, is true to life.
5. The fantasy rules are clearly drawn and the author does not violate them.
6. The plot makes good use of the fantasy elements – they are not simply decoration.
7. The resolution makes sense within the realm of the fantasy world or the rules of the fantasy.
8. The writer makes us want to believe in the fantasy that is created.
9. The writer's theme grows naturally out of the action and characters – the writer does not preach at us. (214)

Additionally, Russell (217-225) classifies fantasy according to several elements that often appear in these stories, and while all categories will be commented, those who are relevant to classify *The Talisman* will be analyzed in greater depth.

In *animal fantasy*, animals can talk. They possess human characteristics and similar experiences and feelings. As a symbolic literature it is, animal fantasy allows human values, emotions and relationships to be explored. In the *toy fantasy*, toys, teddy bears or dolls can talk. The difference with the animal fantasy is that most toys want to become humans, and even when they do not achieve it, they show human traits. In *magical fantasy*, magic itself – whether a magical object or a character with magical powers – becomes the very subject of the story, rather than a means to an end. *Supernatural and Time-Shift fantasy* depict a fantastic element which is usually perceived as an aberration that must be eliminated from our primary real world, or at least must be corrected, before the story ends. In this terraced house – using Mendlesohn and James' analogy – lives the Gothic genre. *Science fiction* or *Speculative fiction* provides a picture of something that could happen based on real scientific facts and principles, while it is devoted to dramatizing the wonders of technology. The science fiction writer usually wants to create the illusion of reality.

The Talisman, as the Gothic fantasy it is, fits perfectly with the next two subcategories of the genre which, by the way, remain the most successful and important. On the one hand, the journey motif, which is one of the oldest in literature, as it appears in the *enchanted journey*. In fact, realistic stories also use the journey motif, but only in fantastic journeys do magical things occur. The possibilities for plot variations are virtually endless because of the journey motif. There is a journey, displacement from the primary real world to another fantastic secondary world where surprising, marvelous events occur. Adventures start in the real world, where the main character achieves access to the secondary world for whatever reason, and the action takes place in that world. While there may be a purpose for the journey, it is overshadowed by the thrill and delight of the events happening in the fantasy world, whereas we rely on the central character to be our touchstone with reality, to remain linked to the real world.

On the other hand, the *heroic* or *epic fantasy* is built around a quest, search motif.¹⁹ The quest may be pursuit for a lofty reward, such as justice or love, or for a rich reward, such as a magical power or a hidden treasure. The conflict usually centers on the struggle between good and evil, and the main character is engaged in a fight against external forces of evil and internal temptations of weakness. Heroic fantasies owe a great deal to the ancient myths, legends and folktales; at the same time, they remotely recall science fiction replacing technology with magic, and focusing the plots on the struggle between good and evil.

Farah Mendlesohn, for her part, offers us a fantasy category that fits well with *The Talisman*, and convolutes the two most important subcategories in Russell's classification which are relevant to the structure of the novel, the enchanted journey and the heroic or epic fantasy: King and Straub's story, in Mendlesohn's words (*Rethorics* xx), is a *Portal Quest fantasy*, because a point of entry is needed (although in the story, the portal is a symbolic one), magic does not cross from one world to the other and the protagonist goes from a mundane life into direct contact with the fantastic, through which (s)he transitions, to the point of negotiation with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm.

¹⁹ *Manlove*, "Elusiveness of Fantasy" 60-61. Northrop Frye's definition should be taken into account as well. He identifies the "quest-myth" in its various forms as the central myth of literature and the source of literary genres. For him, the hero is conceptually linked to the season of spring, which represents fertility, order, and youth. After a dangerous journey across strange lands, he fights a key combat against evil forces linked to sterility, winter, chaos and old age. The hero wins the battle and revitalizes his community through a feat (187-89).

In order to understand all the literary references and sources reviewers have found in Jack Sawyer's story, and why the novel can be labelled as a Gothic fantasy, it is necessary to take a look at the Anglo-American fantasy tradition, a literary trend with the same remote origins, but that differ and converge equally in its relationship with processes of coming of age.

The English Fantasy Tradition: a Brief History of the Mode.

The English fantasy genre traces its origins to the myths, legends, folktales and fairy tales of the British islands. However, it is not free from other influences from Southern Europe. The fact is that fantasy has the longest and richest heritage of all the forms of literary genres, and it could be said to be the progenitor from which the other forms of literature came from. Fantasy's habit of taking real-life situations and characters and introducing them into a world where unexpected and unexplainable things can happen has resonated with readers since the earliest days. In fact, the very first literary works recorded in history were fantasy: the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Odyssey*, *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*, or Virgil's *Aeneid*. These narratives are concerned with the creation of ancient civilizations and contain exotic adventures, wondrous creatures with magical powers and some of the world's first heroes. The influence of the ancient Greek and Roman mythology in the development of English and American fantasy is undeniable, and *The Talisman* is not free from it. Like in many of these epic tales, and as it happens almost in any coming of age narrative, the hero in King's and Straub's novel must pass through hell on his journey through selfhood and the salvation of the two worlds he knows. The Anglo-American fantasy tradition, however, has its roots in the Nordic mythology, and the epic poem *Beowulf* is the oldest piece of English literature. Both the anonymous composition and Stephen King and Peter Straub's story track the exploits of a larger than life hero who embodies national ideas.

While myths are concerned with creation and the ways in which cultures have understood the world in terms of gods and cosmic creatures, legends concern heroes who are recognizably human telling stories from the past that contain a core of historical truth under fictional embellishments; stories that ultimately form an important part of

the cultural history of a nation or people. One of the most influential legends in Anglo American tradition is that of King Arthur. A leader of warriors that fought and won many battles against the Saxons who began to occupy Britain after the Romans withdrew in the fifth century according to Welsh legend, Arthur's story was spread in Medieval Europe through French romances,²⁰ particularly those written by Chrétien de Troyes: *Erec and Enide* (ca. 1170), *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* (ca. 1177-1181) and *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* (ca. 1181-1190). These stories, together with the anonymous English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, occur in a remote past with fantastic traits, and the hero is tormented by existential doubts, a quest and a feeling for adventure. Troyes's poems and oral tradition shaped Sir Thomas Malory *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which greatly influenced all subsequent treatments of Arthur's legend. An English model of the ideal knight – brave, loyal, honorable, skilled in combat and protector of the weak – Arthur and its legend lie behind the roots of the epic hero the main character in *The Talisman* comes to embody in some parts of the novel. Jack Sawyer is the American cowboy²¹ tormented by existential doubts, a quest and an urgent feeling for adventure in a remote past with fantastic traits that recalls nineteenth century America.

The fairy tale is only one type of appropriation of a particular oral storytelling tradition – the wonder folktale, often called the *magic tale*, which generally focuses on miraculous transformations that overcome the disadvantages of the protagonists and enable them to succeed in life. Usually considered as literature for children, the traditional fairy tales we usually read can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when a small group of authors – including the Brothers Grimm in Germany, Charles Perrault in France and Joseph Jacobs in England – accumulated and published under their own names well known stories rooted in oral tradition originally meant for a much broader audience. The major function of stories like *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Beauty and the Beast* is the socialization of the individual into a culture; that is, transmitting the culture of the society in which the story is told. Tales where the main characters overcome their disadvantages through miraculous transformations fostered by magical outsiders or events answer questions such as which are the proper values,

²⁰ In the Oxford Dictionary of English, a romance is a medieval tale dealing with a hero of chivalry, of the kind common in the Romance languages.

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/romance#romance> on May, 18th 2014

²¹ On the development of the quintessential American hero and its medieval mythical roots, see “The Cultural Myth of the Cowboy or How the West was Won” by Jennifer Moskowitz.

behaviors or roles in a society, as well as defining its outsiders and what happens to them. Although Stephen King does not write for children, the writer sees his stories as nothing more than fairy tales for grown-ups. In fact, fairy tales and King's novels share common characteristics such as that both use children as the focus in a story; both socialize readers into the dominant culture's societal norms, values and belief system, including ideas and practices on family, death, isolation, sex, violence, friendship and love; and finally, both exhibit elements of what we have come to call the horror genre. *The Talisman* is a modern fairy tale that tells the miraculous transformation of thirteen-year-old Jack Sawyer into a hero overcoming obstacles and disadvantages to save his mother with the help of magical tokens and a magical outsider, Speedy Parker.

Childhood as a distinct stage in the human life span is less than two hundred years old. By the nineteenth century, it had become fully identified as a unique stage in the life span requiring a different treatment from adults, including the need for a literature of its own. This shift in mentality stems from French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who a century earlier was already defining children as spontaneous individuals who should learn by active involvement in a topic of their own interest. This newly found attraction to children issues culminated in the development of an imaginative literature where original and fresh works flowered in Great Britain. The masterpiece fantasies of the Victorian era are *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) Such novels inaugurated a new era in children's literature in English: they were books that didn't teach children lessons or rules for a living, but only provided them a space in which to live. Just as Alice enters Wonderland – a dreamscape down the rabbit hole – and finds a world of contradiction, competition and chaos, so Jack Sawyer in *The Talisman* discovers the dreamlike Territories and enters a similar world, where the boy feels sometimes as if he were in the wrong place at the wrong time; as if life was a complicated game being played around him, but not everybody was following the rules. The 1870s brought the figure of George McDonald, whom created worlds in works such as *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) mirror spiritual quests in the real world. McDonald became the source of inspiration and praise for the practitioners of epic fantasy in the twentieth century, turning most of these epics in Christian allegories where the Christ like figure sacrifices himself and fights for the greater good, a trend that *The Talisman* clearly follows.

The wonderful and exotic worlds of Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling and Henry Ridder Haggard in adventures such as *Treasure Island* (1883), *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *The Jungle Book* (1894) influenced the imagination of British Victorian children and modeled their growth. Behind this trail, J. M. Barrie offered the world the play of *Peter Pan* or *The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* (1904), a longing for a lost childhood or state of innocence that cannot be recaptured by adults. While Alice in the Carroll's novels refuses fantasy in returning home because she misunderstands its sentimentalism and she ignores its subversive force, in the Barrie's play Peter Pan refuses to return to reality, because fantasy and reality for him merge into one, and that alternative reality becomes a psychologically damaging realm that puts in danger the main character's socialization. The play turns out to offer inner insights in the inevitability and necessity of growing up. In a similar manner, Jack Sawyer's process of socialization is presented to the reader as something forced but inevitable, the boy wandering through a dangerous and violent realm which necessarily compels him to grow up and leaves him physical and psychological scars. However, the novel also evokes that longing for a state of innocence that cannot be recaptured by adults.

The twentieth century in England brought back the tradition of moral talking animal stories that the Greeks had inaugurated with *Aesop's Fables* in stories such as *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) by A.A. Milne, the Dr. Dolittle series by Hugh Lofting, inspired on the horses' suffering during the First World War, and the fable turned novel *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) by Kenneth Grahame, now a classic of children literature. Apart from the explicitly gore reference to Grahame's novel in King and Straub's collaboration (306), both writers offer us the character of Wolf, a teenager werewolf who symbolically becomes one of the moral centers of the story.

The subsequent decades saw the rise of what is known as high or epic fantasy, beginning in 1937 with the publication of *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien. In the lengthy prose of the epic fantasy, within an expansive setting, a hero, often with supernatural or magical assistance, struggles and saves a people and a way of life. J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) and C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) remain the two most important and influential works of epic fantasy in the twentieth and twentieth first centuries. The complex worlds of epic fantasy are often indebted to Arthurian legend or European mythology for their scope and serious tone, and they tend towards stories of masculine sacrifice, battle and derring-do in which the mettle of a seemingly insignificant young man is tested. While the contemporary British exponents

of this trend are the saga of Harry Potter (1997-2007) by J. K. Rowling or *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000) by Phillip Pullman, *The Talisman* is not free from the large shadow both Tolkien and Lewis cast upon fantasy literature; Jack Sawyer struggles and saves a people and a way of life, and some aspects of Tolkien's and Lewis' contributions to fantasy are present in the novel as well.

The American Fantasy Tradition: an Overview

The fantasy literature emerging from young America was linked to the didactic strains of fanciful works for children. The Puritan inheritance, the lack of an ancient folk tradition, and the focus on the needs of the here and now helped to sustain the preference for realism. The United States has taken its “New World” label to the literal extreme, building a literature and a proper sense of exceptional identity little by little, and trying to escape Europe without achieving it totally.

Americans do not have an Odysseus or Aeneas to complete the American myth. American tradition sees life and history as just beginning. America was originally perceived not as a paradise regained, but as the original paradise, a world starting up again, a second chance for the human race. Americans were the truly chosen people to fulfill the promise of Eden so clumsily fumbled in the Old World of Europe.

This sense of beginning anew saw the rise of a new kind of epic hero free from the baggage of the past, standing at the threshold of experience, looking hopefully out at the Westward future that lay before him. Adam before the fall, he is innocent, self-reliant and self-motivated; the simple genuine self against the whole world. Ralph Waldo Emerson shaped him in his essays *Nature* (1836) or *Self Reliance* (1841), while Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* (1854) or Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) took him into garden-like places where he sought to preserve the vision of America's destiny.

Soon, however, time and space brought an end to that vision of newness and innocence. America was moving west, and conflict inevitably arose at the point where the frontier and wilderness collided. It is from that opposition of civilization and wilderness that the American epic hero emerges.

The American wilderness, though, is Gothic. To understand American literature, and indeed America, one must understand the Gothic, which is, simply, the imaginative expression of the fears and forbidden desires of Americans. This genre expresses the repressed; what is hidden, outspoken and deliberately forgotten in the lives of individuals and of cultures. Influenced by Puritan mentality and the didactic allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, American society has always outspoken and repressed minorities. In a coming of age country, American literature is a process of learning to see American history, and the Gothic would play its part in making the invisible visible. *The Talisman* picks this tradition and reworks it for modern audiences.

The prominent forerunners to shape this edgy contrast between American bright innocence and dark wilderness were Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. Importing European legends, culture and history, Washington Irving wrote sentimental and nostalgic short stories that shaped the American imagination and character. "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) present naïve, idealist and careless characters crashing with the reality of the new world. This crash turns out to be an uncanny Gothic experience, forcing the characters to mature and the readers to imagine an alternative and different American character.

Jack Sawyer being forced to leave his mother in order to save her, and Rip Van Winkle carelessly leaving home and his wife to go to the mountains epitomize the American experience. While Rip is able to pass from a prolonged adolescence to a comfortable retirement, having skipped most of the stress and inconvenience of adult life with a convenient slumber, Sawyer's journey becomes a forced experience, something the boy must forget in order to become a healthy individual. Both Irving's story and *The Talisman* recall the traumatic experience of growing up, although Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" is a pleasant and not threatening tale. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" presents us in its margins an African American presence that in *The Talisman* will evoke the Gothic of race in a more explicit way. The focus, however, remains in the clash between naïve and imaginative Ichabod Crane and rude, individualist and rustic frontiersman Brom Van Brunt. This confrontation will be a constant in American literature and imagination until the American hero emerges throughout the nineteenth century, and *The Talisman* recalls this diatribe in a psychological and Gothic way, just as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" does. Van Brunt disguised as a headless horseman throwing a pumpkin /head to a drunken, terrified and over-imaginative Crane has its

reminiscences in *The Talisman's* showdown between childish Sawyer and cowboy monster Elroy.

James Fenimore Cooper, in his Leatherstocking series, provides the country with his prototypical American hero. Natty Bumppo, an intuitive man of action who never agonizes over moral choice, becomes the model from which all subsequent American heroes will be shaped: tough, aloof and violent. *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841) reveal the cultural ambiguity many scholars have located in the Gothic tradition. To the question about if Gothic tales are subversive or do they reinforce the values of the dominant culture, Cooper answers that the collapse of Indian culture is sad but inevitable. By depicting Indians through conventional stereotypes of noble savage (Chingachgook and Uncas) or demonic savage (Magua), or showing the massacres by Indians in graphic detail, while massacres of Indians by British and Americans take place off-stage, Cooper's epic of Western expansion reinforces the dominant national narrative of settlement and progress. And yet, at the core of the story are Natty and Chingachgook, who hate the settlements. Likewise, *The Talisman* will reproduce Cooper's ambivalence towards issues of race and towards the wilderness. In a country where a belief in progress is almost an article of faith, the Gothic is deeply skeptical that either individuals or societies can be perfected.

The point is that whereas Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were convinced that perfection is an inborn quality of mankind, Gothic writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe reminded Americans that human beings were equally capable of good and evil, and that depravity is an active and real force in our life. Puritan imagery, particularly that of hell, and notions of predestination and original sin created a pervasive image in the American collective unconscious of dark and nightmarish visions. In the narrative of these authors, the Puritan culture of condemnation, reinforced by shame and guilt, combined with current fear of ethnicities, has their most representative exponents in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) and Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835).

Poe's novel inaugurates the sea as a frontier for Americans, and thus a zone for encounters with the unknown. Pym is motivated by the Imp of the Perverse, repeatedly going to sea in risky circumstances that defy common sense. Filled with images of slave rebellion, the narrative plays with a fear *The Talisman* also evokes: that of African

Americans as enemies of the *status quo*. Depicting conventional racial stereotypes,²² Poe's symbolism of black and white insinuate meaning without revealing it. Along the journey, Pym discovers that whiteness diametrically opposes blackness, and that both races must fight for either one of them to exist in order to maintain a fantasy of dominance.

Hawthorne's short story serves as a brief counter-vision to Emerson's sunlit certainties. The dark woodland of the story is an arena where the ambiguities of human psychology and those of nature interact. Goodman Brown both finds and loses his Faith in the woods, and his return to the village brings a life of doubt and suspicion. Brown's virtue has failed its first encounter with an ambiguous world outside the refuge of his home and untested beliefs. Hawthorne reflects in the tale a hypocritical society where externally virtuous people secretly practiced vice, but since Brown sees all evil as located in others, he cannot recognize its real source and overcome it, or accept it. While both Goodman Brown and Jack Sawyer are unable to escape the past, only the main character in *The Talisman* finds his strength and faith facing a hypocritical society to finally bring a sense of healing to himself and his community.

What links Cooper, Hawthorne and Poe is a challenge to define the American character as something unique, different from their European British ancestors. This uniqueness is found in the (apparently) fully communion of man and nature represented in the real and imaginary wilderness Americans found when the country was being shaped. What closely relates them is their ambivalent attitude towards the minorities that also helped to construct that identity: Native and African Americans were both feared and worshiped as natural individuals, primitive and pure ancestors of their land. Slavery and Indian slaughters remain a fundamental tool in the construction of white American identity. Either good, loyal and noble companions or feisty savages, minorities are the pillar of American identity, against it was constructed as a fantasy of exceptionalism.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) also contributed to the creation of this fantastic identity in pre-Civil War America turning his white whale hunt in a fantasy quest for American identity. Melville lays out a version of the frontier myth that sees redefinition

²² In his unfinished serial novel *The Journal of Julius Rodman* (1840), Poe recounts fictionally the first expedition to the West wilderness and gives a similar treatment to the Native Americans of the story. Either they are truly monstrous menacing figures, or they are good, peaceful but inferior individuals. For a detailed account of the story and its comparison with Pym's narrative, see "Edgar Allan Poe's Imperial Fantasy and the American Frontier" by John Carlos Rowe.

of national identity in terms of man confronting his other, reaffirming the self, and – through Ishmael's survival and narration – returning to civilization having defined what he is *not*. Captain Ahab and his obsessive quest for the white whale symbolize in its most extreme form an American desire to face the wild unknown and to promote national ascendancy through the confrontation. In his characterization of the “mad” captain, Melville questions the goals of a politically willful nation, and alludes to the danger inherent in America's expansionist drive. The ill-fated end of the Pequod's voyage to the literal and symbolic frontier highlights the rigidity of the terms in which Americanism is couched – forever in opposition to a mysterious, malevolent, inferior other. *Moby Dick* points to the creation of a dichotomy that leaves little opportunity to relax the definition of “American.” This rigid definition of “American” becomes the central point of *The Talisman*, which evokes the same questions that pervaded in American minds during the nineteenth century. Captain Ahab's obsessive quest for the white whale mirrors in King and Straub's novel Morgan Sloat's hungry quest for power and America's expansionist drive. Maybe, Jack Sawyer in *The Talisman* mirrors Ishmael: he returns home defining what he is *not*.

The American Civil War (1861-1865) became a disrupting event in American history. All the political, social and racial fears, insecurities and boundaries that tried to define American identity imploded, and Emerson's idealism yielded to a practical rationalist school of thought far better suited to the spread of industrialization, the rapid growth of capitalism and the so called “taming” of the West. As Pragmatism views most philosophical topics in terms of their practical use and success, it was not a school of thought well suited for the fantastic.

In fact, fantasy only played a part in the burgeoning literature of the West. The myth of the frontier first made popular by James Fenimore Cooper turned into the most abiding myth in American literature, the Wild West. The dime novels of the late 1800s portrayed life in the frontier as an idealized clash pitting virtuous cowboys and lawmen against savage Indians or outlaw gunfighters. Usually highly colored, if not outright fantastic adventures of genuine characters like Jesse James or Wild Bill Hickok, populated the genre that entered the overtly fantastic with the publication in 1868 of *The Steam Man of the Prairies* by Edward S. Ellis. That year, Zadock Deddrick of Newark had patented a prototype robot that fed into Ellis' novel, which in turn inspired *Frank Reade and His Steam Man of the Plains* (1876) by Harry Enton, the first of a series of dime novels featuring Frank Reade. Combining the adventure of the frontier and a

pragmatic, inventive hero, these stories tended to follow a pattern in which the ingenuity of the young hero creates a mechanical device that saves the day. Coined *Edisonades* by John Clute, these stories became Hugo Gernsback's "scientifiction" at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the idealized dime novels of the West continued that path in the works of Zane Grey or Owen Wister into the twentieth century.

Although American fantasy in the second half of the nineteenth century seemed to be an arid desert more proper of a Western novel, the dominant form that shaped American literature in that period, Realism, contributed greatly to the development of American fantasy. Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), the character that has become an American cultural icon. Apparently a harsh critic of James Fenimore Cooper,²³ he wrote several fantasy novels, but it was his realistic approach the one which helped to shape American fantasy. This influence is two-fold: Huckleberry Finn turns out to be the Emersonian democratic hero Cooper sorted out, but with a realist portrayal of a thirteen year-old uneducated teenager. On the one hand, Twain uses the American Vernacular to offer a compelling character that will shape American fantasy from that moment onwards: every major American fantasy will be populated by a real, credible character, no matter how fantastic the secondary world can be. On the other hand, he helped to define the impact and role of African American culture in American society. The friendship between Huckleberry Finn and Jim in Twain's novel mirrors Speedy Parker's mentorship over Jack Sawyer in *The Talisman*, but both stand for America's continuing drama of race, the fantasy of a desirable multicultural crossover that, in practice, remains missing.

The challenges of building a truly American fantasy were high in a country still forging an identity. The nineteenth century did not see a truly American fantasy land, as the United States tried to forge its own identity through a quite real, wild landscape. American fantasists in pre-Civil War US raised a pervasive American myth, but they did not need to recur to alternative, parallel worlds where monsters or mythical beings lived. The inscrutability and wilderness of the, at the moment, undiscovered country served the purpose. The psychological, philosophical and multiple changes the

²³ Mark Twain wrote in 1895 the essay "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," a satire and criticism of the writings of James Fenimore Cooper. Drawing on examples of the Leatherstocking novels, the essay pleads Cooper guilty of verbose writing, poor plotting, glaring inconsistencies, overused clichés or cardboard characterizations. Sydney Krause sees Twain's satire as an attack on Romanticism in general and a formal announcement that Romantic literature was a "literary dead letter in post-Civil War America" (Railton, "Twain's Indians") Retrieved on December 31st 2012 in <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/HNS/Indians/critic.html>

American Civil War brought did not support a fantasy development either, but it provided the American character with the other side of American rugged individualism, its characteristic pragmatism.

It was not until Frank L. Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) that a truly American fantasy land appeared. This land, however, had nothing to do with the idealized landscapes of the literature of the West. If the West was a land of opportunity and excitement, Kansas in Baum's novel is an unwelcoming place of drought and hard toil. When a hurricane transports determined seven years old Dorothy, the main character, to the magical world of Oz, she finds herself in a foreign land full of American elements and characters, but a place beset with problems of its own that Dorothy is able to solve. In the novel, a political allegory apparently supporting the Populist movement so fashionable in the 1890s,²⁴ Dorothy and her three companions, who could be read as psychoanalytical projections of her inner self, seek for the Wizard of Oz, who could help Dorothy back to Kansas. The first truly American fairy tale, the story can be read too as a more suitable message for children: everything you look for (strength, courage or love) is inside you already. You only have to realize it. Dorothy's return to Kansas is only possible when she is told about her silver shoes' power. She could have come back home from the very beginning without recurring to the adults, who at their best are helpful, but mostly they are deceitful and ultimately powerless. *The Talisman* is the masculine version of Baum's novel, a fantasy tale that offers an inner insight to the America of the early 1980s as an unwelcoming place of drought and hard toil.

If Baum's story for children has room enough for political interpretations, the other major American fantasy characters of the early twentieth century have little room for sensibility and politics, and their stories are fantasy quests but much more tingled to primitivism. *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) by Edgar Rice Burroughs gave powerful narrative force to a widespread sense that modern technological civilization created restrictions, frustrations and losses for men. Following the path of Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville or the literature of the West, Burroughs celebrated untamed masculine individualism in the figure of English aristocrat Tarzan, who embodied the enduring impulse to raw nature, with all its primal, anarchic force. The other major American primitive character is more mythical in origin, and it was born from the weird

²⁴ For Oz read as a political allegory and its controversy, see "Money and Politics in the Land of Oz" by Quentin P. Taylor in <http://www.usagold.com/gildedopinion/oz.html> consulted on June 16th 2014.

literature the major American fantasist of the early twentieth century preconized, H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937).

Weird fiction, a term popularized by Lovecraft in his critical study *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), was marked by an emphatic use of the strange and uncanny intruding upon contemporary reality. It is a decidedly American form that owes a debt to Poe, though the ghost and horror stories of British writers such as M. R. James or Arthur Machen were significant influences. There is no unity in the works categorized as Weird fiction, though. They varied from outright horror to science fiction, being Lovecraft just the tip of the iceberg.

Lovecraft's stories suggested that forces incomprehensible to man steered a fundamentally alien universe, and that any contact between man and this cosmic horror could result only in madness. His best stories, the most influential, established a mythos with common features such as the setting of Arkham in New England, a book of ancient and forbidden knowledge known as the *Necronomicon* and ancient Gods indifferent to human suffering such as Yog-Sothoth. His early demise of cancer was not an impediment to become an inspiration for his close friends, who followed his work. Clark Ashton Smith and August Derleth were his most important continuators, with Derleth turning Lovecraft's amoral universe into a Christian one were the forces of good and evil struggled eternally.

As I have said before, the heterogeneous nature of Weird fiction roomed other guests, and from the guest known as Sword and Sorcery (term coined by Fritz Leiber) the other major American fantasy character of the early twentieth century was born. The sense that there was something magical and heroic in the distant past lay behind the stories of Robert E. Howard, father of Conan the Barbarian. Firstly introduced in *The Phoenix on the Sword* (1932), Conan would encounter a thrilling if repetitive cast of outlaws, mercenaries, pirates, wizards and monsters in more than twenty tales set in prehistoric "Hyborian Age," until Howard's suicide.

The pulp adventures of Burroughs, Howard, Lovecraft and their fellows were big, colorful, nonsensical spectacles; the perfect antidote to the stock market crash, the dust bowl and the Depression years. The counterpart to the grotesque horrors and highly colored adventures of these fantasists were the fantastic comedies of Thorne Smith, all of which involved copious consumption of alcohol and generally illicit sex. His biggest success was *Topper: An Improbable Adventure* (1926), the story of a straitlaced banker who finds himself haunted by a husband and wife team of hard-drinking, licentious

ghosts. Smith's other novels, which generally revolved around a hapless man, a sexually predatory woman, lots of drinking and an intrusion of the supernatural, include, among others, a witch condemned in the Salem witch trials brought back to life in the present in *The Passionate Witch* (1941), inspiration for the long-running television comedy *Bewitched*.

In the first half of the twentieth century, American fantasy was restricted to genre writers, and it was not used for serious literary purposes. Any attempt to identify a distinctively American characteristic in the fantasy of this period is doomed to fail. Many used the American landscape; a typical hero would represent the pragmatic, can-do attitude in which the country prided itself, and fantasy would chaff against the puritanical restrictions that are just a part of the American character. But in the last third of the century, the influence of English high fantasy, and Tolkien and Lewis in particular, would bring a new life to American fantasy.

The great success and commercial viability of Lewis's Narnia books, and the high influence of Tolkien, who became a cult classic in the 1960s, produced a proliferation of fantasy trilogies and sequences. The most important American names of the period were a man, Lloyd Alexander, and a woman, Ursula K. Le Guin. Alexander's Prydain Chronicles (1964-68) are based on the medieval Welsh myth collection *The Mabinogion*, and the series feature the archetypal hero of unknown parentage destined to save the world from evil. The ending is similar to Tolkien's epic, as the magic forces abandon the world, leaving it to humans to attend to their matters. Le Guin uses many of the motifs given classic fantasy form by Tolkien in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for her Earthsea series (1968-2002), beginning with *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968). The original trilogy (1968-1972) culminates in a largely conventional form of closure. Ged the Wizard has attained his own spiritual wholeness, restored the broken ring of Erreth-Akbe, and established the young king Lebannen on the throne, bringing peace to Earthsea. These acts embody the achievement of balance between the realms of the spiritual and the political, the personal and the public.

The 1970s followed the same path with the appearance of Terry Brooks' Shannara trilogy (1977-1985) in *The Sword of Shannara* (1977) and Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* (1977- 2013) with *Lord Foul's Bane* (1977). To date, Brooks has completed five trilogies set in the same world, and one tetralogy. While *The Sword of Shannara* was little more than a reworking of *The Lord of the Rings*, subsequent volumes moved away from slavish imitation. Donaldson, for

his part, nowadays seems to have given a closure to the world of Thomas Covenant. Both Brooks and Donaldson's stories became instant hits because people starved new Tolkien. Ironically, *The Silmarillion*, also published in 1977, was put together by Tolkien's son to feed the hungry. Tolkien's stories of Middle-Earth in its early years were the fulfilment of Tolkien's last wish: to complete the whole history of his Middle Earth, though in *The Silmarillion* not all his stories are completed.

1977 was a key year in the history of fantasy, because a cult classic film that occupied a half-way house between science fiction and fantasy was released. *Star Wars* by George Lucas, with its sword-fights, princesses and a sinister emperor was reminiscent of fairy tale, and owes its structure to Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). By the late 1970s and early 1980s, every major science fiction writer was affected by fantasy, and Marion Zimmer Bradley was no exception. She had written a number of novels about the rediscovery of the abandoned colony planet Darkover, and she completed books about the centuries before the rediscovery full of magic and medieval trappings. Feminism and utopian feminist possibilities can be spot through *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), the story of King Arthur viewed from the point of view of Guinevere and the other women in his life. Another example is Ann McCaffrey, whose *Dragonriders of Pern* series blend science fiction and fantasy in the medieval tradition of Tolkien.

The twentieth first century has arrived and Tolkien inspired quests keep on invading the shelves. Even the most influential and celebrity American sagas of the present day take in the large shadow of Tolkien, although Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series (1990-2013) and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga (1996-) are far away from the evocative and idyllic Middle Earth. Stephen King and Peter Straub's collaboration is also inspired tangentially and theoretically by Tolkien and Lewis, but the medieval, fantastic secondary world of the Territories adheres to the original American myth of the original paradise, an edenic garden which Americans have tried to regain since the collision between civilization and wilderness showed the dark realities and squalor that lurk behind the utopian idealism of the United States. *The Talisman* is a Gothic mirror where the nineteenth century American fantasy of exceptionalism returns a distorted reflection of 1980s American conformism.

The Talisman, an Old Modern Myth

Although Stephen King is a landmark writer of horror fiction, the fantastic elements in his work are unavoidable. Both the boom in horror literature and the boom in fantasy fiction of the late 1970s and 1980s collide in the Maine author: *Carrie*, *Christine* and even a realist piece of fiction like “The Body” contain many fantasy elements. As we have seen, *Carrie* is a dark fairy tale; *Christine* works as a techno-fantasy, or, better said, as a techno – nightmare, and “The Body” enters the realms of myth.

Myth seems to be the logical tool for Stephen King to re-construct what he has apparently destroyed, because if we take seriously Leslie Fiedler's words that American literature is a literature of terror, whose plots are motivated by the feelings of guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the paternal past he has been striving to destroy, then Stephen King not only was aware of this statement in his early fiction, but he tried to offer a healing to the irruption of darkness and disintegration of the self this destruction caused.

If myths are concerned with creation and the ways in which cultures have understood the world in terms of gods and cosmic creatures, *The Talisman* is a creation myth, or at least, it is a re-enactment of the creation of American identity. In the novel, we come back to the mythical origins of American culture, a back to basics for a nation that seems to have lost all the references that shaped it, but goes on living haunted by them. Because there is no death without life, and there is not an end without a beginning. In ages of crisis, be it economical and/or of values, the basic freedoms will be the first to be sacrificed. That is America, and by extension, the Western world, for Stephen King. And, as a moral writer he is, King re-enacts the American nightmare, the terror trip experienced by Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym, Herman Melville's Ishmael and other fellow travelers: the search for a utopia of meaning while glancing backward in idyllic reverie to lost innocence (Winter 2).

As a product of the revolutionary 1960s, Stephen King shares the idea of his contemporaries that they have inherited a much better world than the one they are about to leave to their descendants. *The Talisman* tells, on the surface, the epic journey thirteenth year old Jack Sawyer set out on to get a talisman, a pink orb which will allow him to save the life of his mother Lily Cavanaugh, who is dying from cancer, and that of her Twinner, the Queen of the Territories. This magical sphere awaits him in a

Gothic hotel, the Agincourt in California. He travels west shifting through the United States and the parallel world known as The Territories with the hope of getting it, although he is not the only one looking for it. His “uncle” Morgan Sloat looks for the talisman too, a fanatical, Byronic villain trying to get rid of Jack in order to destroy his future in the real primary world, and to usurp Jack's privileged position in the fantastical secondary world. The hotel seems to be a key *locus* that holds the elements of the universe together in a single nexus, a pink sphere containing all the possible universes in one object. In this way, Jack's quest acquires metaphysical dimensions, because the Talisman contains the true meaning of life, a meaning shaped through religion, myths, legends and tradition. In one last word, the pink sphere represents the truly innocence of the American myth locked in the Gothic realm of the Agincourt hotel. That is, if as Fred Botting puts it, “Gothic atmospheres [...] have repeatedly signaled the disturbing return of *past upon presents*” (*Gothic* 7), the talisman stands for a symbol of the ancient, traditional, and stable values of myths in general, and the myth of the American Adam and the West in particular, which nowadays seem to be obsolete and to have lost their sacred meaning.

The Talisman is written as if it were an ancient myth but with an updated prose: it is not realistic, characters are larger than life, the supernatural element is omnipresent and it contains a moral message and structure. In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell provides the following definition of mythology:

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazier); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Muller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's revelation to his children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. (330)

As Frazier's definition and Church doctrine seems not to be appropriate for modern myths, Campbell's description of a pattern present virtually in all myths, which he calls the “monomyth” or the “hero's journey,” is more accurate. The monomyth seems to reside in the collective unconscious of humanity, because most stories follow the pattern rather closely. It can be separated into three main phases: *initiation, separation, and return*. The structure is circular in nature, with the hero being called to adventure (initiation), crossing the threshold to a world very different from his mundane existence

(separation), having an adventure there and finally returning back home (return) greatly changed by the experience, typically having gained knowledge, powers or a boon to bestow on humanity.

In ancient mythology, the cyclic, circular nature of the monomyth offered deep and mystical truths about human life itself as well as its stages and purpose: birth, childhood, passage to maturity, enlightenment, death and, sometimes, rebirth. As such, the hero's journey is perfect for any moral story about the role of individual in society, or of getting knowledge through experience (that is, spiritual maturation). But according to Joseph Campbell, society has changed very much from the past:

Then all meaning was in the group, none in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group – none in the world: all is in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have been all cut, and we have been split into two. The hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo. Where there was darkness, now there is light; but also where light was, there now is darkness. The modern hero-deed must be that of questioning to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul. (334).

Modern myths should try to lead the lost soul of our individualist culture through a new type of spiritual or philosophical heroic journey. *The Talisman* offers precisely that. Although Jack Sawyer wants the talisman merely to heal his mother, his journey towards the Agincourt hotel has many more mythic overtones: Jack is the American Adam looking for the true meaning of its existence, and his quest could save this world and others. What is more, although Jack seems not to be aware of that, he is looking for an explanation to the problem of evil in the world, which is a recurring theme in Stephen King's novels. Jack's fear is that God is dead, or even worse, that He has become malicious, because his mother is dying and his world of normalcy and taken for granted reality are crumbling down. His ultimate goal has nothing to do with saving the world, but he must do it, because the talisman only works for whom can achieve it, the right chosen one. Jack's hero-deed is precisely to bring to light the “lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul.” In order to save his mother, Jack must obliterate evil and heal the world.

It is not a coincidence then that, in the novel, the main character's name is Jack Sawyer. Other than the obvious reference to the teen protagonists in Mark Twain fictions, the boy is an allegorical American Adam, an amalgamation and succession of

the previous incarnations of this tradition raised from the founding fathers of the myth (Poe, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and last but not least, Twain himself). To explain the conception of this American myth and its epic incarnation,²⁵ we must rely on the work of American scholars Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx and R. B. W. Lewis. Nash Smith reminds us that in its origin

One of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward through the passes of Alleghenies, across the Mississippi Valley, over the plains and mountains of the far West to the Pacific Coast (3).

This open continent impacts on the American consciousness, which reflects this disposition in American literature. The continent is presented as unspoiled by man: “a new and enchanting region of inexpressible beauty and fertility” (11). Akin to the already mentioned Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis, the opportunity to be found in the West was astonishing. It offered America the chance to become a self-sufficient entity, to break with the past. Smith remarks of Turner's thesis that “it concerns the image of themselves which many – perhaps most Americans – of the present day cherish, an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future” (4). America for Smith is an America of itself, independent of Europe, independent of the past. America is a new Eden, presented as a garden, its inhabitant the American Adam, the innocent edenic hero ready to fall into experience. Part of the break from the past involves freedom from the baggage of Mother Europe. As a result, the American Adam is free.

D. H. Lawrence introduces America to its myth, and subsequently to its reality. For him, the American myth is one of rebirth, as the American Adam dies from an old order to a new state of youthfulness. The hero of this myth is defined by R. B. W. Lewis as follows:

An individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources... His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness, he was fundamentally innocent. (5)

²⁵ Dean Miller defines the hero as follows: “An individual is named the hero of a particular incident, which means that he or she had intervened in some critical situation in an extraordinary fashion acting outside, above, or in disregard to normal patterns of behavior, especially in putting his or her life at risk” (1)

This self-propelled man seems to incarnate the principles of linearity and progress which characterize the conquest and the expansion of the West. Leo Marx identifies the dialectical tension between the pastoral ideal in America and the rapid and sweeping transformations wrought by machine technology. This tension is expressed in literature through the recurring image of the “machine's sudden entrance onto the landscape” (343), and American popular culture usually longs for a puerile and sentimental pastoralism, the simple and unreflecting urge to find a “middle ground” between the over-civilization of city and “the violent uncertainties” of nature (28). Thus, the American Adams are instantiations of the “new man” from the enlightened farmer à la Crèvecoeur to the Romantic hunter, deer-slayer, path-finder, and frontiersman Natty Bumppo; then comes the poet-prophet, the artistic self who shapes the world anew by the power of his imagination and consciousness, Emerson and Whitman's poet; subsequently, the pioneer will find his counterpart in the pilots, sailors and captains, for land and sea are co-terminus and stand for the infinite unknown that must be explored by the Romantic idealists. Soon, the frontiersman will give way to the figure of the soldier, and the explorer to Hawthorne's artists, James' Americans and Twain's innocents abroad. They are the Adams of consciousness, the figure of the boy becoming a ubiquitous and ever-recurrent prototype of the American self.

Jack Sawyer in *The Talisman* becomes the Adam of consciousness in this Gothic fantasy where the sentimental, puerile pastoralism of The Territories contrast with a contemporary America shown as a primary world in a fallen condition, darkened by the Gothic return of disturbing pasts. The journey the boy embarks on, then, fits perfectly with the premises of the American monomyth propounded by John Shelton and Robert Jewett, where a community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition, the superhero then recedes to obscurity (6). Whereas the classical monomyth seems to reflect rites of initiation, the American monomyth derives from tales of redemption. It secularizes the Judaeo-Christian dramas of community redemption that have arisen on American soil, combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil. The super-saviors in pop culture function as replacements for the Christ-like figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism.

A cluster of social changes in the 1980s and a culturally constructed “crisis of masculinity” nudged the purveyors of mythic violence into more extreme postures about the place of women. Factors such as the failure to win the Vietnam war; the nation's diminished economic power following the Arab oil embargo; assertive gay and lesbian movements; unemployment stresses when minorities and women appeared to advance while white men saw themselves languishing and feminism as a provocative factor against male heroic ideals turned America from an Edenic paradise into a community shown in a fallen condition linked to evils within its own leadership. In King and Straub's mythical America, Jack Sawyer is the ultimate answer to violence against women: a new alternative masculinity trying to restore the balance in nature and the feminine principle in society.

The Anxiety of the Modern American Adam: Gothic and Fantasy Structure and Elements in *The Talisman*

As a Stephen King's, coming of age, gothic fantasy novel, *The Talisman* reflects the process of maturation of a boy in a very meaningful way. Jack Sawyer's journey to get the talisman becomes the trip of a lifetime to run away from personal anxiety and distress, as Jack Sawyer is not a self-reliant, self-propelled American Adam. The boy is just a powerless figure trapped in one of the most important dichotomies within the Gothic tradition, that of the male and female Gothic.

Initially referring to simply just the gender of the author, the concept of the male and female Gothic has broadened to encompass the differences of style and plot devices as well. According to Punter and Byron, the major difference between these two styles is in the relationship of the central character to the prevailing Gothic space in the texts. The female Gothic usually concentrates on the plight of the, most often, young heroine who is torn from her happy and sheltered life into imprisonment in a big labyrinth-like castle or house by a malevolent and dominant male figure. She is pursued by this menacing man who threatens her virtue and her very life. She then manages to escape and reclaims her place in the social world by either being reunited with her aristocratic family, or most often through marriage. The female Gothic highlights anxiety instead of overt horror by giving the reader no more information than the heroine herself has of the

events and keeping the focus on the heroine rather than the violence and gore; though the supernatural is frequently mentioned, it is explained away giving a closure to the heroine and the story. The founding mother of this type of Gothic was Ann Radcliffe in novels such as *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Other major exponents were Sophia Lee and *The Recess* (1783), or Clara Reeve and *The Old English Baron* (1777).

The male Gothic, on the other hand, concentrates on the male central character and his attempt to penetrate some encompassing interior, centering on identity issues. The protagonist often transgresses collective taboos and defies social establishments such as the family, the church and the law. Women are often depicted as victims, as mere objects to the male's desire and power, as opposed to the acting subjects of the female Gothic. The male Gothic offers violence, and in particular, sexual violence in candid detail; it uses a fragmented and multiple point of view to deny the reader any concrete interpretation, and in the tragic story line, the Gothic hero is punished but there is no clear closure. Finally, the supernatural element is not explained. The most important example of male Gothic is *The Monk* (1794) by Matthew Gregory Lewis.

In the story of twelve years old Jack Sawyer and his attempt to save his dying mother's life with a magical talisman, the quest takes the main character on a journey filled with dangers across the North America of the early 1980s. Stephen King and Peter Straub seem to be offering their version of the quest for the absent mother of Gothic literature:

On September 15th 1981, a boy named Jack Sawyer stood where the water and land come together, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking out at the steady Atlantic. He was twelve years old and tall for his age. The sea-breeze swept back his brown hair, probably too long, from a fine, clear brow. He stood there, filled with the confused and painful emotions he had lived with for the last three months – since the time when his mother had closed their house on Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles and, in a flurry of furniture, checks and real – estate agents, rented an apartment in Central Park west. From that apartment they had fled to this quiet resort on New Hampshire's tiny seacoast. Order and regularity had disappeared from Jack's world. His life seemed as shifting, as uncontrolled as, the heaving water before him. His mother was moving him through the world, twitching him from place to place; but what moved his mother? His mother was running, running. (King, *Talisman* 3)

Although the mother in the female Gothic is totally, physically and mentally absent, Lily Cavanaugh's absence is psychological, brought on by her growing illness:

Jack had meant to tell his mother about the dream this morning, but Lily had been sour and uncommunicative, hiding in a cloud of cigarette smoke. It was only as he started out of the hotel coffee shop on some trumped-up errand that she smiled at him a little ... "Go out and play" ... *Go out and play*, Jack thought with a bitterness utterly unlike him. *Oh, yeah, Mom, way to go. Too cool ... With who? Mom, why are you here? Why are we here? How sick are you? How come you won't talk to me about uncle Tommy? What's Uncle Morgan up to? What* – Questions, questions. And not one of them worth a darned thing, because there was no one to answer them. (12-13)

Jack Sawyer is the hero of female Gothic, a very distressed boy, since he is very concerned about his mother's rapidly declining health and her possible demise. It is this distress that ultimately leads him to his mission and keeps him going through extremely difficult circumstances. Whereas in the female Gothic the loss of the mother has already taken place and the heroine's actions to remedy the situation are retroactive and secondary, for Jack his motive is the threat of a looming loss, and his only purpose is the quest for the mother and a healing to her.

Jack's journey is an attempt to make everything normal again, since both the Gothic heroine and Jack are taken away from their idyllic lives and plunged into a world of anxiety. They are both considered helpless, the Gothic heroine because of her gender, and Jack because of his age. Whereas the Gothic heroine is threatened by a menacing male figure that imprisons her in a gloomy Gothic castle, and then continues pursuing her and menacing her virtue and life, both Jack Sawyer and Lily Cavanaugh are in a way imprisoned at a hotel, the Alhambra Inn and Gardens, that is described as being a "Victorian pile" with "rambling wings" that "looked like a castle in a Sir Walter Scott novel" (9, 25). They are cornered there by Morgan Sloat's prosecution, the business partner of Jack's late father, who has dire plans in store for both Jack and his mother.

The underlying theme of the whole novel has to do with the concept of responsibility: Jack suddenly becomes responsible for not only himself and his life but for the life of his mother as well. Through this responsibility for them both he is responsible for the survival of both of his worlds: the USA of the early 1980s and its parallel world the Territories, for if Lily and her Twinner, the Queen of the Territories, die "then we got black horror in both worlds" (617). The whole thing of the parallel worlds is a far cry from the Gothic, and it enters the realm of fantasy, or even fairy tales. Though Jack is acting merely for personal reasons, his journey has consequences that go beyond his personal motivations. In other words, Jack is an anxious American Adam with a second chance to recover its essence because, as Stephen King and Peter Straub

point to us, the American Adam was never independent from the baggage of Mother Europe. He was never free, and if “The Body” showed us that Americans act as if they had no identity, *The Talisman* goes backwards to show reality as it was and is: America as a haunted, labyrinth-like Gothic space where individuals are trapped, and the only possible way out is to reach that utopia of meaning that the myth of the West is, symbolized in the talisman and its healing powers.

The reference to the Alhambra Inns and Gardens in New Hampshire as a Victorian pile, or a castle in a Sir William Scott novel is not petty. It takes us back to Victorian America, when the exceptional identity of the American myth was being shaped. If the Victorian era was named after the period from 1837 to 1901, the length of the rule of Queen Victoria in Great Britain, American Victorianism was an offshoot of this period and lifestyle that occurred in the United States, chiefly in heavily populated regions such as New England and the Deep South. The name was derived from the reign of Queen Victoria, which reflected the heavy British cultural influence over the nation during the time.

As American business people of the Second Industrial Revolution created sprawling industrial towns and cities in the Northeast, the growing upper class of the Gilded Age mimicked the high society of their former mother country in dress, morality and mannerisms. Victorian America was a time of uncertainty. The wealthy people were not yet sure what it was to be an American, and they borrowed heavily from European culture, especially French. Slavery was a major political and regional issue in Victorian America, with the South favoring it, and the North opposing it. Of course, these radically contrary positions led to the Civil War in 1860. Immigration picked up during the Victorian era, and Europeans fled from poverty and politics of their homelands to the New World. The American West, a vast land known as the “frontier,” attracted settlers looking to start anew. Laws, such as the Homestead Acts, helped Europeans and their descendants take lands used by Native Americans. By the end of the nineteenth century, America was an industrial country taking advantage of its natural resources whose expansion to the West had finished. And that expansion had nothing to do with the exceptional vision the literature of the West and Westerns have provided.

In *The Talisman*, the North America of the early 1980s becomes a Gothic labyrinth for Jack Sawyer. This Gothic space is interspersed with a magical land, the Territories, that is born from the epic tradition of the twentieth century. The Territories is an agrarian monarchy in danger influenced by fantasy writers C. S. Lewis and J. R. R.

Tolkien. It is natural to consider the two men together, not just because they were close friends, who offered both criticism and encouragement on each other's fantasy writing, but because they stand together at the origins of modern fantasy, mediating the fantasies of earlier generations and both, in their own different ways, helping to give modern fantasy its medievalist cast.

The Lord of the Rings (1954-55) establishes many of the characteristics of genre fantasy, some of which can be indicated by terms that John Clute has introduced into fantasy criticism.²⁶ Middle Earth and the Territories in *The Talisman* are subject to THINNING, a decline from its former state, partly due to the actions of Sauron and Morgan Sloat/ Morgan of Orris in the Territories, which are representations of the *Dark Lord*. The sense of WRONGNESS in the world demands *Healing*, and that is the purpose of the QUEST on which Frodo, Sam and Jack embark. It is typical of the portal quest, in Mendlesohn's definition, that the heroes move from a familiar world into an unfamiliar one, and learn about that unfamiliar world through the uncontested explanations of a mentor figure. (Gandalf and Speedy Parker in *The Talisman*). In the course of this quest, the characters reach RECOGNITION, an awareness of their own role in the story of the world, and finally achieve EUCATASTROPHE, a term which Tolkien himself invented to describe the uplifting characteristics of fairy tale. It is the final turn in the plot, which brings “a catch of the breath, a beat and a lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given in any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality” (Tolkien 62-63).

Tolkien's greatest achievement, however, was in normalizing the idea of a secondary world. Middle Earth is a separate creation, operating outside the world of our experience. This has become so standard in modern fantasy that it is not easy to realize how unusual it was before Tolkien; after 1955 fantasy writers no longer had to explain away their worlds by framing them as dreams or travelers' tales, or by providing them with any fictional link to our own world at all. Tolkien did, of course, bring to the composition of *Lord of the Rings* his profound knowledge of medieval literature, and

²⁶ Anthony Magistrate considers the importance of Tolkien as an inspiration for *The Talisman* unequivocal. For him, all the themes that accompany the construction of the heroic quest are present in King's story: the journey itself, the interaction with strangers along the way, the surprise dangers, the moments when despair threatens to derail the quest, and the learning moral curve associated with successful completion of the quest. Perhaps, the major distinction between Tolkien and King is that the fantasy universe of Middle Earth is just as likely to enchant as it is to terrify, while King's alternate universes are dystopian in design and effect. (Magistrate, *America's Storyteller* 38-39) King himself admits that he was one of those writers who read Tolkien's classic and were “knocked out by the magic of the stories, the idea of the quest, and just by the scope, the broadness of it.” (King qtd. in Strengell 118)

his final contribution to later twentieth century fantasy was that the default cultural model for the fantasy world was the Middle-Ages.

C. S. Lewis's take on medievalism is very different. Since his conversion in September 1931, Lewis became a convinced Christian, but not a Catholic. Although he became Britain's best known popularizer of Christianity, his conversion was unusual. He had become convinced that Christian myths were actually as powerful as the Greek-Roman myths that fascinated him, with the added advantage that they were true. Like a medieval Christian intellectual, he believed that God had given partial visions of the truth to Greeks and Romans, and that their myths reflected part of that truth. The pagan gods were not demons to him; stories about them, at least, could be prefigurations of Christ. In this sense, his *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1965) acquire relevance. When the Pevensey children reached the fantasy world in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), they found it populated by a strange mixture of beings. Fauns, centaurs or dryads live together with talking beavers, Father Christmas or a Snow Queen straight out of Hans Christian Andersen under the gaze of the Narnian version of Christ, a lion called by the Turkish word for lion, Aslan. In the heptalogy, the Christian and the Pagan are interwoven and three of the seven books offer Narnian versions of Christian mythology: the dead and resurrection of a god (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950); the Creation (*The Magician's Nephew*, 1955), and the end of the world (*The Last Battle*, 1956). According to Michael Collings (*Many Facets* 134), the plot of *The Talisman* (1984) by Stephen King and Peter Straub parallels the action of *The Magician's Nephew* in which two children, Digory and Polly, attend the creation of Narnia and save Digory's mother from an uncertain illness. Just as *The Magician's Nephew* reworks the Genesis, *The Talisman* reworks the Genesis of American Culture: the American Adam.

American History for Beginners: the Genesis of American Culture in Victorian America

Jack Sawyer starts his journey in New Hampshire, one of the six states of New England, and the first one in declaring its independence from Europe. The Granite State,

where people live free or die, is full of people from European ancestry and Catholic beliefs. This is so because the majority of inhabitants in New England lived in British colonies established by individuals and companies granted commercial charters by King James I, King Charles I, Parliament and King Charles II between 1606 and 1670 to found and run settlements there. However, the symbolic fathers of the nation arrived there running away from a corrupted, ill mother: the Anglican Church.

Religious strife reached a peak in England in the 1500s. When Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church of Rome, spiritual life in England was turned on its ear. The new church under the King's leadership was approved by the English Parliament, but not all the people in England were willing to accept the Church of England. At first, the battles were waged between English Catholics and the followers of the new Church – the Anglicans. Pilgrims and Puritans both believed in the teachings of John Calvin. According to him, neither the Catholic nor the Anglican Churches addressed God's will. By the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, England was a nation of many different faiths.

The Stuart family, who ascended to the Throne after the demise of Elizabeth, made matters worse for the followers of John Calvin. For King James I and his son Charles I, Calvin was a heretic, a man whose soul was doomed for his religious views. The Pilgrims, called the Separatists in England because of their desire to separate from the Anglican Church, were persecuted by agents of the throne. The Puritans, so named for their desire to purify the Church of England, experienced the same degree of harassment. By the 1600s, each group decided England was not place to put their controversial beliefs into practice. While English Kings saw America as a means to get rid of troublemakers, Puritans and Pilgrims saw in America the chance to create a new perfect society.

Puritan pilgrims shaped New England's mentality, establishing a conservative society built upon a religious utopia, in which church and state were not separated. Women were sinners and temptation to men, and other religions were not tolerated. This male oriented intransigent society became very prosperous due to the trade with Europe and the wheat and corn from the middle colonies (Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Delaware) that would feed the American colonies through their colonial infancy and revolutionary adolescence. In theory, they depended on England, but the continuous English interferences in American politics, such as the imposition of taxes like The Tea Act (1773), or the British King's desire of a British army paid by the colonists unleashed an independence zeal that culminated in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The

American Revolution succeeded with the aid of France and Spain, and the defeated British and the victorious Americans signed a peace treaty in Paris in 1783.

The new nation had to face new problems of its own, and when the Victorian period in America arrives (1837-1901), we see that their dependence on Europe had not disappeared. In fact, this is the time when the false myth of the American Adam was built. The expansion to the West saw conquerors as new colonists, descendants of the Puritans on their way to the “Promised Land.” However, the nineteenth century pioneers had nothing to do with WASP, but they were people from different races and origins. The “American Dream” of the West became a uniting concept, a common purpose in a culturally fragmented country. The most important European legacy of the times was slavery. A British import, slavery existed both in the North and in the South, at times in equal measure. The industrialization of the North and the expansion of demand for cotton in the South shifted the balance so that it became a regional issue, as the southern economy grew increasingly reliant on cheap labor.

If American literature is a Gothic literature of borderlands trying to define American history and identity, it is because during centuries the country was also trying to define its inner borders. New England, the core of the country, added new territories and the country expanded west, but it also welcomed new trouble. Complaints and conflicts about the legitimacy of slavery increased and affected the distribution of the land, to the point that the Mason – Dixon line, which still represents the cultural border between the Southern and Northern United States, became the official tool to delineate and distinguish those states where slavery was legal from those where the trading of slaves was forbidden. By the 1850s, the geographical map of the United States had reached the Pacific Ocean, but struggles about inner geographical, racial and political borders were far from solved.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, southerners and northern abolitionists opened an insurmountable breach among them. Slaves were organizing revolts to regain their freedom as early as 1663, but two of the most important revolts occurred in plain discussion of the institution of slavery. When Denmark Vesey – a free black who won a lottery and purchased his freedom – planned to kill every white man in the South encouraged by the successful slave revolt in Haiti, he sent a chill down the spines of countless Southern planters. He was captured, tried and hanged in 1822 before the uprising of his plan, but the seed was already planted. In 1831, Nat Turner achieved Vesey's ultimate goal claiming to respond to one of his frequent religious visions. He

organized a group of slaves into rebellion, and this gang killed men, women and children. As they continued on their rampage, the group gathered additional supporters. When the ammunition was exhausted, Nat and the slaves were captured and hanged. This uprising was more shocking than any previous one, but Southern slaveholders kept on justifying slavery using arguments such as that the African American race is an inferior one, that black people were not citizens according to the Constitution of the United States, and that History supports slavery because the most important civilizations (Greek, Romans and Egyptians) had slaves. Northerners counterattacked criticizing slavery as the only focus of Southern production, relegating industrialization to a secondary place behind the agrarian development. For Northerners, plantation owners were lower individuals, sinners taking advantage of slaves physically, economically and sexually.

Both sides were taking their opposite positions to extremes. In the South, slaves had their own social classes. Domestic slaves had a better position and more rights than plantation slaves, and took advantage of their situation. Northerners even paid plantation owners to free slaves. But Southerners kept on viewing themselves as victims and they emphasized their characteristics creating a new different code, the Southern Code. During the 1600s, patterns of life were borrowed from the English countryside and transplanted onto America's Southern shores. These included a glorification of riding, hunting and etiquette. The planter was essentially a country gentleman, looking to England for political and economic guidance as well as its literature and manners. In the 1700s, the Virginia gentry established a code of behavior that addressed both men and women and it can be seen in the South still today. Gentlemen were supposed to be honorable, courteous, truthful, generous and hospitable. The ideal man respected his family and treated women with high regard. Strength and courage were glorified and a man was to defend the family name, with his life if necessary. Women were genteel and gracious, they knew how to entertain guests and tenaciously defended their husbands and children. A proper gentleman, it was believed, should be a lawyer, politician, planter, or military man, rather than a business man or other occupations. Southerners were the refined class and they believed in personal integrity, a virtue they thought the Northerners were losing because they lived in suburban areas and the small farmsteads in the North gradually disappeared. The idealistic distance between the two groups, the negative in the South to abolish slavery, and some territorial disputes led the country to the Civil War (1861-1865). The paranoia of inner borderlands reached its climax when

Abraham Lincoln became president in 1860, to the point that seven Southern states became independent and voted a new Constitution. Slavery had become a political launching weapon to defend the rights of federal states against governmental central power.

The Civil War destroyed the South economically, but its inner convictions remained. American Congress turned African Americans into citizens, even giving them the right to vote. However, things in the South did not change at all. The white aristocratic, conservative, racist leaders imposed the “White Terror” as an answer to the imposition of these not-wished laws, and they began intimidation campaigns and promoted physical violence against African Americans. Although they obtained a legal victory, the Civil War for this minority supposed the definitive moral breaking point with American society.

However, for this same dominant white society, the history of the United States begins after the end of the Civil War. The consequences of this conflict shaped the American character: racism remains in the United States in spite of the abolition of slavery; there is an economic boom that prepares the Conquest of the West; internal immigration increases raising the myth of the mobility of American people, and the South, using the historical event as an alibi, justifies current social and political conditions: racism, poverty, laziness, lack of initiative and illiteracy. After the war, beginning with the railroad, small businesses grew larger and larger. By the century's end, the nation's economy was dominated by a few, very powerful individuals. The growth was astounding. From the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to the end of the century, American economy doubled in size due to advances in technology – such as the telephone or the electric lights – which helped to improve the way of life of some Americans and new ways of organizing business that led a few individuals to the top. Industrial Revolution was a big success, and American society became the cradle of savage capitalism with the Congress and a bunch of forgettable Presidents taking pro-business positions while the working class living conditions were awful; however, after the 1870s, they became organized in workers' organizations to make better living conditions and to defend themselves.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Victorian America was a Gothic, grotesque and horrible labyrinth of ghosts and monsters. The ghost of slavery casted a large shadow, and Segregation increased the differences between races in an unbearable and intolerable situation that remained until the 1960s, in which leaders in the South

restricted liberties and rights to African Americans with the indulgent collaboration of the American Supreme Court, that wanted to avoid conflicts. The situation in the West seemed to be better, but it had its own curses. The discovery of gold in California caused a massive impact of immigration to these new and popular territories. Native Americans ended their days confined in reservations after fighting for their freedom in revolts known as “The Indian Wars.” Cowboys led an important industrial boom provoked by the raise of cattle-range industry, whereas agriculture was promoted in the arid West in new ways. The use of irrigation systems to develop “dry” farms provoked conflicts between cowboys and farmers because of the water. When the Frontier (the Wild West) officially disappeared in 1893, civilization had reached the Pacific Coast after years of never ending conflict and genocide.

The nineteenth century for the United States is an age of paradoxes and contradictions. In a period of domestic consolidation, while trying to reinforce inner national and physical borders, politicians had already begun to think about expansion abroad. The Monroe doctrine (1823), which stated that further efforts by European nations to colonize land or interfere with states in North or South America would be viewed as acts of aggression requiring American intervention, has become the longstanding tenet of US foreign policy. Trying to get “America for Americans”, the United States bought Alaska to Russia in 1867 and established naval bases in Samoa and Hawaii. American commercial interests in Cuba led to the first imperialist conflict with Spain, the Spanish-American War. The United States supported José Martí in Cuba, the leader of the independence movement, and finally defeated Spain in 1898, not only in Cuba, but in Philippines and Puerto Rico; American Imperialism had just begun. *The Talisman* reflects all the paradoxes and contradictions of the Victorian American character through a Gothic lens, a dark glass that distorts the American reality of the 1980s, Reagan's America.

Through a Glass Darkly: the World of *The Talisman* and Reagan's America

The Talisman became the best-seller of 1984, the year it was published, in the United States. That year, Ronald Reagan was re-elected president on November 6th after smashing former Vice-President and Democrat candidate Walter Mondale. Ronald Reagan won in all states except for Minnesota with a convincing, optimistic and utopian advertising campaign which most famous and remembered ads were “Morning Again in America” and “A Bear in the Woods.”

“A Bear in the Woods” was an answer to Mondale's pretensions to promote a nuclear disarming politics to reconcile relationships with the Soviet Union. In the ad, a grizzly bear wandered through a forest freely, without any hint of its aggressiveness or peacefulness, a clear reference to the Soviet Union. “Morning Again in America” praises Reagan's economic policies, featuring a montage of images of Americans going to work and a calm, optimistic narration that suggested the improvements to the US economy since his 1980 election were due to Reagan's policies and asked voters why they would want to return to the pre-Reagan policies of Democrats like Walter Mondale, who served as vice-president under the presidency of Reagan's predecessor, Jimmy Carter.

The Talisman, as the Gothic fantasy it is, offers an alternative vision of Reagan's America, not as optimistic as the Republicans wanted it to be. The Gothic labyrinth of 1980s America looks like a distorted mirror of Victorian America due to the politics of Reagan. If the American Adam had an opportunity to start anew in the paradise on earth it was the United States running away from an old, decaying and feminized Europe, in the novel it is impossible for Jack Sawyer to run away from old, decaying and feminized Europe. What today is known as Reaganomics or Reagan's economic policies is just an evolution of what British politicians were applying in the islands. Old, decaying mother Europe was Victorian again in the 1980s, just as America and the Alhambra Inns and Garden in the novel are. Both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan allied to revitalize the conservative movement around the world, and to end Communism and strengthen Capitalism.

To achieve it, they promoted the same reformist agenda: low taxes, social spending reduction, power to the economic market, absolute freedom to private initiatives and constant restraints to the public sector. The state was the problem, not the solution. They

were the pioneers of the nowadays dominant doctrine, a political system that destroyed the welfare state and contributed to a mercantilist fanaticism that culminated in the recent economic crisis of 2008, a crisis we are still suffering. This political system has some reminiscences of slavery, as the common man becomes a slave of the market. For Teresa Goddu, the American Gothic is “a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature” with which “the cultural contradictions of national myth” are uncovered and discussed (9-10).

All the contradictions of the American national myth collide in Jack Sawyer and his journey. The original American Adam was born from the Jacksonian American hero, and Jacksonian America is an English-speaking, Christian (in origins if not practice) folk community of European origins. Jacksonian populism played the key role in assimilating later Europeans, and now non-Europeans, immigrants into the American cultural values of rugged individualism, entrepreneurialism, home ownership, and democracy. Jacksonianism made the American melting pot and the American Dream a reality (Mead 226-231; Lieven 95-97, 101, 109; Hungtinton 38-46, 58-80). In America, according to Goddu, the Gothic stands as an elaborate code for slavery, race, and oppression, including the oppression by the capitalistic marketplace and its consequences. Jack Sawyer will try to embody the Jacksonian code of self-reliance, making his own way in the world through hard work without government handouts and inherited wealth or contacts. He will perform equality, individualism and courage in order to defend his family, his honor and liberty, his community and his country, by force of arms and violence when necessary (Mead 231-37). However, his inner qualities are the product of Victorian America, and it is not a surprise when we discover that Jack Sawyer was conceived in the Alhambra Inns and Garden, that the American Jacksonian hero has his roots in the same old Europe he is trying to run away from:

In 1968, the year before Jack's birth, Lily had been nominated for an Academy Award for her role in a picture called *Blaze* [...] Nobody expected Lily to win, least of all Lily; [...] to celebrate this one moment of real professional recognition, Phil Sawyer had wisely taken her for three weeks to the Alhambra Inns and Gardens, on the other side of the continent, where they had watched the Oscars while drinking champagne in bed. (If Jack had been older, and had he had an occasion to care, he might have done the necessary subtraction and discovered that the Alhambra had been the place of his essential beginning) (6).

This Victorian America appears in the novel as a haunting ghost from the past, symbolized in the Gothic hotel of the Alhambra Inns and Gardens, an empty Gothic

place full with the unspeakable cultural contradictions that shaped the American character and myth, particularly slavery:

A plaque in the lobby announced that it was here, in 1838, that the Northern Methodist Conference had held the first of the great New England abolition rallies. Daniel Webster had spoken at fiery, inspired length. According to the plaque, Webster had said: "From this day forward, know that slavery as an American institution has begun to sicken and must soon die in all our states and territorial lands." (5)

The modern common man is far from avoiding slavery. Jack's turmoil and distress stems from his urgent need to save his dying mother, but in a wider sense, Jack represents the modern man, a one dimensional man, in Marcuse's words, trapped in a "one dimensional" universe of thought and behavior, in which aptitude and ability for critical thought and oppositional behavior wither away: "Until he met Speedy Parker, Jack had moved through the days at the hotel as unconscious of the passage of time as a sleeping dog [...] it was as though his mind had gone to sleep, leaving his body to fend for itself" (8). This one dimensional man seems to be a product of the popular culture of the 1980s and the Reagan revolution. Reagan was a transformative figure in American history, but his real revolution was one of public-relations-meets-politics and not one of policy. He combined his small town heartland upbringing with a skill for storytelling that was honed on the back lots of Hollywood into a personal narrative that resonated with a majority of voters, but only after it tapped into something darker, which was white middle-class resentment of 1960s unrest. His story arc did become more optimistic and peaked just at the right moment, when Americans were tired of the "malaise" of the Jimmy Carter years and wanted someone who promised to make the nation feel good about itself again. His positive legacy today hangs on events that most historians say were to some great measure out of his control: an economic recovery that was inevitable, especially when world oil prices returned to normal levels, and an end to the Cold War that was more driven by internal events in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe than Americans want to acknowledge. In fact, what he did shrink was government regulation and oversight, which critics have linked to a series of unfortunate events from the savings-and-loan crisis of the late 1980s to the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008.

But in 1984, Americans still thought that it was morning again in America, that Ronald Reagan and his continuous references to a simpler and more simplistic America

were true. Stephen King and Peter Straub offer us a Gothic fantasy that is about to show us the fallacy and back rooms of the myth. It was never morning again in America, and it has never been since 1984. The journey of Jack Sawyer reminds us a lesson of life: what is important is the journey, not the destination.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY: SEPARATION

Jack Sawyer's ordinary world is one of confusion, unease, distress and a sense of impending doom, as we have seen. A dark, psychological awareness of imminent disaster disrupts the boy's mind. The very beginning of the story and the peculiar incidents around the Alhambra hotel, such as the strange seagull (13-14) or the talking portal opening up in the sand (16-17) fits perfectly with Joseph Campbell's description of how the monomyth should begin.²⁷ When the boy meets “Speedy” Parker, everything makes sense for him. Speedy Parker is an African American old man, the caretaker of Arcadia's amusement park beside the Alhambra hotel. Lester, which is his first name, belongs to a long tradition of characters in Stephen King's canon that Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu identifies as “magical negroes.”²⁸ The characteristics of this kind of characters are particular: an ethnic character in a predominantly white story, he or she has nothing better to do than help the white main character, who is a stranger for him at the very beginning. A wise, patient, down to earth and spiritual individual, he is also uneducated, handicapped, at a low position in life or all of the above.

King and Straub describe him as follows:

Lester Parker was a black man with crinkly gray hair and heavy lines cutting through his cheeks. He was utterly unremarkable now despite whatever he had accomplished in his earlier life as a travelling blues musician. Nor he had said anything particularly remarkable. Yet as soon as Jack had walked aimlessly into Funworld's game arcade and met Speedy's pale eyes, he felt all the fuzziness leave him. (9)

²⁷ A blunder – apparently the merest chance – reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood [...] blunders are not the merest chance. They are the result of suppressed desires and conflicts. They are ripples on the surface of life, produced by unsuspected springs (Campbell 42).

²⁸ Other examples are the cook Dick Hallorann in *The Shining*, wise old woman Mother Abigail in *The Stand*, and child-like prisoner John Coffey in *The Green Mile*. See *Stephen King's Super-Duper Magical Negroes* by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu.

The old man in this story is the Mentor figure, who not only explains all Jack needs to know and sets him on his journey, but also gives him tokens, the essential means to be able to start the journey and, later in the story, steps in, guiding Jack or helping him realize or remember the goal. In the middle of the nightmarish confusion, uneasiness and turmoil Jack feels because his mother seems to have gone to the Alhambra Inns and Garden to peacefully die, the kid seems to remember a better world that apparently has nothing to do with our own in what he calls his Daydreams. Premonitory senses about his life make Jack feel that he is on hold of something, but that something has nothing to do with “the other place, the one he dreamed about when things were boring or maybe a little scary” (16). Voices around him alert of danger, and when he finally talks to somebody about what upsets him, Jack relies on Lester. The boy perceives both Morgan Sloat and Lester Parker as opposites, as “Night and Day, Moon and Sun; Dark and Light, and the black man was the light in these polarities” (28). The blues musician and the boy share a special relationship, as if they had met before somewhere else,²⁹ and when Jack Sawyer hears about the Territories for the first time, everything in his mind fixes itself and the nature of the secondary world is revealed:

The Territories. That was right; that was his name. They have magic as we have physics, right? An agrarian monarchy ... modern weapons to the right guys over there ... Uncle Morgan plotting. His father answering, putting on the brakes: We have to be careful about the way we go in there, partner ... remember, we owe them, by which I mean we really owe them ... (34)

When Speedy Parker tells Jack that this other secondary world “might be somewhere a fellow could get to – get to anytime he liked, that is, if he wanted to see it bad enough” (34), he is giving him a huge clue about that secondary world: if Jack desired it enough, he could enter it at will, as the boy did when he was younger. However, Jack is not ready, even when the old man gives him **the call to adventure**:

“Man like me, he hear all kinds of stories. Stories about two-headed parrots, men that fly with their own wings, men who turn into wolves, stories about queens. Sick queens ... Troubles everywhere, son. Sick Queen ... maybe dyin. *Dyin*, son. And a world or two waitin out there, just waitin to see if anyone can save her.” (35)

²⁹ Campbell's mention of suppressed desires and conflicts is interesting, because, as the story unveils slowly throughout the book, Jack has known about the Territories since he was a very little boy. He was almost smothered by Morgan as an infant (a mirror attempt to Morgan's alter-ego's murder of Jack's alter-ego, Jason, in the Territories) and was also kidnapped by strange non-human figures when he was a little boy (described in pages 37-40 as also the first encounter with Speedy Parker, who was mysteriously there to save him).

At this point in the story, Jack is unable to understand what is being required from him, even when Speedy gives him a bottle of bittersweet liquid that will allow him to enter the secondary world at any time (36). This magical juice is an interesting aid, since it does not do anything. It is a placebo; it mainly serves as a stimulus to help Jack ease in to the transformation between the two worlds. However, later in the story, Jack discovers he is able to flip without it by remembering the feeling. This is closely connected to the fact that Speedy Parker used to be an artist, as he slowly helps Jack share the artistic “feeling” of the magic. However, at this moment Jack is worried about her mom, and the **refusal to the call** occurs when he leaves Speedy in order to check his mother's current condition. After he confirms it, both the mentor and his pupil resume the conversation and the reader is given the big picture: the Territories are real; Speedy, Jack's father Phil and his partner Morgan Sloat knew about them, and while Phil went there to learn about that magical land, Sloat “just went to plunder him out a fortune” (49). Some people have Twinners in that other world, twins who are like extensions of the primary world individuals, but not all of them. Jack is special, as he has no twin, and Morgan knows it. His mother's twin is dying, and Morgan will not do anything to heal Lily because when Queen Laura Delossean dies, Morgan's twin will take control of everything, including Jack's future. Jack must cross the country towards California in order to get a talisman that will save not only his mother and himself, but all worlds. Speedy remarks the transcendence of Jack's journey:

Talisman be given unto your hand, Travellin Jack. Not too big, not too small, she look just like a crystal ball. Travellin Jack, ole Travellin Jack, you be goin to California to bring her back. But here's your burden, here's your cross: drop her, Jack, and all be lost. (62)

The burden Speedy refers to is really heavy, as the talisman is a representation of mythological America and the sins of its character. As I have explained a few pages ago, the exceptionalism of the American character was built upon the subordination of ethnic and groups such as African Americans and Native Americans.

Okorafor-Mbachu explains to us that “the archetype of the magical negro is an issue of race. It is the subordination of a minority figure masked as the empowerment of one.”

An obvious link to the relationship between Speedy Parker and Jack Sawyer would be that of Huckleberry Finn and Jim in Twain's novel, where it occurs exactly the same: the subordination of a minority figure (Jim) masked as the empowerment of one. In *The Talisman*, part of what makes Jack comfortable with Speedy is that the old man is completely and utterly nonthreatening: "What Jack had understood as soon as he had known that his father would have liked Speedy Parker was that the ex-bluesman had no harm in him" (28). Stephen King and Peter Straub are just reproducing a long tradition in American letters and cinema.

Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) in the first-person voice of its main character, Huckleberry Finn. The text reproduces the vernacular, or spoken, language of people who lived along the Mississippi River in the mid-nineteenth century. The word nigger is frequently used, and though Huck befriends Jim the slave and tries to help him escape down the river, Jim is often the butt of jokes, and outwitted by Huck and Tom Sawyer. Twain's ideas about race did not develop in a vacuum. There were two prominent sources for white understandings of African American life in ante-bellum America, the blackface minstrel show and the abolitionist novel *Uncle's Tom Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

In minstrel shows, white performers would use a burnt cork to darken their faces and hands and mimic black dialect, dances, and songs. Minstrel shows were massively popular among white audiences in the United States and Great Britain across the political spectrum. They conveyed a variety of messages to the audiences, and racism was only one of them. Abolitionists put on blackface shows to depict the horrors of slavery. Proslavery advocates pointed to the foolish behavior of white minstrel performers as proof that slaves were not intelligent enough to look after themselves. What they got was the propagation of an African-American negative racial stereotype known as one of the characters of these minstrel shows: Jim Crow.

This stereotype was born when minstrel show father, white performer T. D. Rice, saw an old black man singing along the street. By 1832, Jim Crow was a stock character in minstrel shows, a carefree slave, along with Mr. Tambo, a joyous musician, and Zip Coon, a free black attempting to put "on airs" or rise above his station. The burlesque tone of minstrel shows, along with their stereotypical depiction of black characters, helped to popularize the belief that blacks were lazy, stupid, inherently less human, and unworthy of integration.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom Cabin* was a publishing sensation and a powerful force for abolition. The novel inspired antislavery sentiments in its readers, famously even moving Queen Victoria into tears, through its depiction of the suffering that slaves endured when they were sold away from family and friends, abused by cruel overseers, or attempting to escape. However, this character was also a stereotype that was born from a caricature. The Tom caricature portrays black men as faithful, happily submissive servants. Supporting the Southern vision of slavery as a positive and useful tool in America's society, Stowe's Tom is a gentle, humble, Christian slave. Despite being a model one – hard-working, loyal, non-rebellious and contented – Tom is sold, cursed, slapped, kicked, flogged, worked like a horse, then beaten to death. Beecher Stowe makes of the novel an unabashed attack on slavery, questioning the contradictions of a religious American society supporting such inhuman practices. She uses the character of Tom to show the gentleness and forgiving nature which she believed lay dormant in all blacks, but in the end the use of the stereotype to attack slavery does not provide any further advance. Tom does not complain, rebel, or run away. This partially explains why the names “Uncle Tom” and “Tom” have become pejorative terms for African Americans in the United States.

When Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, the United States was defining itself as a nation postwar and post slavery. Despite the positive and apparently conciliatory messages the novels deliver, or precisely because of them, both *Uncle Tom Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn* contributed to the institutionalization of racism against African Americans in the United States. Although Stowe and Twain challenged the dominant ideology of white supremacy, their novels gained an exceptional popularity, resulting from the authors' use of extraordinary rhetorical strategies. The novelists assumed that their audiences were white racists and tried not to stimulate their antipathy. In fact, with the South's defeat in the Civil War, the life of black Americans improved little. Slavery, though outlawed, was replaced with racial discrimination and injustice that was upheld legally by Black Codes (laws restricting rights of blacks). Codes denied freed slaves the right to vote, to possess any form of weapon, and to leave a job and to move elsewhere. They were considered servants now instead of slaves. Efforts by the federal government to rebuild the South's economy and society in the 1870s abolished Black Codes, though open racial prejudice and discrimination persisted.

When reconstruction ended in 1877, Southerners began passing new laws enforcing racial segregation (separation of black people from whites) known as the Jim Crow

laws. It was these laws through which the beliefs about the inferior nature of African Americans were perpetuated through much of the twentieth century. Racial prejudices led to this discriminatory measures passed by state and local governments that sought to keep blacks at lower social and economic positions. Jim Crow laws strictly enforced public racial segregation in almost every aspect of Southern life. In 1896, the Supreme Court upheld laws enforcing segregation in railway car accommodations on the condition that the facilities were of equal quality. This decision became known as the “separate but equal” principle, and it became the cornerstone of Jim Crow laws.

Although many African Americans ran away from the South looking for a better life in the North, their situation remained the same for the most part of the twentieth century. Racial incidents spread throughout the country, and many African Americans in the North saw themselves in the same discriminatory positions than when they lived in the South. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement was born in the 1960s that their legal situation changed. The Jim Crow era ended when laws banning discrimination were approved, but blacks' social and economic status remained. The chief challenge to white authority that this movement posed turned the South in a place of loss and white supremacy into an image of villainy. While discrimination spurred by Jim Crow laws was being overcome, violence escalated. Government eased discrimination approving affirmative action programs (1965) to open up opportunities in education and employment long denied to minorities which required that employers and schools favor minorities and female applicants in an effort to create a more socially diverse workforce or student body. Everything was forced and imposed in the South, and as a result, the gained advances were only effective on paper. Multiple riots and the assassination of Civil Rights Movement leader Martin Luther King in 1968 evidenced a bitter truth: the Jim Crow era's shadow was large, and prejudice and discrimination was far from ended.

Speedy Parker receives the baton of a long tradition in American letters to show that African Americans' situation nowadays has not improved too much. The old man is a mixture of the stock characters of Jim Crow and Mr. Tambo, an old, carefree, joyous musician. However, the fact that Speedy is Jack's mentor and guardian does not take the burlesque tone away from his characterization. Although as we have already mentioned, Lester “Speedy” Parker is Jack's guide and magical helper, “a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass. What such a figure represents is the benign, protective power of destiny.” (Campbell 59), the old man is also the trickster figure, “both a fool and

someone who is beyond the system. He represents all the possibilities of life that your mind hasn't decided it wants to deal with [...] The fool is the breakthrough of the absolute into the field of social controlled orders" (Briggs and Maher 39). Speedy is a constant reminder of the other worlds, of the existence of magic and of everything beyond. He is a magical negro, as we discover along Jack's journey, and his twin in the Territories, Parkus, gives us the other side of the coin: Lester Parker is *not* a zip coon, he is a free black with a prominent role in the Territories without any intention to put on airs:

"I am what you'd call the Judge General and Lord High Executioner all rolled into one. Over here, that is." ... "Over there, I'm just this fella who goes around from place to place, does a few odd jobs, strums a few tunes. And sometimes, believe me, I like that a lot better." (711)

The magical negro stereotype was born in the 1950s, and it typically references characters in films. The mystical black character going around and selflessly helping white people is a throwback to the stereotypes of the noble savage, and a very suitable anachronism if the Gothic signals the return of disturbing pasts upon the present. Stephen King and Peter Straub assume that their audience is a racist one, and in the 1980s this was crystal clear if we pay attention to the politics of Ronald Reagan.

Perhaps, the least noble element of the "Reagan Revolution" was the strategic decision made by the President and his advisers to mobilize long-simmering racial controversies to build up his own base of political support. Although the anecdotal evidence is strong that Reagan lacked personal prejudice against blacks, the man whose politics were firmed up during the 1960s white working class backlash to urban riots governed with a callousness towards African-Americans that was breathtaking at times, leading directly to an insurgent 1984 presidential run by the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Notoriously, Reagan kicked off his 1980 general election campaign at the Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi, a stone's throw from where three civil right workers had been murdered in 1964, and he did so with an appeal for "state rights" which carried the echoes of the segregation era. The president did make a deliberate decision to reach out to the minority of white American voters who were motivated by anti-black sentiment. Without saying a single word directly pertaining to racial issues, Reagan communicated a clear message to the white folk of Philadelphia, Mississippi: "I'm on your side." And that decision had significant political and social consequences.

The Reaganites' view of the lower classes would have made the most inveterate social Darwinists proud. Whereas the latter had regarded it as sad but unescapable that elements of the population were genetically predisposed to hardship, the Reagan administration suggested that people lived on meager welfare handouts because that was the life they preferred. For five years before his election as president, Reagan had been regaling audiences with tales of “the welfare queen,” the Chicago woman who he said “had eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veterans’ benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands [...] Her tax-free income is over \$150.000.” It was not only the baldest demagoguery, but also a gross distortion of the facts. The woman, Linda Taylor, had been convicted in 1977 of using two aliases to collect checks totaling \$8.000. But the anecdote was a powerful tool for arousing the anger of white working-class and middle-class voters who were coping with tough economic times. At a time when Americans were feeling the brunt of the poor economy and the new burden of taxation, Reagan was talking about “welfare queens” soaking up their tax dollars and asking them if they were better off than they were four years earlier. The anecdote indulged the prejudice of many northern whites, who came to see welfare as a government-funded scam that allowed lazy, undeserving black people to prosper at the expense of hardworking white taxpayers.

What made Reagan's brand of racial politics uniquely powerful was Reagan's success in channeling prejudice against black people into scorn for the government. He had them convinced that he was going to rout the faceless bureaucrats who were squeezing the life out of the country. Of course, he spoke only in generalities, in saccharine sound bites that made his vision for the country seem benign, even heroic. He never mentioned selling national parks, ending nutrition programs for children, cutting development grants to struggling rural communities, gutting food stamps, or rolling back regulations key to the public's well-being. The Reagan Revolution would implant a new order in America and the world, one whose vast inequalities were completely unnecessary, based on false assumptions about the inadequacy of the liberal consensus governing America. As William Kleinknecht puts it,

While failing to eviscerate fifty years of welfare programs overnight, he dramatically altered how Americans viewed the role of government and the poor. He forced advocates of social programs into rearguard actions to protect what already existed while making it politically impossible for new programs to emerge. And this trend has continued in the years since he left office. It has become received wisdom, even among many liberals, that the US government, which waged war

simultaneously in the Atlantic and Pacific in the 1940s, rebuilt the industrial capacity of Europe and Japan in the 1950s, developed railroads, the computer, the nuclear bomb and the Internet, and put a man on the moon, is a morass of inefficient bureaucrats that cannot be trusted to solve any of the domestic problems facing the United States in the twenty-first century. (35)

Both Jack Sawyer and Speedy Parker belong to traditional oppressed groups: children and African Americans, and as *The Talisman* is a Gothic recreation of Reagan's America, it is comprehensible that the old African American man is a positive model for Jack Sawyer, that Speedy is Jack's mentor. Gothic fiction is credited with deliberate subversion, it is read symptomatically for the ways its terrors betray cultural anxieties about whatever threatens the dominant social order or challenges its ideologies. As Jack's quest is about not only saving his mother's life, but about recovering the essential innocence of the American character and myth, Speedy Parker seems to be the obvious father figure for a fatherless child: African American masculinity as the harmless custodian of the white patriarchal system, an American dominant culture and society which has traditionally destroyed any attempt of African American men to obtain freedom and equality. The role of custodian to Jack Sawyer performed by Speedy Parker is a desirable but threatening wish,³⁰ and a down to earth reminder of American realities as opposed to American fantasies. In a mythical realm which must re-start again and define its moral values and parameters, Speedy's role as "biblical legislator" (Clemente 124) is the ultimate conciliatory desirable fantasy.

In an American community shown in a fallen condition, however, the appearance of a "magical negro" stereotype is also a reminder of the lack of racial intimacy, a deep knowledge and familiarity with those who are not part of the racial in-group. Without such familiarity, there is no real equality. Because of American writers' fundamental ignorance of African American life and culture, the "magical negro" is "put there to give the illusion that there is cultural crossover, to satisfy that need [for healthy race relations] without actually addressing the issue" (Dorfman qtd. in Kempley). What is more important, the "magical negro" is the next to last expression of the institutionalization of racism, as the stereotype resonates with audience expectations of a new racism that "supports the social order while seemingly challenging the racial inequality constitutive of that order [...] it reinforces the white characters as moral and

³⁰ Christopher Vogler comments that the tricksters are "the natural enemies of the status quo" (77) and they look for a potential change in it.

pure characters while also delineating how powerful, divine and/or magic wielding black characters may interact with whites and the mainstream” (Hughey 544). In the context of post-civil right relationships, the explicit reading of Speedy Parker may be progressive and emancipatory, but it implicitly functions to reify dominant racial discourses and narratives concerning white identity. Although, according to Nielsen, “These magical figures can be seen to function then as a means to appease the social anxiety of the dominant group by counteracting the racism that white audiences normally have toward black characters within mainstream films” (133), and in this case, the same could be applied to his novels. Speedy Parker is the impersonation of the never ending marginalization of black culture and gender.

Crossing the Threshold in the Territories: Reagan's Policies and the Unbalance of the Feminine Principle

Speedy Parker gives Jack the instructions to start his journey to the West. The boy will have to avoid meeting both Morgan Sloat and his twinner in the Territories, Morgan of Orris. In order to fully understand his mission, Jack must **cross the threshold** of the monomyth, a place where he will find the source of his power to develop and move forward. Speedy provides him with an atlas of the Territories and a guitar pick to find captain Farren, the man who will help him reach Queen Laura de Lossean, his mother's twin and the source of his power.³¹ Taking a long shot of bittersweet juice, Jack flips into the Territories, a magical mythical place reminiscent of the American Garden of Eden:

He tipped the bottle up and the taste of the odor invaded his mouth. His stomach clenched. He swallowed, and rough, burning liquid spilled down his throat. Long seconds before Jack opened his eyes, he knew from the richness and clarity of the smells about him that he had flipped into the Territories. Horses, grass, a dizzying scent of raw meat; dust; the clear air itself (77).

³¹ Jack's mother seemingly fits the Good Mother archetype, characterized in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* as “associate with the life principle, birth, warm, nourishment, protection” (Guerin 187). Lily Cavanaugh is the engine that sets the timeframe, creates the ticking clock and hence sets the pace of the story. She is the “Quest” – the aforementioned kingdom to be saved.

The Alhambra Inns and Gardens has become in the Secondary World the Queen's palace, a busy and crowded castle in a medieval town waiting for a deadly outcome:

It was actually a big rambling pavilion, long wings on each side, with gates and a courtyard. Like the Alhambra, this eccentric structure – a summer palace, Jack's instincts told him – stood just above the ocean. Little bands of people moved through and around the great pavilion, driven by forces as powerful and invisible as the effect on iron filings of a magnet. The little groups met, divided, poured on again (93).

The magical token in the form of Speedy's guitar pick marks Jack as a person who can be trusted, sent by Speedy to the royal palace; without it, Captain Farren would not help Jack discover the alter-ego of his mother, and would not give him further instructions and a magical coin token, working as a proxy for the Helper figure (127-128). The moment Jack sees the Queen, he finds the source of his power to move forward and understands the purpose of his journey:

Open mouthed, Jack stared at his mother. She was dying, he could not doubt that any longer: even her skin seemed bleached and unhealthy, and her hair too, had lost several shades of color. [...] The dying woman was his mother's Twinner; it was Laura DeLoessian. (100-101)

When asked about the Queen's sickness, Captain Farren tells Jack that “the Queen cannot see, she cannot speak, she cannot move” (101). Ronald Reagan's Presidency and its legacy on women's issues are tarnished by Reagan's outspoken opposition to abortion rights, appointment of anti-choice judges and successful push to remove support for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). He was the first American President who published in 1983 a book about his opposition to abortion, and Reagan's administration allegiance with Christian fundamentalists as Jerry Falwell gave his social conservative agenda a zealotry that left women speechless, blind and motionless. In fact, although the cowboy deregulator did not oppose the Equal Rights Amendment actively, he was able to get women do his dirty work in removing support for equal rights for women. At the 1980 Republican National Convention, the Republican Party platform was amended to end its support for the ERA. The most prominent opponent was Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative activist who campaigned organizing potential enemies of the amendment defending traditional gender roles and baiting feminists. ERA was defeated when Schlafly turned it into a war among women over gender roles. Public opinion in key states shifted

against the ERA as opponents, operating on the local and states level, won over the public. Schlafly was the visible enemy of the Amendment, a woman doing the dirty work against other women. By 1982, ERA was dropped from discussion at the American Congress, and the situation remains the same to this day. Ronald Reagan did not make up institutional violence against women, but he contributed to his perpetuation; the Reagan era was a masculine mythical realm, a backlash to women and feminism that has nowadays spread the idea that feminism is dead because it succeeded. When I talk about feminism and its backlash, I do in the terms used by Kelly Bean in her volume *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media since Reagan-Bush*, where she refers to a discussion of feminism in the U.S. mainstream media: “American media limits and manipulates the distribution of ideas and information in an emphatically ideological, and often misogynist way [...] the anti-feminist trend is a class-driven, opportunistic media phenomenon made possible by the conditions of late patriarchal capitalism and monopolization of the media” (5-7). This phenomenon started during the Reagan era, and it is a consequence of false beliefs: “The trajectory of the anti-feminist backlash requires that feminism exist as the antagonist to its ideology [...] the fact of the movement's end – or success or redundancy – inaugurates all anti-feminist discourse” (9). Bean sees this backlash as a phenomenon that conformed feminist language to its purposes, and spread through American society and institutions: “In the main, anti-feminism begins and ends in academe; [...] Academic women who speak or behave in a manner that threatens the status quo are singled out for especially vituperative treatment” (10).

The cancer Lily Cavanaugh must confront from a 1980s, and even contemporary, point of view is the cancer of success, the (apparent) success of mainstream, academic, middle-class dominant feminism.

Jack Sawyer will try to fight this institutional violence saving his mother from death, but the fact that Morgan Sloat and his minions want to control a medieval monarchy imposing their savage capitalistic vision is a reminder of the Ronald Reagan foreign policies. During the 1980s, though the American government did not seem to be concerned with the most desperate problems of their citizens, it was extremely concerned with peoples in other countries, especially if the leaders in those countries were lefties or Socialists. If *The Talisman* is indeed critical of, and inspired by Reagan's America, it is not a coincidence that the dark evils of Morgan Sloat / Morgan of Orris emerge from the west coast and head east, roughly paralleling Ronald Reagan's

progression from political ascendancy in California to the U. S. presidency in Washington, D. C. If Ronald Reagan became a father figure for his nation during the 1980s, Stephen King and Peter Straub tell us that he was a Gothic father.

Phil Sawyer's partner fits perfectly into the role of evil father figure of the Gothic. He, too, harasses, pursues, and even kills his victims when given the opportunity, but while the evil father figure's prosecution of the heroine has a constant threat of sexual assault, Morgan and Jack's relationship lacks this overt threat, since Sloat is motivated purely by money and power. His main objectives are to get rid of Jack, to get his hands on the Talisman and to become the undisputed sovereign of both the Sawyer and Sloat joint business in this world and the whole of the Territories kingdom in the parallel reality. It can be said that Sloat is trying metaphorically to rape Jack's spirit rather than his body, since he cannot get his hands on him. The plight of Jack Sawyer and the Gothic heroine is also caused by the refusal of the victim to succumb to the evil father's oppression. This way to undermine the paternal domination and attempt to gain certain degree of control of their own life must be dealt with by the father figure, quite often through violence, or the threat of it. Jack Sawyer and the Gothic heroine are the prey, and the evil father figure will use them to his personal gain, as the only value Jack has for Morgan Sloat/Morgan of Orris is that of profit; no love is lost in this relationship, as money and power, and the desire for them, lie at the heart of it. Sloat is trying to climb the social ladder through Jack, to use him in his own quest for the total control of the business and the sovereignty of the Territories. Jack is only worth having around as long as Sloat can control him as well as get what he wants from and also through him. Once he has fulfilled this task, Jack becomes a liability and must be disposed of. That is exactly what Sloat is trying to do, to kill the disobedient child:

Sloat came to a realization: if he learned, or even suspected, sometime in the next few days, that Jack Sawyer had discovered the existence of the Territories, he would kill him. There was such a thing as an unacceptable risk. (86)

Morgan Sloat, in his quest for becoming the all-powerful and controlling father figure of the business and the territory, is both “The Dark Lord” of fantasy, and the dark hero of the Gothic, who was called “the Byronic hero.” The “Byronic hero” is an alienated individual with sinister, ambitious, and anti-social qualities, whose ancestors were raised in the first Gothic writings of Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Gregory Lewis.³²

³² See, for example, “The Satanic and Byronic Hero: an Overview” in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature on line*: http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/topic_5/welcome.htm.

A transgressor, a dark and mysterious character, somewhat an outcast, an individual that defies collective taboos and social establishments, he breaks the boundaries of decency and morality and acts according to his own set of rules and not those posed by society and decency.

In his world, women are demoted to mere victims, the passive objects of his sexual desire and power. Sloat's attitude towards women is reflected throughout his relationship with Lily Cavanaugh, the only woman in the novel. This relationship has never been particularly warm, and it has only deteriorated even more during the years after the death of Lily's husband, Phil. Her cancer has finally turned her into the frail, vulnerable and passive female that cannot hold her own as she used to. Now she really has become the helpless victim of Sloat's harassment, just like he always wished her to be, trapped in the Alhambra Inns and Garden with nowhere left to hide, and she is at last at his mercy to be dealt with in whichever way he best sees fit. Morgan is finally able to wield his power on her, and even the sexual aspect of Sloat's desire to have Lily under his control is also mentioned, even if only in passing, when he recalls about the single time he made a drunken pass at Lily who rejected his advances and slapped him (706). This apparently trivial incident only mentioned almost at the end of the story seems to be as an undercurrent in Sloat's attitude towards Lily. It is the ultimate insult to the already troublesome relationship they both share, and it made Sloat's bitterness and vindictiveness grow.

Both Morgan Sloat and the Byronic hero are transgressors of boundaries. They do not obey the rules and conventions of society on their path towards their goal, but rather do what they please and do not pay attention to the consequences. Jack's "uncle" arranges several "accidents," has people killed when they get in the way of his plans, cheats and steals, harasses and haunts, and does not really care about anything else than how these things work in his own favor.

Morgan Sloat is also the dark lord of fantasy, possessing magical abilities, controlling great armies and portrayed as the ultimate personification of evil. His ethic of business represents the contemporary illustration of capitalist imperialism:

Uncle Morgan lived for business, for deal-making and hustling; and he was so ambitious that he challenged every even faintly dubious call in a tennis match, so ambitious in fact that he cheated in the penny-ante card games his son had now and then coaxed him into joining. At least, Jack *thought* that Uncle Morgan had been

consulted on December 18th 2014. H. P. Lovecraft finds these similar roots in his seminal work *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 59.

cheating in a couple of their games ... not a man who thought that defeat demanded graciousness. (28)

Although his plans for the Territories are hazy, Morgan has already brought weaponry in the land, and has begun using slave labor. He has made himself a place in the Territories, and he means to get rich off of its resources after he overthrows the Queen. The primitive agricultural society of the Territories seems to represent smaller, weaker nations in which America was involved during the entire decade of the 1980s. Ronald Reagan was a Dark Lord of fantasy, and his foreign policies were the result of manipulation of media and rhetorical policies rather than reality. His fervent anti-communism dates to his days in blacklist-era Hollywood following World War II, and was strengthened during his years of rallying General Electric workers behind the common cause of the Cold War as he honed his speech. His core belief – that the Soviet Union and other communist states were doomed to failure because of their lack of political freedom and economic opportunity – dovetails with the chief tenets of foreign policy expert George Keenan and his “containment strategy.” Reagan deserves a sliver of credit for America's success in the Cold War, but only as one of a string of presidents who essentially held fast to that strategy, which was already in place for forty years, since Harry Truman adopted it in the 1940s. It was Reagan's view – to his credit, politically correct – that the Cold War would not be so much won by the West as lost by the U. S. S. R. and the contradictions of communism, which he espoused in his radio commentaries of the 1970s and in several speeches of his first term. To call the Soviets “the evil empire” was a rhetoric weapon to strengthen the spirit of a nation traumatized by an economic crisis, and a line to soothe the zeal of the National Association of Evangelicals, his right-wing religious allies.

It is a spread myth that a “blank check” awarded to the military and the billions of dollars of waste that predictably followed, along with his cowboy's tough talk were the triggers that caused the Berlin Wall to tumble in 1989; but instead of Soviet economy, his bold actions and soaring rhetoric altered Soviet thinking. In particular, the impact of Reagan's dream for a high-tech shield against a nuclear attack was big. The Soviets saw Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, best known in the popular imagination as the “Star Wars” defense system, as a potential return to the worst days of the Cold War. This plan and other tough talk tamped down early talk of Soviet reforms, especially when the younger and change-oriented Gorbachev arrived on the scene, because

Reagan's words complicated the new leader's relations with his own hawks. Reagan's rhetoric did not destroy Soviet economy; the U.S.S. R. collapsed because of deeper structural inefficiencies, corruption and the PC, the personal computer. When the high-tech revolution began to really take off in the West during the 1980s, the lack of entrepreneurship under communism became glaring. So did the desire of people behind the Iron Curtain to join the surge of consumerism during the Reagan years. This sorry state of affairs is what truly motivated Gorbachev in 1985, when he finally took over the Kremlin from a generation of aging leaders that was making its last gap throughout Reagan's first term. His drive both for reform and for more openness, or *glasnost*, in Soviet society accelerated after the horrific 1986 nuclear power accident at Chernobyl, which exposed tens of thousands of people to potentially deadly levels of radiation and was an international embarrassment.

There is a common thread that links the more hawkish aspects of Reagan's White House years. These included not only the rhetoric or the pricey weapons, but the support for bloody crackdowns and counter-insurgencies by right-wing elements in Central America, or his 1983 invasion of Grenada (the first major offensive use of US combat troops since Vietnam). The way they were handled has roots in Reagan's reluctance to risk the lives of American troops and other citizens overseas or expose the American military force to prolonged conflict.

That was, in a nutshell, the basis of the "Reagan Doctrine," which sought to roll back Soviet influence in developing nations such as Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan through massive support of so-called freedom fighters like the antigovernment Contras in Nicaragua – whom Reagan called "the moral equivalents of our Founding Fathers" despite irrefutable proofs that the rebels were involved in human right abuses and drug trafficking – or the ultraconservative government of El Salvador and its death squads. The doctrine was the result of two very different impulses, the other one being a desire to avoid another Vietnam, with that traumatic military debacle so fresh in the American mind.

Despite the frequent acts of Middle East terrorism, the turmoil in Central America, and the tensions of a Cold War, Reagan the Great and Terrible was focused in uplifting Americans' self-image through mediatized conflicts, and no one was more controversial than the October 1983 invasion of the small Caribbean island of Grenada, which had been ruled since 1979 by leftist leader Maurice Bishop, who became a close ally of Cuba. With the island in turmoil after an October, 13, 1983, coup and Bishop's murder,

Reagan ordered an invasion of Grenada twelve days later. The reasons he cited to the American public were murky – the postcoup chaos, the construction of a new airport that the United States said seemed to be military in nature, even though it was planned and carried out by British and Canadian architects starting long before Bishop took power, and the large number of Americans attending a medical school on the island. The evidence that the American students were never remotely in danger is quite strong, but the subsequent military action did claim the lives of American servicemen, most because of accidents such as a midair helicopter collision and drowning.

The overwhelming use of American firepower, including the bombing of a civilian mental hospital that reportedly killed twelve civilians, was condemned around the globe, and one of the most prominent opponents was Reagan's ally, Britain's Margaret Thatcher. But the operation was popular where it mattered most to Reagan – with the American voter, and with his reelection just one year away. Just after the military action, the president's approval rating soared, and whatever the military significance of invading Grenada, the political impact shows the intuitive understanding by Reagan and his aides of the electorate's mood in the early 1980s: battered by Vietnam, desirous of an uplifting story about American goodness and might, but deeply fearful of another prolonged conflict and sustained loss of U.S. troops.

Grenada was a hasty response to change the focus of media attention from a not so patriotic and idealistic conflict in another tiny nation, Lebanon in the Middle East. The decision to send a multinational peacekeeping force to Beirut was not at first motivated by Islamic extremism but largely to defuse tensions escalated by Israel, with its 1982 invasion into Lebanon and the massacres at two Palestinian refugee camps inside the Israeli-occupied lands. Once the peacekeepers, an international force with U.S. participation, set up camp, they essentially became sitting ducks in a complicated, escalating conflict involving rival militias and sects, as acts of terrorism increased. The murky U. S. presence led to mounting criticism, and as a suicide bomber drove a truck larded with explosives into the lobby of the main U. S. Marine compound in Beirut, blowing the building off its foundations and flattening it, the official U.S. response to the terror attacks was predictably resolute. While officially America would not be cowed by terrorists, behind the scenes, Reagan's advisors realized that weak public support for the Lebanon mission was masked by the Grenada euphoria and that the situation in and around Beirut was becoming even more dangerous, both for the

Marines and politically for Reagan. The foreign policies of the card-sharp cowboy and its consequences still reverberate nowadays. Will Bunch explains that

It's interesting that Reagan's legacy builders unequivocally award him all the credit for winning the Cold War – even though the final acts took place after he left the stage – but don't seek to assign him with blame for the fact that Islamic-linked terrorism, with the United States as a target, grew after America's confused and failed misadventure in Lebanon, and with the seeming lack of a clear policy in the region ... The seeds of America's great foreign dilemmas of the 2000s, from the Iraq of Saddam Hussein (covertly supported by Reagan as a bulwark against Iran), and Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, allies in the U.S.- funded struggle with the Soviets in Afghanistan, were planted and allowed to grow during the Reagan years. In the end, the loose strands of Reagan's foreign policy are knotted by the same things that fueled its presidency in other areas: the odd force of the inner Reagan and his powerful imagination. (91-92).

Roads, Trials, Enemies and another Threshold.

After crossing the threshold in the secondary magical world and following Speedy's instructions to find Captain Farren and his mother's alter ego, Queen Laura de Lossean, both characters must run away from the court. Upon their stealthy scape, Jack and the Captain are intercepted by Osmond – Morgan of Orris' henchman:

Standing, halfway across the paddock area, looking unsettling out of place there, was the skeletal courtier the Captain had been afraid of – Osmond. He looked at them from dark gray melancholy eyes. Jack saw something stirring in those eyes, something deep down. His fear was suddenly sharper, something with a point, jabbing into him. *He's crazy* – this was the intuition which leaped spontaneously into his mind. *Nuttier than a damned fruitcake.* (112).

Jack immediately recognizes Osmond as one of the creatures that tried to kidnap him a long time ago, and luckily for him, Osmond does not know who Jack really is. Still, Jack's performance as a retarded kid does not save him from being flogged; Osmond's unnecessary violence claiming creepily that “All boys are bad. It's axiomatic” (114) confers the character with a religious fanaticism and a homophobia that also define the dominant traditional masculinities; and Osmond and his alter-ego of the primary world of the America of the early 1980s, Sunlight Gardener, as cruel, crazy, dangerous shadow figures. Interestingly enough, Reagan's policies in his first term seemed to replicate that same motto in regards to sexual education for teenagers. The Adolescence Family Life Act is a United States Federal law enacted in 1981 during the Reagan

administration to provide funding for a series of social programs aimed at promoting abstinence through reproductive health education. The bill carried strong religious undertones, particularly with the strategic funding of Catholic organizations, and abstinence only until marriage has remained the official position of the US government since the act was quietly signed into law without hearings or floor votes in the US Congress. The character of Osmond in the Territories and his counterpart Sunlight Gardener in the United States of the early 1980s and his closeness with Morgan Sloat/Morgan of Orris is a representation of the hazy line between Church and State in the United States.

An apparently fortuitous incident moves Osmond away from Jack, and the boy flips again from the Territories to the real world after an encounter with living trees in a forest. On the road, while on hitchhiking across USA, the echoes of the evil father figure of the Gothic and the sexual threat he represents are mirrored in the “sugar daddies” he meets. In a strange way, they all seem to want to be Jack's “fathers,” first appearing to be helpful and protective by offering him a ride in their cars and then turning on him when he does not comply with their sexual desires. (252-253) In addition, the evil father figure theme is echoed in the “Wicked Stepfather” story that Jack tells to potential employers when he is on his journey (162). And evil father figures is what Jack encounters along his way but before that, the hero must also **cross the threshold** in the primary world that takes him from his mundane existence to the world of the unknown. The hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the “threshold guardian” at the entrance of magnified power. Such custodians bound the world in the four directions – also up and down – standing from the limits of the hero's presence sphere, or life horizon (Campbell 64).

The first threshold for Jack Sawyer in the primary world of the USA is the Oatley Tunnel. But as a Gothic fantasy hero(ine) Jack is, the guardian of the threshold stems from the child's imagination rather than from reality. While crossing the tunnel to reach the town of Oatley, Jack is frightened by something that “scratched the ground only a foot or two behind him,” “a shape getting nearer” and two orange eyes coming towards him (144-45). The monster guardian of the threshold turns out to be a car that almost runs over him.

When Jack comes back to America, he is following Carol Pearson's heroic stages. According to her, the Innocent and the Orphan set the stage:

The Innocent lives in the prefallen state of grace; the Orphan confronts the reality of the Fall. The next few stages are strategies for living in a fallen world: The Wanderer begins the task of finding oneself from others; the Warrior learns to fight to defend oneself and to change the world in one's own image; and the Martyr learns to give, to commit, and to sacrifice for others. The progression, then, is from suffering, to self-definition, to struggle, to love. (4)

Therefore, the Orphan, confronted with the contrast of his rather comfortable life before he went on his journey and the reality of his life on the road, has to hitchhike with complete strangers, and continues travelling in dirty clothes and without much money or food. It is this necessity, once in Oatley, what urges Jack to make the terrible mistake of taking a job at a bar owned by Smokey Updike. The boy ends up being made to work extremely hard for almost nothing and forbidden to leave (163- 173). Another version of the evil father figure, Smokey Updike, and the town of Oatley represent the dark side of the United States and its capitalistic mentality. Both *The Talisman* and *Huckleberry Finn* unmask a patriarchal America of violence and stupidity, amply characterized in the latter book by Col. Sherburn, a man of mock gentility who defines his manhood by killing an unarmed drunk under the barest of provocations, and by the Duke and King, who rely upon their cultured hypocrisy to trick people out of their dollars and dignity. Anthony Magistrale says that one of the lessons that Jack learns on his journey is the economic and psychological bondage that Reagan's America placed on the less fortunate. Smokey Updike and the Oatley Tap epitomize Jack's experiences on the road. The boy finds himself in an enslavement that neatly parallels Huck's servitude at the hands of the Duke and King. Both children are trapped by virtue of their innocence and vulnerability, manipulated by men without scruples who are interested only in obtaining power and lining their pockets.

King and Straub's description of Oatley, New York, with its "shabby" buildings, its factories with "dingy" or broken windows, businesses with boarded over windows, and houses with "sagging porches" and "neglected" yards highlights the desolation and poverty that some American towns began experiencing in the 1980s and still exist in America's heartland: "The fields were brown and bare, and the houses were not farmhouses [...] No cows lowed, no horses whinnied, there were no animals and no farm equipment" (142). Reagan became President when America was economically sclerotic. The economic slowdown of the late 1970s and the 1981-1982 recessions were so severe that the inevitable rebound looked like a roaring freight train, and the Hollywood cowboy rode into Washington promising not only to slash everyone's taxes

and reduce government but to ease up on what he described as oppressive government regulations. However, his revolution rested on a fallacy – that somewhere in the American past shimmers a halcyon era where the masses lived happily and private enterprise flourished without interference from the dead hand of the government. Trying to take America on a journey back to a mythical land that never existed, Ronald Reagan set in motion a tidal wave of deregulation and privatization that transformed the nation and nowadays world. His ideas unleashed one of the great philosophical misadventures of modern history.

The key criticism of his deregulatory policies rests in the disastrous consequences of easing the rules on the financial industry, when he signed in 1982 a bill into law to lift many restrictions on the savings-and-loan industry, giving thrifts the power to make larger real estate loans and to compete with money market funds. A few years after Reagan was safely out of office, that industry was on the receiving end of the largest bailout in American history. What is more important, this scandal was part of a broader emphasis in 1980s economy on manufacturing financial deals rather than manufacturing durable goods, an anxiety that was voiced in 1987 by novelist Tom Wolfe's bond trader Sherman McCoy in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. A self-proclaimed “Master of the Universe” who cannot explain to his own son exactly what he makes for a living,³³ McCoy belongs to a trend that leads to the subprime mortgage crisis and the tricky financial instruments that led to the collapse of the brokerage house Bear Sterns and huge losses elsewhere around the globe, all fueled by weak or nonexistent government regulation in the United States.

Meanwhile, the flurry of corporate takeovers hosted by deregulatory policies encouraged widespread layoffs, and that was the beginning of the long-term flow of blue-collar jobs across the border and then overseas to Asia. The loss of manufacturing jobs was only one of the consequences of the deregulation Reagan applied, another one being the treachery to the common American man and the betrayal to the land carried out through the policies applied to agriculture. Worldwide recession put a damper on the demand for farm products in the early 1980s. The strong dollar priced U.S. farm products out of many foreign markets, and farm commodity prices and farm income began a rapid descent due to Jimmy Carter's embargo on grain shipments to the Soviet Union after the Afghanistan invasion. Many farmers who lived a fever of speculation in

³³ As we shall see when we explore again the character of Morgan Sloat, this is a characteristic that both characters share. Sloat belongs to this trend of characters.

the 1970s became a prey to the Farmers Home Administration, the federal agency that had encouraged so much of the borrowing.

Reagan's solution to the problem was the usual rhetoric: a reduction in federal farm programs and more free enterprise for the business of agriculture, which he said would be the salvation of the family farmer. He embarked his administration on a program that would dramatically increase farm subsidies, for the benefit not of the small farmer, but of the large landholder and the agribusiness. Aiming to boost agricultural exports by lowering commodity prices to a point that they would be competitive on the world market, Reagan passed the 1985 farm bill, compensating farmers for their losses with federal subsidies known as “deficiency payments.”

The bill failed miserably in improving the competitive positions of American farmers, and the deficiency payments amounted to a healthy subsidy for large farms but did little for middle-sized family farms, which defaulted on their loans in record numbers. However, the policy performed mightily for agribusiness concerns, the constituency that really mattered to Reagan. Depressed grain and livestock prices meant a windfall for grain-trading companies like Cargill and Continental Grain, which were getting their raw materials at a lower cost. These and other agribusiness concerns saw their profits soar in that period, but they were not passing on the low commodity prices to consumers; they were putting the money in their pockets.

The same could be said of all the deregulatory policies Reagan applied. Oatley in the novel and small towns in the United States, even nowadays, bear all of the dreary stamps of Reaganism: deregulated commerce, decimated labor unions, a starving public sector, privatization, corporate mergers, and the growth of temporary work. In brief, Ronald Reagan and his counterpart Morgan of Orris in *The Talisman*, and other figures such as Smokey Updike personify the worst trends of extreme neoliberalism: in a society that never has overcome the malaise of slavery, the mumbo jumbo of the master and the slave is replicated through the economic policies that have spread worldwide.

Jack Sawyer is at this point of the novel a common American boy trapped in the political webs of a Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy and its stereotypes. While in the Oatley Tap, which could be considered a Western Saloon, the boy meets, and is frightened by Elroy, “the cowboy-thing” (183), a mixture of animalistic monster and human who wants to abuse him. The man arrives to Oatley to make sure Jack goes back home: “Suddenly, shockingly, the cowboy mouthed these words: *Get your ass* home. And winked” (178). A monster “who looks like Randolph Scott” (178), it represents the

dilemma of the Jacksonian infatuation with the common man. Western literature often returns to the image of the bombastic frontier-hunter, not the meek farmer to tell stories, where the Jacksonian “common man” turns out to be the racist, rugged and individualistic counterpoint to the Jeffersonian yeoman. The confrontation between Jack and Elroy in *The Talisman*, with Jack flipping again into the Territories terrified, tells us, in Pearson's words, that the boy is the Wanderer, beginning the task of finding oneself apart from others. The boy is still the Jeffersonian innocent farmer confronting and fearing the dark side of the archetypal Jacksonian hero he is about to become in the Americans' imagination throughout the nineteenth century, and in the novel; that of the rugged individualist personified by frontiersmen in literature and cowboys in movies. Elroy is a grotesque being, a pedophilic shape-changer with the worst traits of the romanticized heroes of the Western: mean, tough and a killer. The fact that Elroy is another Sloat's minion comes to represent Ronald Reagan's /Morgan Sloat's appropriation of the myth of the West and its distortion for personal benefits.

The boy, a Jeffersonian yeoman with a bond with Mother Europe, flips to the Territories in Oatley using the “magic” of the wine bottle, and he is about to have one of the few moments of true happiness in the whole journey in this Gothic fantasy before everything changes for him. In the fantasy world, the middle ground between the over-civilization of city and the violent uncertainties of nature, Jack ends up in a medieval market where he just gets to go unnoticed for a while, and although he is tricked by a salesman, the boy thirsts his appetite and realizes he would not mind to be in the Territories forever, as these are not strange lands for him any longer. If we have previously commented that *The Talisman* concentrates on a key element in both Tolkien's and Lewis's theories of the fantastic, now it emerges. While Tolkien calls it “eucatastrophe,” the consolation of the happy ending, Lewis refers to it generically as “joy.” an emotion deeper than reason or logic. On his way to the West, joy is what Jack seems to feel at this moment of the journey, and joy is what the flying men in the sky he meets (221) instill him. However, the moment is ephemeral, and the sight of Morgan of Orris's diligence driven by Elroy makes him flip again to the United States primary world.

The alternative worlds in the novel are reciprocal and, as Jack goes between the worlds, for reasons unknown he triggers an earthquake in the nearby town of Angola. By the time the boy arrives to Buckeye, Ohio, and enters the city shopping mall to have a little fun, Jack is no longer the spiritless, afraid lad that started journeying west. His

experiences on the road have strengthened him, and his quest has achieved a mythical tone that makes him a unique human being and an outsider from society, as he recalls when meeting other girls his age:

Just then three girls a year or two older than Jack bounced out of the back of a Subaru Brat which had swung recklessly into a parking spot near the mall's main entrance. For a second they had the look of models contorted into awkwardly elegant poses of delight and astonishment. When they had adjusted into more conventional postures the girls glanced incuriously at Jack and began to flip their hair expertly back into place. They were leggy in their tight jeans, these confident little princesses of the tenth grade, and when they laughed they put their hands over their mouths in a fashion which suggested that laughter itself was laughable. Jack slowed his walk into a kind of sleepwalker's stroll. One of the princesses glanced at him and muttered something to the brown-haired girl beside her.

I'm different now, Jack thought: *I'm not like them anymore*. The recognition pierced him with loneliness. (235)

However, Jack feels incredibly guilty for accidentally causing an earthquake which killed five people while flipping. Luckily for Jack, Speedy Parker appears again, disguised as another artist, a blues singer called Snowball outside the Buckeye Mall. When Jack, absolutely sure Snowball is, in fact, Speedy, Snowball reassures him: “Well, if yo friend Speedy was here, *whoever* he might be, or *whatever* he might be in this old world, he might tell you that you cain't carry the world on yo shoulders, son [...] first, it's gonna break yo back, and then it's gonna break yo *sperrit*” (244). A few lines along, after Jack continues to call him Speedy, Snowball tells “Nothing speedy here [...] Cept maybe how speedy some folks are to put the blame on themselves for things others might have got started” (245). Finally, the blues singer tells Jack that “Some things you cain't help. Sometimes people get killed because someone does something [...] but if somebody *didn't* do that something, a whole lot of more people would have gotten killed” (246). The mentor figure – manifesting itself though a similar type of person in the Trickster way mentioned when analyzing Speedy – reassures the hero of his doing and makes him remember his goal and go on. As Campbell comments: “The fantasy is a reassurance – a promise that the peace of Paradise, which was known first within the mother womb, is not to be lost” (59).

Of Wolves and Men and Transformative Stages

Shortly after facing the consequences of the earthquake and almost getting caught by Morgan Sloat in America, Jack runs away again to the Territories and meets Wolf, a complicated character. A good hearted and noble werewolf, he could be considered the traditional Helper figure. An individual with supernatural strength, stamina and speed, his former position as a shepherd defines him as the Caregiver archetype, taking care of Jack as if he were his guardian and behaving towards Jack as if he were a part of the herd, thus trying to protect Jack on the way. The fact that his noble savage personality comes from his animal like behavior is problematic, though. The relationship between Jack and Wolf is polarized in the sense that Wolf is an Other – he works in a contrasting way to Jack, the contrast lying mainly in the man/ animal duality, and in the fact that Wolf comes from the Territories.

The key moment that marks the bond between both Jack and Wolf arrives when Morgan of Orris appears disguised as the Dark Lord of fantasy displaying magical abilities and attacking Jack with a lightning rod (273-274). Jack is forced to flip into America with Wolf and troubles begin for both of them. There, Wolf becomes literally a piece of the other world brought into our world, unable to cope. For example, the teen werewolf keeps on talking about the different smells he experiences in our world. Due to the overwhelming smell of vehicles, he is unable to ride those, which incredibly slows Jack down and creates unnecessary trouble.

Several aspects of the trickster archetype appear to complicate the ambivalent relationship both characters share. Vogler defines the Trickster as an entertaining figure that serves as “a comical relief” (77), as the counterbalance that gives us some perspective when we are taking ourselves too seriously. Wolf's misplacement from the Territories to our world sometimes leads to absurd and comic situations coming from the werewolf not being able to deal with modern technology (e. g. when Jack takes Wolf to see Ralph Bankshi's animated movie version of *The Lord of the Rings* in chapter eighteen) and different surroundings and principles (e. g. the paper-box packed Burger King meal Jack buys him, which he eats including the paper in chapter twenty). Vogler's comment that the tricksters are the enemies of the status quo fits with the fact that Wolf is an intruder in our world; he is beyond our world, he does not share modern values and he is the primitive animal-like absolute breaking into controlled social order.

And in connection to him being a werewolf, he personifies Jung's description of the trickster: "He is a forerunner of the savior, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being" (Guerin 188).

The trickster can also be a shadow figure (Wheelwright 286) and this is somehow present in the background because of Wolf's savage and deadly nature. Since he is a werewolf, due to his monthly cycle Jack has to worry about losing control over the wilder and wilder Wolf, which forces Jack to travel through backwaters, avoid civilization and eventually deal with the situation by locking himself in a barn so Wolf could not hurt him (307-320). However, the fundamental aspect of Wolf is that his character works as a narrative tool, the trickster bringing, according to Vogler, "healthy change and transformation" (77). Tricksters are catalyst characters, "who affect the lives of others, but are unchanged themselves" (79). In this sense, the fantasy of the bonding between Jack Sawyer and Wolf is a representation of the catalyst role African Americans and Native Americans have performed in the narrow but widely shared sense of the past Americans have – a history that has viewed American as European in ancestry.

Race has functioned as a necessary metaphor to the construction of Americanness: the American Revolution and its theoreticians defined American as white. As the governor of Virginia during the Revolution, Thomas Jefferson supported the broadening of landownership, for he believed it produced the basis of social and political stability. Like others before him, Jefferson worried about class tensions and conflicts within white society. The New World, he saw, offered something Europe could not – an abundance of uncultivated land. Americans would remain virtuous as long as they were involved in agriculture, and this would last as long as there were "vacant" lands in America. In Jefferson's judgement, the way to avoid class conflicts in American society was to open opportunities for white men to become farmers. As free individuals, and owners of property, they would become responsible citizens. Jefferson's was a vision of independent and virtuous yeoman farmers.

The fantastic and complacent view of African Americans as savage and noble individuals is a product of nineteenth century literature and ideas, but its patronizing reality goes back in time to the seventeenth century, when planters in the colonies, mainly in Virginia, did not fully consider the explosive consequences of changing from white indentured servants to black slave laborers. They wanted to diminish the presence and power of a white proletariat, armed and numerous. African slaves seemed to offer a

solution to the problem of class conflict within white society. Slavery enabled planters to develop a disenfranchised and disarmed black force. By the time the third President of the United States had built a utopian America of “lovely whites,” slavery had become a delicate affair. A giddy multitude that constantly threatened social order, slaves for Thomas Jefferson were savage animals which could not be neither hold nor freed, “the wolf by the ears” (Takaki 76). Unable to free himself from his belief in black intellectual inferiority, the President desired to abolish slavery, not because of sentimentalism, but to avoid a race war. It was a difficult task because slavery had become an important economic motor.

The transition from a static, democratic Jeffersonian mentality to an individualistic, boundless character is attributed to war hero Andrew Jackson and his vision of democracy; and in this transition, race again plays a fundamental role. In order to justify the removal and destruction of Indian tribes, Jackson affirmed the “errand into the wilderness,” like the early Puritans. He advised Indians to seek new homes in the West and follow the example of the whites: restless and boundless, the whites were constantly seeking to improve themselves and settle in new places. Meanwhile, cotton became a strategic product in American economy, which was defined by Republicanism and a psychology that was fueling economic acquisition and expansion in America. While the Protestant ethic had defined work as virtuous, requiring the habits of self-control and the accumulation of wealth as a sign of salvation; republicanism was now proclaiming worldly goods as markers of virtue. The impetus of this economic boom buttressed the institution of slavery and the westward expansion into Indian territory, but the very boundlessness of this racial and ethnic diversity generated a need to reinforce interior borders.

The critical point where the boundlessness of American racial and ethnic diversity and the need to reinforce interior borders collide is the American Civil War (1861-1865). A catalyzer fact, the Civil War fortified and defined the American character as rugged and individualist, but headed American citizens to a hell on earth that added and completed the American character, while the situation of Native Americans or African Americans – the catalyzers of this situation in a way – remained the same. Reversing “the wolf by the ears” Jeffersonian metaphor, Wolf brings change to Jack's life, who feels compelled to take care of him and adjust his journey according to his limitations. And just as the need to preserve the American political and identifying unity ended in a hell on earth, Jack and Wolf enter **the belly of the whale** in *The Talisman*, the last

transformative stage of Separation in Campbell's monomyth, when they are arrested and brought to the Sunlight Gardener Home facility for boys.

In Sunlight Home, Jack meets Sunlight Gardener, the American counterpart to Osmond in the Territories, Morgan's henchman. Gardener is shown as a fanatical fundamentalist, put into context by Tracy Nectoux:

A demonstrable example of 80s American culture in *The Talisman* is the character of Reverend Sunlight Gardener, a frighteningly insane Christian fundamentalist, who is modelled on the likes of Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell and Jim Bakker – four prominent television evangelists in the 1980s.

A twisted character leading a sadistic and abusive institution under the false flag of social aid and improvement, Gardener's organization reminds the orphanage from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837), especially in the relationships between the older and the younger or freshly arrived prisoners (Golden, Wagner and Wiater 64). In a more profane and nowadays sense, the Sunlight Gardener Home hierarchy reminds of the Wal-Mart chain of stores, which expanded worldwide in the 1980s appropriating Christian values and economically expanding thanks to Reagan's commerce deregulations, settling temporary work, low wages and censorship. However, to the purpose of the analysis of the novel's structure, the facility turns out to be the belly of the whale, a dangerous place and a literal medieval hell when Jack and Wolf try to flip to the Territories in the bathroom (392). The experience signals a clear break, distinguishing Jack Sawyer, who began this quest against his will and full of trepidation, from Jack / Jason Delossean, whose spirit Jack really comes to embody while a prisoner at Gardener's home. Not only is the Jack we see there willing to fight to protect himself and Wolf; he likewise possesses a mental toughness that enables him to refuse, even under the duress of torture, to provide Sunlight with answers to his requests for information.

Gardener keeps Jack locked up in one place for Morgan to arrive and deal with him. Wolf is confined in a metal box, where his werewolf cycle comes again (404). However, even during the times of aggression, Wolf is, in Pearson's classification, the Caregiver archetype, always taking care of Jack, showing his best side and acting almost as a Helper figure. In the end, things escalate and Wolf in his savage state helps Jack run away (and expose the evil Sunlight Home for good) for the price of his own life – sacrificing himself for the greater good.

If the Civil War signaled a breaking point in America, and after the struggle Americans began to think they had a proper identity and history, the sacrifice of Wolf is a reminder of the situation of African Americans in white society, whose laws began to recognize them as citizens and human, but only on paper. The fact that Wolf gives his life fits perfectly with the role of catalyzer of the Trickster archetype. Wolf brings transformation, but it is a sudden, not a natural and healthy one. The status and welfare of the werewolf do not improve; they remain unchanged, just as the social and economic status of African Americans in the United States. But, finally, Jack has overcome the breaking point of his development. That Jack endures the violent loss of Wolf and continues his journey only highlights Jack Sawyer's attributes as an epic hero: he emerges from the hell of Gardener's captivity a stronger individual, the Warrior who learns to fight to defend himself, and ready to change the world in one's own image. Jack is finally about to become the Jacksonian hero he feared at the beginning of the journey: individualistic, rugged and ready to achieve goals and overcome obstacles. However, the burden of the loss of Wolf will accompany him throughout the whole journey.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY: INITIATION

After Wolf's death, Jack will try to find his childhood friend, Richard Sloat (Morgan's son) in order to find safe haven and also some help on his quest. When they meet at the Thayer boarding school in Illinois, which Richard attends, Jack completes the next stage of the monomyth, **the meeting with the goddess**. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* it is explained that

The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage of the hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. ... The meeting with the goddess (who is incarnated in every woman) is the final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love (*amor fati*) which is life itself as the encasement of eternity. And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. (Campbell 99)

This is a very important step in the individuation process and it is often represented by a person finding the other person that he or she loves most completely. Jack Sawyer

finally reunites with Richard Sloat, his all life friend, and Jung becomes useful to explain the meaning of this pairing. He contrasted the critical and rational faculties of *logos* with the emotional, non-reason oriented and mythical elements of *eros*. For him, *logos* represented the masculine principle of rationality, in contrast to his female counterpart, *eros*:

Woman's psychology is founded on the principle of *Eros*, the great binder and loosener, whereas from ancient times the ruling principle ascribed to man is *Logos*. The concept of Eros could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of Logos as objective interest. (Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine* 65)

The masculine and feminine principles are present in all individuals, and they are not related to gender. If Jack Sawyer has been in *The Talisman* the Gothic heroine in peril, at least for a time, it is because he represents the *Eros* feminine principle when compared to his close friend, Richard Sloat, representative of the masculine principle. Although Jack expected Richard to be another helper, Richard turns out to be an Other archetype, a contrasting figure to the hero. A coward individual contrasted to heroic Jack, Richard is the personification of *Logos*, an extremely realist person trying to rationalize all the strange situations he encounters with Jack. From this perspective, he works as a counterpoint to Jack's childish naivety and emotionality, characteristics of the female principle. It is that naivety the value that allowed Jack to accept the Quest in the first place, while at the same time, Richard seems childish because he contrasts with Jack's coming of age. Richard is the voice of reason and science, a person who “also saw strange things as a boy, but rather than pursue them, as Jack has, he closes his mind off to such things and becomes an ultra-realist, until Jack draws him into his adventures in the Territories” (Golden, Wagner and Wiater 67). Similarly to Wolf, Richard also works against the pace that Jack's mother's illness sets, because as Jack brings him closer to the Talisman, Richard gets sicker and slows Jack down.

His existence is not entirely working against Jack, though. Vogler mentions that “two lovers, friends or allies may be attracted to one another because they complete each other, perhaps clashing at first because they possess contrasting values, but discovering that each needs something the other has” (318). Richard makes Jack verbalize his quest and explain the realities of it. The “otherness” does not mean he is an evil character, but the perfect balance to the feminine principle. Both Jack and Richard represent the perfect mystical marriage of *Eros* and *Logos*, the completion of the

American character that raised after the Civil War: the characteristic masculine pragmatism complemented with the natural (and feminine in nature) rugged individualism.

After both characters meet at the Thayer school, the two worlds, the United States of the 1980s and the Territories, start to melt together in a dream-like scene in which the school is ridden with maggots, demons, monstrous dogs [...] This is an ineffective attempt to slow Jack down, because Morgan is headed to Thayer, anticipating Jack to seek out Richard. After Jack and Richard escape flipping into the Territories, they have to take a train across the dangerous Blasted Lands, the Territories' nuclear wasteland which parallels the Vast Great Plains.

Recalling the Jacksonian “errand into the wilderness,” Jack and Richard penetrate into a wasteland product of the nuclear tests the American army conducted in Nevada and Arizona in the United States of America. Taking into account that Morgan would transform the Territories into another version of the American wasteland, the pristine beauty of the Eastern territories is meant to contrast sharply with what modern technology has created in merely a century and a half of transforming the American landscape. The Blasted Lands are a fantastic, dark, grotesque version of the American frontier where the trees themselves, mutated versions of tortured Treebeards brought to life in a futuristic version of Tolkien, embody the spirit of a dying landscape:

As long as Jack was not directly looking at the trees, he saw their tortured faces in perfect detail, the open O of the mouth, the staring eyes and drooping nose, the long agonized wrinkles running down the cheeks. They were cursing, pleading, howling at him – their unheard voices hung in the air like smoke. Jack groaned. Like all the Blasted Lands, these trees had been poisoned. (532)

They could be a dark prognosis for America's larger future. King and Straub indict the highly rational minds that produced nuclear weaponry for the highly irrational consequences in terms of animal and vegetable mutations. The writers required little imagination, given the examples of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to envision the aftereffects of a nuclear nightmare that King at least feels will be technological man's legacy to the earth:

As the train pulled past the animals, Jack saw that the testicles of the male had swollen to the size of pillows and sagged onto the ground. What had made such monstrosities? Nuclear damage, Jack supposed, since scarcely anything else had such power to deform nature. The creatures, themselves poisoned from birth, snuffled up the equally poisoned water and snarled at the little train as it passed. Our world could look like this someday, Jack thought. (535)

King's feeling and nuclear fear does not rest in such events, though. They are the product of Reagan America and its circumstances. The event that permanently altered the course of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy – and thus world history – wasn't the President calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” or when he asked Mikhail Gorbachev to tear the Berlin Wall down, or his ability to persuade Congress to spend billions on defense; instead, it was the production and national broadcast of a TV movie that was conceived in Hollywood and was quickly adopted by American peace movements as their own.

The producers of ABC's *The Day After*, a two and a half hour movie broadcast on November 20, 1983, insisted their project was a public service to educate Americans about the effect of a thermonuclear war between the United States and the U.S.S.R., not a political jab at the Reagan White House. A fairly formulaic TV disaster epic, the movie shows normal lives interrupted by unfathomable events, in this case, a nuclear exchange that killed millions of people set in the American heartland, the epicenter the city of Lawrence, Kansas. It is absurd to think that the film was apolitical when it was produced in the early years of the Reagan presidency, when his tough talk towards the Soviets and his record increase in military spending had brought both America and the world to focus on the possibilities of a World War III. But the imagination – prone Reagan had suffered much of his adult life from worries over the prophecies of a world-ending Armageddon as depicted in *The Day After*, and he tried to convert his imaginative vision that he personally could save the world from a nuclear Armageddon into a reality, moderating the confrontation with the Soviets in his second term. Both potencies even contemplated the destruction of all nuclear weapons, but foundered on Reagan's refusal to give up another cherished personal vision: his notion of a high-tech weapons shield.

The myth of the West and the terrors and paranoia of the Cold War blur in the Blasted Lands of *The Talisman*. In a similar manner, the imagery of the literature of the West and the Cold War paranoia converged to make up the archetypal hero of the American myth, the gunfighter. A product of the Cold War ideas about professionalism and violence, the gunfighter replaced the frontiersman in American imagination due to the archetypal heroes of Westerns like *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953). Reflections of a period filled with unease because of McCarthyism and Communism, the

gunfighters were lone avengers cleansing the morally corrupted American society from an invisible enemy that had infiltrated American character and minds.

Jack Sawyer becomes Shane, the ideal farmer turned gunman when the train reaches the end of the tracks and both he and Richard must face a dangerous shootout with Osmond's army of bad wolves and Osmond's mutated son. In an episode that recalls the decimation of Native Americans, the original inhabitants of the Territories, be it good (Wolf) or bad (Osmond's army), are wiped out of the land.

By the time Jack Sawyer and Richard Sloat have traversed the Blasted Lands, the true heir of the Territories has learn to appreciate what has been sacrificed in the land, before he can restore the wasteland. A radical environmentalist, Jack Sawyer emerges as the truly Jacksonian American hero confronting Reagan's callous indifference towards the environment and rebelling against Reagan's appointees James Watt and Anne Burford and their efforts to dole out drilling and mining leases on public lands and water down toxic waste rules and policy decisions. He is now truly the Warrior in Pearson's words, an individual trying to defend himself and changing the world in his own image. However, as the truly archetype of the American myth, Jack has also regenerated himself through violence, inflicted or received and, therefore, he must be reborn again to clean his soul and be worthy of the Talisman.

Approaching the Black Hotel

With the help of the weapons brought by Morgan to the Territories which they find on the train and the magical coin given to Jack by captain Farren, they win the battle to Osmond and can continue until they reach the ruinous town of Point Venuti in California with the Black Hotel that holds the Talisman standing on the beach. From the point both boys meet at Thayer school, Richard is thrown into the magic reality of Jack's quest and since that moment acts in a disbelieving way, attributing everything he experiences to dreaming. Jack is forced to explain everything and to verbalize his quest to an incredulous Richard, who little by little finds out that his dad Morgan is “one of the guys in the black hats” (568) and supports, reluctantly at the beginning, Jack's goal.

The Talisman is inside the Black Hotel, with Osmond and the remaining Bad Wolves guarding the entrance, and Jack decides to cross the city and try to get inside the Gothic locus from the beach. As they go further towards the Talisman, Richard starts to have fevers, rashes and the closer the two are to the Black Hotel, the more difficult it is for Richard to keep up with Jack.

In desperate need for a plan and help, Jack and Richard once again meet Parkus/Speedy, the Helper, at the beach. The old man is also plagued with the same disease as Richard, which is, supposedly an allergy to the Black Hotel, a transitional place half between this world and the Territories. Speedy / Parkus acknowledges Jack's transformation into the Hero by saying "You the one, all right. The road laid its mark on you, I see. You the one. You gonna do it" (617) and then provides Jack with a plan to go to the hotel through the back door, accessible from the sea and gives Jack an inflatable raft to reach it. Jung tells us that the Helper "always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea can extricate him" (Guerin 188).

With semi-unconscious Richard, Jack departs for the Black Hotel, where he leaves the sleeping beauty in the dining room and then goes deeper into the hotel to find the Talisman. Inside the hotel, the reader is often faced with the main protagonist being referred to as both Jack and Jason and sometimes even watching the events happening in both America and the Territories:

Jack swung toward
(*Jason swung toward*)
toward that opening door
(*that rising drop-gate*)
his hand plunging into
(*the poke*)
the pocket
(*he wore on the belt of his jerkin*)
of his jeans and closing around the guitar pick Speedy had given him so long ago
(*and closing around the shark's tooth*)
he waited to see what would come out of the Heron Bar (640-641)

When the thing behind the door makes its appearance as an armored knight, frightened Jack tries to escape the danger by jumping to the Territories. However, with the Black Hotel being a transitional place, the two worlds correspond much more closely than it was usual before. Jack (now referred to as Jason) finds himself still facing the dark knight. Terrified and not knowing what to do, Jack ends up in a tight and wounding grasp of the knight while, all of the sudden, in a moment of death or life crisis, the

Helper figure of Speedy comes back once more to help the distressed hero reminding him to use the token he gave him at the very beginning, the guitar pick which showed captain Farren early on that Jack could be trusted:

It's going to kill me and my mother will die, Richard will die, Sloat will win, going to kill me, going to (tear me apart rip me open with its teeth) freeze me solid –
JACK! Speedy's voice cried.
(JASON! Parkus' voice cried.)
The pick, boy! Use the pick! Before it's too late! FOR JASON'S SAKE USE THE PICK BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE! (645)

In a moment of absolute connection, Jack becomes the mythical dual Jack/Jason. Joseph Campbell tells us that

the hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died. [...] Instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again. [...] The devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis” (77)

Jack does not disappear, but evolves into something bigger:

“In her name, you filthy, aborted thing!” they shouted together – but it was one shout only: the shout of that single nature, Jack/Jason. *“Get you off the skin of this world! In the name of the Queen and in the name of her son, get you off the skin of this world!* (645).

For Joseph Campbell, this “is the highest and ultimate crucifixion, not only of the hero, but of his god as well. Here the Son and the Father alike are annihilated – as personality masks over the unnamed” (164). After a few more knights destroyed by the pick, when Jack is about to confront the last knight, the pick dissolves, leaving the hero apparently unarmed. Trying to dodge the knight's attacks, Jack hears again Speedy's voice: *“ Jack, you didn't need no magic juice to git ovah, and you don't need no magic pick to pull the chain on this here coffee can, neither!* (655) — *“All the magic is in YOU, Jack! Don't you know that by now?”* (656) and he again follows Speedy's advice in one final act of mastering his inner powers:

He stood on his toes, reached up, and seized the black helmet on both hands. [...] “Get you off the skin of this world” he said in a voice that was low and calm, almost conversational. “In her name I command you”.

The red light in the helmet puffed out like the candle inside a carved pumpkin, and suddenly the weight of the helmet – fifteen pounds at least – was all in Jack's hands, because there was nothing else supporting it; beneath the helmet, the suit of armor had collapsed. (656)

With the last knight vanished, with Jack fully connected to his mythical alter-ego Jason, and after proving numerous times through the book that he is worthy of the Talisman, the passage to the Territories Ballroom where the Talisman had been stored is opened and Jack is about to receive **the ultimate boon**, the achievement of the transcendent goal of the quest. In order to prove that he is worthy of The Talisman, Jack has been transformed into the Martyr; he has learned to give, to commit, to sacrifice for others (Richard and Wolf).

The Talisman is Jack's reward. From the pieces of information and described effects on the boy, it seems not only to be a healing artefact, but also a key to omnipotence. When Jack picks it up in the Black Hotel, he experiences an **apotheosis**. In Campbell's words, "Those who know, not only that the Everlasting lies in them, but that what they, and all things, really are is the Everlasting, dwell in the groves of the wish fulfilling trees, drink the brew of immortality, and listen everywhere to the unheard music of eternal concord" (142). The boy sees the universes in their entirety:

As it came down, worlds reeled about his head. He did not seem to be crashing through layers of reality now but seeking an entire cosmos of realities, all overlapping one another, linked like a shirt of (*reality*) Chain-mail. *You are reaching up to hold a universe of worlds, a cosmos of good, Jack* – this voice was his father's. *Don't drop it, son. For Jason's sake, don't drop it.* Worlds upon worlds upon worlds, some gorgeous, some hellish, all of them for a moment illumined in the warm white light of this star that was a crystal globe chased with fine engraved lines. It came slowly down through the air toward Jack Sawyer's trembling, outstretched fingers. (664)

After the moment Jack touches the Talisman, the reader sees people connected to Jack and his journey and Jack's acts towards them and sudden connection with them through the power of the Talisman. A signal is sent to his mother: "Jason? she gasped, and then frowned; that was not her son's name. But in her dream from which she had just startled awake she had had a son by such name, and in that dream she had been someone else" (665). However, Jack also punishes the wrongdoers he has met through the power of the Talisman:

Smokey looked down at his calculator and saw a single word blinking on and off in the red window: TALISMAN-TALISMAN-TALISMAN-TALISMAN Then his eyes exploded ... A moment later the entire Oatley Tap blew sky-high, and before

the fire-trucks could arrive from Dogtown and Elmira, most of downtown was in flames. (667)

As the first snow began to spit down from the leaden skies over Cayuga (and as Jack Sawyer was touching the Talisman some two thousand miles away), the LP tanks behind the kitchen exploded. ... The Sunlight Home burned to the ground in almost no time at all. (672)

Refusing the overwhelming power, Jack openly reveals the one and only motivation for his journey, tying himself to Pearson's caregiver, as well: *No, I don't want to be God! Please! Please, I don't want to be God, I ONLY WANT TO SAVE MY MOTHER'S LIFE!* (674). But despite the boy finally finding the Talisman, he cannot simply go back to his mother. A confrontation against the shadow figures that have chased him the whole book awaits him; the Gothic heroine must come to terms with the Gothic father figure (s)he was afraid of at the very beginning of his journey.

Defeating the Father Figure

From the Talisman's point of view, Jack has earned it, since the Talisman itself is calling the boy and inviting him to take it since Jack's arrival to Point Venuti. But from Morgan's point of view and the point of view of the magical flora and fauna brought from the Territories, Jack is a thief. Hence, the **atonement with the father** is inevitable. The hero must confront and be initiated by whatever holds the ultimate power in his or her life. In many myths and stories, this is the father, or a father figure who has a life and death power. A symbolical father figure to Jack, Morgan Sloat is also literally a father. He has a son, Richard, who is Jack's best friend. Sloat has been a good, even if somewhat absent father, in the physical sense, that is, for Richard. The boy seems to keep his father on a pedestal, unaware of Morgan's evil deeds. However, all this changes in the course of the novel when Richard joins Jack for the latter part of his quest for the Talisman, and in doing so, disobeys his father and thus abandons his submissive role as the always obedient son. Richard's unexpected revolt upsets Sloat a great deal, since "as long as there was Richard politely coming along behind him, all was well and all was well and all manner of things was well" (80). When Richard rebels against his father and, eventually chooses Jack over him, their relationship turns from that of father and son to that of hunter and prey. As long as the son obeys his father's wishes, he will be safe and loved, but once he starts to think for himself, the boy is suddenly in danger and

becomes expendable. For Morgan Sloat, fatherhood seems to be a matter of choice and rationality, almost a business issue. When the business deal, the father and son relationship, ceases to be profitable for him, the contract might be terminated. In this sense, Sloat becomes the evil father figure even to his own son, since his disobedience cannot be tolerated.

To Jack, however, Sloat has been more or less the evil father figure all along, even despite earlier attempts to pose as the jolly uncle:

When [Jack] looked into Uncle Morgan's face, he saw calculation sink into his skin, slide underneath his jolly fat-man's cheeks like a snake beneath a rock. He looked like Richard Sloat's daddy again, like good old Uncle Morgan who always gave spectacular Christmas and birthday presents, like good old sweaty Uncle Morgan, so easy not to notice. But what had he looked like before? *like a human earthquake, like a man crumbling apart over the fault-line behind his eyes, like something all wound up and waiting to explode...* (193)

Sloat's façade finally comes off completely and he shows his true face and character to both Jack and later on to Richard as well, which costs him his son and heir in the end. Sloat's own actions and his antagonism towards Jack become the downfall of his intended empire and also his own immortality, the first of which he had planned to leave to his son and the second to be reached through him, since “Richard [...] was his immortality” (79). In this sense, Sloat is bringing about his downfall through the alienation of his own offspring. Entwined in the sadness Sloat briefly feels for the loss of his son there is also some sorrow for himself as well, since his plans of becoming “immortal” through Richard are thwarted in the end, and the continuity of his empire is denied.

In fact, although Morgan Sloat comes to represent the father figure with a death or life power, this power is derived from an inner low self - esteem. Phil Sawyer's partner turns out to be an incompetent villain, very much in the line of Oz the Great and Terrible in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900): a common tiny man behind a façade and mask of power that overwhelms him. Sometimes smooth and manipulative, sometimes unscrupulously pragmatic (not afraid of getting rid of some people standing on his way), and greedy business man in pursuit of power, Morgan has always been the underdog of the group around Phillip Sawyer, Jack's dad. He feels that his deceased partner wronged him by always being superior and better than him, making him feel inferior and inadequate. Although this is not true, Sloat bases all his vengeance in this false notion because, in his opinion, he did more for the Sawyer and Sloat business than

Jack, who is about to inherit the company from his father. Jack is being made to pay an unreasonable price for his father's trivial sins, because Morgan will only feel totally vindicated when the sins of the father have been atoned by his son.

But this last statement is mirroring the relationship of Morgan with his son, Richard. Sloat is paying in a way for his own father's sins. The business man tried to run away from a scary and abusive father figure, and got it when he finally went to university, where the monster would not dare to come. Morgan is repeating his father's mistakes with Richard, and that lack of love and compassion alienate the man from his son. He prefers to see Richard dead than allied with Jack, and this unreasonable hate will lead him to his destruction.

Portrayed as a weak figure, Morgan of Orris is the channel Morgan Sloat uses to take care of his dirty work in a way best described as a Dr Jekyll/ Mr Hyde transformation. Just as Osmond turns out to be the crazier and more savage counterpart of Sunlight Gardener, Morgan of Orris is Sloat's darker, more primitive and blatantly evil side. As discovered throughout the book, Jack's father Phil was murdered upon Morgan's request, as was also the case of the lawyer Tommy Woodbine, one of Phil Sawyer's closest friends that stood in Morgan's way to get the rest of the business. Orris himself thinks about the dependent relationship of mastermind and henchman that both projections of the same individual share:

Sloat was able to plan murder, but it had been Orris, time and time again, who had migrated to carry out the act himself. It had been Orris in Sloat's body who had attempted to smother the infant Jack Sawyer with a pillow while a wrestling announcer droned on and on in the background. Orris who had overseen the assassination of Phil Sawyer in Utah (just as he had overseen the assassination of Phil Sawyer's counterpart, commoner Prince Phillip Sawtelle, in the Territories. (490)

Morgan's attempts do suggest he is a villain, but his actions show him more like a bluff. After all, he is a failing actor who makes his living by managing actors. His discovery of the Territories is described pretty much as a matter of chance: when Phil Sawyer told him about them, both partners were high on whisky and marihuana (84). Similarly, the tin key which changed into a magical lightning rod in the Territories and which Sloat tried to kill Jack with throughout the book was bought because of a mere compulsion and a feeling of the key whispering to him (263). Although he is on a quest for power, he does not seem to be willing to really get his hands dirty by killing Lily and Jack, and he does not seem to have the stomach to fully act like the villain his goals

need him to become. Judging from the episodes in the book, it seems as if Morgan never wanted the unnecessary violence in the first place, as if he was only more pragmatic, trying to catch Jack and bring him back to New Hampshire or simply scare him and make him return on his own. Actually, Orris remarks in one of the interludes that mention Morgan in the book that “Sloat had a taste for blood, but ultimately he was allergic to it as Orris was to American food and American air. It was always Morgan of Orris, once derided as Morgan Thudfoot, who had always done the deeds Sloat had planned” (490).

After Jack picks up the Talisman and experiences the multitude of worlds, he must go out of the hotel with it. In his traditional fashion, Morgan orders Gardener to shoot Jack when the boy gets out of the hotel. However, when that actually happens, the sight of Richard accompanying Jack dissolves Morgan's pretended composure, as he finally understands that everything is not under his control anymore:

Sloat really believed he had everything under control – the situation, of course, but more important, himself. He went right on believing this until he saw his son, obviously weak, obviously sick, but still very much alive, come out of the black hotel with his arm around Jack Sawyer's neck. (684)

Morgan felt a moment of swooning fear ... and then his rage, his excitement and the lunacy that had been feeding on his increasingly grandiose dreams of overlordship – these things burst apart the webbing of his self-control. ... SHOOT HIM! Morgan screamed into Gardener's face ... SHOOT HIM; YOU ETHIOPIAN JUG-FUCKER, HE KILLED YOUR SON! SHOOT HIM AND SHOOT THE FUCKING TALISMAN! SHOOT RIGHT THROUGH HIS ARMS AND BREAK IT! (685)

When Gardener shoots Jack, the Talisman protects the boy and almost kills the fundamentalist preacher who, out of his mind, goes after Jack with a knife and dies when is touched by the magical boon. Jack comes back to the beach to finally confront Morgan, the great Shadow, in the final battle.

After every possibility of getting rid of Jack fails, with his henchman and his army dead, both Morgan Sloat and his murderous tool Morgan of Orris become one mad villain. In the struggle, both Jack and mad Morgan flip back and forth, teleporting around. The chaotic fight and Morgan's arrogant comments and banter end when the Talisman once again reflects the lightning from Morgan's deadly key turned lightning rod and kills him:

Then Morgan Sloat was driven backward and enveloped in a field of fire from his own key – fire that had been absorbed inside the Talisman as the flashes of life from Sunlight Gardener's telescopic sight had been absorbed – and which had been

returned to him a thousandfold. A hole opened between the worlds – a hole the size of the tunnel leading into Oatley – and Jack saw Sloat, his handsome brown suit burning, one skeletal, tallow hand still clutching the key, driven through that hole. Sloat eyes were boiling in their sockets, but they were wide, they were *aware* ... And as he passed, Jack saw him change – saw the cloak appear like the wings of a bat that has swooped through the flame of a torch, saw his burning boots, his burning hair. Saw the key become a thing like a miniature lightning rod. (707)

Sloat, an egocentric creature with a total lack of morality and empathy for others, is punished by his actions in the end, just like the father figure of the Gothic and the Dark Lord of fantasy in most tales. No matter how successful they might be, the ultimate victory is never theirs. They lose everything they treasure and their lives as a result of their violations.

A Peaceful Return, a Recession into Obscurity and an Ephemeral Victory

After defeating Morgan and Gardener, and healing Richard and Speedy, the three flip to the Territories, meeting Parker's alter-ego, Parkus. The law-bringer, earlier in the book revealed as Morgan's sworn enemy, instructs the boys further. Following the instructions, Jack and Richard rest and then head east until they arrive to a huge tree. Then they flip back to America and follow Route 17 towards a little town called Storeyville, where both boys meet Wolf's brother. The werewolf drives Jack and Richard back to New Hampshire, a carefree road trip back home listening to loud music and spending a fortune Speedy has left them. Jack returns home with the elixir and heals Lily. When the Talisman has fulfilled its commitment, it disappears and Jack recedes into obscurity to a normal life, "His ordinary life of school and friends and games and music [...] the ordinary life of a thirteen – year – old boy [...] had been returned to him, he realized. The Talisman had done that for him, too" (735).

Reading *The Talisman* we experience the consolation of the happy ending at the end. However, as a Gothic fantasy it is, there is always a sense of ephemeral victory in the triumph Jack gets. As it is usual in the American monomyth, happy endings are contingent and temporary, because the ultimate boon is not bestowed on humanity. The hero recedes into obscurity having restored the balance in the community, a Christ –like savior and a zealous crusader. Jack Sawyer becomes both the Martyr and the Warrior, sacrificing his childhood for the good of others – be it his mom, the people in the

Territories or his friend Richard, and the Innocent in him dies to become the Hero. He learns to fight, to commit and to accept reality as it is at the same time.

However, it is mentioned that during his return home, Jack slowly starts to forget the whole journey, suggesting that his transformation was not an easy and natural thing and that it needs to be suppressed in order for Jack to come back to his ordinary life. After healing his mother, the Talisman heals Jack in a way too, suggesting that Jack has also been damaged or injured. The reversal of Jack's transformation is its final effect before the Talisman disappears after filling its purpose, marking the very end of the book.

What differences Campbell's monomyth from the American one proposed by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett is that in the latter, there is always room for a rebirth, for a sequel, for another heroic adventure. American heroes are always outcasts living outside the community, in the wilderness, regenerating through cycles of violence to redeem the Original Sins their society have committed: racism and misogyny. The United States was established as a white society, founded upon the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans and the neglect of women. King and Straub recreate these American Original Sins to remind us that a healthy and alternative masculinity will not be possible, at least in the United States, unless the racist and misogynist traits of American society are not wiped out of the American character.

King and Straub, Raiders of an Alternative Masculinity

It is extremely difficult for Americans to erase two hundred and fifty years of genocide, racism, homophobia and misogyny. The primary Gothic America and the magical land King and Straub draw is full of characters that reproduce, in one way or another, the traits that have defined, according to Michael Kimmel, hegemonic masculinity:

- Men should not evidence any attitude linked to femininity because these are rejected by real men.
- Men should be rude and never show their feelings.
- Risk and aggressiveness are commonly accepted as natural masculine attitudes.
- Men should have a higher status than women and they should have the power.

It should be born in mind the fact that “Masculinities” are not the same as “men.” To speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. Masculinities concern the position of men in a gender order. They can be defined as the patterns of practice by which people (both men and women) engage that position. Hegemonic masculinity as developed by Raewyn Connell is the pattern of practice that allows men's dominance over women to continue. In Western society, this cultural ideal of manhood was primarily reflective of white, heterosexual middle class men. Considering that the two main features of hegemonic masculinity, then, are aggressiveness and domination, Morgan Sloat, Sunlight Gardener and their counterparts Morgan of Orris and Osmond, alongside with Smokey Updike show these traits, as has been analyzed in most cases. Gardener and Osmond reveal a rejection to any attitude linked to femininity because “men are bad. It's axiomatic” (114, 416). Both Morgans are looking for a higher status and they have the power, with Lily Cavanaugh “the Queen of the Bs” and the Queen of the Territories in a very fragile position. And Smokey Updike is a rude and aggressive man who never shows his feelings, and whose signal of dominance is translated into physical abuse over Jack in the Oatley Tap.

It is worth saying, however, that there is also room for what has been traditionally considered oppressed masculinities, “the good boys.” This double standard was created by Dominant Traditional Masculinities men as part of their domination in our patriarchal societies. Conceiving women in an Aristotelian way - that is, taking for granted that men are naturally gifted to rule and lead - socialization agents such as schools and families promote the “good boys” using the language of ethics. The good boys are non-aggressive, non-sexist, and do house chores; while the bad boys are aggressive and chauvinist. There are four main “good boys” in *The Talisman* that possess these inner qualities, or at least some of them. To begin with, we have Speedy Parker. The African American old man is portrayed as a non-aggressive, relatable guy and he seems to be non-sexist at all when he becomes a mentor figure for Jack assuming the status and power position of Lily Cavanaugh.

Phil Sawyer, Jack's dad, seemed to be a non-aggressive and non-sexist character, either. This can be seen in the novel in the attitude towards the Territories and his family. A good man always ready to learn, Phillip Sawtelle saw the magical land as an open book to knowledge and development. As a family man, he was a good father and a better husband, giving Lily her place and room. Richard Sloat, much to his father's distress and disappointment, is a very rational guy not very akin to violence; in fact, his

attitude could be only catalogued as cowardly if it wasn't because the experience for him in the Territories is a very traumatic and sudden one.

And, finally, there is a very minor character that deserves time and development to understand his fundamental role in the novel. Tommy Woodbine, one of Jack Sawyer's closest friends, appears as a positive role model for Jack Sawyer. A gay lawyer, Tommy is the proof that the AIDS epidemic that devastated the American gay community in the 1980s is symbolically present in the novel, although only as a gay plague, as it was known at the time. Tracy Nectoux reports that by the end of 1981, the Center for Disease Control, commonly known by Americans as CDC, had already reported the death of some two hundred young men, all active homosexuals. By 1982, the term AIDS was being used for the first time, and the CDC had linked the disease to blood. Although the disease was named and widely publicized through the media, it was personally ignored by Reagan for his entire first term. The key agencies that could help in the fight, including the CDC and the American National Institute of Health, were hamstrung by budget cuts. The Hollywood nurtured Reagan appears not to have been personally intolerant of homosexuals, but as with so many other things, it also took a Hollywood event to inspire Reagan into action, in this case the death of his friend Rock Hudson, who succumbed to the disease in 1985. Reagan did not mention AIDS in a prepared public speech until 1987, and his proposals were seen by many as too few, too late. By the end of that year, more than twenty-nine thousand Americans – predominantly gays and minorities – had already been killed by the disease.

King and Straub were aware of the AIDS crisis, and they offer a dignified gay character. In fact, homosexuality itself is treated in such an adult, matter-of-fact way by twelve year old Jack Sawyer, that when homophobia does appear, it is even more starkly highlighted.

Tommy Woodbine's story is told by Morgan, after Morgan has had him killed:

Sloat understood almost at once, and knew that Phil Sawyer would never see it unless he were told, that Tommy Woodbine lived with an enormous secret: whatever the gilded boy might have been, Tommy was now a homosexual. Probably, he'd call himself gay. And that made everything easier – in the end, it even made it easier to get rid of Tommy. Because queers are always getting killed, aren't they? (85)

Tommy was a good man, a trusted friend, possessing humility, “seriousness and straightforwardness” (83), characteristics that feed Morgan's hatred. Phil and Lily make Tommy the executor of their estate, and legal guardian of Jack. Tommy Woodbine

becomes a positive figure, one that both Jack and Lily trust unconditionally. In fact, that the only characters that use bigoted slurs against homosexuals are the ones who display the cruel traits of hegemonic masculinity is significant. Morgan Sloat, Smokey Updike, Sunlight Gardener and his thugs reproduce the fact that, within the overall framework of hegemonic masculinity, there are also specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men.

Speedy Parker, Phil Sawyer, Richard Sloat and Tommy Woodbine are the reflection of oppressed masculinities for different reasons. Speedy is in a subordinated position in the gender relations between men, because of his race. That was one of the American Original Sins we have referred to in the analysis of the novel. In fact, the threat that Speedy poses to the hegemonic masculinity is a sexual threat in nature. Traditionally portrayed as promiscuous noble beasts, African Americans must be subordinated to avoid inter-racial mix. In origin, that was one of the reasons for their discrimination when they arrived in America (Takaki 55-56). The sexual power of African Americans is also hinted in *The Talisman* because Speedy is shown to possess many photographs of naked women (of different races) in his “office,” and the old man explains that “All these here girls met me when I moved in. Didn't have the heart to rip em off the wall. They sort of do remind me of way back when, times I was on the road” (34). The fact that Speedy is a natural enemy of Morgan Sloat that scars him in the magical land bringing some sort of justice thanks to his position of sheriff is a reminder of the fact that, in an American society grounded on racism and homophobia, the only element who differentiates Speedy as a subordinated individual in the gender relations between groups of men is his race. Speedy Parker impersonates a violent standard of hegemonic masculinity in the magical land in response to his own subordination and lack of control in the primary world.

Phil Sawyer, Tommy Woodbine and Richard Sloat are subordinated masculinities because they display several feminine traits. Phil Sawyer is non-sexist and non-aggressive, while Richard Sloat is portrayed as a coward individual. Tommy Woodbine is subordinated because he displays the most feminine trait of all of them: he is sexually attracted to other men. And that is a risk factor in a society where media and many other institutions promote a socialization process consisting in two opposed links: on the one hand, a link between violence and sexual excitation, and, on the other hand, a link between equality and lack of sexual excitation. Men who drive girls crazy in bed are men who kill others. These messages combined with the perpetuation of gender

inequalities socialize some boys in a dependency on violent aggressions and dependency in violent boys on some girls. Those girls tend to think that attraction to violence is something biological, that comes from their inside.³⁴ However, such attraction is social and, as Seidler argues, can be transformed. Summarizing, this socialization process is the cause of violence against women.

This is so because of two main reasons: the first one is that even independent women have assumed these two opposed links, and the other one is that such distinction between the “bad boys” and “the good boys” has reinforced the model of hegemonic masculinity. “Bad boys” are convinced that, for what really matters – that is, they as providers of good sex – they are much more popular than good boys. As we have seen earlier, Dennis Guilder in *Christine* is not the bad boy, but he is in that position at the beginning of the novel. The boy is a football player and a womanizer. He keeps on patronizing Arnold Cunningham. In the case of “The Body”, Ace Merrill and his gang are portrayed as tough guys drinking and having sex with girls; they are feared and revered by the younger boys. In fact, after the confrontation with Ace, the four children acquire an ephemeral status at school that proves the “popularity” of the bad boys.

The answer by good boys to this position can be twofold: either they develop a complex,³⁵ or they begin a socialization process for being successful with women.³⁶ In many cases, these good boys not only become bad, but the worst of all. The good boys are not an alternative to the bad boys because these consider the good boys a compliment, not an alternative. “Bad boys” do not regard “good boys” as an obstacle to getting in touch with any girl; they even think that they can get the “good boys” girlfriends, since these men are good for marriage but not to have fun with.

In *The Talisman* we can see how the double standard of bad boys and good boys reinforce the hegemonic masculinity. While Morgan Sloat exerts power over both Lily and Jack, Gardener and Smokey Updike abuse Jack whenever they can. Two of the “good boys,” positive roles that can influence Jack's socialization process, are already dead: Morgan gets rid of both Tommy Woodbine and Jack's dad, Phillip. Richard Sloat is Jack's best friend, but on the journey, he acts more as an annoying person slowing down Jack's travel. And Speedy Parker helps Jack whenever he can, but the ultimate

³⁴ See, for example, the physically dependent relationship between Christine Hargensen and William Nolan in *Carrie*.

³⁵ Gordon and his friends in “The Body” behave as they think a man does: on their journey, they smoke, tell profanities and do boasts.

³⁶ See the destructive transformation of Arnold Cunningham in *Christine*. In “The Body” Gordon Lachance makes up a tough alter-ego, Chico.

responsibility relies on Jack. Summarizing, the good boys do not represent any obstacle for the bad boys.

In fact, Jack Sawyer comes to embody the ideal alternative masculinity sociologists are looking for, the savior warrior that could help to overcome violence against women. This ideal alternative masculinity combines equality and attraction, moves away from violent people with no egalitarian values, and seeks egalitarian relationships based on desire and love. According to Jesús Gómez (90), the three main characteristics of New Alternative Masculinities for men are strength, courage and self-confidence. The strength Gómez talks about, however, is not associated with physical power, but with emotional resistance to all that revolves against dominant masculinities, and which actually hinders the overcoming of violence against women. A man expressing his feelings is not a weak man, but the opposite.

In the end, Jack Sawyer is Agape for his friends, unconditional love. The boy learns to express his feelings and to love openly, without reservations. Here there are some moments where that unconditional love is expressed:

Wolf smiled so openly – and yet so wistfully – that Jack was moved to take his hand. It was something he never could have done in his old life, no matter what the circumstances, but that now seemed like his loss. He was glad to take Wolf's warm, strong hand. (269)

Jack reached for Richard. Richard tried to push him away. Jack was having none of that. He held Richard. The two of them stood that way in the middle of the deserted railroad bed for a while. Richard's head on Jack's shoulder. (579)

A Gothic heroine in peril at the beginning of the novel, Jack acquires strength, courage and self-confidence to destroy the evil figures that embody violence against women: Sunlight Gardener, Morgan Sloat and Smokey Updike. Jack Sawyer proves in the end that he is worthy of the Talisman; he is the ideal of a new alternative masculinity: non-homophobic and non-racist. His non homophobic traits are visible when he encounters some minor characters in his journey: the “sugar daddies” who try to abuse him sexually and Donny Keegan, one of the few actual orphans in the Sunlight Home facility for boys.

A mentally handicapped boy who lives in the Sunlight Home with Jack and Wolf, Donny is the other prominent homosexual character in *The Talisman*. We first meet him when the boys are working the fields, and another boy, Ferd Janklow, starts teasing Jack that Donny is “in love” with him, which embarrasses Jack terribly. (368) This scene

could be enacted in any playground or park everywhere, a realistic portrayal of boys interactions when they are confident enough among them. But when we next see Donny, circumstances are different. When Jack grabs the Talisman, he connects with many people, Donny among them, and these people experience the power of the Talisman and the force of their own personal revelations:

Donny looked up suddenly, his muddy eyes widening. Outside, clouds ... pulled open in the west, letting out a single broad ray of sunshine that was terrible and exalting in its isolated beauty. *"You're right, I DO love him! ... He's beautiful and I love him!"* Donny honked his idiot laugh, only now even his *laugh* was nearly beautiful ... His face was bathed in the sunlight from that one clear, ephemeral ray, and one of the boys would whisper to a close friend that night that for a moment Donny Keegan had looked like Jesus. (666)

Our last sight of Donny Keegan is this revelation, this experiencing of "love and truth [...] of grace for once fulfilled and delivered," of "ecstasy" (666). If we compare Jack's friendships with Jack's reaction to Donny's adoration, the imagery is not subtle and starkly elucidates Agape vs Eros: "Donny grinned at him worshipfully, baring those amazing buck teeth. Spit dribbled from the end of his lolling tongue. Jack had looked away quickly" (367). When the so called "gay plague" was ostracizing homosexuals, categorizing them as "others," Stephen King and Peter Straub were writing a novel that contains not only open, affectionate, loving friendships between male characters, but innocent and dignified gay characters.

Jack is not a racist, either. The mentor and paternal figure of Speedy Parker allows him to overcome such prejudices, to the point that when the adventure is about to end, Jack feels real concern about Speedy: "Speedy's old" Parkus said. "He's my age, but your world made him older than me. Just the same, he's still got a few years left in him. Maybe quite a few. Feel no fret, Jack." "You promise?" Jack asked. Parkus grinned. "Yeah-bob" (711).

However, in the end, Jack as the ideal male of a New Alternative Masculinity is only a wishful thinking that crashes with the reality of a masculine America rooted in the myth of the West. The male gender role is not biologically fixed, yet it is a result of culturally defined gender norms and ideologies (Oransky and Fisher 57-72). In the stage of adolescence, hegemonic masculinity positions some boys, and all girls, as subordinate or inferior to others (Laemmle 305-307). Boys in their adolescence are pressured to act masculine in order to fit the hegemonic ideals, yet the possibility of

suffering long-term psychological damage as a result looms overhead (De Visser and McDonnell 5-14).

Jack Sawyer's transformation into the warrior savior and crusader is not natural at all. Mirroring the evolution of the traditional American hero, Jack Sawyer experiences his redemptive tasks as something traumatic and disruptive. Stephen King and Peter Straub are telling us that in the United States, hegemonic masculinities assume a certain relationship to nature. Masculinity itself involves the control and domination of nature. Men learn a language and a discourse of control, and hegemonic masculinity is defined as sustained control. Nature has to be subordinated, and Americans measure their civilization and the notion of being civilized in contrast to the distance they have moved from nature. In a country built around the concept of Manifest Destiny, this Christianized civilizing discourse aims to replace nature. As the control of nature is related to the control of colonized societies, the Christ-like savior and crusader achieves his goals of mastering nature and society through violence in some cases, and through the hierarchy of patriarchal society in others. The role of women in this socialization process is testimonial but it is fundamental and definitive: men shape their masculinity through the women's gaze. A damaging process, to fit into hegemonic masculinity turns into a nightmarish Gothic adventure for Jack Sawyer and adolescents in general, and thus they must recede into obscurity and forget about the experience in order to gain a normal life. A boon inside a Gothic abandoned and ruinous hotel, the Talisman symbolizes the ancient, traditional and stable values of the myth of the West, which nowadays seems to have lost its sacred meaning. The Talisman feeds from the faith and experiences of the warrior, martyr, crusader and its healing powers are a reward when the hero has proved to be worthy of it: a non-homophobic, non-racist individual who is able to renounce to the language of control of hegemonic masculinity. That is, when he adopts a caring masculinity as alternative.

The problem with the caring masculinity alternative is that it remains an ideal because today men do not necessarily shape their masculinity through the women's gaze, but through the media. Young males' subjectivities are much more consumption framed. Men's sense of themselves and their masculinity is much more tied to consumption and to the body than it is to the culture of care. And Stephen King and Peter Straub seemed to be aware of that during the Reagan era, where a culturally constructed "crisis of masculinity" was being held. Jack Sawyer turns out to be the ideal response to that crisis: a boy who faces American reality as it is, and in the process turns

into what a man should be through the women's gaze, a caring figure, overcoming obstacles and providing an alternative to the hard bodies Reagan's vision of America promoted.

Chapter Five: *It*

DEFEATING FEAR, CHA(LLE)NGING PATRIARCHY

It (1986) seems to be the appropriate novel to finish this study because, in a way, the story contains and sums up all of Stephen King's concerns developed in previous works. The author provides us not only with an extensive study of childhood and the rite of passage into adulthood, but also with a pseudo-farewell to the horror genre. The monster the seven main characters confront is a polymorphic supernatural entity, and it allows King to do more than merely give his readers a grab-bag full of monsters; *It* becomes a massive fairy tale where the main characters must deal with the horrors of American society as Stephen King understands it: a patriarchal reign of indifference towards individuals, women and men alike, portrayed through the history of the little town the seven children live in, Derry in Maine.

The town becomes a character with a life of its own in the novel, bringing the horrors of societal issues more to the forefront without losing the supernatural terror. Despite his stated intentions,³⁷ King obviously did not completely abandon the horror genre in the years since the novel was published, but with *It*, the author began tackling social issues with more realism:

The publication of *IT* marked the advent of a more socially conscious King. At the book's heart, *IT* is an account of child abuse and how isolate and vulnerable children are. *IT* also deals with spousal battery, a theme King would develop in subsequent writings. In addition, *IT* is a veritable treatise on intolerance and prejudice, dealing with hatred of blacks and gays, and virtually anyone who is different. (Wiater, Golden and Wagner 102)

Briefly, the plot of *It* encompasses the attempts of seven children (and their adult selves twenty seven years later) to defeat a creature that has existed for generations beneath the streets of Derry, Maine. The creature is always a threat, but its depredations increase in intensity according to an unvarying rhythm, cresting every twenty-seven

³⁷ Stephen King considered this novel a culminating point in his career that would allow him to shift his attention towards other literary genres and interests. The story functions as a compendium of horror, a self-reflexive work that looks back not only to literary traditions, but to film, folklore, and to King's own novels and stories. (Collings, *Scaring Us to Death* 15)

years with a year-long cycle of death. The characters primary quest, both as children and as adults, is to discover the nature of the creature and the means by which It might be defeated. As children, they wound It severely; as adults, they gather again in Derry to confront It in Its recovered strength, and they attempt It's destruction.

Once again entering the realms of fairy tales and myth, Stephen King culminates in the novel his attempt to construct a healthy American identity through the figure of the sacrificial child. On the one hand, *Carrie* reveals how patriarchy and its gears work to smash any sign of feminine individuality. The main character's sacrifice does not bring any significant change because all the feminine characters in the novel try to conform to a concrete model of femininity, what Raewyn Connell defined as emphasized femininity, a hegemonic model which is central to the maintenance of patriarchy and male dominant gender relations. As all forms of femininity are constructed in the context of a patriarchal society where women are subordinated to men, this model shows compliance with this subordination by accommodating the interest and desires of men, resisting forms of no compliance and favoring practices that prevent other models of femininity gaining social articulation. On the other hand, the sacrifice and death of Arnold Cunningham in *Christine* results in anything but continuing horror because masculinity is presented as “a social position, a set of practices, and the effects of the collective embodiment of those practices on individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination” (Schippers 86-87). Summing up, both Carrie White and Arnold Cunningham become victims of a patriarchal system indifferent to individuals, both men and women, in which gender issues are socially constructed and ruled, and have nothing to do with biology. Stephen King tells us not only that individuals are chained by collective beliefs and constructions that thwart their development, but that individuals alone are also powerless.

In “The Body,” Gordon Lachance gives the first step in order to look for a meaningful, healthy identity. Although it is a personal journey, Gordon's road to maturity is extrapolated to American society in general. An individual must assimilate the heritage he/ she receives, as well as understand the finiteness of human nature. The same can be said of a society who continues making the same mistakes once and again, unable to overcome and conform to reality its mythical masculine origins. *The Talisman* is read as an attempt to finally integrate the feminine other in the self and in society, and the main character, Jack Sawyer, turns into an idealized version of an alternative masculinity to the normative model. As much as Stephen King attempts to construct a

healthy masculinity, the models of masculinity central to his discourse are disruptive and violent at his worst, or desirable but utopian in the present at its best. *It* gives a closure to the question taking it from the individual sphere to the social collective one with all the consequences. The seven members of the Losers' Club embody a representation of American society fighting a protean, genderless monster with a sexual, social and cultural background: the American hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. At the same time, each member embodies an aspect of the primal masculine archetypes that reside within men, as well as other aspects that influence the construction of gender and identity such as religion or race. Defeating *It* in the novel means defeating fear and cha(lle)nging patriarchy to finally embody a healthy identity.

Pennywise, the Ambiguous Villain of a Cultural War

The main events of the novel take place in 1958, when the seven main characters, all eleven to twelve years old, form the Losers Club as a means to stay together and acquire psychological strength to fight *It*, the supernatural being haunting the sewers under Derry, Maine. Twenty seven years later, in 1985, they must come back to once again do battle with *It* one last time as the consequence of a promise the group made after defeating the monster the first time. Before analyzing the members of the Losers Club, it is necessary to understand the nature of the entity they must confront. It is a compendium of many social and cultural ideas that haunt Stephen King's mind since he began to write; *It* is the ultimate villain.

To begin with, *It* has its origins in fairy tales. This statement is both literal and metaphorical. In one of the central scenes in *It*, the group experiences in their subterranean hut a vision that clarifies them the origins of the creature; that vision takes place as the Losers enter what Mike names the “ago” to Richie, a prehistoric point of origin for the coming of *It* and the locus for story-telling itself:

Richie nodded. Ago, as in once upon a time, long long ago [...] *We are in the ago, a million years back, maybe, or ten million, or eighty million, but here we are and something's going to happen* [...] There was a steady low vibration – he could feel it more than hear it, [...] buzzing the tiny bones that conducted the sound. It grew steadily. It had no tone; it simply was:

(the word in the beginning was the word the world the) (*It* 722)

Both Laura Colmenero-Chillberg and Heidi Strengell have pointed out that King's fiction relies on fairy tales. *It* the creature and *It* the novel summarize the three main points that link fairy tales to Stephen King. Fairy tales, as defined by Strengell, are but initiation myths (Strengell 109). The presence of children then, is a major link of fairy tales to the Maine author, as initiation is explored in his fiction. Fairy tales and the horror genre share some characteristics that Sharon Russell presents in the form of a list (19-22) when talking about Stephen King's theory of horror as a repository of personal and social functions:

1. Horror allows us to prove bravery, and we can test our courage without risking our lives.
2. Horror allows us to re-establish feelings of normality.
3. Horror confirms our positive feelings about the *status quo*.
4. Horror allows us to feel we are part of the larger whole: identifying with the group and working together for a good cause, we identify with the good.
5. Horror allows us to penetrate the mystery of death: horror, on the one hand, shows a way to cope with death and, on the other hand, even suggests what might happen beyond death.
6. Horror allows us to indulge our darkest collective and social fears, connecting our anxieties to a larger concern.
7. Horror allows us to return to childhood.
8. Horror allows us to transcend the world of darkness and negation.

All the stories in this study are individual fairy tales, even with concrete references (*Carrie*). Heidi Strengell summarizes *It* as Snow White and her six dwarves confronting a monster that preys on children (174-178), but if we consider the third point that links fairy tales to Stephen King, maybe we could understand better the nature of the monster. Both fairy tales and Stephen King try to socialize their readers in the dominant culture's rules, behaviors and roles. In this case, *It* can be seen as an indictment of patriarchy.

It, the title character, is an amorphous being from outer space that is shaped by people's imaginations and fears, "a metamonster, serial murdering, shape-shifting bogey" (Badley, "Viewing the Body" 52). Over time, the monster that is *It* has come to exist in a collusion with the town of Derry, more specifically, the adults of Derry. The human inhabitants have become so accustomed to the avatar of *It*'s evil, Pennywise the clown, that they no longer even see him on his quest to ravage the town's children. The monster remains essentially invisible to Derry's adults because it is a fundamental part of the city. In return for helping the town to thrive financially, *It* devours Derry's future cyclically, and grownups are either actively engaged in performing actively for Pennywise, or remain, like Mr. Ross, morally indifferent to the clown's behavior:

“Beverly saw Mr. Ross getting up, looking at her, folding his paper and simply going in his house. *They won't see, they won't hear, they won't know*” (931).

The novel contains five interludes that report the history of Derry through the writings of one of the members of the Losers Club, Mike Hanlon who, as an adult, has become the town librarian. In these excerpts from Mike's memoir it is hinted that It's avatar has been present in the most brutal and violent facts the city has suffered, a history of violence that replicates in a way American history. Beginning with the recorded disappearance of three hundred Derry settlers in 1741, a fact that is compared to the mystery of the Roanoke Island colonists (146-47), whenever any act of cruelty occurs in the town, usually orchestrated by adult males, Pennywise is present to celebrate it, to participate in it, and to reap the power accrued from the act itself. When the Bradley gang is slaughtered in the center of town in a *Bonnie and Clyde* – like ambush, the clown is a member of the righteous mob, emptying his bullets from a smoking rifle (623). Similarly, when the Black Spot is torched in the 1930s by a legion of local racists, the clown is there in the guise of a giant bird of prey, “big bunches of balloons tied to each wing” (449). Derry is a sick little place where citizens foster relationships with a supernatural avatar that embodies the worst elements of that society (violence, child abuse, oppressive institutionalization) while also forming a parasitical relationship with the town itself. Each time Derry experiences evidence of its “unusually high rate of every violent crime we know of” (480), the clown reemerges from the sewers to stalk Derry's children, suggesting that the town's thirst for blood reactivates Pennywise's own thirst; that is, the town is the monster, and the monster is the town.

Michael Kimmel made the seemingly contradictory comment that American men had no history. Kimmel was referring to the paradoxical situation whereby (hegemonic) men have been conspicuous as athletes, politicians, scientists, and soldiers but largely indiscernible as *men*. As Kimmel noted, this veiled status is one of the principal ingredients of men's power and privilege:

The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not to another are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred ... men have come to think of themselves as genderless, in part because they can afford the luxury of ignoring the centrality of gender ... Invisibility reproduces inequality. And the invisibility of gender to those privileged by it reproduces the inequalities that are circumscribed by gender. (Kimmel, “Invisible Masculinity” 30)

In sociological research, men's bodies have inhabited an “ambiguous” and “liminal space,” a “borderland between female corporeality and male sociality that, for a fleeting conceptual moment, male bodies appear, only to disappear immediately” (Witz 11). Stephen King in *It* comes to embody once again gender as patriarchy, but while the former is visible, the latter remains obscure. It is patriarchy in the sense that it remains invisible for everyone except the children, as the key links of patriarchal structure most of the times seem to be covered by a veil of secrecy, an untouchable neutral and yet mostly male zone. Many operative patriarchal structures are difficult to be perceived directly, although we witness their effects in the forms of persisting social problems like spousal battery or child abuse.

Hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy have flown over the main characters in all the narratives of this study, be it as a social system in *Carrie* and *Christine*, or a mythical and cultural concept in “The Body” and *The Talisman* to disrupt the main characters' transition into adulthood. It, through his avatar Pennywise the clown, summarizes the true nature of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity for Stephen King. “It is a calling forth and ritual unmasking of motley Reagan – era monsters, the exorcism of a generation and a culture” and the monster is “a composite of devouring parent and mass culture demigod” (Royson 731). The Reagan era monsters have already been analyzed in *Carrie*, *Christine*, “The Body” and *The Talisman* and have to do with male fear of feminine empowerment. These fears are linked to the American “mass culture” of the Cold War in the sense that its most visible expressions came from television and film, helping demonize Communists, homosexuals and other alleged internal threats to American life. Christopher Newfield tells us that the Cold War provided American men with a history:

Cold War culture formed and reformed American national identity, helping to tell Americans who they were as essential to their knowing what they fought for. For the first half of the 1940s they had fought Nazism and fascism: now they were fighting the apparent opposite, Communism ... The Cold War period excelled at the construction of a powerful – though highly restrictive – vision of the American citizen and the American mission. (Newfield 77)

This highly restrictive vision of the American citizen and the American mission replicated again in the 1980s, but the threat of communism had faded away, or better said, it had mutated into a different kind of menace:

The Communism of multiculturalism apparently consisted of any ethnic differences that were *not* subsumed into a common culture. Ethnic and other “identity” movements also stood for a threatening affirmation – that ordinary people could govern their highly diverse societies without a highly concentrated, militarized, and largely unaccountable central government. (Newfield 88)

The “affluent society,” the good society of the Cold War, was first and foremost a consumer society: its key features were abundance, leisure, and an aura of pleasure or at least contentment brought about by life as a consumer. The Cold War period saw the creation of the first middle class in American history. It came into being for a simple reason: high annual economic growth, which ended in the 1970s, was distributed more or less evenly across all income levels. Cold War income distribution was more egalitarian than at any other time in US history, and abundance served the powerful ideological purpose of being the cornerstone of the argument for the overall capitalist system's categorical superiority to Communism. Affluence had a specific geography, and that was the white suburbs, suburbs created by their television image; shows like *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best* created the baseline norms for America's version of the classless society, the white middle class. Father commuted to his role of breadwinner; he was an amiable, relaxed, slightly distant, but authoritative presence. Mother was a full-time housewife and nurturer who upheld routine law and order with the kids. They lived in a racially white, but also depoliticized neighborhood. Operating as an amnesia machine, the Cold War replicated again in the 1980s and has not disappeared entirely from American consciousness. Newfield himself tells that “We can say that the world has exited the Cold War. We are not yet able to say the same of the United States” (90).

In *It*, the notion of the affluent society comes back to Derry reproducing a Gothic alternative to that idyllic suburbs vision of the 1950s, an oppressive system haunted by a patriarchal demigod whose avatar, Pennywise the clown, is only one of the masks that reveals hegemonic masculinity as undesirable, powerless, and ultimately, tied to the feminine. The characters in the novel keep on referring to *It* as genderless. It is a “something” (151), “some kind of monster” (326), “an unspeakable thing” (951) but, in the end, *It* is an evil, dark embodiment of what Julia Kristeva called “the Imaginary Father”, a “mother-father conglomerate” who has not sexual differentiation and who exists before the advent of the symbolic, that is, before language. In Eduardo Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*, the clown is

A mythic figure, and the inversion of the King – the inversion, that is to say, of the possessor of supreme powers; hence the clown is the victim chosen as a substitute for the king, in accord with the familiar astrobiological and primitive ideas of the ritual assassination of the king. The clown is the last, whereas the king is the first, but in the essential order of things, the last comes second. (51)

The clown figure in literature is a “carnivalizing,” psychological subverting force that manipulates language in order to reveal a failure to acknowledge otherness. He overturns societal hierarchies; he is inversion and exhibition at the same time, the representation of all the evil inherent in the institution of patriarchy. It exploits a female characteristic, the ability to alter appearance, to change outfits, to use makeup; It has an aptitude for becoming unclear and ambiguous rather than concrete and definable. The clown's presence fills the void left by the absent consciences of the adults of Derry, becoming the collective representation of the town's adult darkest impulses. Pennywise uncovers momentarily the untouchable neutral yet mostly male zone of patriarchy but, as a trickster figure, he comes to represent patriarchy as a deceit, a powerless lie that feeds from the fears and tribulations of men, children and women.

However, King shifts to a monstrous female as the ultimate murderer. Despite its many guises, the creature's ultimate form is that of a giant female spider, a pregnant female spider, no less. This development comes as a surprise not only to the members of the Losers Club, but also to King's readers. King gives no clue that the creature is female until the conclusion of the novel. The first mention of It possibly being female comes almost 1000 pages into the novel when It takes Audra Denbrough, the adult Bill's wife. Her last thought before losing her sanity is “OH DEAR JESUS IT IS FEMALE” (973-74). In the end, Stephen King shows the monster and, like the things we manage to confront in real life, the It of the conclusion, reduced to a giant female spider, an alien Shelob, does not seem quite as frightening once it is brought to light. This transformation is the result of addressing the unknown and its reduction to a Saturday Night monster form is but an ironic reference to indicate It's growing weakness. In Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*, the spider is

a symbol with three distinct meanings derived from (i) the creative power of the spider, as exemplified in the weaving of its web; (ii) the spider's aggressiveness; and (iii) the spider's web as a spiral net converging towards a central point [...] The spider's destructive powers are also connected with its significance as a symbol of the world of phenomena. [...] spiders, in their ceaseless weaving and killing – building and destroying – symbolize the ceaseless alternation of forces on which the stability of the universe depends. (304)

The father-mother conglomerate It represents pairs cyclical male violence with menstrual feminine cycles of reproduction, perhaps saying that even though male violence may be horrible, violence perpetrated by females is potentially even worse. With the limitations it imposes on women, patriarchy also gives raise to female violence, but whereas violence by men is accepted and sometimes even condoned under patriarchy, violence perpetrated by females simmers unseen below the surface, directed, more often than not, at children. Patriarchal society expects women to be “lady-like.” The ideal woman under such a system is soft-spoken and always in control of her temper. Obviously, this expectation is unrealistic if not impossible, but the patriarchal system gives women no outlet to vent their frustration and anger. Because of the privacy inherent in the domestic sphere, mothers, both in King's fiction and the real world, will often target children, the group most vulnerable to abuse. In other words, while it does not happen in every case, abused women may become abusive mothers, perpetuating the cycle of violence and doing so unnoticed by the rest of society. This is especially the case in King's fiction, and in his critique of patriarchy, his novels leave no doubt that the society that views violent women as unacceptable often causes them to become violent.

That It not only preys on human children but also happens to be pregnant is a classic representation of the devouring mother.³⁸ In addition, that the children It preys upon are predominantly male plays into the patriarchal notion that boys must break from their mothers in order to complete the rite of passage into manhood. If Stephen King's fiction is, as mentioned when analyzing *Carrie*, the unintended consequence of 1970s feminism, It the monster stands for a terrifying female sexuality, an evil to be subdued, kept in its rightful place. It is also a deceitful patriarchy, the clown being the establishment disguised – unserious and unthreatening on the surface but deadly in reality. It is the ultimate villain of a cultural War that Americans keep on fighting and that remains apparently unsolved, a repository of all the gender and cultural fears raised when trying to subsume ethnicities and other identity movements into a common, powerful yet restrictive vision of American identity, an initiation myth analyzed in “The Body” and *The Talisman* that sees America as young, white, idealistic but mostly male.

³⁸ Its appetite is one of Its two defining characteristics, eating and sleeping; an alien form, It likes Earth because “*the quality of imagination made the food very rich ... Upon this rich food It existed in a simple cycle of waking to eat and sleeping to dream*” (965).

The Losers Club, Flawed Heroes in a Democratic American Myth

When baby – boomers in the United States (those born between 1946 and 1950) came of age in the sixties, they brought to the elements of American culture their own peculiar twists. Love Brown explains that

As they grew into full adulthood, they saw their own past as one of glorious protest and rebellion, recreating the ethos of their country's revolutionary founding. But as baby – boomers reached middle age and looked back, they began to view their own past not simply with nostalgic longing but in mythological terms as an origin story, and these historical fictions began to work their way into the collective representations of the nation.

“The Body” and *The Talisman* already recreate that origin myth to reveal issues central to American culture, all of them related to gender and cultural affairs. *It* comes full circle as the novel “commemorates the androcentric world order of the 1950s. Nostalgia, a wistful yearning for past glory, validates the pursuit of male mastery over a menacing female sexuality” (Thoens 127). In the course of this narrative, the painful denials and implicit weaknesses of American culture manifest themselves, especially in regard to the seven major characters, children who have not quite realized the American Dream because of some physical or social handicap. These disadvantaged American “Others” become the mythological substitutes for the privileged, middle class boomers who were the actual precipitators of the sixties protests and changes. A generation largely affiliated with their mothers; real boomers who grew up in a world of rising affluence, great social cohesion, and lofty social ideas such as justice, liberty, and equality for all. Soon the underside of this world began to seethe to the surface in the mid-fifties with the threat of nuclear disaster and the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in the South. These events stimulated awareness among boomers that there was a disparity between the cultural ideas they had learned and reality as it was. Because the parental generation seemed oblivious to this disparity, the boomers thought themselves to have insights that older people lacked. The boomers took their material well-being for granted and assumed it was possible for everyone to have what they had, leading to a democratic outlook, but the coming of the war in Vietnam just as boomers were coming of age reinforced the feeling that some monstrous evil lurked behind the scenes ready to snatch their lives away. As the myth comes to encompass both 1950s fears and 1960s realities, this evil is captured symbolically in *It the monster*.

It's two main manifestations and the indifference of adults to the stalking of children reflect the lack of concern for both the suffering of minorities made clear in the 1950s civil rights movement and feminism, and the high death toll of an undeclared and largely unacknowledged war in Vietnam. On the one hand, Pennywise the Clown as an ambiguous “creature which would eat anything but which was especially hungry for boymeat” (7) mutilates savagely his victims, as it is reflected in Mike Hanlon's interludes about the history of the city; for example, when a crew of lumberjacks who were snowed in during the winter of 1879 was found: “All nine hacked to pieces. Heads rolled [...] not to mention arms [...] a foot or two [...] and a man's penis had been nailed to one wall of the cabin” (150). A symbol of the wanton destruction of young lives that occurred during the Vietnam era, the body parts the clown leaves behind are the symbols of the maiming that occurred among soldiers, and the disappearances of Derry's children are a reminder of those who went away and never returned.

On the other hand, the pregnant spider reveals a “myth of female ascendance [...] symbolically supported by twenty-seven years of bloody violence” (Thoens 127), a myth where “the woman body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 55). The body and voice of the mother have suffered oppression and particularly the female body has been seen as “impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of physical and moral contamination; `the devil's gateway’” (34). Indeed, the female body is “a field of contradictions,” a space that Rich considers to be invested “with both power, and an acute vulnerability” (102). Motherhood is “sacred” as long as its offspring are legitimate, as long as “the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother” (42). Motherhood is “the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness” (21). Rich concludes that “women – above all, mothers – have been supposed to love that way” (23).

While Michael Kimmel argues that American males have been largely indiscernible as *men*, Simone de Beauvoir holds that

The whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem (De Beauvoir 135).

The woman problem that has always been a man problem is motherhood, a form of slavery for Beauvoir that left woman “bound to her body” and made it possible for men to dominate her and nature (69). She sees woman's nature as oppression and, for her, as well as for Stephen King, “all oppression creates a state of war” (752). Americans have constructed their history at the expense of a regeneration through violence that has shifted targets instead of looking for constructive solutions whenever society changes and demands changes. Women as the cyclical enemies of patriarchy, the villains of a cultural war, are but the ultimate challenge for a society that sees sexuality as a cultural taboo, as a means to reproduction instead of pleasure, while male violence is condoned as something inevitable and, as hegemonic models show, culturally archetypal and inspirational. In *It*, Stephen King reveals the permanent state of war between law and culture, men and women, in which Americans seem to live. As we shall see, the seven children labeled as the heroes in the narrative aspire to some sort of communal sense of identity trying to defeat patriarchal constructions of men and women, the clown and the spider, in order to achieve fulfilment, a fulfilment rendered as mythical, problematic, and unsolved because Stephen King is reproducing the inequalities and assumptions of the patriarchal social system in the novel, perpetuating it.

Ben Hanscom, the King

Twelve years old Ben Hanscom is “fat” and “poor” (77). He is the representation in the novel of the Divine Child, the archetypal energy that prefigures the mature masculine energy of the King. (Moore and Gillette 21). The religions of the world are rich with stories of the miraculous Baby Boy. Surrounded by his worshippers, he occupies the central place in the universe, almighty but totally vulnerable and helpless. The divine child brings peace and order to the whole world, all the opposites brought together into a transcending order. The Divine Child, who renews and keeps men young at heart is the aspirational archetype which has two different dysfunctional projections, *the High Chair Tyrant* and *the Weakling Prince*. Ben Hanscom embodies the latter, at the beginning a boy with very little personality, no enthusiasm for life, and very little initiative. The entire family system revolves around his comfort and he has not got any friends.

Ben Hanscom's mother, Arlene, is affectionate and supportive. She is a single mother and works hard to raise her son, “a hard woman” who usually insists on having her own

way, and Ben is rarely capable of standing up to her (176). She knows little about her son's life, particularly about his friendlessness early in the book, and he feels unable to talk to her about this and his other worries:

Ben nodded soberly, thinking that if she didn't know he had no friends, she probably didn't know anywhere near as much about his boyhood as she thought she did. But he would never have dreamed of saying such a thing to her, not in ten thousand years of dreaming. (177)

Ben's vulnerability and helpless side rest in his obesity, a representation of animal appetite without guilt or limit and selfish sloth, encouraged by her mother, who overfeeds him: "When there were leftovers from supper she would often bring them to him while he was watching TV and he would eat them, although some dim part of him hated himself for doing so" (178). This handicap marks him as a Loser, as the group of friends call themselves, and as feminine for Henry Bowers and his gang, who bully the kids (188). In the case of Ben, the cruelty against him is striking and revelatory, because the two times he is injured in the novel, it is on his belly, first by Henry Bowers and then by It disguised as a werewolf. Most of all, the reader is privy to Ben's self-hatred over his fatness, only slightly modified by the delights of TV, including a role model in the overweight Broderick Crawford of *Highway Patrol* (169).

A loner, he does not question his solitude because, although "he had no friends ... he had his books and his dreams" (169). In fact, Ben Hanscom personifies a specific dysfunctional pole of the Lover archetype, the Dreamer: "For the boy who is under the spell of the Dreamer, relationships are with intangible things and with the world of the imagination within him" (Moore and Gillette 37). He is desperately in love with Beverly Marsh, but idealizes her to the point of adoration. The boy expresses this idealized, romantic love in a haiku, an anonymous poem he sends her without any hope for being answered, and fantasizes with protecting the girl (811). Beverly intuitively knows who sent the poem, and when she thanks him for the haiku once they are part of the Losers Club, she makes clear that, unlike Ben himself (162), she does not think his love is ludicrous because he is fat:

Beverly felt safe. Protected ... That sense of protection was hard to define and she didn't try, although much later she would recognize the source of its strength: she was in the arms of a male who would die for her with no hesitation at all. It was a fact that she simply knew: it was in the scent that came from his pores, something utterly primitive that her own glands could respond to. (899)

However, hope of self-acceptance surfaces only in this hauntingly warm moment, almost despite itself. Under the spell of the Dreamer, Ben only understands his mother ulterior motives to overfeed him as “love” (178), and she engulfs her son within a dangerous devouring motherhood which threatens his development. Ben's metamorphosis is mythical rather than realistic, and the shift in his mind comes for him in a locker room scene reminiscent of that in *Carrie*. Ben, during high school, is brought out of his shell by his coach, who tells him, “You disgust them and you disgust me as well” (471) His weight – loss is motivated primarily by personal shame and by anger at the coach (472), but his mother remained the greatest obstacle to diet:

And nights when I went home and would only eat half of the stuff on my plate my mother would burst into tears and say that I was starving myself, killing myself, and that I didn't love her anymore, that I didn't care how hard she worked for me. (473)

Ben is able to lose weight after confronting her mother because “she didn't care so much *what* I ate as long as I ate *a lot* of it” (474). However, elsewhere the causes of Ben's childhood overeating are very much shown to be in his own head, product of the world of imagination within him. King depicts Ben using food as a palliative for loneliness (169), fear (206) and self-hatred (168). In giving Ben a new Timex watch and telling him to be home by six o'clock every night during the summer, Arlene sets limits on Ben in response to the murders in Derry, but she remains essentially uninvolved with him, as there is a chasm in their communication which causes Ben's silence regarding the whole subject.

The fact that Ben embodies the King archetype is the reason why Ben alone sees Pennywise as an ancient mummy (205), a variation of the vampire in Gothic literature that integrates ancient Egyptian religious elements.³⁹ Fleischhack, when speaking about religion in Egypt gives the clues to understand this figure:

Apart from goddesses that resemble vampiric characters at least in some aspects, the religion of ancient Egypt was concerned with death and the afterlife. ... the Egyptians did not accept death, even if it was such a huge part of their culture. The incredible tombs and monuments [...] were [...] a way of building against death. (49)

³⁹ The most obvious link between vampires and mummies is their noble ancestry. It is obvious in the case of the mummy because most mummies that were found and put on display in the nineteenth century were in fact pharaohs and their families.

Heidi Strengell points out that the vampire motif in the Gothic production of King reveals an “ambiguous attitude toward homosexuality and ‘sissy boys’” (41) Thus, Pennywise depicted as the mummy is a reflection of Ben's own fear of effeminacy.

He does not lack redeeming qualities, though. These qualities are the ones that define him as the potential archetypal King. Moore and Gillette sum up the qualities of the divine child as “generativity and creativity” (26). Ben Hanscom builds the bond of the Losers Club when, after Henry Bower's assault on him, the kid meets Bill and Eddie for the first time, and helps them to build a dam in the Barrens, the place where they usually go to play and run away from parental indifference and the bullies' menace. Soon, Richie and Stan reunite with them and the seed of the group is planted. Incidentally, Ben also designs the subterranean hut where they spend most of the time during the summer. His nickname “Haystack” is that of Haystack Calhoun, a famous wrestler. Ben is physically strong, and possesses a brave and noble character that symbolically surfaces the most when he defends and protects Beverly, his true love and the only girl of the gang (388), replicating what, when analyzing *Christine*, Warren Farrell called the Superman expectation.

Bill Denbrough, the Warrior

Bill Denbrough is “a poor boy from the state of Maine” (119). He feels responsible for his brother's death, six years old George, because he was ill in bed while his younger brother played outside with a paper toy boat Bill had made. When the toy boat is absorbed into a sewer, George becomes the first victim of It in 1958 when his arm is bitten off by the monster. He is the representation in the novel of the Hero, the archetypal energy that prefigures the mature masculine energy of the Warrior (Moore and Gillette 37). It is the peak of the masculine energies of the boy, the archetype that characterizes the best in the adolescent stage of development. And yet, it is immature, and when it is carried over into adulthood as the governing archetype, it blocks men from maturity.

The two dysfunctional negative poles of the Warrior are the *Grandstander Bully* and his opposite the *Coward*. Bill Denbrough oscillates between the two poles when he is a kid because he becomes the leader of the Losers Club, and at the same time, like the rest of them, is chased by Henry Bowers and his gang and the monster It. The boy under the power of the Bully intends to impress others. His strategies are designed to proclaim his

superiority and his right to dominate those around him. He is not a team player; he is a loner (Moore and Gillette 37). His aura of invulnerability makes him take unnecessary risks (38). Tied to the Mother, he has a driving need to overcome her. He is locked in mortal combat with the feminine, striving to conquer it and to assert his masculinity, but once he's won her, he doesn't know what to do with the princess (39). The Coward will run away for a fight, perhaps claiming that it is more “manly” to walk away, and he will allow himself to be bullied emotionally and intellectually (40).

The Hero enables the boy to begin to assert himself and define himself as distinct from all others, so that ultimately he can relate to them fully and creatively. The Hero encourages the boy to dream the impossible dream and it empowers the boy to fight the unbeatable foe that, if he is not possessed by the Hero, the boy might just be able to defeat. The death of the Hero signals a boy's or man's encounter with true humility. He has met the enemy, and has finally understood that the enemy is himself. He has overcome the Mother and then realized his incapacity to love the princess.

To begin with, Bill's striving need to conquer and overcome the maternal is derived from his feelings of guilt. Devastated by their younger's son death, both of Bill's parents withdraw into themselves, leaving the kid feeling that they blame him for George's death and no longer love him, but Bill's mother, Sharon, is the parent represented as least functional, most repressive, and most to blame for the failure of both parents. While little Georgie was being murdered, Sharon was at home, playing the piano. A former piano student, she detested rock and roll: “She didn't merely dislike it; she abominated it” (9). Bill's mother is symbolically linked with rigid, formal classical music. Her piano playing implies a negligent participation in her son's murder. Never portrayed as nurturing, she is at best distant and restrictive, possibly negligent and perhaps worse. At the age of three, Bill “was knocked into the side of a building” by a car (10). According to Bill's mother, the accident, which left him unconscious for seven hours, caused him the stutter that marks Bill as a Loser. “George sometimes got the feeling that his dad – and Bill himself – was not so sure” (10) It is inherently insinuated through Georgie's innocent remarks that, for both Bill and his father, there is an ambiguous link between Sharon Denbrough and the stutter, the handicap that defines Bill as an unsubject unable to find his own voice.

Bill Denbrough is portrayed as a mature kid for his age when Henry Bowers and the bullies confront him and Eddie while they are trying to build a dam in the Barrens, the same dam Ben will show them to properly build later. However, from the point of view

of the Hero archetypal force, Bill is being the Coward, trying to avoid the fight, to walk away from it:

Bill had had more sense than to argue with the big boys when they broke out of the bushes, looking like ill – tempered hunters on the track of a beast which had already mauled one of them. Eddie, however, had rashly opened his mouth and Henry Bowers had unloaded on him. Bill knew who they were, all right ... They had beaten up Richie Tozier, who Bill sometimes chummed up with, a couple of times. ... Stuttering Bill had watched the unequal race from its start to its preordained conclusion. No sense getting involved; those three galoots would be just as happy to beat up on two kids for the price of one. (216)

Bill's most appreciated possession, and the symbol of his masculine power, is Silver, a massive bicycle that transforms him into the loner hero that saves the day. One example of this embodiment occurs when, after the previously mentioned fight, Eddie, broken nose and bleeding, suffers an asthma attack and he has not his medicine. Riding Silver, the de facto leader of the gang saves the situation going back to town to get an inhaler:

“Hi-yo Silver AWAYYY!”

The words came out deeper than his normal speaking voice – it was almost the voice of the man he would become. Silver gained speed slowly, the quickening clackety-clack of the Bicycle playing cards clothespinned to the spokes marking the increase. Bill stood on the pedals, his hands clamped on the bike-grips with the wrists turned up. He looked like a man trying to lift a stupendously heavy barbell. Cords stood out of his neck. Veins pulsed in his temples. His mouth was turned down in a trembling sneer of effort as he fought the familiar battle against weight and inertia, busting his brains to get Silver moving. (220)

Bill's aura of invulnerability is appreciated by the rest of members of the Losers' Club, especially by Beverly, who falls in love with him. The boy is forced into partial adulthood at an early age, and is able to recognize it, as the other members do. After recognizing and beginning to understand his role in the Losers Club, Bill thinks:

He saw the gratitude in their eyes and felt a measure of gladness for them ... but their gratitude did little to heal his own horror. In fact, there was something in their gratitude which made him want to hate them. Would he never be able to express his own terror, lest the fragile welds that made them into one thing should let go? And even to think such a thing wasn't really fair, was it? Because in some measure at least he was using them – using his friends, risking their lives – to settle the score for his dead brother. And was even that the bottom? No, because George was dead, and if revenge could be exacted at all, Bill suspected it could only be exacted on behalf of the living. And what did that make him? A selfish little shit waving a tin sword and trying to make himself look like King Arthur? ... *if this is the stuff adults have to think about I never want to grow up.* (698-699)

Gradually, Stuttering Bill turns into Big Bill for everyone, including himself. He is the leader, the one who has the authority to even make mean jokes in front of adults, as when all the gang is playing Monopoly at Bill's house and he references Stan's Jewishness in an unsuitable comment that shocks her mother but bursts everyone else in laughter (815). As the quote above shows, Bill is aware of his selfish motives to battle It and join the Losers Club, but losing his brother makes the crusade personal for him and transforms him into the leader. With his parents ignoring him and each other, he feels a growing sense of responsibility to avenge his brother's death and to win back his parents' love.

This selfish urge inflates the sense of importance in his abilities, taking unnecessary risks. When he decides to confront It alone with the only help of Richie at the house of Neibolt Street, the clown is disguised as a werewolf (354-367). Strengell tells us that the archetype of the werewolf is a demonstration of “the paradoxical existence of both good and evil in a single person” as a perpetuation that reveals “our inability to evolve past our base instincts” (68). For Bill, it is an encounter with death that allows him to acknowledge his own limitations. He has confronted the enemy, only to realize that the enemy is himself. Richie almost dies and Bill is overwhelmed by the circumstances, his father's gun useless against the monster. Both kids end crying after running away from It in Silver. The fact that Bill is the only one who keeps viewing always It as Pennywise the clown (even when confronting the werewolf) is a reminder not only of his link to the monster for personal reasons (Pennywise killed George) but it has to do with his position of power as well. As the reverse of the King, the clown stands for the limitations of human nature, a reminder that “if we do not face our true limitations, we are inflated, and sooner or later, our inflation will be called to account” (Moore and Gillette 39).

Bill Denbrough logically becomes the alpha male in the group. Beverly sees him as a form of “good” authority opposed to her dad's “bad” authority. That is why the love Beverly feels for Bill and the one Bill feels for Beverly is expressed in terms of power. It is through Ben's eyes that we understand the dynamic of the relationship:

“Can I have someone's shirt?” Beverly asked, blushing more furiously than ever. Bill glanced down at her, and the blood came into his own face, all in a rush. He turned his eyes away hastily, but in that instant Ben felt a rush of knowledge and dismal jealousy. In that instant, that one bare second, Bill had become aware of her in a way that only Ben himself had been before ... “I can't help that I'm a girl”, she said, “or that I'm starting to get big on top ... Now, can't I please have someone's shirt?” (835)

Good look, Big Bill, Ben thought, and he turned away from that gaze. It was hurting him, hurting him in a deeper place than any vampire or werewolf would ever be able to reach. But all the same, there was such a thing as propriety. The word he didn't know; on the concept he was very clear. Looking at them when they were looking at each other that way would be as wrong as looking at her breasts when she let go of the front of her blouse to pull Bill's tee-shirt over her head. *If that's the way it is. But you'll never love her the way I do. Never.* (836)

It always comes back to power. I love Beverly Marsh and she has power over me. She loves Bill Denbrough and so he has power over her. But – I think – he is coming to love her. Maybe it was her face, how it looked when she said she couldn't help being a girl. Maybe it was seeing a breast for just a second. Maybe just the way she looks sometimes when the light is right, or her eyes. Doesn't matter. But if he's starting to love her, she's starting to have power over him. Superman has power, except when there's Kryptonite around. (837)

Richie Tozier, the Magician

Richie is one of the most important characters in the recreation of gender patriarchal relationships that *It* represents. He embodies the archetypal force of the Precocious Child, whose mature archetype is the Magician. The origin of our curiosity and our adventurous impulses, he urges us to be explorers and pioneers of the unknown (Moore and Gillette 28). He is able to see the hidden connections in things; he can achieve cognitive detachment from the people around him long before his peers are able to accomplish this; he is also extroverted and eagerly reaches out to others to share his insights and his talents with them.

The two poles of the shadow of this archetypal force are the Know-It-All Trickster and the Dummy. The boy under the power of the Trickster makes a lot of enemies because he is the practical joker, adept at making fools of us, and a manipulator. He is expert at creating appearances, and then “selling” us on those appearances; he shoots off his mouth a lot, wanting to trick his peers into believing that, compared to him, they are dolts. However, the Trickster is also positive because he is very good at deflating egos, his and those of others (Moore and Gillette 30). The purpose of this immature energy is to expose lies. The Dummy is another trickster disguised as a naive and inept individual, because his dunce-like behavior may mask a hidden grandiosity that feels itself too important and vulnerable to come into the world.

Richie embodies the dysfunctional pole of the Know-It-All Trickster and almost all his characteristics. Nicknamed “trashmouth” (215, 466) by his peers, the boy is unable to stop his mouth because to joke about things is easier than running in fear of them, but this flaw puts him repeatedly in danger with the school bullies and adults. His imitation of multiple voices is shown as a talent that makes Richie an extrovert kid and foreshadows his ability to achieve cognitive detachment from the people around him long before his peers, who are unable to appreciate this talent, perhaps because Richie is perceived as constantly making fools of them. The boy is categorized as a Loser because he wears glasses. Time and time again, they become the focus of embarrassment and ridicule. There are references to the fact that his glasses are always held together by adhesive tape, for instance (289). Richie's mother association with his glasses is established when a bully pushes Richie into the gutter breaking them: “His mother was furious with him about it, lending very little credence to Richie's explanations” (630). Maggie's anger over the broken glasses compounded by her lack of sympathy over Richie's pounding by a bigger boy wounds Richie less than the knowledge she didn't believe his story: “This failure to make his mother understand hurt much worse than being slammed into the gutter” (630). Conjuring up pictures of Richie's father working late, she suggests Richie's guilt in incurring the cost to replace the glasses: “You think about it ... her voice was curt and final – worse, it was near tears” (630).

Richie's glasses are the symbol of everything that defines the character. He comes to see Pennywise or It disguised in two different characterizations that shape his personality. First of all, when Bill and Richie go to the house of Neibolt Street looking for the monster to kill it, it is to check what Eddie Kaspbrack, the Lover, has seen. However, what they find is Richie's personal vision, a werewolf. Richie sees It disguised as the werewolf because while the Magician is the only one who can truly see the lie inside Pennywise, the immature trickster is confronted with his dual nature, the capacity of good and evil within a single person. When the whole gang is reunited to hunt the monster, it is the werewolf that all of them see when they come back together to the house of Neibolt Street (831) because Richie finally is able to “share” his talents and fears with his friends. The werewolf regards of the most negative aspect of the Magician archetype and its shadow projection of the Know It All

Trickster: “If it is left unchecked, it moves into its negative side and becomes destructive of oneself and others” (Moore and Gillette 32). The negative side of this immature masculine energy is really hostile and deprecating of all the real effort, all the rights, all the beauty of others. The Trickster does not want to do anything himself, he does not want to honestly earn anything; he just want to be, and to be what he has not right to be. In seeing the werewolf, Richie is looking into himself, his dark side, the real Richie masked behind his voice personalities.

This vision has a direct link with Richie experiencing the monster alone as the plastic statue of Paul Bunyan (557), the giant lumberjack of American folklore. Richie does not tell the rest that he has experienced Pennywise as Paul Bunyan, denying the vision as an illusion, but this underscores a more significant symbolism about Richie's fears. The brave, strong man yields his axe on Richie because his childhood life is based on illusion. Just as Paul Bunyan's stories are fake exaggerations of real experiences, Richie creates his voices and jokes to mask the real Richie. When both Bill and Richie confront the werewolf in the house of Neibolt Street, it is Richie who hurts It the most with illusions: his voices and sneezing powders, illusions Richie believes in. The Trickster's positive side rests on his capacity to deflate egos, and Richie hurts It for good. But It hurts Richie for good, too. The monster is also a trickster figure, deflating Richie's ego and revealing Richie's inability to believe in tall tales, in magic. For a mind that works on a reality/fantasy basis, monsters are fantasy but the statue is real. The fact that Pennywise chooses to disguise himself as an American fake hero has a connection with the werewolf disguise. For It, Richie is the fake hero, because the trickster does not want himself to take the hero's responsibilities. In fact, he does not want any responsibilities. He wants to do just enough to wreck things for others. (Moore and Gillette 32).

It is important to note, then, that Richie is the person who knew “Bill better than anyone until Audra Phillips” (705), because he is the only one really approaching Big Bill's status and the hidden connections inside the group:

Bill would not let things get out of control. He was the tallest of them, and surely the most handsome. Richie only had to look sideways at Bev's eyes, fixed on Bill, and then farther, to Ben's eyes, fixed knowingly and unhappily on Bev's face, to know that. Bill was also the strongest of them – and not just physically. ... since Richie

did not know .. the word *charisma* ... he only felt that Bill's strength ran deep and might manifest itself in many ways ... And Richie suspected if Beverly fell for him, ... Ben would not be jealous ...he would accept it as nothing but natural. And there was something else: Bill was good. ... He was like a knight in an old movie ... it occurred to a Richie Tozier in his mid-teens that John Kennedy reminded him of Stuttering Bill. (347)

In his role of deflating egos, Richie is able to soothe a bit Bill's guilt about his brother's death (316). He is the big “seer” of the group, the one who has the capacity to expose the “truth behind the lie.” That is the reason why he, along with Mike, is the only one who saw the coming of It in the Smoking Hole Ceremony (722). However, his glasses are a reminder of his lack of vision. Everyone knows that glasses distort reality, and Richie's glasses and eyes become the cumulative symbols of what is wrong in his childhood *and* in childhood in general, when everything is perceived with a tone of nostalgia that blurs and distorts reality. In 1958, Bill embodies the maternal male, “their leader, the guy they all looked up to” because he is well loved, because “they all sensed something comfotingly adult about Bill [...] a sense of accountability, a feeling that Bill would take the responsibility, if responsibility needed to be taken” (303). The idealization of and love for Bill is not due to his authority but to his commitment to the others and most probably to his knowledge that love is what really matters (863). But the fact that Richie and Bill experience Pennywise as a werewolf when they are together at the house of Neibolt Street is a reminder of the dark side of the Warrior, of the problematic nature of this archetype when its immature poles are reproduced in adulthood.

Eddie Kaspbrack, the Lover

Hypochondriac, weak, skittish, fragile Eddie Kaspbrack embodies the archetypal force of the Oedipal child, the immature projection of the Lover. According to Moore and Gillette, all the immature masculine energies or poles that prefigure the masculine mature archetypes they define – the King, the Warrior, the Magician and the Lover – are overly linked, one way or another, to the figure of the mother and its archetypal representation. These immature masculine forces are deficient in their experience of nurturing, but the Lover, in his shadow of the Mama's Boy, experiences the perversion of his connection to the archetypal Mother in a much more explicit way. The Oedipal child's sense of mystic oneness and mutual communion of all things comes out of his deep yearning for the infinitely nurturing, infinitely good, infinitely beautiful archetypal

Mother, the Goddess, the Great Mother (Moore and Gillette, 34). However, the Mama's Boy is literally fantasizing about marrying his mother and taking her away from his father. If there is no father, or a weak father, this crippling side of the Oedipal child's bipolar shadow may possess him.

Eddie Kaspbrack's weakness is his asthma, a physical infirmity that marks Eddie for membership in the Losers' club. He carries his inhaler with him everywhere, but Mr. Keene, the druggist, tells Eddie that his aspirator contains a placebo. The druggist insists that Eddie does not have asthma and that Sonia, Eddie's mother, is the real problem: "Your mother is determined you are ill" (741). Eddie's throat tightens because he knows he is not crazy: "Your asthma is a result of a nervous tightening of the diaphragm that is ordered by your mind ... or your mother" (741).

Sonia Kaspbrack is a widow, and the dynamics of the relationship with her son are established in the clash over Eddie's friends when Henry Bowers breaks his arm and Sonia forbids his son to see his friends anymore: "She had a way, a way of working on a guy" (731). Eddie's mother consciously uses tears as a weapon, is responsible for Eddie's psychosomatic asthma and turns him into a lifelong hypochondriac. When Eddie is hurt or in danger or contemplating doing something as harmless as playing baseball, his principal concern is not his own feelings, but his mother's reaction – always conceived of as strongly negative. Sonia is terrified that Eddie will grow up, move away, and get married, thus leaving her alone, and when he shows signs of independence, she becomes afraid of him. The emotional turmoil concerning the Losers continues until Eddie proposes a compromise; he will not question his asthma if she does not interfere with his friends. Emotionally devouring Eddie, Sonia's mothering creates an invalid, a conscious one. Eddie experiences Pennywise in the House of Neibolt Street as a leper hobo that frightens him with a proposition: "How bout a blowjob, Eddie? (300). The vision is a representation of his maternally induced asthma, and after the other guys tell him that the hobo has syphilis, he associates homosexual contact with castration and death. In a dream at the hospital, after Sonia chases Eddie's pals away, Eddie sees the monster as his own mother: "But just before the clown washed out completely, he saw the most terrible thing of all; his ma's face" (756).

A kid that needs psychologically be taken care of, his idolization of Bill fits the role perfectly. When they are going to face Henry Bowers, his gang and It, Bill says, "You walk with me, Eddie. I'll keep an eye on you" (924). However, when Eddie is with his friends, everything is different. He depends on them, and they depend on him. Unlike

his relationship with his ma, there is mutual reciprocation, and Eddie finds he can be strong. Even his inhaler acts as a weapon and a placebo for the rest of his friends. His asthma medicine can be magic when he is a child because, in essence, that is what it does.

Beverly Marsh, the Tomboy

The only girl in the Losers Club seems to corroborate Leslie Fiedler's argument in *Love and Death in the American Novel* that no American novelist has been able to treat the passionate encounter of a man and a woman, because instead of love, American novels depict “comrades in arms” (5). A strange mixture of fragility and strength, Bev Marsh is the only member of the Club who shows any talent with the slingshot, one of the first weapons the Losers use to confront It and a weapon usually associated with male children. All the boys have a secret crush on her, and it is Richie, the Magician, the “seer” of the group, who best describes the nature of Beverly: “she liked her because she was tough and had a really good sense of humor. Also, she usually had cigarettes. He liked her, in short, because she was a good guy” (332). Comfortable among boys, she is presented in some parts of the novel confronting Bill, the leader, on sexist beliefs (710-712) when her participation in the Smoke Hole ceremony is questioned.

Her crush on Bill seems to be too deep to be just a crush. Again described in terms of power, Beverly makes a parallel between both Bill Denbrough and his father as authority figures, a statement that clarifies her feelings:

He [her father] *had* loved her, and in some ways she supposed that had everything to do with why she had fallen so desperately in love with Bill Denbrough that long summer of 1958 – because of all the boys, Bill was the one who projected the sense of authority she associated with her father ... but it was a different sort of authority, somehow – it was authority that listened. She saw no assumption in either his eyes or his actions that he believed her father's kind of *worrying* to be the only reason authority needed to exist ... by the end of their first meeting as a complete group in July of that year, that meeting of which Bill had taken such complete and effortless charge, she had been madly, head-over-heels in love with him. ... She simply lived with his face in her heart all the time, a kind of sweet, hurtful ache. She would have died for him. (536)

Alvin Marsh justifies beating Beverly as his duty as a parent to correct her behavior: “*Daughters, Al Marsh said, need more correction than sons.* He had no sons, and she felt vaguely as if that might be partly her fault as well” (381). She is victimized by her father's battering, but she becomes a member of the Losers Club because she is poor,

not abused. The fact that she knows she is poor and feels inferior to other girls like Sally Mueller puts her in a position to feel humility. She gets used to feel ashamed, and takes it as a course of life. Alvin Marsh takes advantage of this, and his violence has an incestuous vibe in his favorite sentence when he beats Bev: “I *worry* about you, Bevvie. I worry *a lot*” (380). Bev's mother, Elfrida, routinely dismisses her husband's physical abuse of Beverly. “Did you get your dad angry at you last night, Bevvie?” Then, voicing her true concern, she asks “Bevvie, does he ever touch you? (386). Aware of the incestuous undercurrent to Al's violence, her mother neither confronts him nor protects Beverly. Elfrida warns Bev to be home before dark when she hangs around, implying concern about Bev's safety, but she is masking her crucial failure to protect her daughter at home.

Beverly Marsh first experiences It as blood gurgling out of the drain in her bathroom, splashing up around the room, blood that her father does not see. Beverly's impending puberty, the blood, the bathroom, and Al's anger masking his barely controlled incestuous desire are conveyed in sexually laden imagery, a symbolically unleashed feminine sexuality. When Al questions Bev about her scream, she lies: “There was a spider. A big fat black spider. It [...] crawled out of the drain” (380). Ironically, instinctively, Beverly knows what It really was, the form beneath the disguises; because Beverly is female, she knows what the boys must risk their lives to uncover and confront. *It* is about sexuality, bloody female sexuality, female sexuality as imagined by a male.

Stan Uris, the Rational

Stanley Uris is the weakest link in the group. His obsessive cleanliness is the major factor that defines him. Stan's entire basis for character is defined by Bill when remembering him after coming back to Derry in 1985:

He was an ordered person. The kind of person who has to have his books divided up into fiction and non-fiction on his shelves [...] and then wants to have each section in alphabetical order. I can remember something he said once – I don't remember where we were or what we were doing [...] He said he could stand to be scared, but he hated being dirty. That seemed to me the essence of Stan (476)

The kid, who encounters It as the corpses of drowned children in the Standpipe, believes in an orderly universe, a universe of natural laws: “God had given the earth a final tilt on its axis [...] He had done that and He then had said, in effect: `Okay, if you

can figure out the tilt you can figure out any damn thing you choose'” (411). It is Stan's reaction to the scene what gives the reader insight into his character. Although he is scared by the dead boys, he is more “offended” by them. Coming back from death is not only scary, but wrong. The drowned bodies offend everything Stan believes in, his pragmatism:

Offended, yes. It was the only word he could think of, and if he used it, they would laugh ... All the same, there were things that were not supposed to *be*. They offended any sane person's sense of order ... I got nothing else to say, except that two and two makes four ... You can live with fear, I think ... It's *offense* you maybe can't live with, because it opens up a crack inside your thinking ... Go to your church and listen to your stories about Jesus walking on the water, but if I saw a guy doing that I'd scream and scream and scream. Because it wouldn't look like a miracle to me. It would look like an *offense*. (411-412)

His strong pragmatism represented by his hobby of watching and cataloguing birds, carried by his father, is the only magic he can afford. In a clean, rational world, It does not – cannot – exist. Stan is the one who suggests that they must clean Bev's bathroom after Bev has seen the blood gurgling out of the basin. This proposition is clearly linked to his obsession for cleanliness, but the fact that he is Jewish also plays an important role. The boy is marked as a Loser because of his religious background, but this religious background remains fundamental to understand Stan's role in the group and all his decisions. The drowned corpses in the Standpipe are a negation of spirituality for Stan. Barbara Creed remembers that “Within the biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul. As a form of waste, it represents the opposite of the spiritual” (47). In relation to the horror film, Creed explains that the most horrific creatures are bodies without a soul (vampires), living corpses (zombies) or corpse – eaters (ghouls), but that the most important representation of abjection, of body waste, is the maternal figure. Julia Kristeva explains that in most religions, the maternal figure has always been represented as an abject figure, and Judaism is not an exception. The maternal figure, abjection, in Judaism was a biblical abomination, a taboo. Thus, Stan's rationality and obsession for cleanliness is linked to his religious background, because the kid signifies nostalgia for a past you could trust, the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchy in which God was on top and God was male. In this past, the maternal abject remained hidden and unspoken. When the Losers confront It in the final battle the second time as adults, femaleness is

recognized as the ultimate Jewish taboo, the maternal abject figure. Ben remembers that Stan played an important part in recognizing It's true nature:

That's Its egg-sac, Ben thought, and his mind seemed to shriek at the implication. Whatever It is beyond what we see, this representation is at least symbolically correct: It's female, and It's pregnant ... It was pregnant then and none of us knew except Stan, oh Jesus Christ YES, it was Stan, Stan not Mike, Stan who understood, Stan who told us ... That's why we had to come back, no matter what, because It is female, It's pregnant with some unimaginable spawn ... and Its time has drawn close. (1005)

Ben fails to specify what Stan told the rest of the Losers during or after the first battle with It, since the book provides no other evidence that Stan realizes that It is female and pregnant. However, this mention is significant because his religion allows him to understand the menace. The spider, a representation of the maternal abject, symbolizes all the demonic feminine traits Jews are afraid of, feminine power unleashed. His rationality does not allow him to understand the spider as a reality because that would make tremble and fall all the religious patriarchal beliefs upon which Judaism, and Christianity influenced by Judaism, have constructed Western societies: man at the center of the word, and women at the margins. Stan Uris is the only one in the group who is able to understand but unable to confront the consequences of denying an undisputable truth: men are the great minority, only one of the poles in a binary whose feminine pole is not only necessary but essential to human development. Women have power outside the margins men confine them to, and if it is socially denied, it can only lead to chaos.

Mike Hanlon, the Custodian

Mike Hanlon is the last kid to join the group. A regular, ordinary guy, his blackness does not much interfere with that fact. It is the reason for his status in the Losers Club, but the fact of his being black is not the end-all, be-all of his existence. Like Ben, who is a Loser because of his weight, but whose defining trait is creativity, or Bill, who stutters but he is trying to find his own voice, Mike is governed by a love of history.

What mainly distinguishes Mike from the other Losers when he is a kid is the healthy relationship he shares with his father. The others, to one degree or another, have failed or failing parents, but Mike's relationship with his family is the only really

healthy child-parent relationship in the book. Jessica Hanlon is the parent who keeps Mike at his cores, while Will Hanlon is the one who tells her a boy needs time to play. Mike's father passes on his love of Derry history to his son. "I think," Mike says, "It's because he wasn't born here" (691). Mike is the one who brings his scrapbook to the Barrens, and gives them all a brief history of Derry, and in turn, of It. When the Losers Club hold the Smoke Hole Ceremony, it is only appropriate that, besides Richie, Mike sees the vision of It coming. It is Ago, the defining moment of Derry's history and Mike, for the first time, is witnessing the history he is so much fascinated with. And history is what defines his actions and his experiences with Pennywise.

Mike's first vision of It also has a history. Ostensibly, Mike is freaked out by the monster Rodan, Godzilla's enemy, on TV, and that is why he sees It as a giant bird. But we learn through the Interludes that Mike's dad saw the same bird during the incidents at the Black Spot, and Mike himself was terrorized by a bird as a baby. Eduardo Cirlot's dictionary of symbols tells that birds are symbolic of the human soul (28), but the idea of the soul as bird – the reverse of the symbolic notion – does not imply that the soul is good. Mike is witnessing Derry's soul, embodied in Pennywise the clown, an evil soul. As an Afro-American character, this vision is symbolic of the prosecution he suffers by Henry Bowers and the bullies because he is black, and of Derry's history of racism and homophobia related in the Interludes.

We learn, after the initial chapters, that adult Mike is the historian of Derry (albeit, the underground historian). Mike's "Derry Interludes" structurally promote community and they are an attempt at a history of the town, specifically of It's appearances. Mike's dual role as personal and social historian, his comprehension of the past and of the personalities of his friends, allow him to recognize the cyclic patterns associated with It's returns. Mike Hanlon is the only one who remains in Derry when they are all adults because, in order to continue examining Derry's history (and, in turn, being a part of it), Mike had to stay behind. As he is only interested in the Ago, Mike represents the hidden memory of Derry and his friends. He becomes the custodian of the group's memory, the one who keeps the lighthouse (490).

Defeating It as Children, a Youthful Victory

The main characters in *It* are irrelevant when alone. They become significant as participants in a small group relationship. We see gradually how the group comes together to face both ordinary and extraordinary menaces. The ordinary evil takes the form of a slightly older boy, Henry Bowers, and his gang. Henry represents the juvenile delinquent, the disdain that Americans hold for those who do not meet their standards and the invalidity, and sometimes the immorality, of those standards and how they become perverted into the banal evil of everyday existence. In short, Henry personifies the immature projection of hegemonic masculinity, the kind of American male who accomplishes his goals through the illegitimate use of force and whose success depends on the numbers of his accomplices and the weakness of his opponents. This ordinary evil lurking within the American way of life, left unacknowledged and untreated, can be diverted and used to serve the greater evil that lies beneath the surface.

Ben has his stomach marked for life and is almost murdered on the last day of school in 1958, Bill loses the dam, Eddie has his arm broken, Beverly knows that if she is caught in the Barrens she will be raped or killed, Richie's mouth guarantees him a beating, Stan's face is washed with snow until it bleeds because he is a Jew, and Mike is almost stoned because he is a "nigger." Bowers chides of all them individually and lauds his imagined superiority over them hurling whatever epithets come to mind. However, his most personal hatred is channeled towards Mike, marking him as an intolerant racist. Both characters share a personal history that links both their families. Will Hanlon and Butch Bowers kept a legal dispute in the past for some poisoned chickens that goes on haunting Butch Bowers' mind and feeds his racist hate. At the same time, Butch gradually corrupts Henry's mind with his stories, turning the kid into a savage child unable to love, a bully who spends his days repeating grades in school and devising methods of spreading torture and destruction. A product of an abusive and broken family, the anger and hostility with which he greets the world reflects the parental legacy he has inherited.

It is thus little wonder that Pennywise is drawn to employ Henry in his service. Even without the clown's corrosive influence, Bowers' madness is symbolic of Derry itself. Indeed, his capacity for hatred, his proclivity towards violence, and his relentless quest for vengeance reveal him to be yet another of *It's* avatars. Ben Hanscom realizes that

“It's using Henry. Maybe the others too, but It's using them through Henry” (900) The boy's imagined superiority is a product of his inner insecurities, sexual and social. After spending the afternoon with his gang in the Barrens, Bowers is edged towards insanity by the sexual advances of another boy. Led in a circle jerk and then masturbated by Patrick Hockstetter (“You liked it! You got a boner!” (785)), Henry balks at fellatio – but it is too late. He is finally overcome by doubts about his own sexuality: “On the day when he had allowed Patrick Hockstetter to caress him, that bridge [over some mental abyss] had narrowed to a tightrope” (875). Henry goes definitely crazy, trying to eliminate his own fear of effeminacy by projecting it onto others and attempting to prove his manly strength. The circle jerk and masturbation scene are both viewed through the horrified eyes of Beverly, female and representative of the natural social order. She reacts with “terror” (778) at the scene, seemingly a proper attitude toward (homo) sexual perversion, but also a symbolical delineation of cultural and social boundaries. Like the town's children, the gay and black communities of Derry exist outside the social mainstream.

That is why only children, the seven characters of the Losers Club in the novel, are able to see and confront Pennywise preying upon a morally corrupted and amnesiac society; a subversion of the idyllic vision of the 1950s Americans may have in mind. Adults seem completely unaware of Pennywise and his evil deeds; grownups do not believe – not in the existence of the very evil before their own eyes and not in the ideals that can vanquish it. To American baby boomers, it is incredible that adults watched their children get maimed and disappeared without reacting more decisively against the cause of these tragedies. Adults are untrustworthy; they are part of the evil. They must confront It themselves, together. Although the episodes of It terrorizing the children alone weigh heavily on the seven and lead them to depression and fear, the adolescents in the Losers' Club gain the courage and power to vanquish foes that are their physical superiors.

A wellspring for the collective energy that radiates from the Losers Club is their shared commitment to one another and to the other children of Derry. The Losers view themselves as engaged in a righteous quest for all the victims of Derry's oppressive history. The strength of the children who struggle against It lies in their ability to join their individual imaginations to create the psychic potency of a group dynamic. Their first awareness of their own power as a group comes when they build a dam together and gain mutual satisfaction from this collective accomplishment. Ben Hanscom, the

archetypal King, ensembles a group around him fated to a greater purpose. Their joint strength is reconfirmed in the rock fight in the Barrens where the group is united against Bower's tyranny, unified in spirit and enlarged in number, for Mike Hanlon's introduction into the club increases its membership to seven. Having assembled piles of rocks to protect against Bowers, they stand together and defeat him, a development reminiscent of the whites who joined black civil rights protesters when the civil rights movement of the fifties brought the realization of the foul presence of racism into every American home by television. The number seven has magical implications, and each member of the group seems to sense it: "Bill looked from Mike to Richie. Richie met his eyes. And Bill seemed almost to hear the click – some final part fitting neatly into a machine of unknown intent" (667). In the confrontation against Bowers, Bill emerges as the leader and spokesperson for the Club. He defeats Victor Criss, a member of Bowers' gang, in a rock-fight showdown, and he is the one with enough bravado to claim the Barrens for his friends. The group's solidarity gives definition to their community of seven.

Until the moment of meeting Mike Hanlon, the Losers had tried to understand how to defeat the monster which preys on them individually, but once Mike joins the group, the time has come to defeat It once and for all, together. They find out that the way to kill It is ritualistic. A sort of Indian tribal ceremony is held to understand the origins of the monster, and they stand in a circle and tell each other how much they love and need each other (712-713). The circle provides them a huge surge of power and love, a love that will sustain them through their encounter with the abomination.⁴⁰ The power to defeat Pennywise resides in their friendship, mutual love and loyalty; it is not the result of physical action. Only Mike and Richie, because of their symbolic roles inside the group, attend the landing of It's spaceship into what Mike understands as the Ago, a prehistoric time before man was on Earth. The Afro-American kid functions as the memory, the historian and the conscience of the group. As they go through Mike's scrapbook of old Derry photographs, they learn of the violence and disaster that afflicts every generation in Derry.

Loyalty, friendship and support will be the guns the kids will use when the seven decide to destroy Pennywise. They go to the House of Neibolt Street to confront the

⁴⁰ Joseph Campbell maintains that the circle stands "for the kinship group, the clan, the tribe [...] it contains the secret of the transformation of heavenly into earthly forms. The hearth in the home, the altar in the temple, is the hub of the wheel of the earth, the womb of the Universal Mother whose fire is the fire of life" (34).

monster, only to find that the silver bullets Ben has designed to kill It, and the slingshot Beverly shoots are not enough. They enter the sewers in Derry in order to vanquish the evil, a lonely monster which preys on the children individually because It senses that their strength resides in their unity. The riot at the House of Neibolt Street instills a new, different feeling in Pennywise:

Something new.

For the first time in forever.

When It had burst into the house on Neibolt Street, meaning to kill them all, vaguely uneasy that It had not been able to do so already (and surely that unease had been the first new thing), something had happened which was totally unexpected, utterly unthought of, and there had been pain, ... and for a moment there had also been fear, ... For the first time, It realized that perhaps Its ability to change Its shapes might work against It as well as for It. (966)

The kids themselves are pursued into the sewer by Henry Bowers and his two friends, a trio that is not held together by any spiritual tie; they are merely an instrument and symptom of the greater evil that exists. In fact, they have not protection against that evil. The trio experiences Pennywise disguised as Frankenstein (914), a monster that, according to Strengell, represents “the refusal to take responsibility for one's actions and hubris, that is, false pride and defiance” (53). After trying to rape and murder Beverly and breaking Eddie's arm (which almost costs him his life and his friends), Bowers is blamed for his own actions, and for those of Pennywise, and ends up his days confined in Juniper Hill mental asylum after It slaughters his minions Victor Criss and Belch Huggins in the sewers.

Meanwhile, the road to confront It for the Losers Club is not an easy one. Eddie's navigational skills are really useful to find It's lair. Bill admits that if he was lost, he would always rely on Eddie because “He just *knows*. My dad says some people, it's like they got a compass in their heads. Eddie's like that” (968). When It appears in front of them disguised as the Crawling Eye, a symbolic representation of Richie's fears that he has “shared” with all of them,⁴¹ it is “broken arm” Eddie who reacts, fights It with his inhaler and saves a petrified Bill from dying. The inhaler works because it is magic, “battery acid” (983). Cirlot tells that a single eye is a symbol of “the subhuman [...] and extra-human powers” (100), while multiple eyes refer to the night, and the individual with multiple eyes (in this case, Richie) is left in darkness. Multiplicity is a sign of

⁴¹ *The Crawling Eye* is a 1958 English horror B movie directed by Quentin Lawrence that scares the crap out of Richie because once again, it is directly linked to his primal weakness, his eyes; eyes that distort reality.

inferiority, but finally Richie punches the eye and defeats his fear. When later the monster comes back for more disguised as the giant bird, it is Stan who saves Mike from his own vision, a reminder of the long relationship and involvement of the Jews in the Civil Rights movement. His firm belief in reality saves him and his friends, because he tells the others that “A bird like that never existed. That's all” (987).

Although it is true that most of them take part in the fight against It, it is Bill alone who confronts the spider. His personal reasons, though, are less than caring and supportive. As he admits to the group when they are adults, vengeance for his brother is his true motivation, and the most important one to fight the monster (491). Again, physical action is not the answer, but a ritualistic confrontation. Perhaps, Bill's most important contribution to the Losers' victory over It is his scholarly investigation. Looking for information in the library under the heading “werewolf,” Bill finds the term “glamour,” which is identified as a Gaelic word for a particular kind of monster that often transforms itself into that which the observer most fears. The kid explains to the others that the Ritual of Chüd, an ancient riddle game in which the human opponent and the glamour wrap their tongues around each other's tongue and then bite down to “staple” them together, is the appropriate ritual to defeat the monster. Eye to eye, the duelists tell jokes and riddles through telepathy. If the human laughs first, the glamour eats him; if the glamour laughs first, it has to go away for a hundred years.

In Stephen King's creation myth, the ultimate evil is repulsive, spiderlike; significantly, It is a pregnant female. It is also revelatory that Bill alone, the immature Warrior, confronts the spider. As the archetypal force that must overcome the maternal, Bill's stuttering is a signal of inferiority. However, to defeat the monstrous mother is a male task, and the ritual of Chüd symbolizes the male challenge. In order to repel the abject mother, “the point where meaning collapses” (Creed 65), the male has to master the symbolic order, language, to put limits and boundaries to the abject semiotic. When Bill confronts the spider, the kid is thrown into the void of eternity, where he discovers that there are other durable, good and strong forces apart from the evil It. Bill encounters the Turtle, a passive force: “*I'm the Turtle, son. I made the universe, but please don't blame me for it; I had a bellyache*” (1009). The boy pleads with the Turtle to help him, but it refuses maintaining that “*I take no stand in these matters. My brother – has his own place in the macroverse; energy is eternal*” (1009). The Turtle reveals Bill that there is a bigger force, the Final Other, that dwells in a void beyond this one, and has created both the Turtle, who only watches, and It, who only eats. This Final

Other is “a force beyond the universe, a power beyond all other power, the author of all there was” (1009). Heidi Strengell has identified this Final Other with the Aristotelian principle of the unmoved mover, who makes things happen of their own accord. In *King God* requires humans to help themselves and their fellow human beings and may therefore seem indifferent. However, the Turtle, clearly a father figure, gives Bill the clue to defeat It: “*son, you've got to thrust your fists against the posts and still insists you see the ghosts ... that's all I can tell you*” (1010).

Becoming a hero for Stuttering Bill involves finding a voice. His brother's death opens the novel, and Bill journeys inward and outward to confront that fact. It seems fitting that a phrase designed to help stutterers overcome their handicap in communicating to others, more than once helps Bill, especially when he hurls it at Pennywise the spider in the final riddle game. Finally, Bill masters the symbolic finding a proper boundary for the abject mother, apparently defeating the monster. He is finally able to overcome the maternal because his inner self retains somehow some innocence:

... stand, be brave, be true, stand for your brother, your friends; believe, believe in all the things you have believed in, believe that if you tell the policeman you're lost he'll see that you get home safely, that there is a Tooth Fairy who lives in a huge enamel castle, and Santa Claus below the North Pole, making toys with his trove of elves, and that Captain Midnight could be real, yes, he could be in spite of Calvin and Cissy Clark's big brother Carlton saying that was all a lot of baby stuff, believe that your mother and father will love you again, that courage is possible and words will come smoothly every time; no more Losers, no more cowering in a hole in the ground and calling it a clubhouse, no more crying in Georgie's room because you couldn't save him and didn't know, believe in yourself, believe in the heat of that desire) ... OH,SHIT! I BELIEVE IN ALL THOSE THINGS! (1013)

However, when they think they have succeeded in killing It, their special bond begins to dissolve. To make matters worse, they are lost in the sewers and caves below the city.

As panic threatens to divide them and with division leading to death, Beverly reestablishes the bond in the only way, according to the novel, that she can; she has sexual intercourse with all six of the boys, one after another. Throughout the novel, she assumes a nurturing role of “sister, mother and fantasy lover to answer her own and her friends' various needs” (Dickerson 183), but it is through the actual sex act that she becomes the center of their magic circle, and serves as an effective feminine force to counterbalance the evil of the female It. The scene in which Beverly “saves” her male companions through sex is supposed to be more about love than the physical act; nevertheless, despite her seeming control of the situation, Beverly apparently comes across as little more than a vessel for the more important male rite of passage.

Bev must talk all six boys into it, and because all seven are virgins, they do not really know what they are supposed to do. Most of the boys are still too young to be able to do “whatever it is” (1037) to finish the act, but there is a certain symbolism in the act for all of them, as well as for Beverly. Because he is the most frightened and the one with the navigational skills to lead them out of the sewers, Bev chooses Eddie Kaspbrack to be the first one. The personification of the immature Lover comes to her as it is expected from him:

Eddie comes to her first because he is the most frightened. He comes to her not as her friend of that summer, or as her brief lover now, but the way he would have come to his mother only three or four years ago, to be comforted; he doesn't draw back from her smooth nakedness and at first she doubts if he even feels it. (1035)

At her young age, Bev has something of an epiphany about the most intimate act between woman and man:

The pain fades. Suddenly, he moves more quickly, then stops, stiffens, and makes a sound – some sound. She senses that this is something for him, something extraordinary special, something like ... like flying. 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. She feels no physical pleasure, but there is a kind of mental ecstasy in it for her. (1037)

Bev realizes that the sex act is the “essential human link between the world and the infinite, the only place where the bloodstream touches eternity” (1037), but the scene also serves to clarify her true feelings and give some important clues about the boys as well. It is hinted, for example, that Stan is unable to finish the act (1038), maybe unable to “dirty” himself in that way. Beverly is divided between a physical crush for Bill and a different kind of love and understanding she comes to feel for Ben, a mutual bond in which two people could help each other and take comfort in each other. (899). The act of sexual intercourse Beverly performs under the sewers puts Beverly's feelings in their place. She feels pleasure for the first time with Ben and shows her true love feelings for him (1040), while Bill is the last one to be with her, a reminder of the shifting he experiences from love interest for Beverly to leader of the group. In this last performance, as well as in the whole scene, she takes the initiative, and enjoys the intercourse in a different way (1041). Ben is the man Beverly would marry, while Bill is the man she has fun with. By the end of the scene, the “sexual initiation [has] triggered the necessary psychic and physical energy for them to keep the circle of love intact long enough to find their way home” (Dickerson 182). The passage implies the not very

politically correct thought that women's greatest power stems from their sexuality, but it is undeniable that the scene has some more deep implications: Beverly Marsh is the (sexual) maternal figure for the boys in the Losers' Club, the positive feminine force that helps her mates enter the symbolic world in a proper way. The girl guides them successfully through their gender insecurities and into a safe (hetero)sexuality. Taking her role into account, the scene where she witnesses Bowers' and Hockstetter's intercourse or even the monster itself acquire other implications. Patrick Hockstetter does not drive Henry insane, but Bowers is driven crazy by his own fear of the Otherness within, his inability to live with his own homosexual impulses. Beverly's terrified reaction to the circle jerk scene may be more complex than a heterosexual girl's natural repulsion for quasi-homosexual behavior. Beverly's strongest fear is not that the world will be tainted by the boys' homosexuality, but that their homophobia will lead them to rape or kill her if they discover her watching. The circle jerkers feel guilty about their act, knowing what (homophobic) society thinks of males masturbating together; if a girl were to see them, they might have to prove their heterosexuality by raping her, or kill her to ensure her silence about what she has seen. The scene replicates again the fear that male bonding will be seen as gay attraction, pervasive in King's fiction. In *Christine*, Dennis is concerned about embracing Arnie, and in "The Body" Gordie and Chris are sort of embarrassed at their warmth for each other. Interestingly enough, It, it turns out, is afraid of any Otherness, "that maddening, galling fear [...] that sense of Another. It hated the fear, would have turned on it and eaten it if It could have [...] but the fear danced mockingly out of reach, and it could only kill the fear by killing them" (973). It tries to project Its fear of Otherness onto specific others because others can be eliminated, but the trick does not work: the Otherness It fears is within Itself, an inner insecurity, that cannot be allayed through the murder of outsiders. In this too, It mirrors Its victims, whose own insecurity leads them to see Otherness as monstrous.

The seven children are convinced that they have killed the monster and rid themselves and the world forever of its violence and mayhem. But they gather outside the sewer and swear to return if the monster is not really dead. Stan Uris proposes it with a pact of blood, the blood representing their deep bond. However, if idealism and protest against evil represent the crucible out of which baby-boomer solidarity was born, then the belief that that evil had been conquered was the cause of its temporary demise. The adult comeback in *It* is symbolically ambiguous, because the seven have been "cursed" somehow for their original exploit. Only their return to Derry as adults

can rid them of this original curse, but Mike's call to duty turns out to be lethal to some of them.

Defeating It as Adults: an Incomplete Resolution

Karen Thoens explains that, in *It*, nostalgia forms the subtext of the novel, in which the past wields power over the present, merging inseparably with it at some points. The overwhelming celebration of the past – its music, lost youth and innocence – combines with the fear of a monster that lurks in the past, a monster that has not been vanquished, a female monster. *It* resists the forces that have propelled society into the present, seeking out the glory days of the past, hoping to reestablish the lost paternal order. King uses Bruce Springsteen's lyrics to suggest a connection between lost youth and women: “Glory days [...] gone in the wink of a young girl's eye” (59). For Stephen King, change is unpredictable, uncomfortable; undesirable. The Losers travel back in time to their own childhoods, but as adults, they all remain childless, symbolically castrated. *It* is not about childhood, *It* is about longing for the past, going back and finding that it is still inhabited by the same demons.

In 1985, the present of the novel, the first victim of Pennywise is a gay man, Adrian Mellon, beaten and thrown off a bridge by the current generation of Derry bullies. It is waiting under the bridge to feast on him. This change in victims from 1958 to 1985 indicates deterioration in a place already inhabited by evil. Mellon, like his boyfriend Hagarty, is marked and judged by voices carefully distanced from the author. Presented in opposition to violent homophobic voices, reasonable statements of male heterosexist privilege attain a central position, marginalizing the victim's voice. To officer Gardener, for example, a fair, decent man, Hagarty is a subspecies: “This man – if you want to call him a man – was wearing lipstick and satin pants so tight you could almost read the wrinkles in his cock” (16). Pronouncing social judgment on Hagarty and his dead companion, Gardener concludes that, “he was, after all, just a queer” (16). References to Mellon like this one position sexuality as defined in contemporary terms in opposition to nostalgic versions of clearly defined roles. Linking male homosexuality with being female, and by oppositional definition less than male, Hagarty and Mellon are belittled for their resemblance to females: “Garton saw the two of them, Mellon and Hagarty, mincing along with their arms about each other's waists and giggling like a couple of

girls. At first he actually thought they were a couple of girls” (20). The subtext of *It* links male homosexuality to female sexuality in a hierarchical structure privileging the heterosexual male.

As we can see in the interludes of the novel, the existence of a recognizable gay community symbolized in the Falcon bar in Derry, which opened in 1973, marks a change in the social order in Derry, a reflection of a change in America that was not noticed at first. A similar function makes the Black Spot in Derry, the Negro nightclub that burned down during the reign of *It* in the 1930s. In the world of *It*, change is frightening. With the normalizing of the Cold War, the passage of civil rights legislation, the war on poverty and the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, the fears and violence in American life subsided. The establishment authorities lost their power to inspire, and baby boomers began to take their places as functioning adults. American wrestled emotionally many years with the consequences of Vietnam, and they did so by first denying and forgetting. During that time, boomers matured, became established in their careers, and began taking over the responsibilities of the nation.

But all was not well with the members of this generation. Despite their idealistic vision, they began to show marked signs of pathology. In the seventies, the United States went through an economic decline that put a damper on the possibility that all Americans could be materially well off. At the same time, boomer tendencies toward self-reflection and materialism lapsed into narcissism, and there was a decline in fertility and a devaluation of the institution of marriage. Once again, baby boomers revolted against the establishment electing Ronald Reagan as President. However, the world seemed troubled. Unemployment, violence and child abuse became visible, but this time, the violence and evil were clearly internal. Whatever relationship this societal evil had to the earlier evil was cloaked by a shroud of forgetfulness. This collective memory loss is typical of future oriented societies. The loss of any causal connection between the past and the present fostered a sense of disconnection, a problem that afflicts American society to this day.

In 1985, when Mike calls his friends and asks them to come back to Derry, all of them have forgotten the past, but they have been shaped as adults by their experiences as children. Exhibiting the characteristics of baby boomers, they are all childless, some of them with failed relationships. What is more important, they are all repositories of American baby boomers' pathologies. For example, Bill Denbrough's act of writing answers deep-seated needs and completes the process of being and staying alive. It is a

response to a significant human loss, to replace what death has taken away: “His [Bill's] folks had given it [an old typewriter] to him for Christmas two years ago and Bill sometimes wrote stories in it. He did this a bit more frequently since George's death. The pretending seemed to ease his mind” (319). When we meet Bill in 1985, he is a very successful horror writer who has been reviving his encounter with It once and again in his novels, and has eased his mind and remembrances of his brother through writing. He lives of the pretending, and is happily and solidly married to a famous actress called Audra who resembles Beverly a lot; Richie has made a career out of his voices and jokes in Los Angeles, turning his annoying abilities into a gift, but still hiding his true personality behind multiple masks. Ben is one of the most important architects in the world, remains single and he is not fat anymore.

For his part, Eddie grows up to marry Myra, a woman who is frighteningly similar to his mother Sonia. At the beginning of the novel, when Eddie receives the phone call from Mike Hanlon summoning him back to Derry, Myra considers stopping him by force:

The thought of simply bundling him into the closet and then standing with her back against the door until this madness had passed crossed her mind, but she was unable to bring herself to do it, although she certainly could have; she was three inches taller than Eddie and outweighed him by a hundred pounds. (81)

Before he ever proposed to Myra, he compared a photograph of her with one of his mother and realized that “they could have been sisters” (86). When he is about to leave, he realizes that, had he tried, he could have broken away from his mother, but Myra has trapped him instead:

Myra had condemned him with solicitude, had nailed him with concern, had chained him with sweetness. Myra, like his mother, had reached the final, fatal insight into his character: Eddie was all the more delicate because he sometimes suspected he was not delicate at all; Eddie needed to be protected from his own dim intimations of possible bravery. (87)

Despite this realization, Eddie also realizes that he loves Myra and that she loves him, but King's choice of phrasing again adds an almost sinister aspect to her love: “She had drawn him to her with the fatal, hypnotizing snake's eyes of understanding” (88). Both Myra and his mother Sonia are stagnant and serve only to stifle Eddie with their smothering affection. King seems to imply that some women only impede the men in their lives. Eddie's professional career is, though, a success because he has taken

advantage of his navigational skills and possesses a limousine business in New York that is really profitable. But the fact that he keeps his childhood inhaler and he still is a hypochondriac is significant.

After experiencing true love, desire and power, Beverly, like the rest of them, has forgotten the past, grows up and marries a mirror of his father. Unlike Eddie, who at least recognizes the similarities between mother and wife, Beverly seems not to know that her choices in the type of relationships she has had with men have all been abusive. Tom Rogan is only the most recent and most brutal. In the novel, when the adult Beverly receives the call summoning her back to Derry, she knows that Tom will try to stop her and that his attempt will likely be painful for her. Tom has wasted no time in turning their marriage into a sadomasochistic relationship in which he is the very strict disciplinarian. Bev lights a cigarette as she talks on the phone, and when Tom smells it, he cannot believe that she has not yet learned from their “Special Seminars” that he disapproves of her smoking (101). Seeing Bev with the cigarette reminds Tom of “the two nights which had assured him of his complete control over [her],” and he takes pleasure in the memory (102). On the first night, she had not argued with him when he told her to pitch the cigarette and quit, a reaction that had put him in “a good humor for the rest of the night” (102). The second night came a few weeks later, and was much more severe. Bev unthinkingly lit a cigarette as they were leaving a movie, and, when they got in the car, “he unloaded on her pretty good, his hard open hand striking across her cheek hard enough to make his palm tingle, hard enough to rock her head against the headrest” (103). He waited for her to protest, to say the relationship was over, but he realized that she accepted his dominance when she guiltily threw out the cigarette. His pleasure only increased when she could not formulate “an adult rhythm of speech” because he had “regressed her” (102), and after hitting her again, he humiliates her even more by treating her like a child, making her say that she is sorry and that she would never smoke again without his permission. At this point and for their entire marriage, at least until the night of the phone call, Beverly is completely under Tom's control.

However, Beverly is really effective when she has finally had enough. When Tom gets a strap of leather that had once been a belt, his disciplinary instrument of choice when he needs to give Bev a “whuppin” (108), he is surprised of Bev's lack of “the fear he wanted to see – the fear of him” (109). Tom is so psychologically addicted to her fear of him that its absence makes him doubt his own existence. He is even more surprised when she tries to take the belt from him. He chases her around the room, landing blow

after blow, until she finally holds him off by throwing jars of cosmetics at him, and speaking slowly, she says “If you come near me again, I'll kill you. Do you understand that, you tub of guts? I'll kill you.” (113). Tom's reaction to her threat, a headlong charge, gives Bev the epiphany that makes her the forerunner of King's female characters in the 1990s, strong, suffering and independent women:

Time after time she had seen herself leaving him, leaving Tom's tyranny as she had left that of her father, stealing away in the night, bags piled in the trunk of her Cutlass. She was not a stupid woman, certainly not stupid enough even now, standing on the rim of this incredible shambles, to believe that she had not loved Tom and did not in some way love him still. But that did not preclude her fear of him ... her hate of him ... and her contempt of herself for choosing him for dim reasons buried in the times that should be over. Her heart was not breaking; it seemed rather to be broiling in her chest, melting. She was afraid the heat from her heart might soon destroy her sanity in fire. (113)

Beverly breaks free from Tom Rogan, but not before turning the tables on him by giving him several hard strokes with the belt, including one last lick that “whacked across his balls with a brisk yet heavy sound, the sound of a woman striking a rug with a carpet-beater” (115). She views his agony coldly, and when she finally leaves the house, she finds herself laughing as she runs down the dark street.

Bev not only stands up to and leaves her abusive husband, but she also feels that she is at least partially responsible for the nature of her relationship with Tom, if for no other reason than she enables his violence, that “part of her craved the hurt. Craved the humiliation” (115). While the scene appears to play into the stereotype that the woman in an abusive relationship wants, or in King's word, craves the abuse, the scene points to a horrible yet very real aspect of domestic violence. Many women are brainwashed by their abusive partners into believing that they deserve the abuse, hence the need for shelters with programs that address self-esteem issues. Viewed in this light, Bev's character is very realistic and gains her nobility by taking the first step in changing the situation. The fact that she uses violence to answer violence, though, perpetuates the problem rather than solving it, because Tom chases Beverly to her hometown.

Stan Uris is, ironically, the only member of the Losers that does not come back to Derry to confront the shape-changer. The boy that sealed the pact to come back to fight the monster with his and his friends' blood commits suicide at home after Mike's call, unable to accept the fact that Pennywise is alive again. In a final act to try to wash the memory and dirtiness of It off, he dies in a symbolic return to the maternal womb after cutting his wrists in the bathtub; finally, the boy that looked like “the world's smallest

adult” (391) in 1958 is doomed by his strong belief in a material, rational world. That strong belief is what allows him to see what It really is, because his mind is constructed to see the real, so It's masks worked less on him. As an adult, Stan is the most important accountant in Atlanta, he is married to Patricia Blum and childless. He goes into accounting because numbers are real, rational things that do not change. But still, he vaguely remembers It, more than any of the others that left Derry (43), and he buys and reads Bill's novels. Stan still remembers because the magic of forgetting works less on him, because he did not believe in it. In the end, to accept only the sane and rational as a child sets up a series of dominoes that will eventually lead to his suicide. Stan, a small adult in a time for kids, would not be able to return to childhood, to recover those memories, because he never was a kid in the first place.

Stan's Jewishness hints at the Jewish past and the inability of so many to believe in the monstrosity of Hitler and Nazism, another case of monumental horror. Stories and films about the Holocaust were emerging and plentiful during baby boomer childhood, and there were many survivors around to testify. But, by using Stan to invoke the stereotype of the intellectual, Stephen King writes his death to symbolize the mistrust of rationality by baby boomers. One of the consequences of the sixties was the loss of faith by baby boomers in the power of science and objectivity – the gods worshipped by the American parental generation, which had led the country into lethal confrontations and death. Stan's death symbolizes the inability of rationality to account for the presence and prevention of evil. Yet, no new understanding of rationality replaced the old one. Rather rationality itself was allowed to wither and with it all explanations for the presence of evil. Baby boomers replaced science with magic. The use of magic in *It* acknowledges the rise of New Age religion and its emphasis on the magic worldview.

The adult Mike Hanlon, the librarian that never left Derry, is the only one who remembers the past. Unlike the others, he has not become unusually successful. The Interludes trace Mike's personal development (addressing mainly his father and the town's racial discrimination) and his mission to bring the others back to Derry and themselves. Like Bill, he is also a writer in a sense, and language and the entrance into the cultural narrative that its power brings, belong to him. It enables Mike to voice and to record the evidence of racist horror in the northernmost reaches of late twentieth-century America. His act of writing sets in motion and drives the novel's narrative and Stephen King is insisting with his character that the story of the black American

permeates the history of the American Northeast as much as it does the history of the South. Racism is part of the American cultural narrative, a nightmare of history. Mike becomes both scapegoat and savior in the novel, the African-American telling his own history and participating in a role that engages the other members of the Losers' Club in the communal act of memory to challenge It.

Adult Mike becomes the leader of the group time enough to make them remember. He is aware of the lives of the others, and prepares everything to come back to the sewers recovering objects that could be valuable for his friends. Mike brings together the gang in a Chinese restaurant, where they begin to remember through magic and dialogue. The magic is the bond of love all of them shared as children, which surfaces when they all begin to put the few things they remember in common. Mike advises his five remaining friends to get ready to the confrontation by walking alone in the streets, because each one must remember his or her personal experiences, why they are in Derry in the first place. And Pennywise appears again, old demons coming back to haunt the adult Losers, who are unable to leave the past behind.

Ben Hanscom comes back to Derry's library, to his books; the place where he spent most of the time as a child, becoming filled with dreams, fairy tales and stories. But this time, he finds Pennywise in the library disguised as Nosferatu (519), F. W. Murnau's classic rendition of Dracula. Clearly, this version of Dracula has nothing to do with the attractive version of Bela Lugosi, the characterization that has shaped the archetypal vampire and pervades in popular culture. Nosferatu is far more dreadful, with all the features of Bram Stoker's Dracula exaggerated into a grotesque being that resembles a Jewish caricature with its dark, foreign appearance. It became a particularly telling figure in the political and social unease of the Weimar republic in the 1920s in Germany, and in the context of Stephen King's novel it is a reference to American anti-Semitism linked to the dangers of unbridled feminine sexuality, given the fact that the ultimate shape of Pennywise is a pregnant spider. It is also a reminder of Ben's own fears of effeminacy, and of the fact that Ben is still the immature King. Pennywise advises Ben to go away because all the Losers are too old to confront It again. It is only a warning.

Eddie Kaspbrack returns to the baseball pitch where he tried to play like the rest of the kids until his mother forbade him to do it. The fact that he experiences there Pennywise again disguised as the leper hobo (533), as the baseball coach, and as a victim of Pennywise with a balloon that reminds him of the futility of his inhaler /

placebo reflects all the fears of his childhood and connects them to his present, to the fact that, in the end, he marries his mother. Eddie, although becoming an adult, still represents the immature Lover. For his part, Richie comes back to take a look to the statue of Paul Bunyan and remember his troublesome childhood, only to discover that a bigger and more dangerous Pennywise has taken the plastic statue's place. Richie is still the immature Magician, the fake hero, unable to take responsibilities in his life.

Beverly decides to come back home, the place she left behind to avoid his father's violence and incestuous urges. But she finds there Pennywise disguised as Mrs. Kersh, an old woman who turns into the witch of "Hansel and Gretel," and symbolically into an embodiment of her father: "She turned, swirls of red hair floating around her face, to see her father staggering toward her down the hallway, wearing the witch's black dress and skull cameo; her father's face hung with doughy, running flesh" (545). Like the father in the "Hansel and Gretel" fairy tale, Bev's father, Alvin Marsh, has betrayed her. Her whole attitude towards men has been shaped by his abuse and neglect. And as a consequence, she comes to identify masculinity with monstrosity and violence, but also inculcates the belief, handed down from father to husband, that she deserves the punishment that men keep claiming is her due. Whenever Alvin Marsh appears to his daughter, even as a ghost when she is a grown woman, sexual incest and violence inform his every gesture: "I beat you because I wanted to FUCK you, Bevvie, that's all I wanted to do ... I wanted to put you in the cage ... and get the oven hot ... and feel your CUNT" (545). It finds in Alvin Marsh an avatar of the dark paternity found in "Hansel and Gretel" and extends it to include the masculine authority figure threatening her adult life – her husband, Tom Rogan. Both Alvin Marsh and Tom Rogan represent the dark side of hegemonic masculinity, whose dominance is expressed through violence. Stephen King is illustrating the attraction for and subjugation some women feel to the "bad" boys. Particularly, Beverly, who is a successful fashion designer because of her own skills, is unable to define herself and her success without a masculine presence; when they all meet at the Chinese restaurant, Beverly talks about Tom Rogan as a charming prince responsible of her success, and as a protector figure who cares for her. Beverly has regressed to her childhood in the worst way possible.

While the rest of his friends experience It in their solitary walking, Bill is about to get his childhood's symbolic power back, his massive bike. Silver reappears in Bill's life in a bargain department store, and he takes it to Mike's place. While Bill experienced growing up too early, he is the most prepared to grow young again. While the others,

maybe with the exception of Richie, have gone mostly into “adult” jobs, Bill has made his living doing what kids do – making things up. As he was always good at thinking up games when they were kids, he has become good at making tales as an adult.

In the novel, the past and the present metaphorically mix, and the monster takes advantage of it. While Tom Rogan has followed Beverly to Derry taking the information from Bev's friend in a violent, rough way, Audra, Bill's wife, has gone to her husband's hometown out of true love and concern. A haunting presence from the past, Henry Bowers, also answers the call of the monster and returns to Derry looking for vengeance. After their walking tours, the gang get together again in the library to link the different pieces of their mental puzzle. But, while all of them come back to their hotel to rest before the confrontation, once again, Mike stays behind. He remains alone in order to give voice to and record their encounter. Henry Bowers, who has run away from Juniper Hill with the priceless help of Pennywise, is waiting for him. Mike is almost stabbed to death by Henry, and ends his adventure at the hospital and without any possibility to help his friends in the final battle.

Mike Hanlon symbolizes the dilemma of African-Americans in the United States, who have always been aware of societal evil and its violent consequences, because they have been its victims. Blacks were the first to protest over injustices in the post-war era, and it was their example and participation with them in the civil rights movement that spurred many young people on to protest the Vietnam War and the conditions of society in general. In this sense, blacks have always been the keepers of history and conscience for Americans. Since Mike Hanlon never left Derry, he never forgot the evil. Similarly, most African Americans in the United States have never forgotten the past and have noted the continuing presence of racism, unlike their white counterparts who seem to have forgotten the past.

Yet what is also interesting is that Mike Hanlon is prevented from assisting in the solution to the problem of evil. Mike becomes the victim of Henry Bowers, structurally denying black independence and equal contribution. Even though Mike is *It's* chronicler, narrator and eventual leader of the group, the actual elimination of evil is responsibility of the others. They will emerge as the active heroes that ride into town, dispose of the evil, and drive off into the sunset in another wave of forgetfulness. Baby boomers see themselves as having eliminated the problem of racism, having freed African Americans as well as themselves from the monster whose evil included racism, an idea reinforced when the adult Losers in the sewers telepathically save Mike from the

attack of It one last time when the Afro-American lies convalescing at the hospital (1000-1003). American baby-boomers are free to forget the past and move on, while African Americans struggle to catch up. Mike Hanlon always stays behind the whole novel, financially, socially and in the end, physically, leaving the problem of racism and its causes unsolved.

Henry Bowers acts as a catalyzer to trigger the final confrontation with It. After disposing of Mike, who ends alive but in bad condition, the former Derry bully goes to the hotel with Pennywise disguised as the evil 1958 Plymouth Fury Christine (911) driven by his old ghostly pal Belch Huggins. Unaware of what has happened to Mike, all of them sleep quietly in their rooms but Bill and Beverly, who make sex after reconnecting partially with their past. Again, an act of sexual intercourse becomes vital for the novel and the characters, because finally Beverly engages in a healthy sexual relationship with a positive masculine authority figure. Beverly turns her fantasy true, only to rediscover the sexual “sacrifice” she performed to save her friends. For Bill, having sex with Beverly reminds him of his role of “bad boy” in opposition to Ben, who is “the good boy,” the non-threatening male. Beverly was meant to be for Ben, as finally Bill understands his role in the love triangle, but he also understands Beverly's role in the group and her power to make decisions, the fact that she is free to choose who she wants to be with:

“That was your way to get us out” ... It should have been Ben with you, dear, he thought drowsily. I think that was the way it was really supposed to be. Why wasn't it Ben? Because it was you then and it's you now, that's all. Because what goes around always comes around. ... And maybe it's me now because Ben's the one who's supposed to see the lady home. (893)

Meanwhile, Henry awakens and attacks Eddie, who finally kills the racist with a broken bottle, but not before the former bully breaks his arm again. This sort of street fight symbolizes the challenge of overcoming the past and its ghosts. Only through love and nurturing would be possible to heal the past and parental wounds, but the immature Lover gives the first step to perpetuate the problem through violence, and the fact that Eddie will fight It in the same exact conditions than when he was a child is not a good premonition.

When the five remaining Losers go back once again into the sewers, they have finally been thrown into their childhoods: Eddie guides them all, Big Bill stutters and he is the leader again, Ben stays close to Beverly and Richie is Richie. But what they first

encounter in the sewers are signs of their present as adults: It has used Tom Rogan to find and kidnap Bill's wife, Audra. Tom Rogan dies after contemplating It's true nature, and Audra remains catatonic after the horrifying vision of the monster. It thinks it is going to win because the Losers are now adults with adult worries and concerns, and the strongest of the Losers' – Bill Denbrough's – mind is clouded with fear and rage, but a familiar feeling returns to the monster:

Only now that they were coming, the fear had returned. They had grown up, and their imaginations had weakened – but not as much as It had believed. It had felt an ominous, upsetting growth in their power when they joined together, and It had wondered for the first time if it had perhaps made a mistake ... The writer was half-mad for his wife, and that was good. The writer was the strongest, the one who had somehow trained his mind for this confrontation over all the years, and when the writer was dead with his guts falling out of his body, when their precious “Big Bill” was dead, the others would be Its quickly. (975)

Bill is tempted to leave the fight when Pennywise appears before him disguised as his little brother, Georgie (994), but, as the origin of evil on Earth, the egg-bearing female spider must be conquered, her evil spawn destroyed to prevent unthinkable consequences. In order to destroy the ultimate female evil, Bill must overcome his fears and insecurities, but this time, his urge makes him weak. Trying to begin the ritual of Chüd again, Bill gets trapped in the void of It, and Richie must come to his friend's rescue. The Magician and the Warrior team up to defeat Pennywise once again but, as in their childhood, this is not enough to win the battle. It is really upsetting because all the Losers are potentially dangerous, something the monster never understood because it underestimated them. Now it is Eddie's time. While the spider is busy fighting his two friends, the immature Lover attacks It again with his “magical” inhaler. Although the inhaler hurts the monster, this time the magic does not work. It grabs Eddie and crushes his arms with its claws, but the fragile man finally frees his friends from It's spell and dies peacefully in Richie's arms, having become a kind of virgin sacrifice and having saved Bill's life once again.

The monster retreats, draining life, and Bill and Richie pursue the spider to make sure that this time they have really killed it. They find It in its lair, weakened, and finally it is Bill who is locked again in mortal combat with the feminine, striving to conquer it and to assert his masculinity, the female body a “dark continent” to penetrate and pacify:

It lunged clumsily forward, trying to bite him, and instead of retreating, Bill drove forward, using not just his fists now but his whole body, making himself into a

torpedo. He ran into Its gut like a sprinting fullback who lowers his shoulders and simply drives straight ahead. ... With an inarticulate scream he drove harder, pushing forward and upward with his legs, digging at it with his hands. And he broke through; he was inundated with Its hot fluids. ... He was in the black again, up to his shoulders in Its convulsing body. ... He plunged his hands into It, ripping, tearing, parting, seeking the source of the sound; rupturing organs, his slimed fingers opening and closing ... *Yes try this you bitch!* TRY THIS ONE OUT! DO YOU LIKE IT? DO YOU LOVE IT? DO YOU? ... Bill felt Its body clench around him suddenly, like a fist in a slick glove. Then everything loosened ... At the same time, he began pulling back, his consciousness leaving him. (1048)

Bill recovers Audra, but the remaining four Losers must abandon Eddie in the sewers, and they finally go their separate ways after the confrontation. The incidents fade from memory, recalled by a Mike Hanlon who is also beginning to forget because it is not necessary to keep the lighthouse anymore in this fairy tale. Beverly “runs away” with the King after “playing” with the Warrior. She finally chooses Ben over Bill overcoming all her previous problematic relationships, starting an apparently more fruitful relationship that is not based on violence and attraction. Richie comes back to Los Angeles and forgets about almost anything, and Bill stays with Audra and tries to bring his catatonic wife back to life taking her to ride in Silver, the symbol of his masculine powers and a reminder of the fact that he is the only one who returned to childhood in a healthy way. Stephen King's *It* ends like so many of the fairy tales that kids are raised on. The monster is slain, and all live happily ever after. Yet there are some disturbing conclusions to be drawn from this story. Because Americans do not know the end of their (hi)story, the adult defeat of It and the ending are only projections of what might be. If we analyze the outcome, we are left with an incomplete resolution and some troubling details.

Stan's death and Mike's assassination attempt speak of a mythical America where, as Simone de Beauvoir put it, there is neither a Negro problem nor a Jewish problem. The sacrifice of Eddie Kaspbrack speaks to the continuing problem of defining masculinity and sexuality in America. Eddie alone of the seven remains symbolically attached to his over protective mother, and he becomes a sacrifice after attempting to be brave and saving the rest of his friends, but he is portrayed to be weaker than the only woman in the group. This sacrifice becomes a crisis ritual in which the purest member of the group, and the weakest, dies to save the stronger, more viable members of the group, an outcome reminiscent not only of fairy tale logic but of a lingering and simplistic belief in the survival of the fittest. The implication is that Eddie had the least to lose by dying, being he the only one who has no hope of overcoming his handicaps. Bill Denbrough

overcomes his stutter when the monster is dispatched the first time, and again, when he finally gets rid of the spider in its lair. He finally has mastered the things with which he had problems – words – by becoming a bestselling author. Ben Hanscom sheds his fat and becomes a famous architect; Beverly Marsh finally overcomes her subjugation and attraction to abusive masculine figures by rediscovering her love for Ben Hanscom, and Richie Tozier overcomes his annoying hyperactivity and humor to become a radio personality. Eddie alone still suffers from his attachment to his mother and his hypochondria. And there is no relief in sight for him. Because he is not strong enough to solve his problems on his own, and does not solve them once he is back in the group, he must be eliminated.

Having cast doubt on their own masculinity through their close affiliation with their mothers and rejection of their fathers (by the rejection of the manly act of war), angry boomer males resent Eddie's effeminacy because they are fed by guilt over avoiding combat in Vietnam. The threat of effeminacy is effectively wiped out in this act of sacrifice, leaving Eddie manifestly honored for his bravery in attempting to save the others and latently despised for his weakness. Americans have not overcome the fear of lost masculinity that is associated with the absence of fathers and the dominance of American mothers.

The fact that Eddie Kaspbrack symbolizes the archetypal masculine force of the Lover is also significant. Stephen King sees America as a white middle class dystopia, where race and religion are wiped out of the construction of community, and love, care and nurturing are rejected because of a lack of roles or models. Although women usually performed the nurturing role, but feminist and gender revolutions put that in danger. In Stephen King's dystopian vision of America, women have become men mimicking their apparently magnificent freedoms, and men have reacted becoming inevitably immature kids. Although meant to be positive, the ending of *It*, with the encroachment once again of forgetfulness upon all of the characters, relegates the important events of the two confrontations to oblivion. The characters of the novel have no intention of keeping in touch with each other, an odd outcome after they have shared such an intense experience together, and especially odd because of their incessant quest for community. In the end, Stephen King is telling us that Americans in general, and baby boomers in particular, have failed to overcome the greatest problem of all – their own detachment.

This detachment is the product of parental wounds that have been reproduced through patriarchy and American culture. The father wound is the origin of many behavioral and emotional conflicts in individuals, and they can be the result of failing to have a strong, loving and supportive relationship with a responsible father, or as a result of mimicking undesirable violent behaviors from hegemonic models of masculinity. Stephen King tries to heal this father wound relying on alternative nurturing models that substitute the father figure for caring friends. But all the attempts to heal the father wound in American culture have had consequences. In healing the father wound, the mother wound, that is, the pain of being a woman passed down through generations of women in patriarchal cultures and the dysfunctional coping mechanisms used to process that pain, remains open and ignored. Carrie White symbolizes the lack of control and awareness of women's own powers, while Arnie Cunningham in *Christine* suffers the consequences of the maintenance of a patriarchal society. The character of Gordon Lachance and his story show that Americans are unable to assimilate death and legacy, something very typical of future oriented societies. Chris Chambers and Jack Sawyer show the reader the inability of Americans to face reality as it is, and the failure of hegemonic models in healing parental wounds. Finally, Bill Denbrough and the Losers Club reinforce that idea showing an American society full of immature individuals unable to solidly love and connect to each other. For Stephen King, traditional gender roles disrupt American society's evolution. Ultimately, through the five stories contained in this analysis, Stephen King is showing the weaknesses of America. The conclusion for him is that American society is still rather immature and childish.

CONCLUSION

Stephen Edwin King, the most successful American horror writer since World War II, is also one of the most prolific, well-known authors of any time or genre. His early literary production can be seen as the unintended consequence of the raise of feminism in the 1970s, with the author relying on gender issues to show American society and its inner domestic demons. Because gender and social construction of sex and sexuality are a key point in horror fiction, most of Stephen King's earlier narratives are a compendium of the origins of human beings and the experiences that condition them as social beings through sexual differentiation. Particularly, masculinity centered themes have been a large part of his career because writers usually reflect what they know, and because they usually reflect their times. Consequently, Stephen King has written about American fears, and since the 1970s most of those fears were of a feminine nature.

The stress and turmoil in American society caused by feminism is reflected in his teenage characters, who appropriately enough are unable to adapt to hegemonic – dominant – models of gender (masculinity) or fear them. The Maine author shows the malaises and weaknesses of a young immature society with masculine mythic roots which continues living haunted by them, a haunting expressed in Gothic terms. Horror is a subversive genre that expresses skepticism about the ability of human beings to develop, to change the *status quo*. On the eve of the nineteenth century, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote *Letters from an American Farmer*, and his third letter entitled “What is an American?” answered this question telling that “the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions” (56). However, Stephen King offers the reader a different answer. He seems to tell that the American is an individual conjured by old prejudices, perverted principles, biased opinions and a threatening sexual Other. He is showing his readers the dark side of American society, a future oriented society that has progressed very little in spite of rooting principles like progress, individualism and self-reliance. American society is still an immature, teen society relying heavily on its European ancestors.

Carrie (1974), the first novel published by Stephen King, is a reflection of American puerility regarding gender issues, and the reason why his production is seen as an

unintended consequence of the raise of feminism. The character of Carietta White relies heavily on its European Gothic ancestors, and taking into account her origins and antecedents in fact and fiction, the girl is another example of Gothic *femme fatale*. Her first traumatic menstruation unleashes Carrie's powers, sexuality and telekinesis, turning the novel into an amalgamation of feminist anxieties about the inability of women to control the tremendous powers they have. From the point of view of some characters that surround the girl, Carrie's psychic powers express the fear and the insecure future for both men and women that would be produced if the equality proposed by feminism would not come to terms; that is, if patriarchy is substituted by radical feminism. Literally, unleashed feminine powers – sexuality – clash with the traditional patriarchal values and roles associated to women: wives, mothers and daughters, the battle ending in mayhem.

The second wave feminism and its struggles becomes the backdrop to a novel that reproduces a patriarchal system where the interrelation of gender on a very large scale is centered on a single structural fact: the global dominance of men over women. In a culture of violence such as the American, values such as dominance and aggressiveness acquire relevance to define hegemonic models of masculinity, those which legitimize masculine powers in society. For teenagers – individuals trying to define themselves, their relationships with family and peers, and their social life at school – these dominant models are appealing, and because masculinity is a set of behaviors transcending biological boundaries, girls are also attracted to the apparently great freedoms enjoyed by boys. In fact, *Carrie* is full of tomboys, girls and women assimilating values and behaviors traditionally associated to men. One of the milestones of second wave feminism was sexual freedom for women, and the novel portrays girls behaving sexually like boys; but at the same time, these girls struggle to conform to the needs and desires of masculinity. Raewyn Connell called this behavioral model “emphasized femininity,” a template organized around compliance with gender inequality in order to accommodate those needs and desires. A hierarchical gender model, its characteristics are the display of sociability rather than technical competences, fragility in mating scenes, compliance for men's desires with titillation and acceptance of marriage and childcare as a respond to labor market discrimination.

After analyzing the main characters in the novel, it can be concluded that, on the one hand, Susan Snell is the stereotypical girl next door who repudiates violence and

aggression and represents “emphasized femininity” in the novel. Her tomboyism is expressed through sexual intercourse with her perfect partner: Tommy Ross, a socially conscious, non – aggressive and non – sexist boy. Her decision to quit the prom and ask Tommy to take Carrie to the dance can be seen as a generous action that hides the egotistical purposes of freeing herself from guilt and gaining certain independence claiming her ability to live without social affirmation. On the other hand, Christine Hargensen is a tomboy who reproduces the behavioral traits that define hegemonic models of masculinity – she is sexually aggressive and dominant. In this sense, Chris mirrors her perfect partner: William Nolan, an alpha male. The good girl, the bitch goddess and their perfect partners are stereotypes complementing and reinforcing each other in a hierarchical dependency. That is, both couples come to represent the two faces of a patriarchal system where aggressive men dominate women and “good” oppressed men. Although – after the opening scene in the novel where Carrie White is humiliated – both Sue and Chris are the dynamic forces that set in motion the main events in the novel, their different reactions to that scene and their different relationship with their respective boyfriends are nothing more than stereotypical representations that perpetuate gender and social violence. In fact, the redemptive actions and fortuitous survival of Susan Snell do not bring any significant change to a hierarchical society that Carrie destroys.

Carrie White, therefore, symbolizes an alternative to the hegemonic discourse. She represents all the feminine traits women repress to conform to the image of femininity men desire; however, her scapegoating impedes her empowerment. Patriarchy oppresses women, but there is not an escape mechanism to channel their frustration and anger. Thus, the repression ends in female violence against their equals and the assimilation of misogynist traits that perpetuate inequality and hierarchical models of patriarchy. The message in the novel is that feminism is not only a threat to men, but also to women who support and strengthen the *status quo* in American society. The characters of Margaret White and Miss Desjardin work terribly well as tomboys, sustainers of patriarchal society. However, they are horrible maternal figures to Carrie. Margaret opposes her daughter's development becoming a religious, fanatical and intransigent impersonation of patriarchal principles. Miss Desjardin, for her part, symbolizes the false, paternalistic protection of patriarchal institutions. Lacking a healthy paternal figure who could help her understand her socialization, the tale of frog – turned –

princess Cinderella Carrie White becomes a nightmare. In a social system where women do the dirty work for men, Carrie's only relief is to revenge and kill a rotten maternal figure and destroy a patriarchal system which only understands femininity as an object of consumption.

Christine (1983) is a tale of human machines. The novel reflects how American patriarchy works for men, and what men must sacrifice in order to fit in those hegemonic models of masculinity Americans venerate. Manhood in America cannot be understood without the myth of the self-made man, an individual relying heavily on his individualism and self-reliance to achieve his goals. In the novel, however, we attend the failure of the self-made man when masculine powers prioritize values such as aggressiveness and domination which burden the personal and psychological development of human beings when other alternative and positive values are looked down on.

Dennis Guilder represents the hegemonic model of masculinity in a positive, natural way: he is a strong, powerful, non-feminine football player, and a womanizer. His friend, Arnold Cunningham, is a sensitive, good boy who wrongly embodies domination and aggressiveness when he engages in a dependent, metaphorical sexual relationship with his car. Christine is a monster of feminine nature that rivals for the boys' affections with its female counterpart, Leigh Cabot; it also turns into the means to explain why the consumption and disposability of masculinity contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchy.

The car – a repository of the dark aspects of the feminine, and of patriarchy – delineates the boundaries and limits imposed by the heterosexual ideal fantasy of male power Warren Farrell develops in *The Myth of Male Power*. Christine, a symbolic phallus, splits all the possible affective relationships in the novel. If the traits of hegemonic masculinity are aggressiveness and domination, values such as love, nurture, tenderness and compassion have no place and they are relegated or ignored. Thus, to avoid the gay side of things, the friendship of Dennis and Arnold finally breaks in fear of being perceived as mutual attraction when Christine becomes the Other in a series of triangular relationships which replace love, nurture, tenderness and compassion by obsession, dependency and deliberate blindness. The car promotes Arnie at school and, at least at the beginning, secures the love of Leigh Cabot. The girl truly falls in love

with him. However, in a social system where cars and girls are consuming goods, Leigh perceives the car as a rival in the affections for Arnie. While both Leigh and Christine struggle to complete him, the boy becomes obsessed and chooses his car over his girlfriend. In any case, the relationship between Arnie and Leigh is doomed to fail because it was born from a need to possess. Leigh is the hot new girl at school, the prize all boys want to get.

The triangle among Arnie, Leigh and Dennis is born from a matter of survival when the car tries to erase the girl from Arnie's life. It finally explodes because when “good boys” succumb to hegemonic models of masculinity, they display their traits intensely; when they become “bad boys,” they are the worst of all. The car accentuates the mess turning Arnie and Dennis' friendship into rivalry for Leigh. The relationship between Dennis and Leigh is also doomed to fail, anyway. It is also born from that previously mentioned necessity to possess, and not from love. The intrusion of Christine in their lives turns Dennis into the hero of the novel when he gets rid of the car with a sewage truck. In the process, he “steals” now Arnie's ex-girlfriend, the natural prize for the natural hegemonic man, and loses his male powers symbolized in his role of football player.

The real winner in the novel is patriarchy. This social system, embodied in the ghost of Christine's first owner, Roland Lebay, secures the love of Christine when this demoniacal paternal figure comes back from death to eternalize violence and usurp and destroy Arnie – his confused and disoriented “son” – and all the town scumbags who vandalized the car. Although Dennis and Leigh finally survive the chaos, their survival does not bring any significant change or freshness to the engines of patriarchy. Precisely because Dennis represents the hegemonic model of masculinity, and Leigh leaves college and fulfills her aspirations marrying, it only reinforces them.

For Stephen King, as well as for Warren Farrell, male power resides in fantasy. Its hegemonic model imposes a set of traits which stipulates that a man can never be unfeminine enough. To fully fit the role of hegemonic masculinity is not only impossible but dangerous, because the model erases fundamental traits perceived as feminine such as love, nurture, tenderness and compassion. By pairing sexual desire with violence and equality with lack of desire, male individuals perpetuate patriarchy remaining warped in their emotional development and subjugated to the

institutionalization of gender. In this institutionalization, both sexes are disposable, but men's disposability requires socialization. To be successful, this socialization requires rewarding boys with social bribes of approval: promoting them, turning them into "heroes" or securing them the love of women to perpetuate the cycle. The car symbolically stands for those social bribes in the novel.

As mentioned before, American society relies heavily on hegemonic models of masculinity due to its masculine mythical origins. These hegemonic models are culturally inspirational in a society based on individualism and material success, American values only within reach of just a few. Nobody has prepared men to become disposable in a patriarchal society whose values acclaim individualism and personal success but despises or ignores those who do not achieve them. This traumatic disposability causes a widespread frustration which translates into a dirty and amoral violence fed by misogyny and homophobia to perpetuate the institution of patriarchy and its subjugation of individuals. *Christine* is a metaphor about male power, but its message is loud and clear: while it may be useful to mold the character of a community and its cultural values, hegemonic masculinity is both undesirable and dangerous to individuals when essential qualities for their development such as love, nurture, tenderness and compassion are ignored.

"The Body" (1982) lacks many of the Gothic elements Stephen King is famous for because it is a realistic coming of age of its main character. Sensitive boy turned writer, Gordon Lachance, goes back in time to rewrite his personal story in order to assume death as a part of life and a personal legacy which haunts him to the present. This cathartic experience of assimilating death and legacy mirrors the coming of age of the United States, which after the raise of feminism and minorities in the 1960s began to question its mythical origins. Most Americans seem to live as if they did not have a legacy, as if death were not a part of life; they are amnesiac. Gordon acts as a father figure to himself, his friends and America telling readers how the United States lost its innocence.

Twelve years old Gordie, a potential king among outcasts at a mythically clear, black and white age – the America of the 1950s – is about to reach maturity in the journey he embarks on with his friends to recover the dead body of a boy missing for three days, Ray Brower. The story allows Stephen King – through his alter-ego – to make a

reflection about the American body politic of the early 1980s. Ronald Reagan reached the White House and tried to spiritually strengthen a social body suffering a long and painful, economic and cultural crisis. He did so by appropriating the discourse of the traditional values of the American myth of the West and its hegemonic model of masculinity, the cowboy. Criticizing a narrow discourse and politics which favored an immense minority, the Maine author reveals us in “The Body” multiple masculine bodies, including a confident embodiment of the hegemonic model of masculinity which, instead of displaying aggressiveness and dominance, has in love, nurturance, tenderness and compassion its main traits.

After their departure and during their first steps in the journey, teenager Gordon and his friends rely heavily on the mentor, strong, paternal figure of Chris Chambers, a nice and positive embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. This positive light is brought to the surface when, after a series of experiences which transform Gordon into a more mature individual, - including a metaphorical death and a rebirth - the story turns into a Cold War western. Gordon and his buddies, metaphorical pioneers without land, will have to face a confrontation for the remains of Ray Brower with Ace Merrill, the town's bully, and his gang. An alpha male displaying domination and aggressiveness, his figure contrasts with that of Chris Chambers, a cowboy without hat that protects his friends and saves the day. However, the fact that Ace abandons the confrontation does not give a closure to the breach opened among the multiple American bodies. It is only a reminder of the fact that, in real life, archetypes never transcend the myth. What once is considered a blessing can turn into a curse when circumstances change and demand transformations. In the 1980s present, Ace Merrill survives embodying the negative consequences of the policies supported by Ronald Reagan, and the death of Chris Chambers interceding in a fight mirrors the waste of human potential produced when a culture once and again relies heavily on the rigid concepts of a too much praised mythical model. Chris also embodies the loss of innocence of American society because he is a personification of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the last good cowboy standing.

Gordon Lachance, the communal storyteller, becomes a counterbalance to the hegemonic model of masculinity Chris embodies. A man can be a writer other than a football player, an actor, a cowboy or any other stereotype hegemonic masculinity supports, and still be a man. However, Stephen King is placing a subordinated, oppressed masculinity at the center of this story to counteract the hegemonic discourse

of a model of masculinity which Stephen King considers the origin of the malaises in American society because Americans have misunderstood or ignored their mythical roots. Gordon finds in writing an alternative channel of power to soothe the communal despair of his peer group, and Stephen King in “The Body” tries to exorcize the individual and collective demons of an American society living in uncertainty and fear, haunted by the raise of feminism. Adult Gordon's feelings of isolation leave the exorcism incomplete.

The Talisman (1984) was an experiment that reunited Stephen King with fellow writer and friend Peter Straub. When their collaboration was announced, readers expected the ultimate horror story written by two masters of the genre. What they finally wrote is a fantasy quest adventure with a teenager main character which embodies an actual alternative model of masculinity to those Stephen King had previously offered. At the time of publication of the novel, though, this alternative model was a wishful thinking. Maybe, nowadays it still is.

Thirteen years old Jack Sawyer travels across the America of the 1980s and a parallel world called The Territories to achieve a Talisman that could heal his mother, Lily Cavanaugh, who is dying from cancer. This apparently simple plot owes its structure to a long and old tradition of English and American fantasy. The novel updates the old modern myth of the American Adam, sprinkled with Gothic elements, in order to make the reader face American reality as it was and still is: a masculine mythical realm. Possibly as a reaction to the raise of feminism, Reagan's America mirrors through a glass darkly the genesis of American culture in Victorian times. In order to strengthen a culturally constructed masculinity in crisis, Reagan's policies tried to relegate women again to the margins of society, even at a time when they were starting to achieve social prominence. The old values discourse of Ronald Reagan appealed to the American male voter, immersed in a huge economic crisis and of values since the beginning of the decade. In 1984, when Reagan's America was at the peak of his glory, with the President sweeping at the elections and carving his name and presidency in what nowadays is called the Reagan years, Jack Sawyer's epic revealed the backroom of Reagan's America and tried to balance the feminine principle in American society.

Jack Sawyer crosses thresholds, walks roads, faces trials and enemies, and receives support and strength from animal and human friends to finally be worthy of the

Talisman. He sacrifices his youth in order to save his mother and the worlds he knows and he has learned to love, the America of the 1980s and the Territories. By the end of his journey, when he approaches the Black Hotel where the Talisman awaits him, Jack becomes the traditional American hero, dominant and aggressive, to defeat a Gothic paternal figure embodied in his “uncle” Morgan Sloat, a selfish and unscrupulous individual who becomes a dark alter-ego of Ronald Reagan. The boy also learns to love without reservations his mentor figure, African American old man Speedy Parker, and his pals Richard Sloat and Wolf.

In the traditional hierarchical disposition of masculinity that sociology conveys, most of the characters that surround Jack are traditional oppressed masculinities: Richard Sloat is a rationalist, non – aggressive individual; Jack's father, Phil, was a non-sexist, peaceful individual; Tommy Woodbine, Jack's godfather, was a homosexual, and Speedy Parker, his mentor, is African-American. While during the journey Jack comes to embody the hegemonic model of masculinity American society praises, the whole process is revealed to be a traumatic task and, therefore, Jack recedes quickly into obscurity after receiving the Talisman and saving his mother and friends. His reward is a peaceful return to his normal life of a thirteen year old boy.

In an American fantastical society that Stephen King and Peter Straub portrait homophobic and racist, the figure of Jack Sawyer embodies a new alternative masculinity for a magical while. The boy proves to be non-homophobic and non-racist showing openly his affections, a fact that turns Stephen King and Peter Straub into raiders of an alternative masculinity. In fact, Jack Sawyer becomes an aspirational model of behavior for those teenagers fascinated with aggressive and dominant American hegemonic models of masculinity.

Gothic literature subverts traditional values, social conventions and literary tropes to allow the reader to reinforce his or her well-being and the *status quo*. In spite of being formally transgressor, the genre usually depicts conservative messages. *Carrie*, *Christine*, “The Body” and *The Talisman* tell Gothic, traumatic, individual journeys to maturity which offer a dark insight to American culture and society. Therefore, they do not convey any significant change or boon to humanity in general or American society in particular. Stephen King shows American society as it is, and individuals conforming to it.

It (1986) gives a closure to what Stephen King has to say about American society in general, and about children and teenagers in particular. The novel is a massive fairy tale featuring a group of seven kids trying to defeat fear and cha(lle)nge patriarchy confronting Pennywise, the ambiguous villain of a cultural war that represents the worst traits of American society. These kids, flawed heroes of a democratic myth, defeat It and its avatars twice. When they are children, the youthful victory seems definitive and satisfactory. But in this novel, Stephen King finally completes the process of maturation of his teenagers, showing the reader their successful lives as adults. However, these successful lives remain somehow flawed, and the return of Pennywise and its final defeat offers an incomplete resolution, a poignant happy ending. The story reveals a dystopian vision of America, where the feminist and gender revolution of the 1960s put in danger the nurturing roles usually performed by females, when women were willing to become men enjoying and mimicking their apparently magnificent freedoms, and men reacted to that becoming immature individuals. Although the characters of the novel embark on an incessant quest for community, Stephen King's final message is that Americans have failed to overcome the greatest problem of all – their own detachment.

If we take a look back to the previous representations of teenager characters, in *It* there is a kind of natural evolution in patriarchal standards. Bill Denbrough, the leader of the kids and the only positive hegemonic model of masculinity in the novel, becomes the natural evolution of Gordon Lachance. He finally exorcizes personal and collective demons at the end of the novel. The other kids are oppressed traditional masculinities expecting to survive conforming to social circumstances. On the one hand, Mike Hanlon and Stan Uris represent oppressed traditional masculinities because of race and religion. On the other hand, Eddie Kaspbrack, Richie Tozier and Ben Hanscom stand for traditionally oppressed masculinities because they are non-aggressive and non-sexist individuals. The only girl in the group, Beverly Marsh, is a female tomboy displaying masculine traits. When compared to her counterparts in *Carrie* or *Christine*, she finally “matures” in patriarchal standards beginning a healthy affective relationship with a man. The novel offers a logical, culturally constructed conclusion and evolution to a culturally constructed crisis that began in the 1970s.

If we could make groups of teenager characters according to the different masculinities Stephen King portrays in the novels analyzed, three main groups appear:

Dominant Traditional Masculinities

Positive: Dennis Guilder (*Christine*), Chris Chambers (“The Body”), Jack Sawyer (*The Talisman*), Bill Denbrough (*It*)

Negative: Chris Hargensen, William Nolan (*Carrie*), Arnie Cunningham and the bullies that vandalize the car (*Christine*), Ace Merrill (“The Body”) and Henry Bowers and his gang (*It*)

Oppressed Traditional Masculinities

Susan Snell, Tommy Ross (*Carrie*), Leigh Cabot (*Christine*), Gordon Lachance (“The Body”), Richard Sloat (*The Talisman*), Beverly Marsh, Stan Uris, Mike Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrack, Ben Hanscom and Richie Tozier (*It*)

New Alternative Masculinities

Jack Sawyer (*The Talisman*)

We can conclude that Stephen King chronicles in his early production a perpetual crisis of white masculinity since feminism raised in the 1970s, claiming that the cultural models of masculinity available in American society are appealing but dangerous in the personal development of individuals during their adolescence. Those characters who embody dominant traditional masculinities in a positive way become leaders, paternal figures and role models for his peers. These models, however, are born from the lack of positive masculine models in American society since the raise of feminism put in question hegemonic traditional models of masculinity. The author portrays in these novels a transitional time between the raise of feminism in the 1970s, and the birth of masculinity and gay movements at the end of the 1980s. The appearance of a new alternative masculinity in the figure of Jack Sawyer gives credit to Stephen King (and Peter Straub) as a pioneer, visionary author. His literary production remains relevant nowadays, when the defects, malaises and weaknesses of the American society he portrays (racism, homophobia and sexism) keep on being frighteningly alive.

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RESUMEN TESIS

Entrelazando varias disciplinas literarias de investigación, como son feminismo, masculinidades, la mito-crítica o la literatura de horror, *Teen-age Identity Construction in the Fiction of Stephen King: a Gendered View* o, en castellano, *La Construcción de la identidad adolescente en la ficción de Stephen King: una visión de género* tiene como objetivo ofrecer una explicación de cómo las cuestiones de identidad, género y poder se reflejan dentro de la narrativa de Stephen King tomando como ejemplo algunos personajes adolescentes que pueblan sus relatos.

Partiendo de las palabras de la catedrática americana Kathleen Ann Sullivan, quien asegura que toda la ficción que Stephen King lleva cuarenta años escribiendo puede considerarse la consecuencia accidental del auge feminista de los años 70 del siglo pasado en Estados Unidos, se procede a un análisis exhaustivo de cuatro novelas y un relato de Stephen King en busca de evidencias que demuestren una evolución dentro de la producción literaria del autor a la hora de reflejar conceptos como poder, género o identidad. *Carrie* (1974), la primera novela publicada por Stephen King, es la piedra angular sobre la que se asienta la afirmación de Sullivan. En pleno auge de la segunda ola del movimiento feminista americano, la novela expresa una amalgama de ansiedades feministas que giran en torno a conceptos como poder y género, a la incapacidad femenina de controlar el tremendo poder que poseen las mujeres. Puesto que Stephen King es meramente, aunque no solo, un escritor relacionado tradicionalmente con el género del horror, lo que el feminismo evoca en King es el monstruo sexual femenino. A lo largo del relato, vemos a la inadaptada Carrie White tratando de adaptarse al microcosmos social de su instituto y su familia desestructurada, al tiempo que su

primera menstruación despierta una telequinesia latente. A su alrededor, sus compañeras tratan al mismo tiempo de acomodarse a los convencionalismos de una sociedad patriarcal haciendo uso de uno de los poderes femeninos fundamentales: la sexualidad. El resultado de esta socialización es desastroso, pues lo que Stephen King refleja en la novela es una distopía en la que las mujeres copian los peores comportamientos masculinos. El autor refleja, en definitiva, cómo funciona el patriarcado para el género femenino demostrando que las propias mujeres sustentan dicho sistema.

Christine (1983) funciona perfectamente como un tardío complemento a las alarmantes conclusiones a las que Stephen King llega en su ópera prima. Christine, el primer coche que el inadaptado Arnold Cunningham compra, personifica una *femme fatale* que acapara el tiempo y el afecto del muchacho, y trata de aplastar o alejar a toda aquella persona que le rodea o trate de lastimarlo. El académico Warren Farrell proporciona las premisas que nos permiten asegurar que la novela logra poner el mito del poder masculino en un brete. La hombría en Estados Unidos no puede entenderse sin aludir al mito del hombre hecho a sí mismo, un individuo que se apoya firmemente en su individualismo y autoconfianza para lograr sus objetivos. En el relato, sin embargo, presenciamos el fracaso de este modelo cuando la masculinidad se entiende como un sistema que prioriza valores como la agresividad y el control mientras ignora o estigmatiza otros más positivos como pueden ser el amor, la compasión, el cariño o la educación.

Stephen King, al igual que Warren Farrell, considera que el poder masculino es pura fantasía. Para cualquier individuo, reproducir un modelo de masculinidad cuyas características sean únicamente el control y la agresividad no solo es imposible, sino muy peligroso. Dejar de lado cualidades como el cariño, la compasión o el amor merma el desarrollo emocional de un individuo y le subyuga a la institucionalización de género.

Esta institucionalización convierte al individuo en prescindible, tanto del género femenino como del masculino. Sin embargo, convertir al género masculino en desechable apela a un proceso de socialización que requiere premiar a los hombres con cebos sociales de aprobación como pueden ser promocionarlos, ascenderlos de estatus, convertirlos en héroes o asegurarles el amor de las mujeres para perpetuar el ciclo patriarcal. *Christine*, el automóvil, simboliza y aglutina en la novela estos cebos sociales para todos los personajes.

En una sociedad como la americana – que basa sus relaciones sociales en modelos hegemónicos de masculinidad que veneran el individualismo y el éxito material, pero que ignoran o desprecian a todo aquel que no personifique estos valores – este tipo de modelos causan una frustración que se transforma en una violencia alimentada por la misoginia y la homofobia. Estos valores negativos perpetúan la institución patriarcal americana y su opresión del individuo. *Christine*, en definitiva, es una metáfora sobre la incapacidad masculina de controlar el poder que se le ha otorgado y sobre la ausencia de poder masculino individual y tangible.

El relato de “The Body” (1982) puede considerarse un reinicio del estudio en el que Stephen King ofrece una alternativa al modelo hegemónico de masculinidad tradicional. El escritor Gordon Lachance encuentra en su oficio un canal alternativo de poder para aliviar la desesperanza de una sociedad americana que, en el mundo ficticio del autor de Maine, vive en una amnesia permanente tras el auge feminista. Incluso nos ofrece el personaje de Chris Chambers, un chico que personifica el modelo hegemónico de masculinidad de forma positiva. Sin embargo, la historia funciona como una catarsis personal y colectiva de demonios relacionados con el feminismo. El inicio de los movimientos de género en los años 60 en Estados Unidos supuso un cuestionamiento de las raíces míticas americanas masculinas. Puesto que muchos americanos desconocen o

malinterpretan sus raíces, Gordon Lachance se convierte en el relato en una figura paternal que re-escribe su historia y la Historia para que comprendamos cómo los míticos Estados Unidos perdieron su inocencia a partir la guerra de Vietnam y el auge de los movimientos de género. El viaje que emprende el pequeño Gordie a los doce años con sus amigos en busca del cuerpo mutilado de otro chico atropellado por un tren, saca a la muerte y a la masculinidad del armario para darle visibilidad en una época, los años 80, en la que los Estados Unidos - bajo el mandato de un Ronald Reagan que, malinterpretando y manipulando sus raíces, convirtió el país en un reino mítico masculino – comenzaba a definir la masculinidad en oposición al feminismo.

The Talisman (1984), la colaboración con Peter Straub, ofrece un viaje a ese reino mágico americano que el gobierno de Reagan había creado partiendo de la base de que el feminismo había sido un éxito. Con la intención de fortalecer una aparente masculinidad en crisis, las políticas de Reagan trataron de oscurecer los logros que la segunda ola de feminismo en los Estados Unidos había logrado relegando de nuevo a la mujer al margen de la sociedad e ignorando otras realidades sexuales. El viaje épico que Jack Sawyer emprende para salvar la vida de su madre y de los mundos que conoce, los Territorios y los Estados Unidos de principios de los 80 del siglo pasado, supone un vistazo a la trastienda de la América de Reagan y un intento por devolver al género femenino el rol prominente que siempre le ha correspondido.

Jack Sawyer conoce aliados, confronta enemigos y aprende a amar incondicionalmente y a sacrificarse por aquellos a los que ama para ser digno de recibir el Talismán que salvará la vida de su madre y los mundos que conoce. En una sociedad americana que Stephen King y Peter Straub retratan como racista, homófoba y misógina, el chico madura encarnando una alternativa masculina carente de maldad, homofobia o racismo durante un mágico y efímero tiempo.

It (1986) supuso un adiós temporal a todos los temas que tienen que ver con la adolescencia, identidad o poder. Aunque tras la novela, ni el horror ni los personajes adolescentes desaparecieron del todo de sus escritos, en su producción posterior quedaron relegados a un segundo término. En la novela, un puñado de preadolescentes trata de derrotar al payaso Pennywise, ambigua encarnación tanto masculina como femenina de un semidiós que encarna los peores valores de la sociedad americana y que acecha y mutila a los niños de una pequeña población de Maine, Derry.

El primer enfrentamiento, en la adolescencia, ocurre en los años 50 del siglo pasado, y funciona como un cuento de hadas en el que los chavales confrontan e intentan superar sus miedos personales, que el monstruo encarna puesto que es un cambia-formas. Sin embargo, el grupo ha de regresar al pueblo treinta años después, ya que *It* ha regresado. Ya adultos, los chicos comprueban que los demonios que creían superados en su adolescencia continúan ahí y amenazan sus vidas. Aunque derrotan a *It* y sus avatares dos veces, el final feliz que Stephen King ofrece a la crisis de masculinidad que Ronald Reagan construyó culturalmente durante los años 80 del siglo pasado es bastante agrí dulce. La historia sigue la línea de retratar una América distópica en la que las mujeres intentaban imitar los comportamientos masculinos, y los hombres reaccionaban a eso de forma inmadura y a veces, estúpida. Aunque los protagonistas de la novela buscan incesantemente un sentido de comunidad e identidad, el mensaje final de King es que los americanos han fracasado en superar su principal problema – su propio desapego e indiferencia.

Vemos, sin embargo, una evolución en ciertos personajes comparados con los anteriores. Bill Denbrough, el líder del grupo, y el único preparado mentalmente para derrotar al payaso por su faceta de escritor, acaba exorcizando los demonios que otro escritor, Gordon Lachance, ya había augurado. Por su parte, Beverly Marsh, la única

chica del grupo, evoluciona a su manera iniciando una relación sentimental sana con otro de los miembros del grupo. En este sentido, supone cierta evolución en el sentido de que las adolescentes reflejadas en su primera novela utilizaban la sexualidad como arma y estaban inmersas en relaciones tóxicas o carentes de profundidad con el sexo opuesto.

En definitiva, desde el auge de los movimientos de género en el siglo pasado, una crisis masculina cultural y perpetua parece perturbar la evolución y madurez de la sociedad americana desde el punto de vista de Stephen King.