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Standing Up With The King: A Critical Look At Stephen King's Epic

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Standing Up With The King: A Critical Look At Stephen King's Epic

by

Jenifer Michelle D'Elia

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To Larry Underwood, for showing that it's never too late to knit a spine and Stand.

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Jenifer M. D'Elia

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, it is my intention to show how Stephen King transcends genre, creates and maintains a viable Secondary Reality, and treats capably those literary techniques that critics expect of a serious writer. In addition, I will discuss the ways in which King has secured the loyalty of his Constant Reader. The primary means of my analysis will be through a close reading of the “expanded and uncut” version of *The Stand*, one of the classics in King's arsenal.

I will begin with an overview of the general set-up in the novel—the start in Arnette, Texas, the actions of the military and media, and the 99.4% communicability of the flu itself. From there, I will delve into detailed character analyses of the main players in the story, before moving on to questions of the bigger picture—good vs evil, the question of choice, the Stand itself, the issue of government, and the promise of the future. I will conclude with a brief look at King's style and consider the overall reasons for his popular appeal.

It is my hope that such a lengthy look at one of King's novels—instead of the brief chapters devoted to each of his novels in turn—will reveal not only the reasons why King is worthy of serious study, but will show that King's work does stand up to in-depth criticism, thereby answering one of the key questions of current King scholarship: is there

enough in King to work with? Everybody agrees that King can crank out lengthy novels without much trouble; it is my intention to peak into the corners and down into the basement, if for no other reason than to find out if there really is a bogeyman hiding in there, or if it is merely an over-inflated rag doll of fandom. Either way, whether the horror be in the text or in the lack of substance in the text, I hope that my examination will lend new insight to the study of *The Stand*, and perhaps pave the way for other in-depth studies of other King novels.

Chapter One: Introduction

Stephen King's concept of America is, many critics agree, a frightening picture. From demented madmen infiltrating small towns to rabid dogs who chew on leg bones instead of squeaky toys, Stephen King is known for his ability to make readers squirm. Not only is he an acknowledged master of horror and the gothic, King is also an unacknowledged chronicler of his nation, and an unappreciated observer of the American psyche. Though his works may follow in the footsteps of many canon-worthy greats of American and English literature like Poe, Hawthorne, and Stoker, Stephen King seems unable to win the respect of scholars. Critics are not so eager to give King the stamp of serious literary approval, though they are willing enough to admire him for his prolific stacks of published works. Some, like Harold Bloom, argue that the popularity of Stephen King marks the downfall of the generation and the death of the Literate Reader in America, while others claim that his popularity illustrates a need within the American consciousness for gothic terror in American landscapes, thereby relegating his work to the realm of cultural studies instead of literature.

Although King has outsold most of his contemporary writers, literary critics are often displeased with his work. As Hoppenstand and Browne claim in their introduction to *The Gothic World of Stephen King*,

Some attack his ideas, claiming that the content of his horror fiction is trite and

unoriginal: *Salem's Lot* (1975) is a vampire story and vampire stories have been done to death; *The Shining* (1977) is a mere haunted house tale; or *The Stand* (1978) is simply another end-of-the-world fantasy, and who needs one of those? Other critics attack his style, claiming he has none. In a recent *Time* magazine feature article about King, several of his stylistic nuances were outlined: "The Disgusting Colloquialism," "The Brand Name Maneuver," "The Comic Strip Effect," "The Burlesque Locution," and "The Fancy Juxtaposition." Of course, if original ideas and writing style are valid measures of success, then William Faulkner and Henry James should be on top of the *New York Times*' Bestseller list instead of King. (2)

Many American readers prefer King to the classics, with their often hard to plow through language, but King does have something more to his works than the average easy-to-read bestseller, something that makes his books fly off the shelves, and that quality Hoppenstand and Browne call "the dazzle effect." King can "take the reader outside of himself with fiction" so much so that the reader becomes "oblivious to such things as style (or the written word) in a desire to be swept away by the author's vision, to be oblivious to page turning" (2). This evaluation is not so flattering as it seems at first. According to this definition, King is popular because he manages to spellbind his readers with a good story to the point that they don't care if the story is told well, as long as they get to the end. I am not sure if this view is more degrading to the American book publishing market, because readers are in such dire need of a good story that they will forego the pleasantries of good writing, or the American reader, who apparently is so deprived of entertainment that he is willing to accept anything that keeps the pages

turning. Either scenario is not flattering, and raises essential questions about the purpose of literature in the first place.

Have Americans become so accustomed to “page turners” (entertaining though they may be) that they no longer appreciate the finer nuances of classic literature? According to a 2007 survey, three out of four Americans read books (that are not required by school or work), but when asked to specify what kind of books, two-thirds of American readers listed the Bible or a similar religious work (interpretations and evaluations of the Bible), “popular fiction, histories, biographies, and mysteries were cited by about half, while one in five read romance novels” (Kroszer). Three-fourths is still more than the “fewer than half of American adults” who were reading in 2004; of that half, twelve percent, or twenty-five million, claimed to read poetry, and four percent, or seven million, had read a play in the last year (“Literary reading in dramatic decline”). Surveys do show that Americans are reading more now, but the quality of what they choose to read is questionable. Many works of popular fiction and mystery are not considered official “literature” according to scholars, and would be considered “page-turners” by those trained to evaluate literary matters. If this is the case, can we call these “page turners,” with their minimalist insight into the human condition, literature? Have we witnessed the death of the Literate Reader, as Bloom claims, or is it simply time to reorient the definition of literature to accommodate modern expectations (Bloom, *Stephen King 3*)? I do not advocate a complete abandonment of literary ideals, but certainly readers’ expectations of “a good read” have changed over the years, and it is the responsibility of the literary critic to consider, if not condone, the needs of a changing audience. If sales are any judge of popularity, which they ought to be because people

choose to buy what they presumably *want* to read (books for school aside), and Stephen King is among the best-selling writers of his time, it makes sense that there ought to be something that so many readers find worthwhile in his work. In a country where most people choose television over the printed word, it is significant that King's books sell the way that they do. After all, William Shakespeare, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway were all popular writers in their time, and each is taken seriously by the literary establishment today. In September 2000, Andrew Ervin suggested that King be awarded a Noble Prize for Literature, claiming that "while popularity doesn't necessarily equal greatness, [...] one of the many wonders of democracy is that every once in a while, the masses get it right [...] Just this once, the Academy should bestow the award upon someone people actually read" (Spignesi 10). Such a statement illustrates the division in American culture between that which is popular and that which is considered worthy of serious study. The "Great Divide," as Andreas Huyssen deems this schism, is clearly visible in today's universities: "witness the almost total institutional separation of literary studies, including the new literary theory, from mass culture research, or the widespread insistence on excluding ethical or political questions from the discourse on literature and art" (viii). Some of this division is a result of Modern ideals in literature—the notion that a work must have a "strong and conscious break with tradition" and must "reject traditional values and assumptions [as well as] the rhetoric by which they were sanctioned and communicated"; that is, Modern works "reject not only history but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record" (Harmon 298). By Modern criteria, literature ought to distinguish itself from the culture of which it is a part, focusing instead on individual concepts of reality and existence; this line of reasoning clearly leads to a

rejection of anything that is obviously representative of that society—and rarely is there anything more influenced and shaped by a people than popular culture.

These two categories seem mutually exclusive in modern times; the general theory today is that if a work is popular with the masses, it somehow cannot be literature. So Harold Bloom would say, but Bloom is fast becoming a voice from an older generation of literary critics. Though he decries the rise of cultural studies, blaming the realm of mass culture for the devaluation of the canon, Harold Bloom's claim for what makes literature worthwhile, a quality of arresting strangeness, "a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" can be found in King's work (*The Western Canon* 3). It is this ability to render the ordinary extraordinary that draws readers back to King's novels again and again, where they can "feel strangely at home" (Bloom, *The Western Canon* 3). The question of Stephen King seems to begin with the crucial issue of where his works belong—are they merely a relic of popular culture, something to be devoured and pored over by cultural studies critics, or can they be examined through the critical eyes of literary critics and survive to actually say something about modern literature? The current criticism on King seems to suggest that the answer to this question is yes, on both counts. King's massive popularity alone is worthy of study for those seeking insight into the mindset of the late twentieth century American. The very force of King as a phenomenon serves as fodder for those who would use King as a lens through which popular American culture can be understood and categorized.

When it comes to literary matters, however, even the pro-King critics begin to squirm. The notion of King as a serious writer is confounding, not only because of

reactions like Bloom's, whose standards of acceptability rule out even some authors who rank the high school required reading list, but because to admit to a critical appreciation for a popular writer is only recently becoming an acceptable pastime. The climate of today's literary criticism has shifted some from the Modern standards of Bloom's school of thought; critics are able to evaluate works considered less than canon-worthy, if they so choose. With the rise of Bloom's much lamented cultural studies, there has been a sudden influx of criticism that focuses on sociological aspects of literature instead of aesthetics, and some works that would not have made the cut for their literary qualities are now being considered for their cultural qualities. Huyssen explains the reasons for a compromise in *After the Great Divide*,

High modernist dogma has become sterile and prevents us from grasping current cultural phenomenon. The boundaries between high art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred, and we should begin to see that process as one of opportunity rather than lamenting loss of quality and failure of nerve. There are many successful attempts by artists to incorporate mass cultural forms into their work, and certain segments of mass culture have increasingly adopted strategies from on high. If anything, that is the postmodern condition in literature and the arts. For quite some time, artists and writers have lived and worked after the Great Divide. It is time for the critics to catch on (ix).

This hope that critics would "catch on" remained only that for some time; in 1980, "even with the growing interest in popular culture, comparatively few people have chosen to study these books [best sellers] either for their own content and style or as a tool for

broad analysis” (Greene 31). The explosion of study brought on by cultural studies did not arrive for another decade.

Stephen King seems lost in this shuffle. Some critics laud him as a cultural icon, and examine his work in light of his success. Others focus on biographical criticism or genre studies. There is very little criticism, comparatively, on King’s work as literature. This absence of serious consideration could be attributed to King’s lack of literary success, a circular argument of sorts—King is not literature because literary critics have not yet examined his work seriously, and literary critics have not seriously examined his work because King just is not “literature”; it is easy for literary critics to dismiss him as someone left for the popular culture specialists. This tendency to overlook King’s literariness allows other critics to assume that King is not worthy of serious study and move on to other possibilities. Even so, King studies have started to gain some ground in the last twenty years, and if the rise of King related dissertations is any indication, serious literary studies of King’s work will soon outnumber cultural studies of the “Stephen King Phenomenon.” It is my hope that this dissertation will take the first few tentative steps into this area, showing that while Stephen King may not rank up there with William Shakespeare when it comes to literary genius, his work is certainly worth serious study as literature.

In order to make such a claim, however, it is necessary to define the term “literature” as it used in this argument. From the Greek emphasis on the aesthetic importance of *paideia*, Western civilization has the expectation that the literature of a people embodies the ideals of culture and education held by that society (Jaeger i). Writers are a product of their environment, and so the great writers are able to

encapsulate the spirit of their age and culture in their works, and then share that vision with readers throughout later ages of the world. Literature, then, can be used to enhance “the process of educating man into his true form, the real and genuine human nature” (Jaeger xxiii). The Greeks believed that “the only genuine forces which could form the soul were words or sounds or both—rhythm and harmony”; hence, the position of literature was an exalted one—a form that could reach the soul more truly than any other (Jaeger xxvii). For the Greeks, nothing exemplified this ideal of literature more so than Homer: “As Plato said, Homer was, in the full sense of the word, the educator of Greece” (Marrou 9). Through his idealization of the hero, Homer taught his readers what it meant to be a man, to stand for the values of family and duty, and through his keen depictions of character and motivation, Homer captured the feeling of his time, allowing later readers to experience life as it was in that place and time—what Bloom would describe as making the readers feel strangely at home inside the text. Plato felt that the job of the poet was to educate his readers; therefore the “aim of poetry is not essentially aesthetic, but the immortalization of the hero,” and the poet must “clothe all of the great deeds accomplished by the men of old with glory, and thus educate those who come after” (Marrou 12). By Greek standards, then, literature is a means of educating readers about life lessons and behavioral ideals.

Modernism, however, had different views of literature. In the scramble to differentiate itself from mass culture, modernism has “constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion” (Huyssen vi). Despite this stringent selectivity, modern literature still aimed for a broad appeal—texts that recognized the “complexity of the world” (Greene 37). The critic and poet T.S. Eliot added to this shaping definition,

claiming in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that new works ought to have some connection to the great works that have come before them, both so that readers can have a sense of continuity and a relationship to those great works, and to show how the great ideas of the past can indeed be reworked and re-fashioned to serve a modern world. Eliot claims that tradition depends upon an understanding of the past; that is, “this historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.” For Eliot, the writer must learn to utilize the old with the new, a balance between his individuality and the inspiring forms and ideas that have come before him. This somewhat tumultuous relationship with former great writers is something that has plagued writers for ages—after all, how is a writer to balance the knowledge of old forms that have been shown to work for all time with the certainty that only originality will ensure access to the precious canon? Certainly a blend of some kind is required to make literature today. Harold Bloom answers this question with his theory of the “anxiety of influence,” the idea that all poets (and all writers, by extension) suffer this dilemma with an anxiousness that in some ways makes their work what it is—the modern paranoia contributes to the work itself, and this quality makes the work exemplary for literature today.

Literature in a modern sense does not necessarily have to make the reader a better person, as the Greeks would have it; rather, literature is expected to have a certain aesthetic quality, or stylistic strength, that readers can appreciate. Typically, this “literariness is often said to lie above all in the organization of language that makes literature distinguishable from language used for other purposes” (Culler 27). According to Kant, “aesthetic objects [...] have a ‘purposiveness without purpose’”; in other words,

a work of literature ought to accomplish the purpose of aesthetics through the work of the parts and their contribution to the whole, not through a specific agenda (political, feminist, etc) that takes over the text with its message (Culler 31). Modern literature, in addition to this purposeful purposelessness, ought to prod readers towards critical thinking, “by encouraging consideration of complexities without a rush to judgment, engaging the mind in ethical issues, inducing readers to examine conduct (including their own) as an outsider or reader of novels would” (Culler 35-36). The idea here is that literature allows readers to contemplate the world around them, to consider their own experiences through a different lens of understanding, and perhaps gain some insight into the human condition from the exposure. Perhaps the standards of an 1860 educator still stand true today:

by converse with the thoughts and utterances of those who are intellectual leaders of the race, our heart comes to beat in accord with the feeling of universal humanity. We discover that no differences of class, or party, or creed can destroy the power of genius to charm and instruct, and that above the smoke and stir, the din and turmoil of man’s lower life of care and business and debate, there is a serene and luminous region of truth where all may meet and expatriate in common (qtd. in Culler 36).

Such lofty notions of literature have come under fire in recent years from the same cultural studies critics that Bloom so detests; for instance, Terry Eagleton claims that this high-minded ideal only serves to distract the rabble from building barricades in the streets (Culler 37). This reaction is typical of a multicultural approach to literature—the theory is that a strong focus on classical canonized literature does not represent people beyond the

traditional “dead white male” and so literary critics ought to branch out and find other works that speak more directly to readers who are not white and male. Any reading list that focuses on the high-minded intellectualism of literature, according to the theory, ignores those marginalized voices who are not represented and can only be engaged in some kind of misdirection that tries to teach ideas that reinforce dominant social practices, hence the concept of literature as a distraction from the everyday. Literature can be a distraction, certainly, but to suggest that the study of literature is an exercise in denying cultural history seems farfetched; moreover, the true purpose of literature, as the 1860 speaker saw, is to lift readers out of the ordinary, show them a potential possibility, and then set them back down again armed with the memory of the experience. It is in this way that the Greek felt that literature could truly make readers better people. Suffice it to say that “literature” for purposes of this argument includes works that are aesthetically pleasing, prompt intellectual curiosity, and reflect (but do not copy) a tradition of other works formerly considered great works.

The question of Stephen King as a literary figure inevitably leads to a discussion of precisely what “literariness” entails. I propose that the function of literature is to enlighten the reader, whether through exposure to new ideas or cultures, descriptions of events which prompt critical thinking, or references that hint at a broader world of knowledge and experience. The text need not explicitly refer to previous works of literature, but such references often reinforce the quality of the enlightenment experienced by the reader; a text with references to previous literary greats imparts a sense of history to the reader, an impression of the scope of the world of literature. However, I believe that the most important condition of “literariness” is the result of the

reading; that is, the reader must gain some new insight into the human condition from the text. Ideally, a “literary” text would also be re-readable in the sense that new ideas, images, and lessons can be gleaned from each additional reading, but as long as the reader receives an impression of a wider world than he or she had previously envisioned, the work that inspired this new perspective can be considered “literary.”

In opposition to Modern standards, I do not feel that literature must separate itself from the dominant culture in order to qualify as “literary.” I believe that the lens of popular culture is just as viable as any other as an appropriate means for a reader to gain greater insight into the world. The word “literature” often implies a sense of depth, an understanding that the work in question may require some intellectual effort in order to be appreciated and understood. Often, these works of “literature” require more than a dictionary to comprehend, and volumes of explicatory supplements and critical interpretations are necessary to facilitate understanding. I pose that “literature” does not need to be dense in this sense of the word; that is, a text can be simply written and still retain “literariness” as long as the insight remains visible to the reader. Such exercises in vocabulary flexing may be “literary” in their use of language, but I believe that this style is not a requirement of “literature.” In fact, it seems likely that part of the reason why Stephen King’s work is dismissed as non-literary is due to his writing style, a way of telling a story that mimics the voice of the ordinary American—a tone that does not appear to be “traditionally literary” and therefore is often dismissed without further consideration.

The question of Stephen King as a literary figure, then, for this argument, rests on the result of reading his work. After finishing *The Stand*, readers have borne witness to

death and destruction on a massive scale, and though much has been lost, they have encountered amazing characters throughout the journey. King's readers can hardly emerge from this tale unscathed, and certainly King raises enough ethical issues to promote critical thinking, not to mention the insight into human behavior his casual narrative has revealed. More importantly, though, is the manner of King's lesson—he does not overwhelm the reader with insightful observations, nor does he allow his own personality to take over the threads of the story. The effect of the novel then, that is, what readers take away from the text, is left up to the individual. Each reader is permitted to see what he or she wants, to focus on the aspects that interest the individual instead of simply receiving the wisdom of the author in large, repetitive chunks of dogma. Such an obvious agenda is certainly a characteristic of some “literature,” (Take Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, for instance) but King's “literariness” rests on his faith in his Constant Reader to take away that which is relevant to that person's life and circumstance, gaining insight and perspective as needed by that person. This somewhat casual approach to literature is one of the reasons why Stephen King is often disdained by critics, and dismissed as unworthy of study.

Modern literature is typically considered bound to the realm of the intellectual. This designation is problematic to America, since this country is known for a fairly strong feeling of anti-intellectualism. One of George Orwell's axioms was that “the poor, ‘the ordinary people,’ had a stronger sense of what he called ‘common decency,’ a greater attachment to simply virtues like honesty, loyalty, and truthfulness, than the highly educated” (Johnson 309). A distrust of the educated elite has long been part of American history, but never more apparent than since the 1950s. The view of the lofty

individual has certainly shifted in the last few decades: “the belief seems to be spreading that intellectuals are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old” (Johnson 342). This sentiment is certainly reflected in Stephen King’s work, where he takes every opportunity to extol the virtues of the everyday American and mock the self-importance of the self-proclaimed intellectual. In this sense, at the very least, can King’s work be seriously examined. Granting King the status of serious writer may be difficult for some critics, but the time has come to consider King’s literary qualities along with his popularity. Beyond the curious state of literary criticism and modern readers, there is no debate regarding King’s success as a popular writer.

Hoppenstand and Browne posit that one of the reasons why King is so successful in a genre that is not mainstream is because he aims his stories at women and the young, and because these two groups presumably have the free time to read his works, these are the readers who make his books sell so many copies (Hoppenstand and Browne suggest that women do not work full-time as men do, a somewhat dated notion) (5). In other words, the horror aspects of the story are simply the vehicle in which King makes some kind of scathing social commentary that appeals to women readers, or has some kind of adventure that a young reader could identify with because he or she is experiencing such things every day. Apparently, both of these categories of Americans have enough spending money to purchase King’s novels in huge quantities, and their devotion explains the reason for King’s massive financial success.

This evaluation seems more of a justification for pigeon-holing King than an honest critique, an alarming trend in King scholarship. Granted, King does appeal to women and the young, but he also finds Constant Readers among working men and

retired seniors. King's audience runs far beyond the reader of horror fiction, and in the last decades, he has become an arm-chair celebrity, a writer of books to be read on airplanes, in waiting rooms, and in snatches below desks in classrooms, but he also manages to offer "more than mere escape fiction or 'adrenaline' fiction; [his work] urges readers to confront squarely and disturbingly the horror in their own lives" and "the resulting depth connects him to an audience drawn to literature more 'serious' than horror of genre fiction"; in fact, King's "model has inspired enough followers to cause horror fiction to move to the front of bookstores and the top of the *New York Times*' bestseller list" (Casebeer 207-208). King's audience defies description; his "dazzle effect" manages to affect almost anyone who wanders into one of his page-turners, as his status as a best-selling author will attest.

In this dissertation, it is my intention to show how King transcends genre, creates and maintains a viable Secondary Reality, and treats capably those literary techniques that critics expect of a serious writer. In addition, I will discuss the ways in which King has secured the loyalty of his Constant Reader (the imagined reader to whom King addresses much of his introductory material—King's use of this term dates back to his earliest writings). The primary means of my analysis will be through a close reading of the "expanded and uncut" version of *The Stand*, one of the classics in King's arsenal.

I will begin with an overview of the general set-up in the novel—the start in Arnette, Texas, of the super-flu, the actions of the military and media, and the 99.4% communicability of the flu itself. From there, I will delve into detailed character analyses of the main players in the story, before moving on to questions of the bigger picture—good vs. evil, the question of choice, the Stand itself, the issue of government, and the

promise of the future. I will conclude with a brief look at King's style and consider the overall reasons for his popular appeal.

It is my hope that such a lengthy study of one of King's novels—instead of the brief chapters devoted to each of his novels in turn—will reveal not only the reasons why King is worthy of serious study, but will show that King's work does stand up to in-depth criticism, thereby answering one of the key questions of current King scholarship: is there enough in King to work with? Everybody agrees that King can crank out lengthy novels without much trouble; it is my intention to peak into the corners and down into the basement, if for no other reason than to find out if there really is a monster hiding in there, or if it is merely an over-inflated rag doll. Either way, whether the horror be in the text or in the lack of substance in the text, I can only hope that my examination will lend new insight to the study of *The Stand*, and perhaps pave the way for other in-depth studies of other King novels.

Horror: Red-Headed Stepchild of Fiction

King is largely credited with giving the entire genre of horror fiction a real niche in the American consciousness, or at least the inverse: “it is not so much that the reading public has developed a perverse taste for horror as it is that, emulating King, horror writers have broadened and deepened their art enough to address us all on issues of consequence” (Casebeer 209). As Clive Barker so aptly put it, there are typically two books in every American household—the Bible, and something by Stephen King. However, King is often dismissed from literary circles because of the very genre in which

he chooses to write. Michael Collings, in *The Many Facets of Stephen King*, addresses the pink elephant in the room when it comes to King scholarship, namely King's lack of critical success:

The problem is that King, like his forebears in horror fiction, Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, "has not been taken seriously, if at all, by the critical establishment," in King's case both because of his chosen genre and because of his enormous commercial success within it. Even when trying to separate King from the genre, Charles de Lint paradoxically emphasizes King's identification with horror by writing that ED [Eyes of the Dragon] proves "once and for all that while he can deliver the shocks, he doesn't need them to be one of America's premier story tellers." That is in fact the crux of the matter. King may lapse into stylistic infelicities [...]. He is on occasion (and by his own admission) afflicted with "literary elephantiasis." Yet, as de Lint implies and a number of other critics have admitted, ultimately those technical problems fade and the story takes over. In many cases, the story is based on terror or horror; yet invariably, beneath the horror lies an extraordinary talent for the tale well told. (13-14)

The problem with King then, lies not with the quality of his storytelling, which his commercial success illustrates is spot-on with many readers, but with the literary establishment's predisposition to disregard anything that can be neatly categorized in the horror genre. It is only in the recent explosion of cultural studies that these "genre novels" have been studied as anything more than examples of their respective types; in-depth examinations of these novels as works of literature are still somewhat lacking, but

with the emerging acceptance of this type of genre study, there is hope that more critical reviews are on the way.

What is it, then, that is so terrible about the horror genre that makes critics squirm? True, it is a style well known for blood, gore, and a basic plotline of “scary monster-type kills lots of characters before getting killed by hero” or the more Modern “scary monster-type gets away with killing lots of characters despite the best efforts of the hero.” But there has to be a reason for the longevity of the genre, a type that has been garnering fans from the 1800s. Douglas Winter, author of *Stephen King: The Art of Darkness*, a seminal work on King, addresses this issue:

At a minimum, horror fiction is a means of escape, sublimating the very real and often overpowering horrors of everyday life in favor of surreal, exotic, and visionary realms. Escapism is not, of course, necessarily a rewarding experience; indeed, horror fiction’s focus upon morbidity and mortality suggests as masochistic or exploitative experience, conjuring subjective fantasies in which our worst fears or darkest desires are brought into tangible existence. (3)

Though not the most flattering of explanations, Winter has hit upon the crux of the matter—horror deals with the ordinary world turned sideways, a possibility that unnerves almost as much as the saliva dripping from the monster’s curved fangs. It is not the philosophical potential that critics malign, however; rather, they generally disapprove of anything that requires monsters in order to get the point across. On the contrary, King feels that horror reaffirms people’s “self-image and our good feelings about [them]selves” because it allows them to peek at the monster and walk away thinking, “Hey, I’m not so bad. I’m all right. A lot better than I thought” (Underwood 9). The

chance to see the unspeakable allows readers to appreciate what they have, much like Aristotle's notion of catharsis; readers are exposed to a "worst case scenario" and all of the sudden, their ordinary lives seem quite livable, even wonderful. Through the extraction of Aristotelian terror, readers realize that the real world should be appreciated, if only for the sake of what could possibly happen should reality take a more sinister turn. Mapping those dark possibilities is the duty of the horror writer.

Like Tolkien before him, King works within a genre that has been traditionally ignored; even the classic Holman and Harmon *Handbook to Literature* does not have an entry for this kind of writing. Though Tolkien's genre was the much neglected fantasy, King chose to begin his career with horror, and many critics are still determined to leave him in that category. Now, as Winter claims, horror has often been associated with escape, a need for the reader to abandon the real world in favor of gore and guts. This statement is true, but only to a certain point. After all, even critics agree that there are few things more horrifying than to find elements of horror in the real world, and this integration is exactly what Stephen King does in his work. He takes ordinary American settings—small towns in Maine in particular, forgotten elbows of the landscape in general—and peoples them with recognizable American faces. The horror element arrives not in the form of a big, bad monster, though certainly those do haunt the pages of King's novels, or in supernatural events, though King has been known to toss in the old ghost or ghoul now and then, but in the faces of one's neighbor. Sartre said that hell was other people; King has solidified this philosophy into reality. The true horror of his tales is that they begin and end with ordinary people, believable people, and readers are unable to ignore the mirror that has been brought before them. King shows the world as it is, and

as it could be, and then as it just may be, if people forget what it means to Stand against evil.

King would not be nearly as successful without his penchant for blood and gore; it is in his ability to blend such shocking scenes with the ordinary that allows him to get away with gore in front of a mainstream readership. Readers are so surprised by the emergence of the unspeakable in the midst of the regular world that they are spellbound. In King, such events are like car wrecks—readers want to look away, but they cannot, and they read onward, trapped by their need to find out what happens to everyone else. The potential for such events in the real world, however remote, manages to ensnare readers' imaginations because after all, what if it really did happen? King's uncanny ability to blend the Primary World with his created Secondary World lets readers believe in his story enough for it to completely overwhelm them. It is this gripping madness that readers devour en masse, and the fact that the author they read so greedily is categorized in the Horror section of bookstores ceases to matter. King transcends genres just as he transcends boundaries between readers—he finds dedicated readers in housewives and businessmen, school children and retirees. Part of that appeal is due to his amazing ability to reel readers in with a good story, but there are many levels to King's allure, and the horrific elements are only the beginning.

Part of his appeal is his ability to create characters that readers can believe in amid the chaos of the horrific. As Gareffa put it when discussing *The Dead Zone*, “by creating a world so very close to our own existence, then disturbing it with a frightening supposition, King offers a horror no seven-foot green monster or fanged stalker ever can. After all, horror we can place in an isolation booth is one thing. Horror let loose in the

real world is quite another” (335). Punter expands this to include the world of films: “There are many films of terror, Alfred Hitchcock’s and Roman Polanski’s among them, which ably demonstrate that fear is at its fiercest when it is seen to invade the everyday contemporary world” (4). It seems that King’s ability to combine the ordinary world with the horrific is one of the things that make him so successful, though his many readers could probably list numerous other appeals.

Horror fiction allows readers to face their fears in a safe environment. Unlike “ordinary” fiction like mysteries or thrillers, where readers are shown the real world with real characters and real events, horror takes readers to the proverbial edge of the abyss and allows them to take a quick peek into what lies beyond. Popular fiction is popular fiction because it is easily recognizable. King offers readers this recognition, then teases them with a view of something beyond the ordinary. After all, “in the tale of horror, we can breach our foremost taboos, allow ourselves to lose control, experience the same emotions—terror, revulsion, helplessness—that besiege us daily” (Winter 4). King lets readers experience things they can relate to, but in a context that makes it easier to digest—it is safe to watch, he assures readers—it’s only a book, after all. With any fiction, readers assume they are allowed control of the situation; they can choose to close the book if the scene gets to be too much, they can skip ahead if the description gets to be overwhelming. Such a luxury is not available in the real world. Horror fiction may appear to give readers a chance to steer the course of their experience, yet it is the virtue of the horror writer to upset that journey as much as possible. While readers may seem to be in charge of their fear intake, in truth it is the author who controls the experience, and with a storyteller as skilled as King, readers can rest easy in the knowledge that they are in good

hands; aren't they? This slight uncertainty only adds to the overall experience, and this quality is another reason King can address a Constant Reader in his introductions.

Horror is often dismissed as escapist fiction. Critics say that people read horror when they need to get away from the real world. This is not exactly the case with King's work. In fact, most of his stories take place in the patently real world, and this realism is the appeal that readers respond to. Douglas Winter continues to expand on the escapist nature of horror fiction, adding:

despite its intrinsic unreality, the horror story remains credible—or at least sufficiently credible to exert an influence that may last long beyond the act of reading. One does not easily forget the thing that waits inside “The Crate.” [...] This credibility is possible because horror's truths are judged not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the reader or viewer. Although horror fiction appeals to the source of the daydreams—and of nightmares—its context is waking reality. (3-4)

Part of the appeal of horror, then, is not what is revealed, but what the reader imagines. Unlike ordinary literature, where much value is placed on how the writer tells the story, stylistically speaking, horror fiction must be judged on what the writer chooses to omit, thereby heightening the terror and increasing the overall effect of the tale. Perhaps it is this difference that makes horror such an oddity in the world of criticism.

The horror in King's work is known for walking the thin line between fantasy and reality—monsters appear in ordinary living rooms, aliens invade recognizable back yards. Horror fiction suggests that “rationality and order are facades, mere illusions of control imposed upon a reality of chaos” and “we are clothed with the thin veneer of civilization,

beneath which waits the beast, eager to emerge” (Winter 8). Winter argues that “along with its obvious cathartic value, horror fiction has a cognitive value, helping us to understand ourselves and our existential situation. Its essential element is the clash between prosaic everyday life and a mysterious, irrational, and potentially supernatural universe” (5). This glimpse of the beyond is what King reveals to readers. There are the monsters in the closet that readers expect from King, but what keeps the audience flipping from chapter to chapter is the hope that along with the horrific, King will also show them something beyond bogeymen. King delivers on this score time and again, whether it is in his vision of a world “moved on” in *The Dark Tower* series, or in the casual way the Derry residents of his many novels ignore the fact that children tend to disappear quite often in their small-town Eden. It doesn’t matter if King is creating entire multiverses or describing the happenings inside one home on a quiet street; he manages to show readers another layer of reality—sometimes gruesome, sometimes shocking, but always something on the very edge of believability—and it is no wonder that King’s images haunt his readers long after they have finished the book.

This glimpse into the underbelly of the American psyche is what King promises readers, and this is the quality that has earned him such a dedicated following among the masses, despite his roots in the horror genre. For a more detailed look into the horror genre, King himself has written *Danse Macabre*, a consideration of his theory of horror—basically, he jokingly admits, horror has been here for a long time, and will be here for a long time to come. According to King, part of the appeal of this genre is that “magic moment of reintegration and safety at the end, that same feeling that comes when the roller coaster stops at the end of its run and you get off with your best girl, both of

you whole and unhurt” (*Danse Macabre* 14). Horror allows readers to experience terror and the semblance of death, and this tantalizing look into the world beyond is what keeps readers enthralled.

Stephen King is often associated with gothic, though the term “gothic” evokes images of vast castles haunted by tragic loss, or heroines terrorized by blackguard villains, and King rarely uses any of these devices. However, the New American Gothic, which is “said to deal in landscapes of the mind, settings which are distorted by the pressure of the principal characters’ psychological obsessions [where] we are given little or no access to an ‘objective’ world,” seems more closely linked to King’s style (Punter 3). Though he rarely utilizes the first person narration such distortions may require, King does create worlds that seem at first very much like ours, and then after a few subtle interjections—a telepath here, a demonic car there—he has readers hoping that the initial resemblance to reality was not as close as they thought. After all, if the world seems so familiar, what is to stop the other events from happening to their town, or their family? Readers may wonder if the world they are reading about is a mirror of reality, or if King has somehow given them the slip, substituting a world of dark magic and evil potential for the one they thought they recognized. King has a knack for interchanging the “real” world with his own creation so seamlessly that distinction between the two becomes difficult—King’s world is both recognizably the America readers know and some disjointed vision of an America that readers recognize, much to their own horror. Readers are left wondering when their America became the horror landscape and when they lost track of the differences. This sleight of hand may make his work resemble the New American Gothic, where readers are never quite certain if the world is as the author

portrays, or if it has been somehow infiltrated and fundamentally altered while they weren't paying attention.

King is often credited with describing a “nightmare America” in his novels, a dark version of the country that readers want to believe and deny at the same time. Gary William Crawford considers King's status as a Gothic writer in “Stephen King's American Gothic,” where he decides that King's work does relate to that of Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, but that King shows the American Dream as it possibly may be—a nightmare. This inversion of that which is utterly American, the notion of the American Dream, marks King as a writer very much aware of his time period; King plays on modern questions about what it means to be American and to pursue the Dream that literature has been dissecting for the last century. Though Crawford wonders if King's novels will stand the test of time, he cannot deny that King's success as a gothic writer has allowed other gothic writers to come onto the public stage, and he credits King for the return of the gothic novel (the short story having been the popular mode of gothic and horror for decades).

Despite his categorization as a horror or gothic writer, King has managed to transcend traditional genre boundaries, thereby earning himself a readership made up of a cross-section of American society. His work certainly has elements of the horrific and the gothic, but overall, it is the realism of his novels that have earned him so many devoted fans. Whether he is detailing the grueling work of a graveyard shift, or narrating the internal monologue of a frustrated parent, King's ability to depict reality is a crucial ingredient in his storytelling capabilities.

King Criticism: Or Lack Thereof

Criticism on Stephen King is, to use Michael Colling's word, schizophrenic (in the misused modern sense of the word), at best. Critics vacillate between hedging approval and disparaging censure, often in the same essay. Typically, he is considered among fellow horror writers, and occasionally along with the American Gothic, but the number of complete books dedicated to his work is considerably less than fellow horror greats of American literature like Poe or Lovecraft. Stephen King's appeal for literary critics has grown with the rise of cultural studies, but in comparison to others in his genre, serious critiques of his work are lacking.

King has, however, managed to earn the right to a Howard Bloom edited collection of essays in 1998—a rather surprising foray into the realm of serious scholarship. Before readers get excited about this apparent critical success, however, it is important to note that Bloom's introduction is devoted to a rather scathing theory of current fiction. In fact, Bloom baldly states that the fact that he must write the introduction to a collection of essays about the popular writer Stephen King marks the downfall of an entire generation of American readers, and that "King will be remembered as a sociological phenomenon, an image of the death of the Literate Reader" (3). He deplores the popularity of King's work, stating plainly, "the triumph of the genial King is a large emblem of the failures of American education" and readers of his introduction might think that he connects anyone who dares to write of King critically with a tabloid celebrity squawking about the latest Hollywood gossip (2). In Bloom's eyes, King is entirely unworthy of criticism, and the fact that such a body of criticism exists marks the end of American literature as we know it. Bloom adds, after admitting to rereading

Carrie and *The Shining*, “with great effort,” that “the prose is undistinguished, and there is nothing much that could be termed characterization or inwardness, or even vivid caricature” (2). Bloom does grudgingly admit that King has mastered the art of powerful images, though he believes that the images aren’t themselves powerful, but gain power as a result of his “heaping them up” until they “constitute giant or central images” (2). Bloom clearly dislikes King’s work, and goes out of his way to condescend to the writers whose critical works are included in his text with a number of “Ben P. Indick believes” or “Chelsea Quinn Yarbrow claims” phrases. Essentially, the gist of Bloom’s introduction is that King is a curious popular phenomenon, akin to jelly shoes or *American Idol*, and serious study of his work is an indulgence at best.

Though Bloom lambasts King in the introduction as a disgrace to literature, the authors and essays included in his book have become landmarks in King criticism. More recent criticism is still somewhat lacking (despite a small surge in theses and dissertations in the last five years), especially since the flurry in the 1980s, and full-length studies are negligible, but the collections that do exist are certainly insightful. 1984 marked the year of Douglas Winter’s *Stephen King: The Art of Darkness* and Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller’s collection of essays *Fear Itself*. These two works set the standard for King criticism with their evaluation of theme and style in each of his novels published to date. Both books devoted a section to each of King’s novels, but neither delved into any one work with any real depth.

Michael Collings explains in his analysis, *The Many Facets of Stephen King*, the problem with much of the scholarship on Stephen King. Up until Collings’s work in 1985, King criticism had addressed his novels from a chronological standpoint, a

seemingly convenient but entirely impractical way to view King's work. After all, the order in which King's works were published does not reflect the order in which they were written. Collings organizes his critique topically, and in doing so, takes the first few steps into serious King scholarship.¹

As if Michael Collings had sounded the alarm for scholarly attentions, 1985 marked a year of much criticism. Still, most of these were collections of essays by various authors, each examining some aspect of King's work, but nothing too in-depth. Darrell Schweitzer, in his two volumes of *Discovering Modern Horror Fiction*, the first of which includes Ben P. Indick's "Stephen King as an Epic Writer," (the essay that compares *The Stand* to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) explains that King's popularity is largely to thank for the existence of the collections at all: "King has attracted so much attention, and inspired so many books already, that it is useful to think of the *Discovering Modern Horror* series as typical volumes of Stephen King criticism—only about everybody else" (*DMHF II* 1). The swell of collections continued in 1985 with Darrell Schweitzer's *Discovering Stephen King*, an assortment of current King scholarship. Also in 1985, Michael Collings published *Stephen King as Richard Bachman*, a consideration of the works King penned under his alternate identity, and with David Engebretson, *The Shorter Works of Stephen King*, a look at King's short stories.

Trends in King scholarship continued along these lines until 1987, when Michael Collings published *The Stephen King Phenomenon*—the first book to really address the collection of existing King criticism. Collings puts matters into perspective:

At first, it was difficult to find neutral—to say nothing of favorable—criticism of King's novels; now, when critics have begun to take him seriously and to explore

the complexities of the worlds he creates, they are themselves not taken quite seriously; the prevailing attitude seems to be that there must be something self-serving in someone who devotes this much time and effort to a writer who is himself “academically” suspect. (61)

Even two decades later, Stephen King is still not an accepted figure in American literature, and students are more likely to read J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels in class than King’s, but there is something to this writer’s work, for specialists and genre fans alike continue to find something compelling in his books.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, there were several book-length critiques of King’s novels, though none examining a single novel, including Tony Magistrale’s *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King’s American Gothic* in 1988, Joseph Reino’s *The First Decade: Carrie to Pet Semetary*, Tyson Blue’s *The Unseen King* in 1989, and Jonathan P. Davis’s *Stephen King’s America* in 1994. More collections of essays appeared in the late 1990s, including an examination of King’s depiction of women edited by Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson, and both Stephen J. Spignesi and George Beahm have published several books of biographical criticism in the early 2000s, but the explosion of criticism in the 1980s has not happened since. Much of the recent work on King focuses on his *Dark Tower* series, likely because King recently completed the last installment in this seven novel story.

Despite what appears to be a mound of criticism for an author who is not taken too seriously, there is an obvious absence in King scholarship—an in-depth examination of just one text. Most King scholarship discusses connections between novels and stories, and settles for exploring common themes in King’s life and work. Trying to find more

than one chapter in a book devoted to the same novel is quite difficult. This is not to say that each novel has not been properly examined on different levels; instead, the intention here is to point out that a single novel has not been examined in-depth by one author in one fell swoop.

My intention in this dissertation, then, is to fill this absence—to make a thoroughly formalist examination of *The Stand*, a novel filled with so many themes and symbols that a book considering the whole picture could potentially be longer than the work itself. It is my hope that it is possible to evaluate this novel on strictly literary terms; by looking at things like setting and characterization, I plan to consider the text as a work of literature—inspecting the fine details in order to extract meaning on multiple levels. If the purpose of literature is, as Horace, to entertain and educate, I anticipate finding that *The Stand* delivers on both counts. If the criteria for literature is to be Bloom’s “arresting strangeness,” I expect to discern this mysterious quality in the work. At the very least, I know that King’s work possesses the “re-readability” that introductions to literary study often suggest is the key characteristic of Literature.

The Stand

The Stand was originally published in 1978, an epic novel about a super-flu that destroys 99.4% of the world’s population. The real story, however, is not about the flu itself; rather, King focuses on the world after this modern (and much more vicious) Black Plague. The crux of the novel is the battle between the forces of good and evil as each side is influenced by both Christian theology and outside forces of unnamed fate. King

addresses serious issues of the human condition and human nature as he establishes the framework of his narrative, illustrating his ability to tell an engaging story while forcing readers to confront questions about the potential future of mankind.

The Stand begins with the flight of Thomas Campion and his family from a secure military institution. Though he managed to escape before the gates sealed the facility for good, Campion is not fast enough to escape a dose of a fatal superflu, and his flight allows the spread of this deadly virus to canvas the country. The narrative focuses on a large cast of characters as they experience and react to the superflu: Stu Redman, the good old boy from Arnette, Texas who is inexplicably immune despite endless tests by government officials; Frannie Goldsmith, a pregnant girl from Ogunquit, Maine who is one of two survivors in her entire town; Harold Lauder, an outcast boy from Ogunquit, Maine, who is tormented by aspirations of greatness (and obsessed with Frannie Goldsmith); Larry Underwood, a one-hit wonder who is patently “not a nice guy”; Glen Bateman, a retired sociologist who theorizes about mankind’s future in the post-plague world; Nick Andros, a wandering deaf-mute who is used by divine powers beyond his control; Tom Cullen, a mentally challenged man who has an innocence that even the superflu cannot destroy; Nadine Cross, a woman tortured with indecision about the part she will play in the post-plague world; Lloyd Heinreid, a hardened criminal who willingly chooses to serve evil in the form of his master; and Trashcan Man, a pyromaniac whose obsession with fire manages to undermine the very cause he sought to aid. Once the virus has taken its toll on most of the population, the survivors begin to group themselves into two main factions: the mostly good-hearted join Mother Abigail,

a 108 year old Christian woman in Nebraska, and the evil, though this is sometimes a matter of perspective, join Randall Flagg, King's embodiment of evil.

The narrative follows these characters as they converge in an epic showdown between good and evil. Some of the "good" characters betray their comrades as they try to rebuild society in Boulder, Colorado; some of the "bad" guys turn out to be bad news for their own people in Las Vegas, Nevada. At the end, four heroes set out from the "good" camp in Boulder, Colorado, at the behest of a dying Mother Abigail, to Stand against their foes in Las Vegas, Nevada. Three of the heroes are apprehended by Flagg's people in Las Vegas (one falls along the way and cannot continue, but is rescued as an ironic result). Of the three heroes, one is brutally shot when he laughs in the face of his enemy, and the other two are paraded out for a public execution. Before things get too far underway, however, one of Randall Flagg's minions, the pyromaniac Trashcan Man, arrives with a nuclear bomb. Through a series of fortunate catastrophes—one of the "bad" people speaks out against the execution and is summarily electrocuted by a bolt of lightning—the bomb is detonated and everyone (except Flagg of course, who manages to escape in spirit form at the last second) is blown up. The novel finishes with the tale of the lone hero's return to Boulder, only to find the new haven is quickly starting to resemble the America everyone remembers. He and his family decide to find a place without so many people, and the novel ends with the unanswered question: "Do people ever really learn anything?"

King's novels are known for their length, often several hundred pages, but *The Stand* is the only book that King had to considerably shorten in order to publish. When he first sent *The Stand* to his publisher, King was forced to remove close to 500 pages of text

in order to make the book marketable. When he released a new and uncut version in 1990, after his popularity allowed him to publish as he wanted, King made several changes to the original story. First, he changed the date of the novel from 1980 to 1990. He added a new beginning and a new ending along with restoring some 150,000 words. King also included a new preface to the expanded edition, explaining to readers that this rendition was not a new story, but rather an expansion of the original. Though he insists that readers will not “find old characters behaving in new ways,” King does say that readers will find more information about old characters, and even meet some new ones along the way (ix). When he considers the question of length (that is, why expand a book that was already over 800 pages), King gives an extended analogy. He summarizes Hansel and Gretel into a paragraph that captures the essentials of the tale, then explains how that version is “like a Cadillac with the chrome stripped off and the paint sanded down to dull metal” (xi). The new version of *The Stand* is, in King’s mind, a restored Cadillac with all of the bells and whistles—a car as it ought to be. King also adds as an afterthought to his preface that *The Stand* is his fans’ favorite, and it is his intention to have this final version answer the thousands of fan letters asking “What happened to so-and-so?”

At the end of his preface to the complete and uncut version of *The Stand* published in 1990, Stephen King refers to this story as a “long dark tale of Christianity” (xii). The apocalyptic novel is not a new idea by any means, but King hasn’t just written another end of the world tale. The curious thing about *The Stand* is that it is specifically about the end of America, and everything that the country stands for and encompasses, just as much as it is about the endless fight between good and evil as waged by a few

memorable characters. Many apocalyptic novels focus on the destruction of humanity, and the loss of modernization, and those forces are present in *The Stand*—perhaps not more clearly than the afternoon Frannie spends scrubbing clothes in a washtub and bemoaning the loss of her washing machine—but even more so, *The Stand* echoes with a thoroughly American consciousness. Perhaps this is because Americans are hard-wired into modernization, and they can imagine the loss of technological benefits more easily, as someone who relies on her computer can imagine a world without the internet during the hours when service is unavailable. King’s work appeals to Americans because it is about the world in which they live—the brand names they recognize, the comforts they utilize, and the cars they drive appear in the novel.

The Stand introduces a theme common to the rest of King’s work: the notion of the Stand itself. Essentially, Standing Up in a King novel means to confront evil at all costs. When characters are forced to make their Stand, they often do so without training, weapons, preparation, or expectation of survival. In fact, most of King’s heroes do not survive their final Stand, but what is important is that they do Stand, for however long they can manage. King values the idea over the result of the idea.

However, *The Stand* poses certain problems for readers who want to know what to expect from the novel. First of all, it shifts from an apocalyptic end of the world set-up to an epic fantasy about good and evil expressed in Christian theology. Readers end up feeling as confused as the characters in the novel, not with the narrative, but with their own expectations. Collings explains this uncertainty best when he says,

In terms of genre, *The Stand* is problematical, since it lacks the monsters and creatures of traditional horror, except for Randall Flagg’s occasional shape-

shifting. It begins within a science-fictional framework, detailing with the care and precision of hard science fiction the consequences of an escaped super-flu virus; yet just as the characters begin to adjust to the new world technology has forced upon them, they must confront something essentially fantastic—their dreams of Mother Abigail and the Dark Man. Again and again, King shifts between dark fantasy and science fiction as the novel turns from the superflu to Randall Flagg. At the same time, its length and scope link it with the epic quest, as Ben Indick argued recently in “Stephen King as Epic Writer” as he points out a number of thematic and topical resemblances to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. (MFOST 109-110)

What is one to do with such a mixture of purpose and genre? By blending modes, King manages to attract a wide variety of readers from all spectrums of interest, and he is also able to create a complete fabric out of variegated threads. *The Stand* is such a critical work because it is complete. As Tolkien explained in his essay “On Fairy Stories,” any good fantasy needs to be believable according to the terms of the world in which it exists. According to these characteristics, King succeeds admirably in creating a viable Secondary Reality as believable to readers as their own lives, and this verisimilitude allows readers to get involved with the characters and events of the novel. When Larry and Nadine stare out at the deserted Maine coastline, Larry is conflicted by his emotions:

Part of him clamored at their sad and blatant ugliness and at the ugliness of the minds that has turned this section of a magnificent, savage coastline into one long highway amusement park for families in station wagons. But there was a more subtle, deeper part of him that whispered of the people who had filled these places

and this road during other summers. Ladies in sunhats and shorts too tight for their large behinds. College boys in red-and-black-striped rugby shirts. Girls in beach shifts and thong sandals. Small screaming children with ice cream spread over their faces. They were American people and there was a dirty, compelling romance about them whenever they were in groups—nevermind if the group was in an Aspen ski lodge or performing their prosaic rites of summer along US 1 in Maine. And now all those Americans were gone. (King 458)

Larry understands what readers can only imagine—the loss of everything that identifies himself as a member of America. King illustrates this dislocation with handy images—most Americans will be able to picture such a summer vacation, even if the reader has never personally been to US 1 in Maine. The people, quickly evoked with a few short lines, are familiar to readers, and King raises that familiarity only to destroy the tranquility of the readers' experience. These people, so easily imagined, are gone, victims of the superflu, and readers can only try to imagine a world without fun-filled vacation lands, or even worse, all of those empty vacation spots slowly being reclaimed by Nature. It seems a harsh judgment indeed on mankind. Scenes like this are typical of King's writing, evidence of his devotion to realism and his ability to capture the essence of the thing—the familiarity of Larry's recollection of US 1 resonates in readers' imaginations, creating the sense that Bloom requires of literature, to feel strangely at home in the text.

One of the major questions raised by critics and readers alike on the subject of *The Stand* involves the overt Christianity of the tale. Like Tolkien before him, King's epic is sometimes considered an allegory, interesting in one facet, but such an

interpretation ignores the multiple levels of meaning intertwined through the novel. When asked about the “Christian Allegory” in *The Stand*, King replied,

The Stand starts out with a plague that wipes out most of the world’s population, and it develops into a titanic struggle that Christianity figures in. But it’s not about God, like some of the reviews claimed. Stuart Redman isn’t Christ, and the Dark Man isn’t the Devil....The important thing is that we are dealing with two elemental forces—White and Black—and I really do believe in the White force. Children are a part of that force, which is why I write about them the way I do. There are a lot of horror writers who deal with this struggle, but they tend to concentrate on the Black. Look at Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*; he’s much better at evoking the horror and the dread of Mordor and the Dark Lord than he is at doing Gandalf. (Grant qtd. in Collings *MFOST* 110)

Allegorical readings are often too close to a child-like interpretation for comfort. Certainly, some things in *The Stand* can be read as allegorical, (Stu Redman could be an image of the New American Indian; just look at his last name) but not as strictly allegorical (Stu is hardly a man who lives off the land and espouses a “back to nature” ideology); in other words, to focus on the one-to-one correlations between *The Stand* and Christianity seems to zoom in on one fraction of the work’s potential and to ignore the whole picture entirely. It may enhance the reading experience to think of the Walkin’ Dude (Randall Flagg) as the Devil, just as it may add to the overall believability of *Lord of the Rings* to see Sauron as Adolf Hitler, but this is only a sideline interpretation—one that makes it too easy for readers to disregard anything else.

The Stand offers readers a wide spectrum of American consciousness beyond the Christian overtones; from the small town of Ogunquit, Maine, to the backwoods of Arnette, Texas, readers are flooded with recognizable images, and then forced to watch as their familiar country is ruthlessly destroyed by a deadly superflu. Of all of his novels, *The Stand* allowed King to delve the deepest into the backgrounds of many, many different characters. This is one of the complaints that some readers have of King. After all, they claim, do they need to know a man's entire history in order to grasp that he's the one who will spread the superflu to everyone at the movie theatre? The answer to this question, on the surface, is no. Readers don't need to know the details of the character in order for him to perform his function in the plot. However, if one were to distill King's works into basic plot without detail, what would be the fun of reading him at all? Part of King's charm is his knack for creating believable characters for readers to identify with; his skill does not stop with main characters. He will devote several pages to the background and quirks of a character whom he will kill off in the next few pages. While some see this as excess information, others see that such devotion to detail is what makes a King novel work. Readers can't be expected to care about a random character who goes to the movies, not when so many other characters are well-developed, and yet King's readers find that they *do* care about that lone movie-goer despite themselves. For his few paragraphs or pages, he is just as vibrant to them as their next door neighbor, perhaps more so, and this resonance is what keeps readers engrossed after several hundred pages.

The Tolkien Connection

King has been quoted for claiming that his intention with *The Stand* was to create an epic akin to *Lord of the Rings*, but for an American consciousness. It is curious how history repeats itself, as Tolkien himself claimed that he created *The Lord of the Rings* in order to give England a mythology to rival that of the already popular King Arthur and his knights. Though the longevity of King's American attempt remains to be seen, certainly Tolkien was successful in creating a legacy not only for his own country, but for a worldwide readership. When considering *The Stand*, several critics have pointed out the similarities between King's epic battle and Tolkien's famous trilogy, but none so specifically as Ben P. Indick in "Stephen King as Epic Writer." In fact, most of the existing criticism on *The Stand* deals with the *Lord of the Rings* echoes in some fashion—it seems that King's work cannot be criticized without a comparison to Tolkien. Though this kind of examination does not encompass the complex tapestry that is *The Stand*, certainly there are obvious correlations between the two epics.

For Tolkien scholars, the echoes are easy to see, even without Indick's essay. First, both stories concern themselves with a great battle between good and evil. For King's characters, the battle lines are between the Free Zone of Boulder peopled with Mother Abigail's followers, and Randall Flagg's army making preparations in Las Vegas. For Tolkien, the Free Peoples of Middle Earth must stand fast against the darkness of Mordor and the elusive Sauron. Differences of time and place cease to matter once the bare components of the plot are revealed, but epic clashes between good and evil are by no means new to the realm of literature. In fact, most literary works deal with this conflict in some way, whether it is man vs. man, man vs. himself, man vs. Nature, or man

vs. God; literature often displays such battles for control, and sometimes the battle lines are drawn along moral grounds. Both King and Tolkien have taken up this ancient tradition in their work.

Both stories revolve around the notion of a “party of heroes” who stand against darkness. Though King’s party is made up of ordinary people from all walks of life, and most of his fellowship actually makes up the committee set up to rebuild life in Boulder, not the ideal image of heroes, King’s characters still evoke images of Tolkien’s intrepid travelers. The Free Zone Committee may not be entirely representative of the Free Peoples, but King’s fellowship is thrown together by happenstance or fate, just as Tolkien’s is chosen by Elrond—a god-like figure in Middle Earth. This is where the similarities end, however, as King’s heroes are not happy about being in charge, nor do they see themselves as champions of good in the coming battle against evil. No one volunteers to help destroy the evil in King’s work; there is no brave dwarf to step forward and offer his services to the greater good, no elf to show up in Rivendell and expect to be sent with the Fellowship. Even more so, the mission itself is unclear in King’s work. The characters spend a great deal of time wondering what they ought to be doing, and vacillating between believing that Mother Abigail is divinely inspired and speaks the Word of God and convincing themselves that she’s just an old woman, and such things don’t happen in the real world. Perhaps this inability to accept the existence of forces beyond human control is a result of an American determination to separate the spiritual from the secular. Just as Americans divide church and state, so do they tend to divide the supernatural from everyday experience, and this split leads to a general uncertainty about both facets of the world.

Characters in Tolkien share no such ambivalence. There is no question that Sauron is evil and that the Ring must be dealt with. Each character knows what he is expected to do. The question of certainty is a characteristic that often marks the difference between fantasy and horror fiction. In fantasy, heroes always know the quest before them. Frodo must destroy the Ring. Spenser's Red Cross Knight must rescue Lady Una. Peter S. Beagle's last Unicorn must free her brethren. In horror, characters spend a great deal of time trying to accept that crazy things really are happening. Nick never quite accepts the truth of Mother Abigail's God. In William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, Reagan's mother tries every other alternative before accepting that her daughter is possessed. It is quite common for victims in horror tales to stand by as their death approaches—whether it be in the form of a monstrous beast or a deranged killer; true, characters in horror are frozen by the terror of what is happening, but they are even more paralyzed by their own inability to believe in what is happening to them. Characters in fantasy may suffer self-doubt, but they rarely doubt the very events that surround them; in horror, this uncertainty is a common issue. Still, both King and Tolkien have chosen a select group of characters to stand their ground against evil, and in this, their works mirror one another.

The Stand and *Lord of the Rings* involve ambiguous characters who blur the battle lines, but end up being crucial in the end. For King, the turncoats Harold Lauder and Nadine Cross plant the bomb that sends the four remaining heroes off to Stand before darkness. Without their betrayal, Larry, Glen, Ralph, and Stu would never have left the safety of Boulder for Las Vegas, nor would they have confronted Flagg in his place of power. Indick is quick to point out that King also adds the odd character of the Trashcan

Man, a tortured pyromaniac who would as soon serve his master as light him on fire, literally. For Tolkien, the entire idea of the Fellowship is to go into Mordor, but the presence of the ambiguous Gollum ends up becoming the most important thing in the end. Both King and Tolkien suggest that though evil may seem to cause only problems, sometimes such trouble is the only path towards victory.

Both novels deal with excessively high stakes—the end of the world as the characters know it—and both end with a eucatastrophe of sorts. For King, evil turns on itself—a notion that Tolkien would have heartily agreed with—and Randall Flagg is destroyed—for now. Through a series of happy coincidences (public execution, evocation of lightning, arrival of nuclear bomb, annihilation), evil is vanquished for a time, and though the sacrifices may seem severe, they are a necessary part of the battle. Even as events play out, readers may be uncertain about the outcome, after all--Flagg survives to the last page, but looking back, it is easy enough to see how each part came together in a fortunate catastrophe. If Larry and Ralph had not walked out to Stand against Flagg, there would not have been a public execution, and though the bomb would have still arrived, Flagg would not have invoked his lightning anywhere near it. The chain of seemingly disastrous events culminates in the perfect scenario to destroy (or at least beat back) the force of evil. In the end, much life is lost, but it is for the greater good. For Tolkien, eucatastrophe is the heart of the story's climax. By combining the elements of Frodo's surrender with Gollum's greed and Aragorn's final stand, Tolkien was able to make a series of rather unfortunate events work themselves out in the end.

Even the villains of both works are similar. King's Randall Flagg is ambiguous, with his dreadful hilarity and his smooth palms, the dark man evokes horror through his

terrible good joy. Flagg's horror is that he looks like an ordinary man, and his behavior is a mockery of humanity—a terrible insight into the human psyche. King suggests that the thing to fear the most is inside ourselves. Randall Flagg delights in evil for its own sake, and readers are shown little of his plans beyond the immediate future. The reasons why Flagg does what he does are as mysterious as Sauron's reasons for his evil nature. In Middle Earth, Sauron is merely a force of evil represented as a lidless eye ringed in fire. A big eye seems unlikely to pose a real threat as a villain, but Tolkien manages to use this simple device to make Sauron into more than just another bad guy. Sauron is beyond physical form, beyond the mind's comprehension, and therefore even more terrifying. He is beyond the scope of any character's experience. King also uses this idea of an Evil Eye, but it is less specific than Sauron's physical manifestation. Mother Abigail is aware of "some glittering Eye—suddenly open wide and turned toward her, searching" (504). When Harold first considers going West to Flagg, he sees a "frightful red Eye opened in the dark: vulpine, eldritch. The Eye terrified yet held him. The Eye beckoned him" (573). Clearly, King is influenced by Tolkien's imagery, for it appears in small strokes across the world of the novel, and specifically whenever Flagg is mentioned early in the novel. Before Flagg is introduced as a physical being, King hints at the existence of evil beyond the superflu with visions of eyes and fire, classic Tolkien symbols of darkness and evil. Where King suggests that true evil is internalized in humanity, Tolkien suggests that the real fear is of that which lies beyond human experience.

Tolkien does explain Sauron's history in *The Silmarillion* and other stories, but readers must eventually accept that Sauron is evil because he is evil. Though this may seem a simple Manichean view of Middle Earth, there are shades of the Boethian as well.

Characters in both stories are faced with a mostly faceless, mindless force of evil—the Manichean dualism expected in fantasy and horror. However, the characters in both stories are often given choices—a rather Boethian right. There are moments in *The Stand* and in *Lord of the Rings* where characters are robbed of their free will, but these usually occur after the character has been given a choice, and has made his Stand one way or the other. Nadine Cross can't help herself from going to Flagg in the end, but she had many chances to choose differently—the least of which is the night she throws herself at Larry and tries to have him make the choice for her. A person must choose, King suggests here, and trying to foist that decision onto someone else is a manifestation of weakness that will probably lead to a poor choice in the end anyway. For King, strength lies in making a decision; avoiding a choice is a sign of weakness in one's character and more importantly in one's soul. Apparently, Tolkien shares this viewpoint on free will as well, when he has Boromir eventually obsessed with the Ring. There were many moments along the way where Boromir could have stayed true—Lothlorien's healing presence the most likely chance for his redemption—but Boromir chose his people before his quest, and in making that not so damning decision, managed to fracture the Fellowship in one fell swoop. Both authors value the notion of free will in their novels, illustrating that making the choice is crucial for any character who hopes to someday triumph over evil.

Despite the many similarities between these two stories, King's *The Stand* is not a carbon copy of *Lord of the Rings*. In fact, beyond these few characteristics of general scope (and certainly length—both stories pass the thousand page marker), King's story is one of an American idealism. His characters Stand against evil, and though many are lost, they succeed well enough to secure their own futures. There is hope that when evil rises

again, he will be met with other heroes who will destroy him yet again. Tolkien's fantasy is less hopeful on that score. Evil is destroyed, that is true, but no one really dies (aside from Boromir and a lot of orcs). Tolkien suggests that survival is somehow worse. Many critics have related this to his World War experience, but for Tolkien's characters, having survived the War of the Rings is not always a blessing. For Frodo, in particular, life is not the same, and he cannot ever be truly whole again. Where Fran and Stu can look into the immediate future with hope for their family, Frodo can only hope for some release in the Undying Lands to the West, and he soon leaves the world to others. It does seem odd to accuse King of optimism; he is after all famous for killing his heroes rather brutally, but when compared to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Stephen King's *The Stand* does end on somewhat of a high note.

Chapter Two: The Set-up

The beginning of any novel is crucial to the story's development. Because *The Stand* shifts gears about a third of the way through from an apocalyptic novel to an epic battle of good and evil, it is even more important to note the way that King begins his story. The start may be typical of the genre, the world ends with a whimper, but King subtly shifts the focus of the novel from this change of lifestyle to a poignant look at what has been lost. Through his depiction of small town Arnette, King evokes images of a dying America even before the superflu is released. After the stage is set, *The Stand* turns to more military matters, and readers are given an intimate look at the governmental response to the flu and the subsequent control of the media. Perhaps the most chilling portion of the preliminary chapters of *The Stand*, however, is the way in which the flu spreads from person to person across the country. King's subtly ironic tone as he describes the "most effective chain letter" ever created allows readers to feel the country's death throes as character after character is given a death sentence.

King's description of Arnette places readers on familiar territory. The America of the novel is recognizable, and this familiarity allows readers to believe in the world King has created. This believability in the Secondary Reality of the novel is only increased when King introduces the military. By playing on modern fears of military intentions and annihilation by weapons of mass destruction or germ warfare, King makes his America even more resonant with readers. Once King has the readers ensnared by his world, he

allows them to feel the personal aspect of the superflu, quickly introducing utterly familiar people and then ruthlessly condemning them to death. As readers try to recover from the reeling sense of loss and betrayal (by their own government, military, and media), King sandbags them with a grim vision of reality. People die—horribly, quickly, and realistically. With this set-up, King guarantees that readers will not be able to walk away from the story.

King quietly establishes the themes that will resonate throughout the novel. First, there is desolation and loss, and then, the notion of rebuilding. The entire start of the novel raises the question of the second half of the book—can people ever really learn anything? Is it worthwhile to rebuild America in the image of the old, if it was that old way of life that doomed the country? What does it say about humanity when the loss of life so tragically depicted in the beginning suddenly inverts as survivors begin to feel that there are too many people left in the world? Questions like these are only the beginning of King's vision of the end of the world.

Small Town America

The world that readers encounter at the start of *The Stand* is bitterly familiar. Life is hard in the small town of Arnette, Texas, where we meet one of the novel's protagonists—Stu Redman. The calculator plant has cut shifts to a minimum, and there is no real work to be found. To pass the time, some of the town's residents spend their days and evenings at Hap's Texaco station. This is a quintessentially American venue—the idea of a small-town gas station filled with local good old boys is one that American

readers can readily imagine, having probably seen such a place at some point in their life. If not in their own experience, Americans can fill in the scene with images from any number of Hollywood movies of travelers on the road as they pass through the middle of nowhere. Arnette, Texas, is literally the middle of nowhere, America. Vic Palfrey is actually referred to as a “good enough old boy” when questions arise about his character (24). The notion of the solid redneck is reassuring to the people of Arnette; it gives them the chance to set their expectations according to known behaviors. The mark of the “good old boy,” typically a sign of disrespect in other parts of the country, is what marks one as trustworthy and dependable in Arnette. Even with this standby of caricature as a reference point, however, most of the residents of Arnette are uneducated, unemployed, and, for the most part, unadmirable.

Readers may wonder why King has chosen this small town in the middle of nowhere to begin his tale. The characters whom readers initially meet are not exactly awe-inspiring. As the good old boys linger at the gas station, Hap discusses the economy and politics “from the depths of his ninth-grade education” (King 6). The other members of his little crew are as intellectual as he is, debating the reasons for their economic situation without much understanding of the bigger picture, and even less influence on how their lives play out. Life in Arnette is frozen, King suggests, and if things do change at all, they certainly will not be for the better. In fact, having Charles Campion crash into their lives with his special gift that keeps on giving is perhaps the best thing that could happen to any of them. At the very least, Campion’s introduction spurs some slight difference into their day-to-day existence. At the most, the arrival of the superflu in the form of a thoroughly American car, the Chevy, shows the residents of Arnette that,

although their lives may have looked pretty pitiful at first, things really weren't all that bad. In true horror novel fashion, they could all be dead, and King seems to ask the question—what would be the difference? Some of them seem dead already.

King continues to build a sense of resonance with his readers as he describes the lives of the Texans. Norm Bruett, one of the Texaco crowd, wakes up into a typical middle American morning with the “kids fighting outside the window and country music from the radio in the kitchen” (21). He is depressed at the state of his family's finances—his kids wear hand-me-down clothes, his wife is willing to babysit for a neighbor for a dollar—and yet he is also filled with a “horrible, shaking anger” that makes him want to beat the kids into silence. Norm is a character with whom American readers can relate. Contrary to the popular image of America as the place where anybody can live comfortably if he is willing to work hard enough, the Bruetts are struggling to survive. Work is scarce and getting scarcer with the factories closing down, they are reliant on donated commodities, and even the employment office can't offer any relief. Lila Bruett is willing to babysit for a dollar that won't even buy a gallon of gas at Hap's Texaco station. Another sign of the times is in Lila Bruett's note to her husband, where she misspells one word in four, including “dolar.” The future does not promise any relief for their situation, either; they are like hundreds of families scattered across small towns in America, and that “familiar helpless anger” isn't going away (23). King's depiction of life in small-town Arnette conjures Bloom's sense of “feeling at home” in the novel. The characters that King evokes in these initial sections are familiar to American readers, and this resonance allows the world of the novel to become more believable.

The description of the Hodge's living room is even more resonant of American culture. As Lila Bruett watches their kids for her "dolar," she is struck by how nice the house is, decorated as it is with paint-by-number pictures of Christ. Lila sees the latest of these paintings as a "real work of art" because it took three months and sixty different oil colors. Lila's interpretation, or lack thereof, is a sad commentary on the lower class understanding of painting, if Lila's idea of real art is a paint-by-number rendition of Christ. What would she make of Van Gogh? King doesn't answer this question, instead ending this slice of American life scene with the soon to become grim harbinger of death—a wracking cough by the infant, easily mistaken for the croup by the uninformed Lila, followed by a series of sniffles and a sneeze of her own. Of course, Lila doesn't understand the full implications of her cold as she sits smoking and watching her afternoon stories, nor does she have any inkling that her husband and children will soon be dead along with her.

There are some familiar and comforting practices to be found in Arnette despite a creeping sense that this is not what life in America ought to be like. For instance, Arnette is filled with people who know one another. There is a sense of camaraderie among the Texaco crowd, among their wives and families—they do stick together. Everybody in Arnette knows everybody else, a throwback to the short-term memory of American readers. While this is no longer so true in modern America, most readers will recognize that sense of community and cohesiveness. Stu personally knows the ambulance drivers that come to pick up Campion and his family. Joe Bob Brentwood, the cop that warns the men at the Texaco station of the impending quarantine, is a cousin. Such familiarity with one's neighbors hearkens back to an age that in the American consciousness was a

simpler and more innocent time. The idea of small town America, where everyone knows everyone else, and everyone behaves in an expected manner, is brought to life, even in a place as depressed and forlorn as Arnette. However, this comfort is short-lived, as King hints at the dark underbelly of such familiarity.

King illustrates the sense of entitlement some Americans feel while commenting on the tendency of citizens to disregard the orders of the military and government. Joe Bob Brentwood, Hap's cousin, is a police officer who warns the Texaco crowd of the impending quarantine. If the name alone doesn't convey the sense of quaintness, then the idea of Joe Bob as a cop who just wants to warn his friends and relatives of the approaching army presence will strike an even more familiar chord with readers. Warning friends is a time honored small town American tradition. On top of that recognition, Joe explains that he thought the good old boys at Texaco had a "right to know" of the coming quarantine since they had just tried to "lend a hand" (25). The idea of having a "right to know" something is definitely part of the American psyche; after all, if one does "lend a hand" that assumes going out of the way to offer aid, and in the American mind, that favor should warrant something in return. In this case, that idea of reciprocity, of deserving to know what's ahead, or what the plan is as a result of helping out some strangers is the proverbial last straw for containing the flu; if everyone had done as he was told, the quarantine may have worked, and millions would not have died. Also, the Texaco crowd's reaction to Joe Bob's warning reveals more about their characters. For instance, readers must consider how much the crowd really went out of their way to offer help in the first place. They called the police, but that's no more than anyone else would have done. Their sense of entitlement to news about Campion and the impending

quarantine shows that even this small gesture of aid has become a bargaining chip with the rest of the world—they expect something in return, as if their experience with hard times has made them more deserving of fairness than other normal people. Their belief in reciprocity suggests a sense of entitlement that life in America does not always warrant. The old saying, “life isn’t fair,” could hardly be more ably demonstrated than in the state of Arnette’s people, and yet residents still believe that good things should and will happen to them. The “good things” may have toned down from a decent paying job and hope for a financial future to a sense of decency and the small feeling of importance being “in the know” lends them, but with things being what they are, the people of Arnette will take what they can get. In this case, Joe Bob’s actions reflect what any reader would hope to do, and this reinforces the sense of security that King’s rendition of Arnette conjures in the readers’ minds, thereby securing the believability of the Secondary Reality that King has created.

King has established a false sense of security here, since the cop’s well-intended warning ends up breaking the quarantine and allowing Captain Trips (as the superflu is eventually called) to spread across the country. Perhaps, King suggests, that long-lost comfort of togetherness is not always such a boon. After all, it was that connection that allowed the flu to wipe out the country. Had the cop not been related to those inside the quarantine, had he had any respect for the authorities that were on their way, perhaps tragedy could have been averted. This lack of respect for authority is definitely an American point of view. As the ultimate underdog, the rebel, Americans often see themselves as individually smarter than any government agency. The cop doesn’t really believe that there is anything to fear, and he sees the approach of the CDC as an

annoyance of red tape and government interference moreso than any response to a real threat. Perhaps part of this irreverent response to authority is a result of the government's tendency to assure Americans that everything is really all right, and no harm could ever come to them. This line of defense is exactly the tactic that the government in the novel uses—they lie about the danger until it is too late for the truth to matter, assuring Americans in between coughing fits that all is well and there is no superflu at all.

The start of *The Stand* resonates with American culture and imagery, but the quality that makes this work worth studying is the subtlety that King displays in raising critical questions. His purpose in the novel is not to rail against the economy of America, and yet he has managed to critique the economy, prompting readers to ask questions of their own, a display of the purposeful purposelessness that Kant would have admired. In this opening, King has achieved Bloom's sense of "arresting strangeness"; readers know Arnette, no matter how much they may want to deny it. King has created a Secondary Reality that readers can recognize and believe. He continues enhancing the haunting familiarity of the novel with his description of the government and military.

The Military

The military in King's novel is a metaphor for the average American's lack of control over the larger issues. King is careful to construct the military machine in the novel realistically so that his Secondary reality is not disturbed. The entire beginning portion of *The Stand* is concerned with the military response to the outbreak of Captain Trips, and readers will be quite familiar with the steps the military in the novel takes.

First, there is containment, a plan that includes the murder of several insightful reporters and journalists, and when that fails, concealment in the form of flat-out denial. Though this may suggest a certain detachment from humanity, the novel's military machine is peopled with very real characters that try to do their best in a bad situation.

King gives the military a personal face in the form of life-time soldiers. Bill Starkey is the first military man in the story, and readers find him distraught over a folder filled with bad news. Along with the ordinary stresses of modern life, Starkey is faced with the knowledge that the superflu has not been contained, and things in the country he loves are only going to deteriorate. The thing that makes Starkey more believable than a stock military man who makes tough choices, however, is the stream of thoughts that King uses to introduce him. Instead of focusing on the massive snafu before him, Starkey is transfixed by the images on his monitors. His view of Project Blue, the government facility that produced Captain Trips and subsequently released it in a series of unfortunate accidents, includes camera feeds from the cafeteria, hallways, and labs. Instead of focusing his attention on the dead doctors who litter the scene, or even the pile of bad news on his desk, Starkey is fixated by a man in the cafeteria who has died with his face in a bowl of Campbell's Chunky Sirloin Soup. He is horrified by the notion of spending eternity with a face in a bowl of soup. Even the news that Vic Hammer, his son-in-law and the man in charge of Project Blue, has committed suicide doesn't quite break through his obsession. This behavior is a very human thing for Starkey to do; instead of being overwhelmed by the problems that threaten to drive him to suicide as well, his mind focuses on one small detail, and allows only that one thing to bother him. He does wonder how to tell his daughter that her husband is dead, but even then his thoughts are

still with the dead man from Project Blue—“I’m sorry, Cindy. Vic took a high dive into a bowl of blue soup today” (31). The soup has become Starkey’s metaphor for death, and his obsession with it only continues to grow as the world around him deteriorates.

King suggests that the only way for a person to deal with what the military deems must be done is to focus attention elsewhere or risk madness. While the military takes its first steps towards covering up the outbreak, Starkey focuses all of his emotions on the man in the soup, whom he eventually identifies as Frank D. Bruce. He orders a very young voice to proceed with an operation coded “Troy” knowing that his orders will cause the deaths of several innocent people. Giving the orders don’t bother Starkey, nor do the impending deaths that he knows Captain Trips will bring; in fact, the only thing that does bother Starkey is the death of Frank D. Bruce, and as he stares at the dead man, he is able to recite his military mantra: “A regrettable incident has occurred” and he has to do something about it (130). As his training decrees, Starkey chooses to cover up the incident by ordering the murder of several reporters who have stumbled onto the story of the spreading superflu. Despite his apparent coldness in ordering the execution of the journalists (whose death King relates in horrifying detail as they realize that even in America, they can and will be silenced), Starkey remains a realistic person. One of the difficulties of a novel with so many narrative threads is trying to involve readers with every event that happens. King manages to include the entire aspect of the military through Starkey’s character. For readers, this man has become the face of the military, and though at times he is not to be admired, he is believable in his actions—and even justified. King has managed to put a human face on the mechanized institution of the military here, while simultaneously raising questions about the right to free speech.

King begins to introduce his concept of Standing very subtly in the novel, often choosing to emphasize the American right to free speech as his characters decide to rebel against the military and governmental decrees for silence. When the military comes to collect the few exposed citizens of Arnette, it is the babysitting Lila Bruett who becomes hysterical with her fear. As they are ushered onto a plane without any real explanations, she begins to scream, “What is all this? [...] What’s wrong with my man? Are we going to die? Are my babies going to die?” and afterwards, when she has made even her fellow citizens uncomfortable with the fuss she makes, she asks, “Why won’t someone answer me? Isn’t this America?” (67). Instead of the answers she seeks, however, the army men on board the plane simply force her to drink a glass full of presumably drugged milk, and she soon passes out. It is odd that King would choose to make this character, a woman uneducated and largely a symbol for the lower classes, the only one who speaks out against the military. She is the only one who questions what is happening. Everyone else, men and women alike, simply go along with the men, and do as they are told. They may whisper quietly among themselves, but the full-out demands that Lila makes stand alone among her comrades. Even the fact of her little rebellion is a source of embarrassment to her fellow citizens; Chris Ortega grumbles, “Christly woman’s worse’n a jukebox with a broken record inside of it” (67). This entire scene is subtle criticism of the mob mentality that seems to happen when situations become complicated. No one is willing to step beyond the safety of the group; even Lila Bruett is only outspoken after she watches her husband collapse with illness and her children coughing more and more. Her situation is immediate and terrifying, and this gives her the strength to speak up. Her tirade has little effect, however, and she is soon forgotten among the many who fall prey to the superflu’s

ravages. Even while he is focusing on a military response to the spreading plague, King manages to guide readers into a specific interpretation of the army's actions. Anyone who witnesses Lila's outburst is simultaneously caught between admiration for her, and a sinking sense of identification with her comrades—after all, what would any one do in that situation? The military is just trying to save lives.

King is quite clear about the intentions of the military as a whole—to maintain order—but the actions of the individuals who represent the machine raise questions in the minds of readers. In direct opposition to the image of America as the lone rebel defending democracy where it can, the military decides that if America as a country is going to be destroyed, it will not go alone. In fact, the military (in the form of Starkey—the soup-obsessed man in charge of the clean-up) deliberately spreads Captain Trips around the world so that others will die as well. When Starkey is relieved of his command, his last order is “Rome Falls,” a code for all agents around the world to release what they think are “radioactive particles to be charted by our Sky-Cruise satellites” (175). Even as he damns the rest of humanity to death, Starkey believes he is rescuing his country. He quotes Yeats, whom he mispronounces “Yeets,” to his underling, claiming that indeed the beast is on its way, and it is their job to “hold as much as we can for as long as we can” (176). There is a terrible twist to a man who can simultaneously order the release of a deadly plague to millions and claim that he has been struggling to hold things together. What makes this situation even more difficult for readers, though, is that Starkey is a likeable character. Even when he goes to Project Blue to commit suicide, readers commend him for lifting Frank D. Bruce's head out of the infernal soup.

Most of the actions taken by the military echo as empty symbols. Lifting Bruce's head out of the soup is meaningless because just as Starkey obsessed over the man's face in the soup, the man who takes over for him, Len Creighton, can't help but wonder why his old friend didn't wipe the soup from Frank D. Bruce's eyebrows before he shot himself. Just like his predecessor, who distanced himself from everything he did by focusing on soup, Creighton will focus on that one small image as way to keep himself sane as long as possible. Perhaps King is saying that in the face of doom, a person has to focus on details in order to keep calm. Readers may be tempted to think of Creighton's wish for eyebrows free of soup as a last ditch attempt at human dignity, but this seems a flimsy excuse to justify the military's actions. It may seem like dignity to remove a dead man's face from a bowl of soup, but the action is meaningless if the man doing the removal has spent the afternoon condemning millions to die. The military in *The Stand* is filled with contradictions like this.

The military machine manages to control the panic as best it can, and it does have memorable characters working for it; yet, it kills several innocents in order to maintain secrecy, and then willingly spreads the flu to other countries. Readers are torn between respecting the institution for doing its best in a bad situation, and being outraged as the military pretends to do the right thing while it really secures its own interests. At the very least, cleaning the soup out of a dead man's eyebrows is hardly enough to justify the "regrettable incident" of the superflu's release, and King seems to suggest that while military men may mean well, their actions are empty symbols that do more harm than good.

King's decision to make the superflu a man-made virus instead of a creation of Nature is worth noting as well. Though the novel does end on an emphatically religious note, the start of America's downfall is not through any outside means; instead, America destroys itself. Whether a result of the general paranoia regarding biological weapons or King's own preoccupations with governmental mishaps, the fact that America is destroyed by its own creation is terribly ironic. This apocalyptic ending is one way to resolve the rift between the "ideal cultural model of American government and the citizenry's views of the actual working government" that lingers in American readers' minds (Holland-Toll 178). Americans have difficulty accepting a government that is both the epitome of democracy (or at least representative democracy) and totalitarian in the iron control it maintains over its citizens; it seems that the problem of determining at what point freedom becomes dangerous is never far away from American thoughts. *The Stand* is very much a novel of modern America, and still resonates in the post-9/11 mindset where fear of the outsider has become part of everyday experience. The 1980 in which it was originally set, and the 1990 that King's revision related are easily recognizable by the general mistrust and occasional fear that both characters and readers share about the government and the military. From the frantic fears of the 1950s to the protests in the 1960s, America has long been a country of people worried about some form of nuclear fallout or biological destruction. King has taken that widespread notion and turned it into the metaphor by which his novel transforms from just another run-of-the-mill apocalypse to a very specific and recognizable possibility in American readers' minds. The military is more than a force in the novel; it is a symbol for the unknown people who actually make the decisions that run the country. The faceless machine of the

military is capable of great inhumanity, and King exploits the fear of not being in control of one's own destiny when he has the military almost entirely controlling the way the country comes to an end. Of course, King reverses this as well by having several different episodes of resistance and uprising, but ultimately, the military still retains the control, and thus is worth fearing. By playing on this fear of mass destruction by some unknown military agency, King grabs hold of his readers' psyche and refuses to let go.

King's use of the military also demonstrates the anti-intellectualism that has run rampant in American culture since the 1950s. The highly educated individuals who work for the military at Project Blue have managed to destroy the population by accident; a sign of the incompetence of such individuals as well as an ironic twist to plans for self-preservation through biological warfare. If intellectuals continue to create viruses like Captain Trips to protect the country, King suggests, perhaps they shouldn't be trusted—after all, that protective intention does not matter when the superflu is released onto the public. It kills indiscriminately, just as it killed its creators. King is relying on an American distrust of intellectuals here, but he also raising questions of responsibility. If intellectuals, or scientists in the case of the novel, are going to play with death, King suggests it is only a matter of time before death decides to return the favor. The military's failure to control the spread of the superflu compounds this sense of anti-intellectualism. In fact, even the gates at the facility malfunction, a sign that reliance on technology is sometimes just as damaging as reliance on human capability to control and contain dangerous substances. The superflu may act as the precursor to a showdown between good and evil, but the creation and subsequent distribution of the virus is a clear black

mark on the face of intellectuals, a sign that questions how much trust Americans should put into these individuals.

However, just in case the notion of a government-created superflu wasn't enough to keep readers up at night, the casual way that King continues his tale of mass destruction is even more horrifying. It is one thing for government officials to release vials of flu to other countries; it is quite another to picture everyday Americans unknowingly passing a death sentence to their friends and neighbors. King has taken a distrust of government agencies and transformed it into a terror of fellow citizens as he uses ordinary people to facilitate the spread of the virus—a clever tactic that a simple hairy and clawed bogeyman could not accomplish. The fear here is not of the unknown entity, but of all people. This is a brilliant device for the horror writer; readers can imagine an end to a specific threat (beast is destroyed, heroes live on, etc), but a threat that exists within everyone around them is harder to defeat—and much harder to forget about even after the novel has been put away.

99.4% Communicability

The Stand is not a typical horror novel, but it certainly has horrific features—vivid descriptions of corpses being the most prevalent, with mangling deaths a close second. Still, it seems like Stephen King has taken a break from the normal blood and gore that flavors his novels. Despite this seeming label of “horror lite,” *The Stand* has elements more disturbing than most traditional horror novels. The most notable is the way King describes Captain Trips' journey from victim to victim across the country.

Part of the horror of the superflu is the speed with which it passes from one person to the next. Readers can learn that the virus has 99.4% communicability when Starkey reads the report on his desk, but they don't quite understand what that means right away. Stu Redman is perhaps the first character to realize the potential for disaster when he is en route to the airstrip in Braintree (after having been strongarmed into custody by the military). Before the Arnette crew even arrives at the plane, the man driving them begins to sneeze. Though Stu is reluctant to believe it, wanting to believe instead that the driver simply has a regular cold, the evidence is clear that whatever is wrong with them, it is possible to pass it from person to person in the space of a short drive. From the ever helpful Joe Bob Brentwood, to dozens of completely ordinary characters, readers will cringe as they watch the superflu spread from person to person. King flavors this deadly rundown with phrases like "He left the sweet thang that waited his table a dollar tip that was crawling with death" and "He also served him and his entire family death warrants" (71). Though seemingly trite, the simplicity of these observations combines with the short sketches King creates of each victim to make the reader actually feel the impending doom on a visceral level.

For instance, readers may recognize Edward M. Norris, who just wanted to show the guys back home that he could take his family on a vacation by car and have a good time. This ordinary man and his family are people readers know, and by having them spread the flu knowingly to so many others, King makes readers imagine themselves in the same situation. The casual way that he traces the progress of the flu is enough to make any reader shudder. King introduces ordinary lives and damns them in the same paragraph with chilling efficiency. One might be tempted to think that such casual death

may preclude readers from getting too attached to any one character, but here is where King weaves his most effective magic. Readers can't help but be drawn to his characters, even knowing that the person they are so involved with at the moment may be dead in the next paragraph, or the next page. The people that wander into and out of the pages of *The Stand* are quite familiar to American readers—from small-town waitresses to older women who play bridge, King allows the readers to visualize someone they know or have seen in the new character, then abruptly reminds readers that these ordinary people are already going to die from the superflu, and they are still busily passing it around to everyone they get near. This double impact forces readers to really accept the fact that Starkey could not quite grasp—99.4% communicability is mind-blowing—but readers do not have a man facedown in a bowl of soup to distract them from the truth.

The casual way that King allows the superflu to spread to supposedly protected military personnel is galling. When nurse Patty Greer begins to sneeze, she does not think anything of it, despite multiple warnings posted all over the military hospital. She is so focused on her next patient, and hoping that he won't be cranky, that she completely misses a significant detail. Her blasé attitude is compounded by her complete faith in her own safety: “she also knew it was impossible for even a tiny virus to get inside the self-contained environment of the white-suits” (116). Patty's reliance on technology and her own self-absorption allow her to spread her case of the superflu to everyone else working on her floor, and the deterioration of even military medical facilities begins. This is a sad commentary on American reliance on both technology and warranties, and King suggests that this dependency is both the agent of the country's undoing as well as the addiction that will spark the rebuilding of society. As Nick considers the future of Boulder, he

keeps coming back to the same words: “Authority. Organization. Politics” (668). Once the people have been given a clear direction, they willingly jump in and help because they believe that such organization will lead them back to the way things were, and the life they knew. Operations to rebuild in Boulder do not really coalesce until there is a plan to get the power back on—a sure sign that dependency on technology is the first addiction that must be assuaged.

King emphasizes his interpretation of human nature when, in perhaps the most unnerving part of *The Stand*, he gives brief snapshots of the people who die in the pause between the end of the superflu and the initial efforts to rebuild society. In these few vignettes, King demonstrates his ability to send chills down the spines of readers even without having to resort to the gross-out factor. From the boy who falls into a well and “died twenty hours later, as much from fear and misery as from shock and hunger and dehydration” or the paranoid woman who blows herself up when she fires an ancient gun, King showcases human fragility and stupidity in a shuddering slideshow of accidents, bad luck, and poor decision-making. Even with all of the death caused by the superflu, readers are more affected by this second wave of suffering because it is not due to circumstances beyond their control, but because of silly mistakes and thoughtlessness. Perhaps the most chilling statement of all, however, is the casual “No great loss” that King peppers throughout the chapter (353). The people he describes, believable and familiar as they might be, are not important to the coming struggle, King suggests, but even more than that, they represent the people who die every day in America and are unnoticed by the masses. King seems to suggest that death, and life, only have meaning in connection with other people—what is the value of life when everyone they loved has

died, or even more, what is the value of death when there is no one around to witness and remember it? Still, these kinds of philosophical speculations are subsumed into a single chapter amid many (78 in total), yet King's questions still many to seep into readers' consciousness without overwhelming the narrative thread.

King is the master of understatement sometimes, and never more so than his chilling descriptions of public reaction to Captain Trips. When Stu watches the news from his Vermont hospital room/jail cell, he notes that as the newscaster smiles reassuringly into the camera and insists there is no danger to the few isolated cases of flu outbreak, someone sneezes off-camera (173). Even more disturbing is the transcription of the President's speech to reassure the country that there is no fatal superflu going around—a speech peppered by sneezes and coughs. The government feels that it is reassuring the people, albeit with empty words, but the manner of the speech's delivery does more to assure Americans of the superflu's seriousness and undermine governmental authority than to silence questions and assuage fears.

In a small twist, King manages to highlight the fast spread of the superflu through newscasts watched and heard by the main characters. Just as Stu and Nick watch the news for some mention of the flu, and are met with reassuring words, they cannot ignore the evidence before their eyes. As Nick watches the news in Shoyo, he hears a report that “in some areas, public gatherings have been cancelled temporarily”; this is followed by the thought that “In Shoyo, the entire town had been cancelled. Who was kidding who?” (207). Even though both Stu and Nick realize that the news is not accurate, each character seeks out the news as a way to reassure himself, and when that is not possible, to gauge the spread of the superflu. The fact that the news is even still on is mildly reassuring, they

think, but the cacophony of coughing in the background heralds darker times to come.

This is an odd way to highlight the spread of the superflu while emphasizing the power of the media.

The Media

The news that the characters receive as the superflu ravages the country is completely controlled. Nick Andros notices that “both newscasters had kept cutting their eyes to the left and right of the camera they were facing...as if someone was in the studio with them, someone who was there to make sure they got it right” (208). This possibility is confirmed later on as the novel narrates events from WBZ-TV in Boston. Several newscasters and technicians stage a coup against the armed men, and spend the next few hours broadcasting the real news. They are summarily executed for treason when the military blows up the building they are broadcasting from. The main newscaster, Bob Palmer, gives a small speech before diving into the real news, stating, “Fellow citizens of Boston, and Americans in our broadcast area. Something both grave and terribly important has just happened in this studio, and I am very glad it has happened here first, in Boston, the cradle of American independence” (212-213). Palmer’s message is quite clear—Americans have always been known for their independence, their refusal to lie down quietly, and even if it means death, at least some of them are willing to stand up for the truth. Once the beacon of rebellion is lit, a series of small victories of truth are won—a man in West Virginia prints a small paper and hands it door to door to those left alive in his town. His only story explains the facts of the flu, and includes the sad commentary,

“Citizens, this is more than a disaster or a tragedy; it is the end of all hope in our government” (215). Clearly, in King’s America, there are people willing to fight until the end, even if they can only manage to stagger across town handing out flyers before succumbing to the flu in the front seat of an old car. As each exercise of freedom appears, the government reprisal grows more extreme. The *L.A. Times* building is dynamited by the remains of the FBI for printing a one-page extra with the truth.

King narrates the degenerating behavior of Americans with distressing skill as things start to fall apart. Just as there are those who would stand against the governmental and military lies, there are those who are determined to stay uniformed. In fact, in a few lines describing the brutal attack of a man wearing an end-of-the-world sign by four infected young men in motorcycle jackets, King manages to show just how desperate people can get, and readers are forced to reconsider their initial reactions to the military’s plan of action (217). Had the truth been generally known earlier, readers wonder, perhaps the degeneration would have been worse. As things go, the last days of the superflu are quite nasty by themselves. In these brief sketches, King manages to undermine the attitude he has so carefully crafted in his readers (that of distrust and near disgust with the military response), and forces them to reevaluate their own opinions of events.

The swift unraveling of the country is illustrated most clearly in the Ray Flowers episode. When the talk show host begins to take calls about the superflu, soldiers are dispatched to “take care of Ray Flowers.” The first two soldiers to receive the orders refuse and are summarily executed, and the rest reluctantly head out to Springfield, Missouri, to do their duty. However, once Ray Flowers has been killed, the soldiers

almost immediately turn on their sergeant, and a vicious fight ensues between the rest (218). This episode scares the rest of the (listening) populace into believing that things really are falling apart. When the military itself can't control its own soldiers, and career government men are refusing orders, it becomes clear that the entire system is collapsing.

King manages to raise a small amount of ambiguity with Ray Flowers. Does he continue his show because he truly believes in free speech and his democratic rights, or does he continue because, as an American, he simply does not believe that the government would really do anything to him? Though seemingly a small issue—Ray Flowers dies anyway—this is a crucial question of the Stand itself. Does intention matter when one is fighting for freedom—or is it enough to simply be in the right place at the right time? King leaves the answer up to the readers. Flowers is a hero because he does try to get the truth out to his listeners, but at the same time, can he be heroic if he really didn't expect to die for his actions? Unlike the people at WBZ-TV, who had been surrounded by men with guns and knew that death was inevitable, Ray Flowers' rebellion may leave readers uncertain about the nature of heroism.

The student march at Kent University places readers back onto familiar ground. The notion of the military firing on unarmed students is not unheard of in the American psyche, and even as the unnamed military man screams, "Those aren't commie guerillas out there! They're kids! American kids! They aren't armed!" readers can imagine the scene (223). The subsequent bloodbath as those soldiers turn on one another for firing and/or not firing is not a surprise either, but readers are left with more solidarity than with Ray Flowers. As episode after episode of things falling apart is reported, readers grow

more accustomed to the chaos, and by the time readers reach the silence at the end, they, like the surviving main characters, are open to just about anything that could follow.

Chapter Three: The Players

Critics often dismiss King's work because some of his characters appear to be stereotypes. While some of his characters have stereotypical characteristics, to claim that they are simply walking caricatures is to ignore the subtleties that King employs when introducing them as symbols of deeper meaning that serve many functions in the subtext of the novel. Stu Redman represents the Everyman in all Americans, while Frannie Goldsmith's origins are a scathing commentary on New England small-town life. Larry Underwood raises questions about what it means to be a nice guy, and Nick Andros is a man used by forces beyond his control even as he tries to rationalize what he sees around him. Glen Bateman serves as King's commentary on the human condition, an intellectual put to good use, and Tom Cullen is an example of how innocence can overcome evil by virtue of being pure. Harold Lauder and Nadine Cross are intellectual characters who choose their own downfall willingly and with forethought, yet still remain somewhat sympathetic to readers. On the other side of the demarcation between good and evil lie Lloyd Henreid and Trashcan Man, each a different interpretation of human evil—one's sin is in knowingly serving a devil, and the other's is simply self-destructive. All of these players are overseen by the devil incarnate in Randall Flagg and the White's champion, Mother Abigail, father and mother of the post-superflu world.

These characters may seem like stereotypes at first glance, and in some fashion, they are. Stu can be classified as an ordinary redneck blue collar worker. Larry is the

epitome of the rock star gone awry. King has not created these people entirely out of thin air; they are conglomerations of his own experience with people in different places and in varied stages of their lives. Like Eliot claimed good literature ought to do, King has borrowed from the literary tradition he has inherited. The notion of an Everyman is older than King's Stu Redman, yet by associating his character with this convention, King adds another layer of meaning to his newest interpretation of an old ideal. In this cast of characters, King manages to both bring images of American personas to the page, and revitalize them with freshly scrubbed faces and shiny new outlooks on life. Each King character has a distinct personality beyond his or her traditional traits, an individuality that allows readers to see them as more than walking caricatures.

Ordinary People Can Make a Difference

Stuart Redman is King's example of how an ordinary person can make a difference in the grand scheme of things. Stu is common, and yet even he can alter the course of the future by standing up when need arises. Stu serves as the Everyman in the novel, a representative of the ordinary man in everyone. His recollection of "goddam good times" include hunting trips and poker games, and he reminisces about the people he knew in Arnette—Chris Ortega's "endless stream of ethnic jokes" and Tony Leominster's Scout (387). He behaves in believable and familiar ways—he is calm under pressure, he is gentlemanly in his pursuit of Frannie, and he is fierce in protection of his newly discovered loved ones. His quiet Texan drawl allows readers to equate him with the Western heroes of old American novels—he is the Hemingway hero, the Western

sheriff, and the canny underdog all at once, and he is an easy character to stand behind as a reader. Though it may seem like Stu is a walking stereotype, King gives his hero a force of personality that makes him stand out from the ranks of heroic protagonists. Stu is American, he is recognizable in his fears, in his failures, and in his occasional faithlessness. He is flawed, but not with the proverbial fatal flaw; Stu is troubled by simple human foibles—he gets annoyed by small things, he dislikes Harold's attitude towards Frannie, he struggles against the decrees of Mother Abigail and her God. Stu is a stereotype in that he is Everyman, but he still retains an individuality that most Texan characters in modern literature lose in the shadow of John Wayne or Shane.

King introduces his hero in the manner of the cautious and careful thinker. Initially described as “the quietest man in Arnette,” Stuart Redman is clearly the hero of the novel from the start, and he is established early on as the man of thoughtful action (4). When readers first meet Stu, he sits drinking Pabst at Hap's Texaco, the sign of American blue collar worker for sure. To complete the image of good old boy, readers learn that Stu almost had an athletic scholarship, but had to work instead when his family got sick, a story that Americans can certainly relate to. Though he is often dismissed by townspeople as “another good old boy in a dying Texas town,” it is Stu who acts when Champion's car comes crashing into the pumps (5). While the others stare dumbfounded at the Chevy heading for them, Stu stands up quite calmly, and swiftly flicks off the switches to the pumps, saving the lives of everyone at the station with his fast thinking, but perhaps unknowingly dooming the rest of America by not allowing the superflu to be destroyed in a fiery explosion. He thinks things through, certainly, but when it becomes clear that something must be done, Stu is always willing to take the necessary steps.

King is careful not to turn Stu into a caricature of the strong silent type that predominates Westerns set in Texas. Instead, King allows Stu to show his emotions; he is not an unfeeling man or the image of the stoic Hemingway hero. When the Texaco crew stares at Campion and his family in the car, Stu is struck by the way the mother and child are still holding hands in death. He “had been in the war, but he had never seen anything so terribly pitiful as this” (8). Stu is more affected by the scene than anyone else who stares into the car, and he is not afraid or embarrassed by his reaction. This empathy is a reassuring sign to readers that Stu is a trustworthy hero. He can accept his own emotional reaction to the scene without any objections; Stu is not plagued by expectations of masculine behavior. When something affects him, he says so; it just takes him a little while to actually say so, not out of fear or some secret shame, but because Stu rarely says anything that does not need to be said. He is careful with his words in the same way that some male characters are with their emotions, holding back until the time is right to speak. This taciturn quality makes other characters, and readers, pay attention when Stu does say something. When the military takes him to the Atlanta Disease Control Center, Stu’s tendency to watch and wait earns readers’ respect. As the only one immune to the superflu, doctors and nurses continue to perform tests on him without telling him what is happening. Once Stu gets fed up, however, his stubbornness makes him a character that all readers can appreciate. He disregards the nurse’s attempts to charm him into cooperation, instead refusing to go along with any more tests until they send him someone who can talk. Even more, he has no real problem with the actual tests; “what he objected to was being kept in the dark, kept scared” (65). While not an intellectual by any means, Stu is not lacking in intelligence. As Gary Sinise says in the film version of

The Stand, “East Texas don’t mean dumb.” When he finally does make his Stand against his captors, it is final, but up until that point, he deliberately avoids asking questions. From his experience with his wife’s death from cancer, Stu knows that not asking questions makes doctors and staff uncomfortable. They expect to be questioned, and those questions give them the authority to give unsatisfying or misleading answers. Stu’s refusal to ask questions makes them take him all the more seriously when he finally does.

Stu also serves as King’s commentary on the intelligence of the ordinary American. He may not be an educated intellectual, but Stu’s knowledge comes from a lifetime of quiet observation. He knows people, and he understands how they behave. When the man finally does come to see him in Atlanta, Stu knows not to show fear. He notes that

Denniger [the doctor who first oversees his care] looked and acted like the kind of man who would ride his help and bullyrag them around but lick up to his superiors like an egg-suck dog. The kind of man who could be pushed a ways if he thought you held the whip hand. But if he smelled fear on you, he would hand you the same old cake: a thin icing of ‘I’m sorry I can’t tell you more’ on top and a lot of contempt for stupid civilians who wanted to know more than what was good for them underneath (68).

Denniger can’t tell Stu anymore about the situation, and his cajoling eventually breaks down to an argument of “Your lack of cooperation may do your country a grave disservice!” to which Stu replies, “Right now it looks to me like it’s my country doing me a grave disservice” (69). Stu could not be more right in this case. Though it takes him longer to react to his situation than Lila Bruett, Stu’s reaction is just as familiar to

readers. His threat to tear a hole in the doctor's germ-suit gives readers a chance to rejoice; finally, someone is going to stand up against those in charge. At this point in the novel, this small rebellion is the only recourse available to readers. With such rampant death all around, Stu's stand against Denniger reminds readers how important it is to fight for what is right. King also uses this altercation as a way for his readers to fight back against the death that surrounds the story—it isn't possible to rail against the superflu, but it is possible for readers to rally around Stu as he stands against Denniger. King illustrates the reason for the dedication of his Constant Reader in this scene; he understands the needs of his readership and caters to those desires as he tells the story. Stu's "tough guy" reaction also lets readers identify with Stu. At a time when they may become frustrated with the helplessness of watching the world fall apart, Stu's little threat takes on new meaning. He is willing to stand up to the man, in his small way, in order to get some answers. King has renewed his readers' faith in the ability of man to stand up to tyranny, even in a small way. King's other heroes are not so simply identified, nor are they so easy to appreciate.

Small Town Maine: King's Specialty

Stephen King is known for his depiction of Maine in his novels, and the Goldsmiths of Ogunquit, Maine are as average as they come, at least on the surface. Of course, like all families in King novels, they have their share of problems. Frannie's mother, for instance, is not about to win any mother-of-the-year awards, and her father is about as down-home blue collar as one can get. However, the relationship Frannie shares

with her father resounds with believability, and this familiarity is what causes readers to immerse themselves in Frannie's life and situation more than any other character in the novel at this point. For all intents and purposes, Frannie serves as the novel's opening Every(wo)man. She has gotten herself in an awkward position, but she is a bastion of rationality. She makes her choices and sticks to them. If Hoppenstandt is correct in his assertion that King writes to women, then Frannie Goldsmith is sure to resonate with that core audience.

This resonance does not imply that Frannie is a stereotypical strong female. She has quirks and foibles that make her as believable as anyone the reader knew from school or the neighborhood. For instance, Frannie's way of ending her diary with a little "things to remember" list gives her a distinct personality. She wants to have some memories to share with her baby, and so she records random details like "you used to be able to get frozen cakes and pies at the supermarket and just thaw them out and eat them" (533). In her diary, Frannie also uses the word "sez" a lot to relate conversations, a girlish trait that makes Frannie more realistic to readers. In addition to her penchant for memory lists and slang words, Frannie is a sucker for the giggles. At odd times, like when she tells Jess she's pregnant, or at a solemn poetry reading, Frannie can't help herself. As her father puts it, "Sometimes King Laugh knocks and you're one of those people who can't keep him out" (57). The notion of a girl from Maine who gets the giggles is easy to imagine for the American reader, and the fact that she happens to be pregnant and poised for a great series of life changes only makes Frannie a character that American readers, male or female, young or old, can understand.

King's introduction of Frannie resonates with believability. When she finds herself in a family way, her strict New England upbringing forces her to compare herself to Hester Prynne, though there is no real adultery, and she is keenly disappointed to realize that her beau, Jess Rider, is no Dimmesdale. Far from the ideal of Puritan Americans, Jess is as confused as she is when he finds out she is pregnant. He gives no great impassioned speech, nor does he make any vows of love or devotion. Though she doesn't expect much more from him, she is still disheartened when she sees right through Jess's "Lord Byron, lonely but unafraid" pose out by the water (13). Jess is the American poet, irresponsible and adorable, but ultimately ineffective. He is not Lord Byron, just a copy of an ideal, like she is a copy of Hester. In contrast to the bastion of masculine strength Frannie hopes for, Jess is terrified when Frannie walks up behind him and taps his shoulder, even crying out with a very unmanly shriek. He considers offering her a handkerchief when she bites her tongue, but reconsiders when he realizes she will get blood on it—the image of the poetic ladies man, but really a farce.

King suggests that Jess is the best thing America has to offer, or at least average or expected—a poor quality copy of a long gone standard. Jess is not the reason for America's downfall, but he is a poor Modern substitute for the Romantic tragic hero. When confronted by Frannie's pregnancy, he panics, argues, sulks, and lashes out in turn. His romantic impulse of marriage, once denied by Frannie, turns into an adolescent temper tantrum that culminates in him slapping her "lightly backhand on the cheek" (19). He is not an ideal gentleman, and his reaction to Frannie's situation only highlights the normalcy of his response. While Frannie doesn't really hope for much more than that from him, she has been conditioned by her American upbringing to dream of a better

response, and when her own practicality brings him down to reality, she is doubly disappointed.

Not all of King's Maine characters prove false versions of old ideals though; Frannie's father, a machinist at the Sanford auto parts firm, resounds with genuine emotion. At first, Peter Goldsmith appears as a strong revitalized version of the henpecked husband, but later on, he transitions into a model of modern fatherhood. He successfully balances a bitter wife with a beloved daughter, and his quiet voice rules the women in his family despite appearances otherwise. Like Stu, Peter only speaks his mind in family matters when he has something final to say—he may chat with his daughter of every day things, but when he speaks before both wife and daughter, there is not doubt that he is in charge of the family, and the women obey his soft-spoken command. In this family, King manages to highlight a very loving father-daughter relationship while upholding a traditional Puritan notion of family life. Of all the parents in the novel, Peter Goldsmith remains the most developed, and his relationship with Frannie sets the example for Frannie's own standards of parenting. Even though "the woman that was his wife and her mother would (and had) all but cut the tongue out of his head with the acid which could flow so quickly and freely from her own," Peter Goldsmith remains a low-voiced talkative man when it comes to his daughter (53). He tries to explain, though not to justify, his wife's behavior, claiming, "Your mother has been using the old yardsticks all her life, and she can't change now" (54). Even moreso, he elaborates, Frannie's mother has never been the same since Fred Goldsmith, her mother's first and favorite child, was killed by a drunk driver. Such blatant favoritism among parents may not paint

the most flattering picture of parenthood in America, but here King has enunciated a secret that most parents would not admit.

King shows his knack for capturing the essence of human behavior when he has Peter Goldsmith describe the changes that came over his wife after the death of her favorite child. Peter tells Frannie that “Carla was different in those days” before Fred died. She was “oh, hellfire” and “she was young herself,” but after Fred died, he thinks that his wife just “stopped growing.” It was as if, Peter explains, “she slapped three coats of lacquer and one of quick-dry cement on her way of looking at things and called it good” (58). This is a very blue collar way of explaining a well known reaction to grief. When faced with disaster, some people just turn themselves off, and King has explained this in a way that readers can understand by using the imagery of a machinist. Essentially, Peter concludes, Frannie’s mother was a lot like Frannie herself, and though it may be hard to see it now, there is a connection between them. King is addressing a very common human question here—how can children be so different from their parents? In this case, King explains, certain life events have made Carla the way she is now, and though Frannie may not see any resemblance, she can be reassured by her father’s certainty that she and her mother are not so disconnected as they may think. It is in small insights into family relationships like these that King once again shows his capability as an author. King also addresses the father-daughter connection with the Goldsmiths. As Peter puts it, “I’m an old man trying to give a young daughter advice, and it’s like a monkey trying to teach table manners to a bear” (59). Still, despite this admission, Peter does his best to tell his daughter what he can, and in doing so, he serves as a model father in a novel that is severely lacking in family support. Once the superflu arrives, very few

survivors actually have blood family, so the time spent on Peter and Frannie's relationship serves as a reminder of a past that is long gone. In the changes that engulf America after the superflu, the idea of family is largely lost, but Frannie's recollections of her father allow her to forge her own family in a new world.

King uses Frannie's position as a pregnant unwed woman to comment on New England perspectives. Frannie is very much aware of the small-town world in which she lives. She knows that even if she moves out of her parent's home to have the baby, she will still be the talk of the town. She may joke about a scarlet letter, but she is genuinely concerned about the gossip that will follow her as her pregnancy progresses. Here King has added a small critique of life in a resort town. The year long residents will know her condition and publicly scorn her, but the visitors who makes the town thrive will not notice or care about Frannie's pregnancy. The people whose opinion her mother holds so highly are the same people that Frannie thinks about; for all that she claims to be different, she is not foolish enough to think that such things do not matter, especially when all of the visitors go back home. After all, she thinks, "the year-round residents always had to have someone to look at" (164). Still, Frannie is a woman of action, and just as she worries about the future, she takes steps to ensure her place in it—confirming a new place to live and making her plans for the baby.

Frannie also serves as King's commentary on the place of women in the post-superflu world. Once she and Stu have sex, Frannie sets herself up as Stu's woman, and the title does not bother her as she thinks it ought to. After all, Frannie wonders, what good is feminist theory when biology has come around to a matter of physical strength? It may be all well and good to talk about equality when technology exists to make any

physical difference unimportant, but in the absence of technology, the fact that women are physically weaker suddenly matters as it hadn't in many decades. Frannie is a thoroughly modern woman, and yet she does not feel constricted by her duties as Stu's woman, and she does not need any kind of formal ceremony (marriage) or name changing to show her position. Once they reach Boulder, Frannie notes that old systems of pair bonding seem to have broken down, and people are simply together as so-and-so's woman. This may seem degrading to a modern feminist perspective, but Frannie sees how precarious this new existence can be for women (she is part of a confrontation between a group of gun-toting men and their female sex slaves and sees just how easy it is for men to subjugate women in this new world) and she is glad to have her man's protection.

Frannie is King's example of a modern Every(wo)Man, and she is an apt partner for Stu Redman as champions for the side of White in the coming battle. Even though she is fiercely loyal and a brave fighter, Frannie never loses the qualities that bring her to life for readers—she is a woman afraid for her man's safety, and ever aware of the danger that Mother Abigail's God puts them in, but she also cannot help her bouts of the giggles, and it is this realism that allows readers to connect with her.

American Nice Guy

Not everyone on the side of good is as straight forward as Stu and Frannie; in fact, Larry Underwood is often described as a “not-so-nice guy.” Larry admits this himself, though it does bother him when others keep bringing it up, especially when his mother

tells him that there is strength in him, but it would take a catastrophe to pull it out. Larry Underwood is a musician recovering from his first number one hit. At the start of the novel, Larry is a symbol for the decadence of the music scene in California, as much as Stu is a symbol for the hard-working blue collar American good old boy. In his very first scene, Larry arrives back home in New York, where he has run back to his mother in an attempt to escape the massive debts his outrageous partying has racked up in Southern California. His very first sight on parking the Datsun Z in front of his mother's apartment building in New York is of a rat gnawing on the belly of a dead cat. Larry can't stop thinking about the image as he sits in his car, contemplating how to approach his mother after his double-edged success on the other coast. In this case, Larry has become the dead cat, or very near to it, had he stayed in California long enough for the drug dealers (to whom he now owes massive amounts of cash) to find him.

King uses the dead cat imagery as an extended metaphor for Larry's position in life. As soon as he became successful with his song, Larry's house became an unofficial party zone for anyone who happened to be nearby. He has already squandered the advance he received for the hit single, and keeping his guests happy has become more expensive than he realized. This is a typical scenario of the small-time musician who hits it big for the first time, or even moreso, the American expectation of a rock star; Larry Underwood now has a song on the radio across the country, therefore he should be able to host elaborate parties for his hangers-on. Except that in Larry's case, as in most cases, the people at the party aren't the friends that got him there; in fact, when Larry looks around he realizes that he knows maybe one person in three. These strangers are the rats picking at Larry's guts, and when Larry has been emptied out, they will flock to the next

free party for pizza and cocaine. It takes a serious talk from his keyboardist Wayne Stukey to wake Larry up, and with this talk, readers get a revealing glimpse into Larry's character. After Wayne has laid out the situation—Larry owes well over twelve grand, and he has less than a thousand left to his name—readers can see what kind of man Larry Underwood is, and it is not encouraging. Larry's first thoughts are to wonder what Wayne wants from him, then he is reluctant to actually hear his friend's words, and then, when everything does become clear to him, Larry hesitates on pulling the plug on his party because he doesn't want the strangers at his house to think poorly of him; in fact, "the thought of telling all those unknown people in there to leave made his throat want to close up" (43). Larry is pathetically weak. Instead of listening to his friend, he is afraid of letting down complete strangers. This is like the dead cat hoping the rat feasting on his guts is satisfied with the menu.

King uses Larry to mock modern notions of success. Since he has "made it," Larry now has an image to uphold. He is the epitome of success in the American music business. He has a hit single. He has an album coming out. In a few short weeks, he has gone from the struggling musician everyone knows to the rock star everyone hopes to be. In that transition, Larry has also become the stereotypical overnight success—he is unable to deal with his fame in a reasonable manner; instead he throws wild parties and allows strangers to take advantage of him. Using the image of the dead cat that introduces Larry to the reader, King manages to offer a somewhat scathing commentary on the Hollywood success story without really breaking the pace of the narrative. King continues to build Larry's character in a way that leaves readers unsure if they've just met a possible hero or another villain.

King continues to keep his readers guessing about Larry's true nature when he relates Larry's reaction to his friends in California. When Wayne shakes some sense into him, Larry is at first annoyed, then embarrassed, then afraid. He wonders what all of those people will say about him, and then is torn between the hangers-on's disapproval and the drug dealer Dewey Deck adding up the money Larry now owes him. Wayne admits that the party-goers will tell Larry that he has "forgotten his old friends" but then reminds Larry that none of them actually are his friends. Larry's real friends, Wayne tells him, have left several days before, none willing to stick around to watch their friend drown in his own success. Larry's reaction to this news is somewhat disheartening to readers seeking any redeeming qualities in this character. Larry is angry, and "the anger was prodded out of him by the realization that all his really good friends had taken off, and in retrospect all their excuses seemed lame" (43). In other words, Larry faults his friends for leaving after he refused to hear what they said; he is indignant when he is the one who has lost their respect—all marks of a weak man indeed. King seems determined to have readers see the worst in Larry. This depiction makes sense when, later on, King redeems Larry; the seemingly useless rock star manages to become a leader of his people, a man worthy of admiration, but only after intense struggle and hardship. King uses Larry to make a general comment about human nature—some people may begin poorly, but when tested, they reveal strengths that were not expected.

King does not make Larry's turnaround a miraculous event. With considerable foreshadowing, King notes that Larry does have something in him that allows readers to have hope. When Larry asks Wane, with whom he has never been particularly friendly, why he has decided to warn him, Wayne explains: "Because there's a hard streak in you.

There's something in you that's like biting on tin foil" (43). This hard streak continues to show itself more and more as Larry grows. Sometimes it allows him to survive where others would fail, and sometimes it lets him get away with terrible deeds. Of all the characters in *The Stand*, Larry Underwood is perhaps the most complex; he shifts between the dividing lines laid down after the superflu. Readers are left wondering which way Larry will turn—will he let that streak of hardness make him into a hero for good, or will he allow that streak to justify his cowardly support for evil? Stephen King does an admirable job in making Larry both lovable and detestable all at the same time. When describing himself, Larry remembers that

he would go along, not thinking, getting people—including himself—into jams, and when the jams got bad enough, he would call upon that hard streak to extricate himself. As for the others? He would leave them to sink or swim on their own. Rock was tough, and there was toughness in his character, but he still used it destructively. (50)

Larry is definitely not a hero as one would hope for, but perhaps in the modern world, King suggests, Larry Underwood, like Jess Rider, is the best there is to offer. Or maybe, King hints, if a modern man like Larry can't get it together to do the right thing, then it doesn't much matter what happens to the rest of humanity. Certainly, Larry is tested often throughout the novel, and even at the end, he is still ambivalent about his course, though he does choose to Stand as best he can.

King points out that even a catastrophe as great as the superflu may not be enough to transform mediocrity into greatness. It turns out that his mother was right about him when she claimed there was "good in Larry, great good. It was there, but this late on it

would take nothing short of a catastrophe to bring it out” (51). The superflu may be the catastrophe she envisioned, but even it alone is not enough to bring out the steel in Larry’s personality. When faced with her son’s burning need for approval, Alice Underwood gives her own blunt appraisal of her son’s character: “I think you’re a taker. You’ve always been one. It’s like God left some part of you out when he built you inside of me” (93). Larry isn’t a bad person, she explains, but he is a just a bit broken, and his condition is worse than expected because he knows he is broken, but is unable to fix himself. Instead, Larry can only watch himself behave in ways that he knows aren’t leading him to the moral high ground. He makes choices, and he does have free will, but he seems to lack the ability to make the right decisions, or at least the decisions that would help out anyone beyond himself. Then again, that self-interest is what allows Larry to survive in the harsh world after the superflu, so readers are forced to wonder which is more important—moral high ground or a devotion to self-preservation. To make matters even more pointed, King has named Larry’s hit single, “Baby, can you dig your man?” with the refrain of “He’s a righteous man.” Larry constantly asks that question as he seeks approval from anyone, but he is not so righteous. Whether he is explaining to his mom why he hasn’t called her as often as he ought to or fleeing from a one-night stand, Larry, in the words of the spatula-wielding oral hygienist of his short-lived fling, “ain’t no nice guy!” (87). The question of whether or not Larry is a nice guy continues to crop up throughout the novel, and readers are never quite sure which way to answer.

The manner of Larry’s introduction showcases King’s ability to capture American landscapes. The city of New York is brought to life in these few pages through the eyes of Larry Underwood, a clear example of King’s ability to render the world of his novel

believable and recognizable. In his dejection as he sits outside his mother's apartment, Larry decides that the city "has all the charm of a dead whore" (34). The neighborhood has degenerated since he grew up there, as many city streets have, and American readers will recognize both the loss of boyhood innocence, and the idea that John Updike put so baldly: "You really can't go home again." As far as Larry is concerned, his home is somewhat embarrassing; though in truth the embarrassment is his own for having to flee back under his mother's skirts—the city itself may have degraded some, but not nearly as much as Larry sees. He is externalizing his own emotions onto the surroundings, and in such a state of mind, even dead cats and rats start to reflect on his own ill-lived life. When his mother wakes him up in the car, Larry is shocked to see how unchanged she is. He expects her to seem "smaller, less sure of herself" and is oddly emotional when she tells him to come inside and have some breakfast. For a second, Larry fears that she will "turn away from him, deny him, show him the back of her cheap coat, and simply go off to the subway around the corner, leaving him" (45). This is an old fear of Larry's, some sense that he is not worth the effort, and at least partly, he is right. Still, blood rings true, and his mother takes him in: "she sighed, the way a man will sigh before picking up a heavy burden" but when she speaks to him, she sounds pleased, and Larry quickly forgets that sound (46). He is a mixture of gratitude and expectation at this point. On the one hand, Larry is nearly in tears when he hugs his mother (a hug that she flinches from at first before receiving and giving back her own embrace); on the other hand, he is smugly sure that his return means more to her than it does to him.

Yet when he does enter the building of his youth, Larry is curiously caught off guard by the combination of things missing (like the pair of stone dogs that once stood

guard on the end of the stone steps leading inside), and things remembered, that for a moment he has to reassure himself that “he had not shrunk two feet, that the whole decade of the 1980s had not vanished back into time” (46). Larry is a man afraid of his past and uncertain about his future, and his initial prospects as a hero for the cause of good are dubious. He is a man at war with himself, and this struggle is both internal as he debates which course to take, and external as the world around him starts to resemble his interior split. In the foreground, Larry embraces his mother and the hope for yet another chance to do the right thing; in the background, however, is the dead cat with the rat still gnawing at its guts. In true gruesome detail, King has managed to juxtapose the idea of home and family with the grit and grisly beat of the city, and these twin concepts continue to revolve around one another as mankind slowly falls apart.

King continues the theme of coming home as Larry wanders through the city of his youth. He expects Times Square “to look different somehow, magical” and that “things would look smaller and yet better there,” but instead, “it all looked just the same—more than it should have because some things really had changed” (154). Larry wants the outside world to change as he feels that he has changed, and yet he wants it to remain as he remembers it—a simultaneous need to affirm his difference and confirm his similarity that marks the essential split in his personality. Throughout the novel, Larry struggles to walk the thin line between the side of him that “ain’t no nice guy” and the person he wishes to be—a man who will Stand when the time comes. Larry does not immediately shift into hero mode with the onset of the plague. In fact, it takes him much longer than most to make his decision. When things do first get difficult in New York, readers are sorely tempted to agree with the spatula-wielding oral hygienist. After all, a

man who can wonder how badly his mother's sickness will screw up his plans isn't worth much sympathy. Even the villains in the novel seem more worthwhile at times than Larry does at first.

King uses Larry as a test for his readers' sense of outrage. He has created a self-centered character with few redeeming qualities, and yet, when readers find Larry alone in Central Park, trying to deal with the remains of New York City, they find it hard not to be sympathetic. King is fast to temper that newfound sympathy with speculation, however, as Larry reminisces about an old friendship that he abandoned over a matter of twenty-five dollars, and a failed relationship that he took for granted. Every time Larry seems to gain ground with readers as a respectable character, he backpedals just as quickly. King also uses Larry's relationship with Yvonne as an image for the perfect American day—sitting on the couch watching the World Series—and readers can relate to Larry as he longs for that lost perfection.

King stretches out that feeling of connection between readers as he relates how Larry reacts to Rita's suicide. Like any normal person, Larry is torn between disgust (he was waking her up so he could have sex with her) and guilt (he was semi-responsible for her survival) when he discovers her body, yet it is hard to accept his justification for leaving her body in the tent they had shared instead of burying her. Larry candidly admits that his actions aren't what a "nice guy" would do, but he also realizes that watching the dirt fall onto Rita's dead body if he buried her would break the small hold he still has on sanity. He calls it cowardice, but it is a fear that most readers can understand—almost. Again, though, Larry manages to make readers shake their heads as he thinks about the event. He shifts from guilt to a sort of ruthless rationalization; Rita wasn't a survivor-

type, and she would not have made it as long as she did without him. In fact, Larry rationalizes, she probably killed herself to set him free, and he is glad to be rid of her. The initial guilt he feels on finding her body quickly fades as he moves away from her remains, and soon he is determined to keep going. Still, leaving her dead body behind in a tent is somehow sacrilegious, and it's hard for readers to forget how easily he abandoned this first responsibility, and more so, how happy he was to be relieved of his burden. King is really stretching the boundaries of "nice guyness" here.

Larry does have a moment of clarity, though, and King marks his first steps towards change with a surprisingly self-aware experience. After endless days of running away from the memory of Rita and the significance of her suicide, Larry is forced to either face his situation or die. He doesn't consciously choose to survive, but he does realize the moment that something has changed within himself. As he stares at Nadine Cross and the savage boy Joe, Larry realizes that he wants to be with other people, and that he doesn't want to disappear into the dreams that haunt him every night. He admits that he doesn't understand the change within him: "there are no maps of the change. You just...come out the other side" (449). By the end of the novel, Larry has a woman of his own in Lucy Swann, and a pseudo-son in Joe, and it is these things that he must give up when he goes on his spiritual journey with Stu, Glen, and Ralph. Larry finally becomes a man on his own terms, and by the end, he has earned the title of a hero, if not a really "nice guy" of a hero.

A Pawn in the Hands of Providence

The world of the novel may be infused with spirituality, but some characters are especially resistant to the notion of a metaphysical reality. King is careful to keep his world realistic as he builds towards his divine climax; he accomplishes this verisimilitude by adding details about people that readers can recognize. Not all of the “good old boys” in the novel are as noble as Stu Redman. When readers are introduced to Nick Andros, the deaf-mute is being attacked by some self-appointed “good old boys,” and he is lucky to escape with his life. King is trading on readers’ recognition of this stereotype here, and he uses the standard as a double comparison between Stu, whom readers already identify with, and other people often associated with someone like Stu. King is shattering stereotypes even as he upholds them. King’s introduction of a wanderer, another stereotype, also challenges preconceived notions of what kind of person matters in America, and Nick seems an unlikely character for a hero, nevermind a protagonist, but he soon becomes one of the central players in the battle between good and evil. The part that Nick plays in the conflict between Mother Abigail and Randall Flagg, or God and the Devil, as it were, is curious because Nick himself is an avowed atheist. He does not believe in God, he tells Mother Abigail, who replies with the cryptic, “He believes in you” (516). Nick has the hardest time believing that there are forces at work beyond his comprehension. When he is on the road with Tom Cullen to see Mother Abigail, he can’t believe it; after all, “he didn’t believe in precognitions or visions” (416). Even when he is faced with the truth of Mother Abigail in the flesh, Nick still tries to rationalize his experience. What if, he asks, the dark man is just “the scared bad part of us all” and that “maybe we are dreaming of the things we’re afraid we might do” (514)? Nick is trying to

be rational about things, a quality that may go far in his role in the Boulder Free Zone, but will not earn him points with Mother Abigail. As Nick tries to give a psychological interpretation of his dreams of Randall Flagg, he is cut down when Mother Abigail asks, “You dreamed of me. Ain’t I real?” (514). Nick grudgingly accepts this logic, but inside, he is extremely uncomfortable with the very notion of her existence. It suggests that there is more to the world than he knows or expects in his experience, and given the limits to his sensory perception, such knowledge makes him wonder just what else might exist in the wide world that he doesn’t know about. The possibility of a metaphysical reality scares him even more than the dreams of the dark man.

King introduces the metaphysical aspect of his novel in cryptic bits at first. While readers are still watching as emerging main characters fight their way through the last days of the superflu and the chaos that precedes the emptiness, King subtly weaves in the deeper issues of his story. The superflu, it turns out, is merely to set the stage for the real conflict, but characters have a hard time coming to grips with the new world around them. Nick, in particular, is exposed to the new reality early on; in fact, he has his first vision of the future before the superflu has even managed to kill everyone. After his dream, Nick wonders if “the normal world had skewed into a place where babies were sacrificed behind closed blinds and stupendous black machines roared on and on in locked basements” (201). In other words, Nick has stumbled into the world of horror. Everything that he fears is suddenly possible, and in the wake of his first glimpse of the cornfield and Mother Abigail, Nick is forced to reevaluate his understanding of reality. Nick’s experience with the clear sense of good and evil in his dream makes him consider these two forces as more than abstract notions. Very soon, Nick realizes, he will have to

make a choice between them, and that decision will be more than a lifestyle preference—it will define his place in the new world that will follow the superflu.

Christian allegorical interpretations of *The Stand* focus on Nick Andros as a Christ figure. Nick is tempted by Flagg in dreams, when the dark man offers to restore Nick's hearing and speech if only Nick will "fall down on [his] knees and worship [him]" (371). Nick refuses, as any hero ought, but he is sorely tempted. Curiously, though, what tempts Nick are not the usual things that Flagg offers—"cities, women, treasure, power"—but rather "the entrancing sound his fingernails made on his shirt, the tick of a clock in an empty house after midnight, and the secret sound of rain" (371). Nick longs for the ordinary things in life, and because Flagg cannot quite understand this, he fails to ensnare Nick's loyalties. Nick doesn't refuse Flagg because of any moral or spiritual qualms—he refuses because Flagg's offer is too big for him, too impossible to imagine, though fear of the dark man also plays a part in his decision. Where others are cowed or amazed by Flagg's dark aura, Nick turns away from the coldness, consciously choosing to stay as he is rather than embrace the evil that Flagg represents. As soon as he does refuse Flagg, however, Nick is rewarded in his dreams with sound and speech, but this time it is the music of Mother Abigail's guitar he can hear, and he accepts the noises as the gifts they are. Mother Abigail does not demand that he bow down before her, but she is nearly as commanding when she suggests that Nick stop by and see her anytime. Instead of trying to scare Nick into submission, Mother Abigail wins his heart with a few comments. It is intriguing that both representatives of good and evil tempt Nick with sound, and the fact that he chooses to seek out Mother Abigail is as much a result of her good singing voice as of any conscious decision to value good over evil.

King develops Nick as a man surrounded by forces beyond his control. However Nick tries to logically justify his beliefs, he is carried along with the force of Mother Abigail's faith. For reasons that appear to Nick as a bad joke, he is elected the leader of the first group that comes to Mother Abigail's farm in Nebraska. He accepts the responsibility reluctantly, but he is more eager to believe it than he is in Abby Freemantle's God. He justifies things in small pieces, thinking at first, "let the old woman have her God, God was necessary for old women as enemas and Lipton tea bags," while he promises to focus on "one thing at a time, planting one foot ahead of the other" (520). Still, even with his resolution to take things slowly, Nick can't help his skepticism any more than he can help his inner-most feelings—"in his heart, he believed everything she had said, and it scared him" (520). When Mother Abigail declares, "So be it, My faith's in the Lord," Nick can only think: "I wish mine was" (518). Abigail is shielded by her faith; it gives her something to cling to, and though her God expects difficult things from her, she can find strength in her belief. Nick has no such relief. He can see how strong her faith is, and only wish that he had a belief that could carry him or give him encouragement.

Nick plays his part in the divine battle despite his status as a non-believer. Even though he dies in the explosion of Harold and Nadine's bomb, and remains a bastion of rationality (and helpful thoughts for the day-to-day running of the committee), Nick's spiritual role happens after his death, when he serves as a ghostly guide to Tom in the days after the destruction of Las Vegas. Nick comes to Tom in dreams, and tells him how to care for the ailing Stu, and is largely responsible for saving Stu's life. Despite his reluctance, Nick manages to serve Mother Abigail's God with his death, a blow that

cripples the first Free Zone Committee and leaves Boulder open for new government.

Still, the loss of Nick weighs most heavily on the heroes who head West, and it is his loss more than anything else that lets them accept Mother Abigail's edict that they head out at all. Though he never believed in her God, apparently Mother Abigail was right when she said that God believed in him, for he certainly plays his part in the dramatic struggle.

Human Nature

King espouses many theories about human nature throughout the novel, and the mouthpiece of these varying interpretations is an aged intellectual. Glen Bateman was an associate professor of sociology at a community college before the superflu, and his commentary about human nature is perhaps the most influential among the characters who form the new government in Boulder. When Stu Redman first encounters Glen after the superflu, the old man is standing in the road in New Hampshire, painting a rather poor rendition of the roadside foliage. Of the main characters in the novel, Glen seems to have the least trouble accepting the new world; "he had accepted the flu with equanimity, he said, because at last he would be able to retire and paint full-time, as he had always wanted to do" (340). Glen doesn't lose anyone in the superflu; his wife has been dead for a decade when the virus arrives. He had no real friends at the college—"They thought I was a lunatic," he tells Stu at their first meeting, "The strong possibility that they were right did nothing to improve our relations" (340). For all of his jokes, though, Glen is perhaps the sanest of Mother Abigail's stolid crew. He has considerable knowledge about human behavior, as a sociologist, and his ability to abstractly critique and predict

how people will act gives the survivors some much needed insight into the future they all face.

Glen is the first person to claim that the superflu has given Western Man the high colonic, “the purging,” that he requires at the end of every century, so that “he can face the new century clean and full of optimism” (341). He introduces King’s theme that the superflu, though manmade, has served humanity in a divine sense, offering the “clean slate” that seems necessary for a fresh start. Over beers with Stu, Glen also admits to “dancing on the grave of the world,” but he is careful to qualify his feelings with overtly historical references or sociological theories. When Stu asks him about the superflu, Glen candidly admits that he feels it has done America a favor. “I was prejudiced against the world,” he says, “The world in the last quarter century had, for me at least, all the charm of an eighty-year-old man dying of cancer of the colon. They say it’s a malaise which has struck all Western peoples as the century—any century—draws to close” (341). It is this detachment from the world that allows Glen to accept his fate calmly. He wasn’t too fond of the world anyway; in fact, Glen isn’t fond of much at all. That is not to say that he is a cynical, bitter man. Quite the contrary, Glen still sees the best potential in people—he just expects them to behave as his sociological training has taught him to predict.

King also uses Glen Bateman to comment on Modern Man’s interpretation of science. For instance, Glen Bateman is the new owner of the few dogs to survive the flu. He speculates that Kojak is the only survivor, but Stu assures him that if there is one dog alive, there must be others. Glen is quick to tell him that Stu is not being very scientific about his dog theory: “What kind of American are you? Show me a second dog—preferably a bitch—and I’ll accept your thesis that somewhere there is a third. But don’t

show me one and posit a second. It won't do" (342). King raises the question of intellectualism here—Glen is clearly an educated man, but he puts his knowledge to good use. He knows how Americans typically react to things, and he uses this knowledge to help create a new government and make the world a better place—he does not use his intellect to build weapons to fight against imagined foes. Even with the knowledge that Flagg is a real enemy, not some figment of the community's imagination or fears, Glen still chooses to use his mental prowess for the advancement of Boulder in practical ways instead of focusing on ways to defeat the enemy. He is a thoughtful teacher, a chatty philosopher, and his theories about humanity contribute a great deal to the new society that Mother Abigail's people build in Boulder. Though readers may at first be thrown off by Bateman's lecture hall tendencies, it does not take King long to make Glen one of the most endearing characters among the heroes. Of everyone who Stands, Glen is the only one who does not let emotions take over; he never loses control of himself. Whether this is a positive quality or not (Hemingway would certainly have approved), Glen's stoicism allows him to survive quite easily in the world after the superflu. True, many of the main characters are stoic in some sense, but Glen is the only one who does not have any chinks in his armor—Stu falters when it comes to Frannie, Larry wavers when it comes to his responsibilities, and Nick hovers on the edges between emotional explosions and calm acceptance. King's understanding of human nature as depicted in this novel is both intensely pessimistic and ultimately optimistic at the same time, a divided outlook reminiscent of the modern world, where many issues are seen in different ways at the same time. King describes the worst behavior of people as sociological facts, and yet he

extols the potential of all people to overcome such tendencies and rise to the best behavior.

Glen Bateman serves as King's mouthpiece on human nature. As he travels with Stu, Glen shares much of his sociological information about how societies form and what they might be able to expect from their fellow survivors. More importantly, though, Glen is the first character to mention the fact that America may be empty of people, but the country is still filled with stockpiles of weapons: "All of that stuff is lying around, waiting to be picked up" (345). As he imagines how communities may develop in the post-flu world, Glen gives Stu, along with readers—most of whom are still reeling from the staggering notion of so much death, their first glimpse of the future. People will rebuild society, but Glen speculates that such a new beginning may not be the peace and perfection that survivors are hoping for. There is likely to be a great deal of bloodshed and confusion before things "get going" again, and even when they do, Glen isn't so positive about making the new society a mirror of the old one. He points out, "They won't remember—or won't choose to remember—the corner we had painted ourselves into. The dirty rivers, the hole in the ozone layer, the atomic bomb, the atmospheric pollution. All they'll remember is that once upon a time they could keep warm at night without expending much effort to do it" (347). Glen's words serve as a harsh reminder of things to come, and foreshadow the novel's central question—do people ever learn anything? Glen gives a number of speeches throughout the novel, but none is so relevant to the plot than his explanation of what sociology says about the human race:

I'll give it to you in a nutshell. Show me a man or woman alone and I'll show you a saint. Give me two and they'll fall in love. Give me three and they'll invent the

charming thing we call “society.” Give me four and they’ll build a pyramid. Give me five and they’ll make one an outcast. Give me six and they’ll reinvent prejudice. Give me seven and in seven years they’ll reinvent warfare. Man may have been made in the image of God, but human society was made in the image of His opposite number, and is always trying to get back home. (387)

This example is almost exactly what happens to the survivors as they begin to form new groups. King uses sociology to explain the actions of the superflu’s survivors as they rebuild society.

Glen Bateman is also the first one to point out essential changes in the economy of the post-superflu world. He tells Stu, “Technological knowhow is going to replace gold as the most perfect medium of exchange” (345). This statement is played out in the novel, as Boulder struggles to get the power back on, and Flagg’s followers in Las Vegas are already doing training runs with the leftover jets. Glen raises one of King’s main themes in the novel—is technological superiority something to be proud of, or is the ultimate end of any technological pursuit going to end in destruction? The citizens of Boulder may focus on getting the power station up and running for now, but how far are they from setting up an army base of their own? If one judges by the end of the novel, then King seems to believe that humanity can only begin the same cycle over again. Life may be simplistic for a few years, maybe even an entire generation, but before long, humanity will pursue technology again to make life easier, or to increase safety, and the same weapons will appear as the destructive cycle inches back around towards another superflu or nuclear bomb.

In the end, Glen serves as powerful commentary on Flagg's faltering powers when he faces the Dark Man in Las Vegas, and on the nature of evil's power over men. Because he has willingly walked into the enemy's camp, Glen knows what fate awaits him, but he is not afraid. His casual dismissal of Flagg does more to undermine the villain than anything else in the novel. When Glen laughs at Flagg, he laughs because, as he says, "You're nothing! Oh pardon me...it's just that we were all so frightened...we made such a *business* out of you...I'm laughing as much at our own foolishness as at your regrettable lack of substance..." (1071). What is impressive about this last Stand of Glen Bateman is that he knows what Flagg is able to do: "Oh, kill me yourself if you're going to kill me," he says between bouts of hysterical laughter, "Surely you're capable. Touch me with your finger and stop my heart. Make the sign of the inverted cross and give me a massive brain embolism. Bring down the lightning from the light socket to cleave me" (1071). The fact that Flagg does not kill Glen himself, but repeatedly asks Lloyd to shoot him raises a question about Flagg's capabilities. Glen knows that Flagg has otherworldly powers, and yet the old man seems invulnerable to them. King suggests that Flagg, or any evil, requires belief in order to hold power, and Glen's belief in the Dark Man has receded to comical proportions. To Glen, Flagg is an ordinary man whom he, and everyone in Boulder, had made into a bogeyman in their minds. They had willingly given him power over them through their fear, but now that Glen has seen the Man, and realized that he is just a man, any control Flagg had is gone. This is intriguing commentary on evil in general, and the horror novel in particular—most of the villain's power comes from the acquiescence of his victims. They agree that he is a formidable force, and so he becomes one. Leave it to Glen, the sociologist, and student of human

nature, to recognize this flaw in Flagg's armor. Even with his realization, Glen's Stand doesn't end with his dismissal of Flagg and the evil he represents. Glen goes steps further and attacks Lloyd in the only way that he knows will work. When logic doesn't work, and Lloyd shoots him, Glen whispers, "It's all right, Mr. Henreid. You don't know any better," words that haunt Lloyd as he continues to serve his master (even as Flagg's empire begins to unravel) (1072). Of all of the heroes, Glen manages to give Flagg the worst wound—he raises doubts about Flagg's capabilities in the minds of readers, and more importantly for the flow of the novel, in the minds of his own followers.

The Sanctity of Innocence

King has a tendency to idolize innocence in his novels; *The Stand* is no exception, except that the innocence in this tale is not that of a pre-teen boy or girl, but in the form of a forty-something retarded man named Tom Cullen. When Nick first meets Tom Cullen, the initial result is a bit of a cosmic joke—Nick communicates by writing notes on a small pad; Tom can't read. Still, Nick is quick to attach himself to Tom, both for the sake of some human company as for the instant connection the two men share. Even though they can't really talk to one another, Nick sees something in Tom's innocence that draws them instantly together.

The introduction of Tom Cullen allows King to delve into one of his favorite issues—innocence—and address the potential for good such innocents possess. Tom Cullen experiences moments of clarity despite being feeble-minded. When Nick first stumbles onto him, Tom has been drinking whiskey, something his mother never allowed

him to do, and it takes a moment for cognition to creep back into his face: “he stood there, empty of face, like a robot whose plug has been pulled. Then, little by little, animation seeped back into his face” (400). Nick later realizes that Tom’s little moments of blankness are not a manifestation of his retardation, but rather moments of “nearly normal thinking” (402). When Tom feels close to comprehending an idea, he tunes into himself, and feels around “like a man in a darkened unfamiliar room who holds the plug-end of a lampcord in one hand and who goes crawling around on the floor, bumping into things and feeling with his free hand for the electrical socket” (403). Sometimes, Tom is able to find that connection, and he sees the idea wholly, and sometimes he continues to stumble around in the dark, but this ability to reach into himself to find the answer makes him a sounding board of sorts—Tom can’t have many ideas by himself, but he can reach into some sort of universal set of knowledge like a man rifling through a desk drawer. Tom’s character is not the commentary on human nature that Glen Bateman extols, but his ability to somehow tap into a universal unconscious shows that he too is an example of what human nature can accomplish when it is pushed to the limit. In order to survive at all, Tom needs these moments of insight, but overall, it is his innocent awareness of the world around him that makes him a key player in the fight between good and evil.

Tom Cullen is King’s symbol for innocence, and the way that characters react to him reveals their deepest tendencies; to be kind to Tom shows a good-hearted streak, and to make fun of him marks a tainted soul. It is immediately clear to Nick that Tom Cullen is going to slow him down and make his traveling harder. Unlike Larry Underwood, however, Nick almost welcomes the challenge that Tom poses, and he certainly appreciates the company, however little they can communicate with one another. Where

Larry viewed Rita's company as an albatross that the fates had dealt him, Nick willingly chooses to take Tom with him, and he accepts everything that encompasses. Clearly, Nick is a much better person than Larry at this point, but even with his good intentions, Nick's nerves are a bit frayed by the minor challenges that Tom brings as they occur. Even when taken on willingly, someone like Tom is a serious burden, especially in a world so drastically altered from what he knows. Unlike Larry, who abandoned Rita's body in a tent because he couldn't face the notion of burial, Nick watches Tom Cullen's eager face and realizes that "he just couldn't leave him. That was sure" (409). Nick is also quick to defend Tom when others threaten or mock Tom's retardation. King suggests that innocence ought to be protected, no matter what shape it comes in, and it is up to good people everywhere to step in and Stand when the situation calls for it.

Tom winds up playing an important role in the end of the novel, particularly in the survival of Stu, and it is his retardation that allows him to survive as he does. When the Free Zone Committee sends him as a spy into Flagg's territory, they hypnotize him so that he knows to return when the moon is full. This subconscious image is what protects Tom from detection by Flagg, as the Dark Man seeks the third spy, and is confounded by images of the moon. Were he a normal person, Tom would have been easily discovered by Flagg, and Stu would have been left alone by the roadside to die of exposure and (ordinary) flu. Tom's retardation also makes him more susceptible to prophetic dreams, long after the others have forgotten them, and he readily accepts Nick's nightly advice for how to care for the dying Stu. Tom plays a pivotal role in Stu's rescue, and symbolically serves as God's hands in the matter of Stu's survival. King often uses retarded adults or young children to exemplify innocence in his novels, and *The Stand* is no exception. Tom

Cullen is one of the more memorable characters in this large cast, and his endearing manner makes readers smile when he says, “M-O-O-N, that spells [insert word here].”

Tom is not the only innocent in the novel—the savage mute boy Joe (later known as Leo Rockway) also has the ability to see things more clearly than everyone else. He has abilities that border of precognition and telepathy, and yet his behavior is wild and untamed. He is soothed by music, and actually turns out to be quite a musical prodigy, but essentially he is an uncontrollable creature. When he senses that his Nadine-mom is succumbing to the Dark Man’s pull, he pulls away from her, clinging to Lucy instead. Of everyone in the novel, Joe manages to hold on to his psychic abilities long after others have forgotten they ever had prophetic dreams. King seems to suggest that such abilities may be more commonplace in the post-superflu world, but even so, only certain people will be able to hold on to them in the face of a rationality left over from the old world. Those who are innocent are somehow more susceptible to such metaphysical capabilities, and because of this, are to be valued by the newly forming society.

Intellect Gone Awry

Harold Lauder is the man that most readers have been trained to react to in one of two ways—either they will idolize him for his abilities and his knowledge, the epitome of the useful intellectual, or they will despise him for his inability to be socially acceptable. Throughout the novel, it is hard to feel a certain way about Harold—he is too variable. One moment he is essentially useful and helpful and insightful, and the next he is a spoiled brat complaining about his lot in life. This constant battle between his abilities

and his inabilities causes Harold to shift quite easily into the Dark Man's power. Tempted by power and women and respect, Harold is a prime candidate for corruption, and yet his intelligence forces him to realize that he does have a choice in things. When he contemplates reading Frannie's diary, he has a moment of revelation:

For just a moment it seemed possible to stop, to put the diary back where he had found it, to give her up, to let them go their own way before something terrible and irrevocable happened. For that moment it seemed he could put the bitter drink away, pour it out of the cup, and refill it with whatever there was for him in this world. Give it over, Harold, this sane voice begged, but maybe it was already too late. (572)

Harold acknowledges his responsibility in choosing to snoop into Frannie's private thoughts, but he tries to excuse himself from the blame, claiming that somehow it was already too late. At this point, though, it is far from too late. Harold has many, many chances for redemption, but he casts each one aside with increasingly convoluted logic. He uses his considerable intellect to logically damn himself. In fact, the very night that he steals and reads Frannie's diary, Harold has a prophetic dream: "He dreamed he was dying halfway down a steep grade of tumbled rocks and moonscape boulders. High above, riding the night thermals, were cruising buzzards, waiting for him to make them a meal" (573). This is exactly the way that Harold dies, and the fact that he is given a glimpse of it here suggests that he has taken the first few halting steps towards that end, but there is still a chance for him to choose another way. Harold remains torn between his potential in the post-superflu world and his memories of the injustice he suffered in the old world. His ambivalent nature is clear despite his usefulness to his fellow travelers: it

was “as if they had a fifth-rate god traveling with them—more or less omniscient, but emotionally unstable and likely to fragment at any time” (525). Harold is unable to embrace his future because he cannot let go of his past, and this conflict makes him very contradictory. Harold’s instability is a key element in his vulnerability to evil.

Harold has the potential for good in him, despite his many flaws. In an ironic twist, King has the originally flawed Larry explain that potential to Frannie when he tells her how he followed Harold’s signs across the country; he describes how he had reached the point where he started wondering what Harold would do in a situation in order to help him get through it. Harold became a rallying cry in Larry’s mind, a capable guy who had answers and plans. This is a glimpse of the person Harold could become, if only he could let go of the anger and resentment inside of him. The post-superflu world is a brand new one for him—all of the people who treated him poorly are dead, and he is surrounded by people willing to see the potential in him—and yet Harold still chooses to serve Flagg because he cannot get rid of the hatred inside of him. He cannot forget the past and move on, even though he actually sees what his new life could be like. When he spends time in the Free Zone and others begin calling him Hawk, Harold realizes that this is his new life calling to him, and yet he still chooses to reject the possibility.

King illustrates how evil seduces its followers. When the notion of possibly belonging to Boulder as a useful citizen does threaten to change Harold’s path, Flagg responds in the best way he can. How should one reorient a wavering servant? Send him a woman to serve his physical needs. That is exactly what Flagg does to secure Harold’s loyalty; when Nadine Cross shows up on his doorstep, claiming that they could do anything except that one tiny thing of altering her physical virginity, Harold is lost. He

still justifies his behavior to himself as he has throughout the novel, but readers become hardened against him. As if the introduction of Nadine into his life as His Woman obliterates any possibility of redemption for him, Harold begins to first abuse and then neglect Nadine, so much so that even readers unsympathetic to her will begin to feel some pity.

Harold's own theories of redemption and personal responsibility are King's way of mocking those who willingly choose to follow evil. It is slightly ironic that Harold's final confession: "I do this of my own free will" is only "heard" by the deaf Nick Andros as he pulls the shoebox from the closet seconds before it explodes. This is fitting, though, since Harold's statement is a false one, a justification that should not be heard because it is not worthy—Harold may think he is exercising free will at the last moment, but any freedom he had is long gone by this point. Now, he is only an agent of Flagg, someone convenient to do some necessary dirty work on site. And once Harold's duty is done, Flagg is quick to discard him with a motorcycle accident. Readers may be tempted to pity Harold as he lies dying in the ditch, as King's prose is quite touching, but it is too easy to remember everything that Harold has done, and in the end, his death is justified to readers, a symbol of intellectual corruption. Harold is doubly damned because he was intelligent enough to know better, and yet he willingly chose to serve evil.

The Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Nadine Cross seems at first like the virgin sacrifice to the dark god, but this image is really a careful construction of her own design, not King's. The former schoolteacher

makes choice after choice that propels her down the path to her own undoing, and it is hard for readers to really sympathize with her. For a woman who claims that “to take life when so much had been lost was the one unpardonable sin,” Nadine slides quite easily into the darkness (444). Even when she still has a possible bright future, Nadine fears that all of her words about “the sanctity of life would someday not too distant rise up to mock her” (452). Nadine is the epitome of the self-fulfilling prophecy. For all that she talks and thinks about doing the right things, an intellectual mind at work, her actions rarely mirror such pure intentions, and every little thing she does sends her even further down the path of damnation. Her rebellion against what she has decided is her “fate” is more of a show, an act she performs to fool herself, than any true desire to reject evil.

Nadine is King’s example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Despite all of her opportunities to choose the side of good, Nadine allows herself to give in to evil because she believes that it is inevitable. She begins with an act of kindness in taking in the boy Joe, and his innocent savagery does protect her for a time, but she quickly becomes unworthy of his affection. Just as she allows herself to entertain ideas of her demon lover, Joe begins to slip away from her into the care of a more “worthy” mother in Lucy. Nadine chooses to ignore this divine judgment, even though she knows that Joe is connected to the metaphysical world in ways she can only glimpse; Joe’s dismissal of her is a clear indication that she is falling from the right path, and yet Nadine does not waver in her direction. Nadine is also warned quite plainly by Mother Abigail in her dreams, when the old woman looks at her with pity, saying, “Your trip will be longer than ours, if’n you don’t fight off his power [...] You’ll go straight to hell if you don’t watch close, daughter of Eve. And when you get there, you are gonna find that hell is cold” (471).

Nadine tries to ignore what is happening to her instead of fighting, though, putting “her faith in radios, not visions” (631). Nadine tries to think her way through things, as she has done her entire life, but her refuge in rationality is foolish when the world around her has become infused with the metaphysical. Still, Nadine refuses to give up her need to think things over logically, and do what feels right. When logic doesn’t work, and she accepts that her fate is to be the Dark Man’s woman instead of going completely mad with the dreams he sends her and the fear that he uses to keep her under his control, Nadine can still be saved by others—namely Mother Abigail and Larry, both of whom miss their chances to rescue her. Still, readers must wonder if Nadine deserves salvation if she can only rely on others to save her. Nadine only makes one last ditch effort to save herself when she throws herself at Larry, but by then it is too late, and any rescue that Larry might have been is lost to her.

For all of her intellectual debating, Nadine refuses to acknowledge any sort of personal responsibility for her plight. She blames Joe for leaving her, and Larry for abandoning her, but the truth is that everything that happens is her own doing. Yet, Nadine refuses to see this, claiming, “So, you see, none of this is my fault. *None of it!*” (836). Even when she plants the bomb in the closet, Nadine refuses to take responsibility for her actions. She does what she has to in order to hold on to her sanity, she justifies, and this is an ironic excuse, since she loses her mind as soon as she goes to Flagg. Nadine Cross is not exactly like the scientists who created the superflu, but she certainly stands as an example of the dangers such a devotion to rationality can lead to. If Nadine had considered her feelings, and her inner sense of rightness, she may have been redeemed,

but her dogged determination in clinging to logic is what dooms her entirely. Thus is the fate of the intellectual in America, and especially in King's work.

For Every Villain a Right Hand Man

Lloyd is the quintessential “bad” guy—he is the Walkin’ Dude’s right hand man, a murdering criminal without much of a conscience, but even with such stereotypical characteristics, Lloyd is still very much a creature worth studying. When readers first encounter Lloyd, he is participating in an interstate crime spree where he imagines himself as an old time criminal, using phrases like “you dirty rat” and “ya lousy copper” (117). However, Lloyd and his erstwhile companion Poke are hardly big time criminals worthy of the black and white screen. They are small time crooks from the start, but the moment they turn on Gorgeous George, the man who set them up with a pseudo-robbery, readers realize that King is introducing more than just a few flat characters to kill time. Lloyd and Poke’s actions set-up a running theme in the novel, one that readers will recognize as lines between good and evil are clearly marked.

Evil, King suggests here, will always turn on itself. This idea, one that Tolkien would certainly have agreed with, is shown again and again in *The Stand*, each time increasing in intensity and importance. The betrayal of Gorgeous George is hardly an event worth crying over—he wasn’t a wonderful guy himself, and readers aren’t too sad to see him go. But when readers watch as Poke, and Lloyd, though he’s mostly along for the ride, tear through a store full of people, sympathies shift sides. Lloyd is no longer a pathetic wannabe criminal; he is a murderer and the fact that he blames Poe for the entire

episode, refusing to ever take responsibility for his actions, makes him even more solidly a villain. Despite the evidence of Lloyd's damnation, however, readers can't help but be moved by his plight when he nearly starves to death in prison. Lloyd isn't a nice guy by any means, but when King describes his struggle, readers are tempted to pity him; after all, no one, no matter how bad his crimes, should be forced to eat the man in the cell next door to stay alive. Lloyd recognizes that he should have been locked up for his crimes, but once the guards die from the superflu, and he slowly begins to starve to death, he stays alive by feeding on his hatred; he is tortured by the knowledge that "they had left him here to die when they could have let him out" (361). The idea that he has been purposefully abandoned torments Lloyd, just as he is haunted by images of the pet rabbit he had forgotten as a child (and the rabbit's corpse after it starved to death). He bemoans his fate, lamenting that just because someone has THE KEY, he does not possess the right to abandon Lloyd and make him choose to eat another prisoner's decaying body to stay alive. Lloyd's outrage and indignation allow him to keep trying to stay alive, if only to spite those who have left him for dead. Even in such dire circumstances, though, Lloyd continues to blame others for his entire plight. When Randall Flagg shows up and offers him release, Lloyd's first words completely avoid responsibility, "it's not fair, if it wasn't for Poke I never would have got into anything but small shit" (364). When Flagg forces him to actually look at his face, Lloyd's terror causes him to scream, "Poke should be here, not me!" (364). Despite his tendency to avoid responsibility, Lloyd recognizes Flagg for what he is, "mister, if you're real, you're the devil" (365). He has a moment where he can choose not to serve him. True, his alternative is to starve to death, and given those choices, most people would choose to survive, but Lloyd's mind is not clouded on

exactly what he is doing. He knows that serving Flagg means damnation, and he chooses to live and to serve.

King couches Lloyd's decision to serve Flagg in religious terms. Lloyd justifies his choice, and even feels special in a way; he feels a "kind of religious ecstasy, a pleasure, the pleasure of being *chosen*" (366). This is a complete mockery of a proper religious moment, something that Flagg makes quite clear when he tells Lloyd that he will make the prisoner his right-hand man, and that he is "going to put you right up there with Saint Peter" (366). Lloyd is a far cry from a saint, and he is the polar opposite of a disciple, yet in a strange way, his devotion to Flagg is just as viable as any of Jesus' followers. The difference lies in the reason for the loyalty, perhaps, because Lloyd follows Flagg out of desperation and fear while the disciples followed Jesus out of love and admiration. The religious imagery continues as the two leave the prison—when Lloyd stumbles from weakness and delirium, Flagg helps him walk, bears him up as a leader ought—and Flagg is rewarded by a look that contains "something like love" (368). To someone like Lloyd, Flagg would be deserving of worship and love. The Walkin' Dude has offered freedom, food, and a position of considerable power all in one fell swoop—much more than anyone else had ever offered Lloyd, and at no real cost to Lloyd either. In fact, Flagg wants Lloyd to continue to serve as he has served his whole life. Flagg wants Lloyd to assume the position he has always assumed—a subservient place of no responsibility or decision making.

Lloyd Henreid is King's illustration of mankind's willful evil. Flagg is evil incarnate, but he lies beyond humanity; Lloyd is a man, and though he may be damned by his position as Flagg's right-hand servant, he is doomed long before the novel ends in a

fiery blaze. Lloyd's major failing is in his inability to make any choices for himself, and in the post-superflu world, such lax behavior will be met with consequences—divine punishment, in fact. Lloyd is King's example of how not to live, not only because he is a prisoner, but because he is a man who cannot choose anything, and it would never even occur to him to Stand in any capacity; in King's mind, Lloyd is a terrible waste of a human being. He has the potential to *do* things, good or bad, and instead, he decides not to do anything of his own accord, but lives to serve the whims of others.

Lloyd suffers from the same need for approval that haunts Larry Underwood. When he arrives in prison, Lloyd equates the comments of his fellow prisoners as accolades because he has become a real "heavy hitter"; in fact, Lloyd imagines that his walk into his cell is similar to the way Tom Cruise (pre-Oprah couch jumping incident) must feel when he enters a world premier of his newest movie (186). Lloyd cannot distinguish between the praise heaped on an actor for a job well done, and the admiration of other villains—to him, either form of praise is acceptable, and he develops a small swagger as he feels himself a big man around the prison. Even with his small burst of pride, though, Lloyd is a character quickly cowed by those around him. Even his defense attorney manages to make Lloyd shut up and listen with a small order. Lloyd functions best as a right-hand man, and is particularly good at following orders. He is loyal, almost to a fault, but he always chooses a perfectly villainous man to follow. Lloyd is what Larry Underwood could have been if Larry had chosen not to make any choices. His easy acquiescence is what makes Lloyd excel as an underling. Lloyd is uncomfortable making decisions and taking responsibility for himself, but he can execute orders with brutal efficiency. Ironically, when Lloyd is first in jail and faced with the hard truth of his

execution, he is furious—raging against any kind of quick trial and judgment—and yet it is exactly that kind of system that he embraces in Las Vegas under Flagg’s rule. Lloyd is unable to even grasp the connection between his former situation as Arizona condemned prisoner and any of those he condemns to crucifixion according to Flagg’s brand of justice.

What is curious about Lloyd, however, is the fact of his likability. Even as he serves as the right-hand of the devil, Lloyd is a hard character to condemn entirely. He is not evil in himself, but he does serve great evil. Though that may seem enough to write him off as a lost cause, Lloyd’s sad devotion to his master, even when things begin to unravel quite obviously, makes him a character worth some admiration. He is the only “evil” character in the novel who does not turn on his master.

Evil Always Undoes Itself

Trashcan Man, King’s pyromaniac, is an odd character to judge in the novel. Though clearly psychotic, Trash has moments of curious clarity that make him frighteningly believable. When he is threatened by The Kid, readers actually worry for his safety, and King is careful to build Trash up as a weakling deserving of pity, not derision. He just can’t help himself, King seems to say, and yet, just as readers are warming up to a grudging understanding of Trash, King throws the entire thing off balance as Trash blows up one thing after another—regardless of who or what is nearby.

Trash serves as King’s commentary on the nature of evil. The man is mentally unstable, clearly, and Flagg’s choice to make him one of his special followers with free

reign of the military base turns out to be the Dark Man's undoing. When Trash does turn on Flagg's men, planting explosives on trucks and planes, he doesn't quite know the reason why. Certainly he imagines that the men had made fun of him in some way, but even this justification pales in comparison to the one thing he does understand—fire. By chaining him up as a pet weapon-finder, Flagg forgets the most important thing about having a pyromaniac for a servant—pyromaniacs need explosions, and after a while, it won't matter whose trucks are being blown up as long as there is a big bang and lots of flames. Trash sabotages the base's equipment out of boredom, a sign that evil turns on itself for arbitrary reasons, and sometimes without any planning at all. Trash doesn't set out to hurt his master, but when he realizes that he has done so—his little bomb party kills the only men who know how to fly the planes left in the base—he tries to atone by finding an even bigger weapon. The moment of his arrival in Las Vegas with the nuclear bomb as a gift for his master could not have been more poorly chosen, and the careful series of events in which Trash plays a key role makes readers wonder just how much influence good and evil have on people's actions.

Is Trash subject to God's orders, however subconsciously, or is he simply a loose cannon? Does he turn on Flagg as a result of God's intervention—the very embodiment of a eucatastrophe—or is it mere happenstance that he arrives when he does? Trash seems to be a wild card throughout the novel, so this would support the random event theory, but the careful way that King has crafted the events in the novel, and the metaphysical influence experienced by most of the characters, suggest that more than random chance is at work here. Perhaps the answer lies in Trash's free will, which would always revert back to a need for fiery explosions, and in Flagg's choice in making him one of his

followers. Flagg knows that Trash is unreliable and dangerous, but he assumes that those qualities will make him a great ally and supporter—it does not occur to Flagg that the unpredictability might turn around and harm him. This is the nature of Evil, as well, King suggests—it rarely assumes that people like Trash will turn on it, rather, it seeks to use Trash as a weapon against his enemies, not realizing that any kind of weapon can easily turn self-destructive.

In the Hands of a Demanding God

For a novel that is centered around a religious climax, King is not always so kind to the so-called “good guys” on the side of White. The God of the novel is demanding, according to his mouthpiece, and sacrifice is a requirement of survival. Even Mother Abigail admits that serving the Lord is sometimes not the easiest thing to do: “I have harbored hate of the Lord in my heart. Every man or woman who loves Him, they hate Him too, because He’s a hard God, a jealous God. He Is, what He Is, and in this world He’s apt to repay service with pain while those who do evil ride over the roads in Cadillac cars” (521). Such words reveal a curious view of the God to whom she has dedicated her life. Mother Abigail’s God is very Old Testament, filled with vengeance and fury and hardness, and the redeeming loving God of Christ and the New Testament is hardly seen in the novel. Characters are expected to first give up the world they know, then the people they knew, and then at the end, the world they have struggled to rebuild. When she sends the four heroes on their road toward Las Vegas, Mother Abigail (and her God) insists that the men go with nothing but the clothes on their backs, a spiritual

journey that requires a shedding of material goods and cares as a way of preparing for enlightenment.

Mother Abigail has several stereotypical qualities of a religious leader. She sees herself as touched by God, and she is firm in her belief that God has plans for all of them. Her stalwart faith sometimes throws off the less faithful members of her following, and her constant commentary about her God makes almost everyone uncomfortable. After all, the characters are modern Americans. They may have some sense of faith, but to believe in God as an active force in their lives is a step beyond what they have been raised to comprehend. Only Mother Abigail, 108 years old, and raised through and through on a Christian grounding can have the sheer belief. Her followers are tormented by a modern sensibility, a doubt that such a metaphysical reality is even possible, despite the evidence of the prophetic dreams that everyone shares. In this sense, Mother Abigail is a throwback to the deep-seated faithfulness that characterized the earlier part of the twentieth century, but seems to have been lost in more recent times. Sure, some Americans are believers, but those with the faith of Mother Abigail are often regarded as fanatics, and their warnings often go unheeded. Mother Abigail only wields the power that she has because America has undergone such a devastating change. Once things in Boulder get back on track, people forget about her as anything more than a figurehead or a spiritual symbol for their new life.

Mother Abigail definitely parallels Christ in her journey—she consciously puts herself in the position of savior, and punishes herself for the sin of pride with her own walk into the wilderness. She gains some clarity from this episode, realizing that God wants her to send her heroes out to face Flagg, but the result of exposure on her body

takes its toll, and she dies. Mother Abigail is so caught up in the spiritual world that she often loses sight of the ordinary one. Mother Abigail serves a dual role in the novel. She serves as the spiritual symbol for the White, and yet she is at heart an old black woman from Nebraska. She has all of the quirks and foibles of an old woman who has been living according to her own rules for some time, and King is not above making his symbol for the good side a bit foolish in her set ways, much as any old person may be viewed as foolish by a younger generation. Mother Abigail has her reasons for acting as she does, but King is careful to make her a realistic old woman for all of her theological importance. Abby Freemantle is still a fragile woman with arthritis and sore hips. She is as real as any readers' grandmother, and her stubbornness makes a character who could be inflated to gigantic proportions as a symbol into a sometimes cranky old woman. King manages to blend the spiritual and the physical in Mother Abigail—she is both a symbol of the coming battle between good and evil, and she is also just another old person trying to come to terms with the eager youngsters who surround her.

American Evil

Readers do not get their first glimpse of *The Stand's* devil until nearly 200 pages into the novel, but they certainly see enough ordinary evil before then. By the time Randall Flagg is introduced, readers are ready to accept that Flagg knows America—his kind of evil resonates in the landscape of a country that has long been home to dastardly deeds. King's physical description of Flagg is curious. Flagg looks like a country western star—from his denim jacket to his cowboy boots, readers may be tempted to

dismiss him as a fashion victim. However, it is the “dark hilarity” of his face that sets him apart from any kind of cheap joke. This “hatefully happy man” is not to be taken lightly, King suggests, even with his Boy Scout backpack and his cutesy little buttons (a yellow smiley face and a pig wearing a policeman’s cap). In fact, King states, Flagg’s was “a face guaranteed to make barroom arguments over batting averages turn bloody” (181). Like an evil creature, Flagg travels the roads at night and sleeps by day, and his passage disturbs those he passes; even the evil-hearted are made uncomfortable when he is near, as “even the maddest of them could only gaze upon his dark and grinning face at an oblique angle” (182). Flagg is introduced as an instigator, a man who easily turns small unrests into civil wars, and he sometimes thinks that he may have been born during the unrest of the civil rights movement—but then he also recalls days of school with Charles Starkweather and reading pamphlets with Lee Harvey Oswald. It seems that though Flagg has no real memory of how he moves through space and time, he has vivid recollections of the darkest moments in American history, and King very clearly places him at the scene of nearly every crime. If the American psyche did have a devil, then Randall Flagg is that force personified, but even with all of his dark history, Flagg is still very much at the mercy of forces beyond even his control. He appears in the novel because he feels his time is at hand, but he is not privy to any knowledge beyond that. This doesn’t seem a very big detriment to him, however, since Flagg is a mostly instinctual creature, but his lack of true comprehension is the quality that makes him equally human and terrible.

Flagg’s lack of intellect relegates him to a creature of passion, and he is often ruled by his emotions, such as they are. Flagg suffers from his outbursts of anger; often, he will lash out in anger without thinking things through, and his extreme behavior

somehow undoes a little more of his plans. When he allows Nadine to goad him into killing her, Flagg manages to destroy his hope of an heir along with his woman, and the loss of that security undermines his authority among his own people. He cannot control himself, and as such, manages to undermine his own cause as much as the forces gathering against him. King suggests that evil does enough to destroy itself on its own. Even so, Flagg manages to survive the destruction of Las Vegas, and his evil is certain to return again. This cycle of evil's rise and fall is crucial to the world of King's novel.

Evil is a given in King's creation. It will always exist, whether it is in the form of Flagg or in other people whose agendas involve death or subjugation; it is not something that people will ever really destroy. The knowledge that evil has only been beaten back for a short time makes the people in King's world value the peace they have earned even more because it is temporary. Flagg may have been undone for now, but he will return, and King can only hope that worthy heroes will stand against him in the future as they have in the past.

Chapter Four: The Big Picture

The Stand has several main themes trailing through its thousand-plus pages. The first of these is the issue of the dreams shared by the survivors, and what these prophetic visions mean to the world after the superflu. King questions notions of free will and predetermination, settling for a curiously Old English view of human choices, and then considers what is worth standing up for, and the sacrifices that epic battles sometimes demand. King also raises questions about government, and who has the right to rule over others, and then ends the novel with an unexpected hope, despite the despairing knowledge that evil will return.

Thematically, *The Stand* resonates with literary tradition. Issues of a metaphysical reality are old questions in literature, as well as considerations of fate and free will. King is drawing on the vast tradition behind him in these areas, but he also manages to add his own twists to each of these old concerns. Where traditional literature considers the human condition, King considers the potential greatness in ordinary humans.

Good vs. Evil: Dream a Little Dream

Most of the events in the second half of *The Stand* are sparked by the occurrence of prophetic dreams. Charles Fisher said, “Dreaming permits each and every one of us to be quietly and safely insane every night of our lives” (Winter 4). It is during the dreaming

episodes that King's main characters are able to accept the notion that they are playing a part in a metaphysical drama—the unreality of dreams allows them to accept the inherent insanity, as in the opposite of the sane rationalism they are accustomed to in the pre-flu world, of a world not only imbued with spirituality, but practically drowning in it. Dreams are also an easy way to see into the true natures of the main characters; there is no need to lie or dissemble in dreams, so the divvying up of survivors into separate camps is quite a simple process. Those who are drawn to Mother Abigail's quaint Nebraska home have little doubt that the "other fella" in Las Vegas plans general harm to anyone who disagrees with his plan. Even so, King does not allow his lines to be drawn so easily. For instance, Detective Second Dorgan decides to stand with Flagg because he had seen the worst of what the pre-superflu society had been capable of, and he feels that the only way to save humanity is with strict rules and regulations. He tells Glen, "I saw what happens when guys like you are in charge, you see," to which Glen snappily replies, "Young man, your experiences with a few battered babies and drug abusers does not justify your embrace of a monster" (1067). Dorgan does make an interesting point, though—he appreciates order, and even Glen has to admit that in Las Vegas, the trains are running on time. Still, Glen observes that Dorgan will not last long in Flagg's new world, after all, he tells him, "There doesn't seem to be quite enough Nazi in you" (1067). When the end eventually comes, it turns out that Glen's prediction is somewhat correct—even among Flagg's followers, there are those who will balk at certain actions—consider Angie Hirschfield who cringes at the sight of the stage they erect for the public execution of Larry and Ralph because she has a "secret fear in her heart, feeling that something bad, something perhaps as evil as the superflu itself, was in the

making” (1073). In small details like this, King manages to rekindle hope in readers’ hearts about the future of the human race.

The plot device of the dreams may seem at first a flimsy way to draw battle lines between good and evil, but King manages to imbue these omens with symbols rich in American resonance. The good dreams involve Mother Abigail in her 108 year old reassuring glory, her sagging porch, her worn rocker, and her familiar guitar chords and hymnals—all signs associated with Middle American Christianity. Music plays an integral part in Mother Abigail’s appeal. The songs she sings remind Stu of his childhood, “of full immersion and picnic lunches” (111). It is Abigail’s musical talent that she is most proud of, especially the moment when she played in 1902 on a stage that had only been home to white people. Though some of her memories are failing her now, Abigail’s recollection of that experience is still quite clear, and the dark man tries to use this memory to trap her. Just as everyone else in the novel dreams of her or Flagg, Abigail herself dreams of the dark man; he twists her memories of that triumphant moment, and tries to sway her with doubts and haunted promises of failure. Still, Abigail’s faith in God is strong, and she clings to that belief in order to hold steady her course—even though at times even she does not know where the path may lead her.

King uses common literary and religious symbols to describe Mother Abigail’s experience; she is surrounded by more symbols than she herself gives to her followers. She is attacked by weasels in the corn, animals known for viciousness and rabies—his animals, as she comes to think of it, and she is hounded by the crow-shape that Flagg sometimes uses when watching his enemies. Crows and weasels have long been symbols in the American mindset for trouble especially among farmers in the Midwest, and it is

this Middle America mind set that King manages to recapture as he develops Abigail's understanding of Christianity. For the survivors who flock to her side, Abigail's faith is sometimes a thing of simplicity that mirrors their own beliefs, but more often, it is a symbol for the hope that the members of Boulder desperately need. If the survivors cannot truly put their faith in God, they can put their faith into the person of Mother Abigail—a woman whom they dreamed about who turned out to be real—and this empirical evidence makes them more likely to believe in what she says, even if they try to ignore the bigger picture of why she says anything. In other words, the survivors succumb to a sort of idol worship instead of more traditional Christianity, and Mother Abigail decides to take a spiritual journey of her own to make up for her imagined sin in accepting the people's adoration; she has committed the sin of pride, and for that, she must redeem both herself and her followers—a rather Christ-like idea. So in trying to atone for her sins, Abigail actually manages to place herself even more into her role as savior; the people worship her even more after she returns, but by this point, she has become an icon to them, an idea, and not a real person at all, and certainly not a representative of any God. Still, Abigail's duty is to call the good-hearted to her, and this she does, in dreams, with the aid of very familiar American symbols of life and faith—corn, guitar music, and hymnals.

Evil symbols are fairly universal as well—King uses the image of a creature in the corn, “two burning red eyes far back in the shadows” to signify the Dark Man and his influence on the survivors. Even before the superflu has gotten well underway, Nick Andros dreams of “endless rows of green corn” as he is “looking for something and terribly afraid of something else that seemed to be behind him” (148). Corn has long been

a symbol of the American Midwest, and many horror movies have played on the fear of getting lost in endless rows. But if the corn is vast enough to get lost in, it is also a place to hide away from things, and King uses both sides of the double-edged symbol in the dreams. As Nick searches for something he cannot name, he uses the corn to hide himself from the Walkin' Dude, as yet an unnamed force when he first begins to dream.

The demarcation between good and evil is quickly established in the dreams as well. On one side, there is “the cornfield, the smell of warm growing things, the feel that something—or someone—very good and safe was close”; this feeling quickly fades as the dreamers realize that someone very dark is in the corn watching them—as Nick puts it “Ma, weasel’s got in the henhouse!” (202). People are quickly drawn to one side or the other, though the method of choice for Flagg’s dreams seems to be terror rather than Christian overtones. He tends to arrive with a fanfare of fear and offers the dreamers what he imagines they want; sometimes this is effective, as his followers are cowed into servitude, and sometimes this backfires, as when he offers the wrong thing to a person, and practically propels that person into the other camp. Once the dreams have arrived however, and survivors have accepted them as a form of truth—something that does not happen so easily—people are quick to avoid them altogether, and sleeping drugs to prevent dreams become commonplace as they head to their respective cities.

The fact that the survivors in *The Stand* move west is more than an arbitrary choice of direction. Douglas Winter explains that “these stories enact the recurrent American nightmare—the terror-trip experienced by Edgar Allan Poe’s Arthur Gordon Pym, Herman Melville’s Ishmael, and a host of fellow journeyers: the search for a utopia of meaning while glancing backward in idyllic reverie to lost innocence” (2). The eastern

United States is traditionally the side of the country associated with the founding, development, and government of America. Pilgrims settled in New England, Washington DC is the seat of the capital, and the first colonies were all along the Eastern seaboard. The West has long been a source of romance and mysticism for Americans, from stories of the Wild West to notions of Manifest destiny, the untouchable, uncontrollable unknown is in the West, and it is fitting that King sets his epic battle between mountains and deserts in what was once the last Frontier of the modern imagination. Still, while the places have resonance for American readers, the cross-section of society that King chooses to represent good in his fight may seem odd to some readers. Why these people? The question is one that both readers and characters are constantly asking.

The only thing medical science can discern about Stu to explain his resistance to infection is the fact that he dreams a lot more than the average person (114). King is ambiguous as to why certain people are immune to the flu, beyond simply needing to have his main characters survive the apocalypse in order to Stand against the coming evil, but certainly there is a metaphysical aspect to their survival. Though ordinary people, they all experience a spiritual awakening of sorts through the dreams. However, the dreams only serve as a beacon to call both sides to order; once the people have reached their respective camps, the dreams cease and most people are quick to forget they ever happened. It seems as though the survivors were both chosen specifically according to a plan, and yet at the same time, it seems like survival is arbitrary; King keeps readers guessing if there is a rhyme and reason to events, or if it just a random series of happenstance.

The Problem of Choice: Predestination or Poor Judgment?

King begins the novel with predestination in mind—the immunity to the superflu is an individual quality of the survivor and has nothing to do with personality—but once the stage is cleared for the coming battle, it seems that free will begins to take precedence. Characters are given many chances to choose their paths. Yet, the pendulum swings back the other way at the end of the novel, when the four heroes are sent out to Stand by Mother Abigail—here they have no choice, but it's as if all of their previous choices have led them to this point of requirement.

King's philosophy mimics the Germanic code of courage under fire exhibited in *Beowulf*. Certain events are fixed, as *wyrd* or fate would have them, and no choices can turn them aside. This type of event would include Stu, Larry, Ralph, and Glen heading off to Las Vegas to face Flagg's minions, or the main characters arriving in Mother Abigail's camp. Other events seem up for debate, as the individual actions of those involved determine the outcome. As Glen posits about the dreams, "We're being given the means to help shape our own futures, perhaps. A kind of fourth-dimensional free will: the chance to choose in advance of events" (549). For instance, if Nadine had chosen to be with Larry when she had the chance (and she knew the moment when it would have mattered), her life could have been spared, and Flagg's plans would have proceeded anyway—her death only enhances the downward spiral that Flagg faces in Las Vegas, but she is not pivotal in any way. She could have easily gone down a different path without drastically altering the outcome of the story.

King suggests that certain events are part of the design, whether it be a plan of Mother Abigail's God, or some other divine providence, while others have multiple

possibilities determined by individual choice. Even the mad Trashcan Man has a chance to reject evil and refuse to join Flagg; when Lloyd offers him the pendant that marks all of Flagg's followers, Trash consciously realizes that "This is my last chance. My last chance to be Donald Merwin Elbert" and then chooses to Stand with Flagg because, as he says, "In for a penny, in for a pound" (622-623). Even someone as damned as Trash has the chance to choose his fate, and he does so willingly and knowingly. This curious interpretation of free will raises essential questions about the characters' control, though; for instance, if certain events are pre-planned, then it stands to reason that others are guided. Can characters be sure that they do have free will at all, or are they simply given the illusion of free will while really behaving according to some mapped out path?

Characters in the story never really work out the answer to this question, but more importantly, most of them decide that it doesn't matter in the end. Larry feels this most keenly; as the character who struggled the most with his fate, Larry decides at the end that he has chosen to be where he is, and that choice is his alone. Nick too becomes a semi-believer, but only in death when he serves as a spiritual guide for his friend Tom Cullen; his transformation is because he has died and presumably knows the answer to his questions about God. Larry is still alive, and his acceptance of his fate illustrates a combination of faith and free will—two themes that King sets up in opposition, but wind up complementing each other.

The Stand: It's the Thought That Counts

King is known for his penchant for killing his main characters just as they Stand up to some form of evil. Typically, evil is only temporarily beaten in King's world, even with great sacrifice. As Collings explains, "since evil is frequently external to characters, coming in its own time and through its own will, it cannot be destroyed; the best King's characters can hope for is a temporary victory in a single, isolated skirmish" (67). This Manichean view of evil gives the force a mind and a will, along with a serious agenda. Evil is not just a turning away from good, but a vital source in and of itself, and though King's characters may stave off the darkness by Standing true, in whatever fashion they can muster, there is always the nagging knowledge that such a Stand is only effective for the time being, and that eventually evil will swing back around to threaten them again. Therefore, readers expecting a complete resolution and a hopeful future may be disappointed.

Love is a key element in *The Stand*, and not only because some of the characters pair up. Perhaps Jane Baker puts it best in her death raving, "love is what moves the world, I've always thought...it is the only thing which allows men and women to stand in a world where gravity always seems to want to pull them down...bring them low...and make them crawl...we were...so much in love" (209). Jane is not the only one who thinks this way. Many other characters reflect that the only real reason to stand against evil at all is because of love, or to protect that which is beloved.

The notion of standing up, or The Stand, has a number of components, but one of the easiest to spot is that of necessity. Many of King's heroes are heroes because when the time came, they happened to be in the right place (or the wrong place, depending on

how the Stand went down). Nick realizes this when he stares down at Jane Baker's corpse and contemplates her burial: "it wasn't his responsibility, but since there was no one else here—maybe no one else well for miles around—he would have to shoulder it" (209). The novel is filled with people who do their duty because they are the only ones left to do it.

For King, the individual journey towards the moment of the Stand is the defining quality of the good person. The hero, for the one who stands is always heroic for that moment, must understand the reason for his Stand and accept the consequences knowing that he may not even make a difference in the end. Larry and Ralph find themselves in this situation when they face Flagg in Las Vegas. The novel's ending may leave some readers wondering about the purpose of the Stand. Why send Larry, Ralph, and Glen off to die? Their deaths aren't significant in and of themselves—they do not fight the evil hand to hand and prove that good is stronger. Yet, their journey is the important thing. As the four travel towards Las Vegas, they become aware of a change within themselves. Glen analyzes the difference, explaining that they are "emptying out the vessel" (1045). What Glen refers to here is an ancient custom of mankind, from manhood rites, to Biblical journeys—the foursome are embarking on their own journey into the desert, and the fact that they go without any supplies, choosing to walk instead of drive, shows their dedication to the purification ritual. They are aware of the effect this journey has on them in different ways. Stu asks if they are changing, and Ralph, ever pragmatic, replies, "We've dropped some weight," a line filled with symbolic overtones that are lost on him (1047). Clearly, they've dropped physical weight, a sign of increased health and vitality, but they have also dropped their physical possessions, and their need for worldly things.

They have also dropped their disbelief in things beyond their experience. Even though they may not believe in Mother Abigail's God, they certainly believe in her enough to undertake the journey, and as they get closer to the Dark Man's territory, each man has his own insights into the purpose of his journey.

Divine interference becomes more and more obvious as the novel continues, though some characters are reluctant to see events as such. When Stu falls in the gulley and can no longer travel, the others are certain (along with readers) that he will die there, another victim of something like chance, but this catastrophe actually turns out to be the accident that spares his life—a eucatastrophe that is only completed by the arrival of Tom Cullen just in time to care for Stu as he battles sickness and injury. The others are not so keen to see this a divine intervention—as Larry says, “It wasn't God's will that Stu fell down here; it wasn't even the dark man's doing. It was just loose dirt, that's all” (1053). Larry hasn't yet reached his moment of illumination, but for the others, Stu's fall is a sign in a series of signs, and it means they must leave their friend behind. Though they think they are walking to their deaths, the idea of abandoning Stu bothers them, but they do not falter for long—each secretly hoping that this apparent tragedy may somehow work itself out. King suggests that sometimes things may seem like the end of the world, but they are not always so, and certainly they can't be understood by bystanders. Yet, Stu's survival is divinely guided, as Tom is told which medicines to give Stu by the spirit of Nick. Obviously, the ambiguity about the existence of God throughout the novel is clarified in this series of events. It seems that once God shows His hand in Las Vegas, He can't keep from tying up loose ends, one of which turns out to be saving the life of Stu Redman and sending him safely home to his family.

The actual appearance of a Godly hand above Las Vegas has many readers speculating about where King stands on the issue of religion. Clearly the novel spins on a Christian base, with a Christian mouthpiece and a Devil stand-in, but up until the annihilation of Las Vegas, the existence of God is still a debatable issue—everything can still be explained as the ravings of an old woman and stress related mass hallucinations. Once things come together in Las Vegas, however, the existence of God becomes clear. Though it can be debated how much control God had over the events that occurred there—did God make Whitney Hogan stand up and rebel against Flagg? When Hogan does push his way through the crowd, he is pale faced with fear and shaking with emotion, but he still manages to stand as best he can, shouting, “We was Americans once! This ain’t how Americans act [...] You wanna watch these two guys ripped in two right in front of you, huh? You think that’s the right way to start a new life? You think a thing like that can ever be right?” (1081). Flagg’s response to Hogan’s speech is almost mechanical—he conjures a ball of lightning and fries him—but that small speech has set a series of events into motion that even Flagg cannot understand.

King’s ending leaves readers perplexed about the ultimate nature of fate. When Trashcan Man arrives with his nuclear warhead in tow, readers are forced to wonder how much of the events are ordained by God—after all, were it not for the presence of Ralph and Larry, the people would not have gathered for a public execution, and Hogan wouldn’t have had his outburst. Without Hogan, Flagg had no need of a lightning ball, and the subsequent explosion between the lightning and the bomb would not have happened. Still, even with a belief in arbitrary events, readers cannot ignore Ralph’s shout as he looks into the sky: “The Hand of God!” Still, Ralph was always a believer,

and his interpretation holds the same weight as Mother Abigail's words. It is when Larry looks into the sky, Larry the unbeliever, who even so has reached a kind of peace in his heart, and sees something that really did look like a hand, that readers can begin to believe with him. Surely King has many forces at work in his eucatastrophe, but the appearance of God is an extra that he could have omitted, leaving readers without the certainty of divine intervention. Yet, even with mostly clear evidence of God's existence (and more to follow when Tom saves Stu using Nick's aid from beyond the grave), the message here is not to believe in God, but to believe that good can stand against evil, even when things do not appear to lay in a straight line and ultimate outcomes are hidden in shadow.

The Right to Govern

The question of government is central to the novel's theme. The survivors of the superflu find themselves both in need of new authority and distrustful of rebuilding any of the old systems that so drastically failed them (in the sense that the government led to the current predicament). Frannie's father, Peter Goldsmith, puts it best when, on the outbreak of the superflu, he says, "Put not your trust in the princes of this world; for they will frigate thee up and so shalt their governments, even unto the end of the earth" and "You have to trust yourself [...] and let the princes of this world get along as best they can with the people who had elected them" (53). His live-and-let-live philosophy seems a great idea until survivors are faced with big decisions about how to live and get along in the Boulder Free Zone. Several of the main characters are quick to establish a committee, and

it isn't long before they are scheming to stay in charge of things just like the old government—an irony that is not lost on them. Still, they all realize that someone has to make some kind of rules, especially after the incident with the teenage boy who gets drunk and nearly kills a few people with a car. Everyone in Boulder saw him and disapproved, but no one felt they had the right to do anything. That kind of apathy shows a serious need for an authority figure, and the Free Zone Committee sets itself up to fill that demand.

King is quick to show how even the best intentions are corrupted by the responsibilities of control. No one really disputes the need for a governing body, but some of the choices the committee makes raise curious questions about their true intentions. First of all, Nick unilaterally disqualifies Harold as a member of their committee, just because he doesn't trust him. True, this kind of insight turns out to be the right point of view in the end (as Harold does turn on the Free Zone and head West to Flagg's people), but it does raise the question of responsibility. How much tragedy could have been averted had Harold been allowed on the committee and made to feel an important member of the new society in Boulder? It is even more curious that the decision to block Harold is made by a deaf-mute, a man who should be used to snap judgments about his character and who should be willing to give people more credit, and yet Nick damns Harold simply because he doesn't trust his smile. For a man who claims to be thoroughly rational, Nick's reasons for excluding Harold seem awfully personal and arbitrary, and this illustrates the fundamental problem with forming a new government.

Some people must be excluded in order for any government to work, and though the majority may be kept happy, there are always going to be malcontents on the fringes

of society, no matter how small the society may be. King's description of events in Boulder shows that even people who have experienced great loss still manage to create outcasts. In a world where every person ought to be valued just by virtue of being alive (even if only to be a viable person for procreation and the survival of the species), human nature still demands a scapegoat, and nowhere will that process be more clear than in the formation of a government.

The Stand does state quite clearly that people need a government, regardless of what kind. Even the totalitarian dictatorship that Flagg creates in Las Vegas manages to keep his people contented. For modern readers, it is hard to accept that Flagg's type of government could actually work out for the people, but when considering the type of people that Flagg has on his side, the no-second-chance rule seems the only way to keep control. Even with the harsh penalties in Las Vegas (crucifixion is the popular method of execution), Flagg's policies on drug use of any kind and even alcohol abuse don't seem like totally bad ideas. Though he can be cruel, he does manage to keep his people in line, mostly contented and working as useful members of his society. Still, King seems to raise the question here—is it acceptable to use Flagg's methods if it means controlling a dangerous section of society? Readers may find themselves torn between horror at Flagg's methods and grudging approval of his results, a conflict that causes readers to question how much of Flagg is inside them—how far would they go to maintain control?

It is easy at first to disregard the notion of government. After all, if 99.4% of the country is gone, why can't the remaining people just work things out amongst themselves? This is something that King addresses early in the novel. Once the superflu has wiped out the existing government, the survivors begin to feel the absence almost

immediately. Frannie feels that loss quite keenly when she emerges as one of two survivors from Ogunquit, Maine. She doesn't exactly seek out the company of Harold Lauder, but when he approaches her with plans for a picnic, she does not refuse. Part of Harold's appeal for Frannie at this point is his tendency to plan things. Harold is motivated and has ideas for the future; Frannie is barely managing to keep moving, though this feeling ebbs as she begins to travel with a purpose again. When Harold suggests going to Stovington, Vermont to check out the Disease Control Center there, Frannie is delighted with the idea: "it appealed to that uncoalesced need for structure and authority" (331). This is the same need that the Boulder Free Zone Committee will exploit when establishing a new government. As Glen would explain, people need someone to tell them what they can and cannot do, and if they (Stu, Larry, Glen, etc.) don't tell them, then someone else will, and who knows what kind of system those other people may come up with? The desire to have a ruling body in place reveals an "inability to break the mind-forged manacles of the past [that] results in a repetition of the same political system which created the dystopia in the first place" (Holland-Toll 199). Glen's idea is to act quickly, before things in Boulder get too crowded, and anyone else can get organized, and the sociology professor turns out to be right—people need structure, and they will turn to anyone who seems to have a plan, especially if the plan is comfortingly familiar. King seems to feel that "any government system, however beneficent in origin, will eventually deconstruct because abuse of power is inherent and inevitable" (Holland-Toll 215). The only way to escape this cycle is to live where there are few other people, King suggests, and this pessimistic theory about the capability of mankind explains why he ends the novel with his hero choosing exile from society. It is ironic that King can see

such negativity in humanity when he stresses the capability of mankind to Stand when the time comes; perhaps King feels that people are only redeemable in an individual or small group sense—once the numbers get too high, people are reduced to mob mentality and subject to a degeneration of morality.

People need people: the axiom may seem trite, but King pounds it into his readers' heads. People need other humans, even if those others are not so wonderful. The survivors of the flu experience prophetic dreams, but more importantly, they also experience the need to regroup. The figures in their dreams give them a direction to head in, and that impetus is what keeps them from losing their minds in the absence of any other structure. Even so, Nick notices that his journey to see what is probably a figment of his imagination is really just a manifestation of a deeper human need for a clear cut goal. Even going to Nebraska to see if Mother Abigail is real is too hazy for him—"it was like a quest with no object in view at the end of it—no Grail, no sword plunged into a stone" (417). In his hopes for more human contact, Nick imagines a man with sunburned elbows driving "some perfectly ordinary American car" who would pull over and tell them to "Hop in here!" (421). Sadly, before Nick runs into a fellow goodhearted survivor, he meets the wicked Julie Lawry, who delights in tormenting the retarded Tom just because she can. With all of the death around the survivors, any kind of human contact is appreciated, so the fact that Nick very quickly wishes that he hadn't met Julie Lawry is significant. He'd rather face the emptiness of the world than listen to her jabber on about her small life; and when this becomes clear to her, she retaliates with gunshots, a sharp reminder to Nick that not all of the survivors will be worth finding. Nick's reaction to her is just as shocking, when he first hits and then threatens her after she

taunts Tom. Though Nick is generally a peaceful man, he can be violent when necessary, a quality that many survivors suddenly find emerging in themselves.

As Larry observes, “If we don’t have each other, we go crazy with loneliness. When we do, we go crazy with togetherness. When we get together we build miles of summer cottages and kill each other in the bars on Saturday night” (459). King may leave readers uncertain about the need for government, but he is certainly clear about human nature and the need for some kind of direction.

Hope vs. Despair: “Do people ever really learn anything?”

The Stand ends on a curious note for many readers. After the mostly symbolic deaths of Larry, Ralph, and Glen, readers are left feeling empty. What was the point of everything, if life will just continue down the same path as before? Frannie and Stu are faced with this question as they stare down at baby Peter. There is hope in the child, and in the fact that he is one of the first post-plague babies to survive, but even the small community of Boulder is too much for them.

Just as Glen Bateman predicted, society has rebuilt itself in an image of what it once was, and though the lessons of Captain Trips and Las Vegas are still fairly fresh, it is easy to forget them under contemplation of the everyday in Boulder. After all, people decide, sheriffs do need guns to protect themselves, and once guns are expected again, then it is only too easy to see the path that lies ahead. Just as sheriffs protect themselves from unknown citizens, maybe the Boulder Free Zone should look into protecting itself from other communities who may seek to do it harm. After all, people think, there are all

of those weapons out there, just lying around, waiting for someone to pick them up. Why shouldn't it be them? And with that mindset, Stu and Frannie see, things pick up right where they left off. With such a sad chain of events to ponder, it is no wonder that the answer to the fundamental question of "Do people ever learn anything?" is a solid, "I don't know."

King suggests that there is hope for the future, at least in the immediate sense. Evil has been vanquished this time around, and though King is sure that it will return again, there is hope that there will be those to Stand true when the time comes. The world has been saved for those who survived this battle, and that is no small matter. The notion that evil will inevitably be back may seem like a terrible dark cloud that can ruin any contemplation of the future, but King does not end his novel on such an apprehensive note. The end of the novel has Frannie and Stu watching children play—a sure symbol of innocence and hope. The epilogue that ends that novel—that of Flagg's return—only serves to reinforce the resolve that has tempered Stu and Frannie, and others like them. The world is a place worth saving, and they will Stand whenever they need to, just as others after them will do. Humanity has a chance, and with that possibility, King eliminates the despair that the notion of an endless battle between good and evil may bring. The knowledge that Flagg returns only strengthens the hope that the survivors, and readers, feel. Evil will return, and good people will be ready.

This ending is King's ironic twist on human nature—a theme which he has not been very kind to throughout his novel. King seems to say that although mankind can be awful, can be cruel, and can self-destruct at the smallest provocation, there will always be people willing to Stand against the darkness, and they will win, in whatever fashion is

possible. Certainly good people will die, and sometimes for what appears to be no reason at all, but there is reassurance in the idea that their deaths somehow contributed to the victory of the moment, and that is—somehow—enough.

Chapter Five: The Nitty Gritty

Joyce Carol Oates once said there were three aspects of King that could be examined: the man, the writing, and the phenomenon. Considerations of biography may be left to others, but certainly a closer look at a few things would not be unseemly; notably, the writing style that Harold Bloom condemned, the genre that made academics squirm, and the popular appeal that made it acceptable for literary critics to dismiss King as a pop culture fad instead of a writer worth studying.

Writing Style: “The Prose is Indistinguishable”

According to Harold Bloom, King’s “prose is indistinguishable” (2). This phrase is up for debate, for the things that distinguish prose in Harold Bloom’s mind are very different from those that ordinary readers expect and enjoy. Harold Bloom views Stephen King as a child who has somehow stumbled onto an adult playing-ground, and he doesn’t understand why everyone who comes into contact with this newcomer is so intrigued by his work. This is largely to do with the schism between literature and popular culture. The novels that are studied in school rarely mirror the stories that students would choose to read on their own. Those which are considered classics are so for very specific reasons—one of which being that they have been studied for some time, and that in itself suggests that they shall continue to be studied, a view that treads dangerously close to

tradition for tradition's sake. Certainly, the classics contain valuable insights into the human condition, and offer readers life lessons as well as stylistic examples, but rarely do books like *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Grapes of Wrath* top a student's pleasure reading list. Even students who enjoy reading do not willingly pull out their Dante or *Beowulf*. This reluctance does not suggest that these texts do not have meaning and worth—they do, but it is sometimes hard to make high school and college students understand the themes and underlying meaning in them. Part of this difficulty has to do with the way that some of the classics are written—the writing style that Bloom finds lacking in King's work.

I believe this disapproval stems from a popular practice in academics today; that is, the proliferation of essays whose writing style is so convoluted and overtly academic that meaning has been reduced to a contest of vocabulary flexing. Harold Bloom comes from a school of thought that expects writing to require deciphering; indeed, for Bloom, not having to figure out what a text is about means that the text is too simply crafted, or too easily grasped, and the fact that the ordinary public can understand, and actually enjoy reading something, must mean that it operates on a lower level of comprehension and is not worthy of study. This is the problem that Bloom has with Stephen King—his simplicity, his lack of grandstanding, his quiet unassuming way of just telling a story, and leaving other questions of academic prose and literary criticism to the experts. King does not set out to write a masterpiece of American literature; he sets out to tell a story because at heart he is a storyteller. Bloom doesn't know what to do with a man like this, who uses his writing to entertain people without any overt agenda or sublimated meaning that is revealed after much digging. For Bloom, the clarity of King's work is its fatal

flaw. For if everything is clear, then what is left for literary critics to illuminate? I pose this dissertation as a possible answer to that question; even with a fairly straight forward story, there is much in King to consider, from the basics of theme to the subtleties of symbol and hidden references. The difference here is that an average reader can enjoy King without understanding the subtext, and that seeing the entire picture only enhances the reading experience, but is not a requirement of comprehension. King delivers the same sense of satisfaction that readers receive from classic works of literature, without the effort (and reader's guides) often required to appreciate such overtly academic texts, a quality that makes his work an accessible literature for the masses to devour.

Genre Choice: Today is a Good Day to End the World?

King's choice to make *The Stand* an apocalyptic novel reflects the time period in which he lives. During the last few decades, Americans have learned to fear the secrets of their government, and death by annihilation has become a common enough worry. Whether it be fears of terrorism or biological warfare, Americans are very open to the idea that in some secret place, the government and the military are working on weapons that could just as easily be turned on the American people as some foreign enemy. King is very aware of this fear, having grown up in the Cold War era of hiding under his desk for air raid practice. Fear of the military's plans is part of the American psyche today, and King manages to exploit that emotion in his novel, where he shows not only a military's biological weapon gone awry, but a military willing to go to extreme lengths to secure its interests in the last days of the country.

King's choice of initial genre also allows him to address other issues traditionally associated with apocalyptic novel—loss of technology, human responsibility and culpability, survival of mankind. Because he begins with these themes, King is able to secure a readership among those interested in the plight of Modern Man, a creature defined by the trappings of technology, by playing on modern fears and exploiting them—as any good horror writer ought to do. Curiously, though, apocalyptic novels often focus on the new world after the old one is destroyed—typically a utopian vision of sorts where people try to avoid the perils of the last civilization—but King patently avoids this direction. The new world that arrives after the superflu very quickly resembles the old world, a twist on the genre's expectations that allows a broader audience to appreciate the story. King's vision of the future is more realistic, some readers feel, because he shows what most people would crave after such an apocalypse—normality, routine, the expected, and to get the power back on as quickly as possible.

Popular Appeal: The Kiss of Death?

There has long been a divide between what is considered literature and what is considered popular culture. If the definition of literature includes a sense of re-readability, that is, the text reveals more and more each time the readers begins anew, then the canon of works considered literature and taught in classrooms is negligently brief. So, literature must be something more—as Horace said, it must entertain and educate. As later critics, with whom Bloom would agree, have said, it must illuminate the human condition in an academic or cerebral way. With this somewhat basic list of criteria

in mind, readers may still wonder why there is such a stigma against certain authors who display these characteristics—genre writers in particular are easily dismissed for writing escapist stories generally lacking in depth.

Popular culture, on the other hand, is known for lacking depth—that’s what the experts claim make it “pop culture.” Still, even with this apparent missing ingredient, people still clamor for the newest Danielle Steel romance, or John Grisham thriller, so one has to ask the question—does something need to be literary in order to have value? Academics answer with a resounding “yes,” claiming that Steel and Grisham novels are time-wasters or fluff-filled snacks, empty of any real substance, but why then do these popular novelists have such a dedicated following? Surely there must be something to them, if so many find enjoyment in their pages. Academics would claim that the ordinary person is entertained by these pop culture novels because they are easy to digest, raise no questions about the human condition, and leave the reader reassured about the world around them instead of forcing readers to ask difficult questions about what it means to be human. For the most part, such academics would be right—most of pop culture reaffirms the status quo instead of challenging it, but does literature always have to break standards and destroy traditions? Could these pop culture novels have value in the same way that some literature does—in showing how people of the time lived, and what the readers of the time sought in the pages of a book? Perhaps the debate between literature and pop culture is not so much a question of depth, but a reflection of a mindset that is not as interested in deeper meanings as some feel it ought to be. Does this make contemporary America akin to the Roaring Twenties, where people focused on song and

drink to escape the problems of the world around them? Does the public read pop culture novels because they need reassurance of something in a world filled with uncertainty?

Stephen King may describe worlds that are familiar to readers, and somewhat comforting in their resonance, but King's tendency to fragment that ordinary world with horrific events of supernatural occurrences often serves to disorient readers more than reassure them. Perhaps King's popularity is due to his ability to make the real world seem dependable in comparison. When people are uncertain about the world around them, they can turn to King's novels, where the ordinary world they know will soon fall prey to any number of catastrophes, and suddenly the oddities of the real world pale in comparison to the possibilities King can envision. In this sense, King reaffirms Aristotle's notion of catharsis, a feeling that most pop culture reading will not evoke. Certainly such a fearful resonance is not required for audiences to appreciate a well-told story, though, and King's popularity in the world of pop culture may simply be a reflection of his ability to tell an engaging story that can be appreciated "as is." Pop culture often does not require interpretation in order to be entertaining, but King's ability to be criticized as a serious writer puts him in a category that straddles popular and literary fiction.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Stand is essentially a novel about change, and how people react to transitions. Some can adapt to a new way of living, and some can only struggle to make the new world mirror the old. Despite the way the world may change, though, King suggests that humanity will remain the same creature. Some people will fight for good, others will stand by and allow evil to thrive, but there will always be enough on both sides for a decent battle to occur. This is an outlook that both damns and saves humanity, but perhaps it is the only view that a modern American audience can truly believe, and this philosophy is what has made *The Stand* a fan favorite among King's readers. Perhaps fans appreciate *The Stand* so much because there is enough in it for everyone to get into. For readers into science fiction, there is the idea of a government created superflu that wipes out most of the human race. For those who enjoy epic fantasy, there is a battle between good and evil fought by a few chosen heroes. For readers interested in social commentary, there is a great deal of talk about human nature and society in general. For those who are fascinated by politics, there is a chance to view government in the making from the ground up. For those who just want a good story filled with good characters, there is a huge cast constantly trundling across the pages, each fascinating in turn, and they all do their part to move the story along.

The Stand is not the next Great American novel by any means. It is flawed. For instance, it is quite long, which is not a criticism in itself, but there are times when the

action drags and readers begin to wonder if the story will ever get going again. This slow pacing is the most clear when King blows up most of the Free Zone Committee with a bomb—he said that he didn't know where to go with the story, and that it had somehow turned into a record of rebuilding society (an interesting point, but not one he wanted to focus the rest of the novel on), so the only thing to do was blow up a few characters and jumpstart the action again.

Still, my intention was to find out if *The Stand* had the depth expected of a serious literary work—themes, imagery, symbols, a certain “arresting strangeness” and resonance with readers; that is, the things that a literary critic looks for when considering a text. In short, the answer is a solid yes. From considerations of politics and government to the nature of the soul and spirituality, King's novel covers a great deal of thematic material. His writing is filled with imagery that further expands his points, whether he is calling on readers' knowledge of Tolkien with his “red Eye” descriptions or the casual way he mentions a dead cat and a rat in order to suggest a litany of subtext. As for symbols, *The Stand* resounds with them, from corn to cars and dead electrical sockets to the full moon; each concept reminds readers of something else that further enhances their understanding of the story.

I began this dissertation with questions about why King is not taken very seriously by the academic establishment, and I have come to the conclusion that his writing style and his popularity have joined together in setting him firmly away from other literary greats. Still, King is still very much a man of the times, and he is not the only writer to not be taken seriously in his day. There is the possibility that in a few decades, academics will turn to his work with the same passion and hindsight that they

turned to Herman Melville or John Steinbeck. Certainly if and when that attention does shift to Stephen King and his phenomenon, critics will not be disappointed. In fact, they may find standing up with the King to be a rather rewarding experience.

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ⁱ The tendency to examine King’s work according to publication does not allow critics to truly see King’s creative process. Many of his works were written and published in chaotic order, and so lumping together novels published in the same few years rarely reflects the actual order in which King formulated and wrote them. This need for a chronological overview tries to categorize King into stages of writing that do not correspond to the actual stages he experienced.

About the Author

Jenifer Michelle D'Elia received her Bachelor's Degree in English Literature from the University of South Florida in 2000, and was awarded her Master's Degree in English Literature from the University of South Florida in 2002. Her areas of specialization run the gamut from an intense infatuation with Old English and medieval literature to an appreciation for Romanticism and Modernism. She has a keen interest in Tolkien and an abiding love for popular culture. She teaches Composition and Literature classes wherever colleges will have her, and she has a very high degree of job satisfaction. Jenifer's love for fantasy has inspired classes devoted to the hero myth in fantasy novels, and her knowledge of Tolkien's mythology has prompted several impromptu presentations at conferences.