

DYSTOPIA, DUALITY AND NEW WORLD ORDER IN STEPHEN KING'S *THE STAND*

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Abstract

There are countless debates and discussions to be found on utopias and dystopias in literature, from Thomas More's Utopia and Francis Bacon's unfinished New Atlantis, to Jurgen Habermas' evaluation of the effect of new advances in modern technology and their ability/impact to steer the destiny of humankind. This paper proposes to study Stephen King's post-apocalyptic novel, The Stand (the 1990 Uncut Edition) to gauge the impact of unbridled technological advancement in the twentieth century which has led to a disruption in the fabric of normal, accepted human life. The Stand famously deals with the aftermath of a world caught in the deadly throes of a pandemic, a 'superflu' which has festered in a government laboratory and its deadly leakage/spillage which wipes out nearly all of humanity, concentrating what modicum of power remains in the hands of a chosen few. If this premise sounds familiar, it may be because we are living in just such an unprecedented reality. This novel brings into focus questions of moral choice, free will, a forced return to Nature where there is a 'Stand' of Herculean proportions betwixt the purveyors of that eternal axis, Good and Evil. Deriving in the main from Friedrich Nietzsche's theorizations in The Birth of Tragedy of the preeminent duality of the Apollonian illusion of order and the Dionysian chaotic disproportion, this paper will postulate the Trashcan Man as a model for vandalism that has resulted in the defacement of vast tracts of the United States (the topography for the novel), the showdown between sections of the government, the allegorical figure of Mother Abigail juxtaposed against the darkly furtive Randall Flagg, and the concomitant banding of two divergent, newly-deracinated forces that go to illustrate how the irrational facade of existing reality can be upended in the service of an unchecked mechanization of life, with the fate of the earth hanging in the balance.

Keywords: *dystopia, pandemic, order, chaos, allegory, humanity, fate, good, evil, Apollonian, Dionysian, duality, reality.*

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Introduction:

The Stand is a novel that has gone through two transformations, the second version being the more compelling and true to the vision of author Stephen King. In the preface to the 1990 Uncut Edition of the novel, King states his reasons for writing an expanded account of the original text. The 1978 version had to be substantially cut short due to the demands of his then publishers noting that the full-length novel would not be an economically viable option (King 7). Similarly, but in more detail, in the final chapter of *Danse Macabre*, King expostulates at great length on his writing of the novel in question, and the time period in which he completed it 'I spent the next two years writing an apparently endless book called *The Stand*.' (396-397). Having thus established the reason for the emended text, King lets his Constant Readers (King's nickname for the dedicated followers/fans of his writing) and critics alike know that the 1990 edition carries an extra four-hundred pages, or roughly an additional 150,000 words, so the tale in *The Stand* can be brought to a closure that is both satisfying to the audience and also the constraints of publishing. The latter concern has been more than addressed on evidence that this novel, King's longest work, has continued to be a reader favourite and to top the bestseller lists of the time.

This novel has been composed on an epic timescale, dealing as it does with the events in the deadly aftermath of a pandemic, centred within a fictive United States. A fatal virus, codenamed 'Captain Trips', has been concocted in a government military laboratory, ostensibly for the purposes of research, but with the help of weapons-grade technology. Due to a failure in oversight, this virus leaks out of its contained area and wreaks havoc in the outside environment. What is especially lethal about this strain is that it possesses a 99.4% fatality rate, and wipes out nearly all of humanity (within the fictive bound area of the text), concentrating the last vestiges of power (administrative/organisational/executive) in the hands of a chosen few. King marshals this cadre of characters with his reputable dispatch, building up their stories parallelly till the events reach a climax, while also isochronously cutting down on the body count by the end of the narrative. This paper deals with a discussion of the choices made by the characters - how they form two factions,

decide to follow leaders whose worldviews stand in radical contrast one with the other, and how these choices reflect a duality in the Western world. This duality is none other than the pre-eminent polarity between the Apollonian illusion of order and the Dionysian chaotic disproportion. For the demarcations between the polarity of the two, I will draw on Friedrich Nietzsche's development of the 'perpetual conflicts' between the 'duplexity of the Apollonian and the Dionysian' (22) discussed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This method of inquiry is given further impetus by the view King holds forth in his commentary on the origin, sources and development of the horror genre in *Danse Macabre*, when he says

'the horror tale generally details the outbreak of some Dionysian madness in an Apollonian existence, and that the horror will continue until the Dionysian forces have been repelled and the Apollonian norm restored again.' (392-393)

Making that perspective my point of departure, I will hereby delve into how the novel manifests questions of moral choice, free will and a forced return to nature, till some semblance of order is restored.

The Stand of Herculean Proportions: Discussion

King has divided the novel into sections that deal with the initial introduction of the vast cast of characters, and their concomitant movement across the deracinated landscape of the fictive United States, some on their way to Hemingford Home, Nebraska, the home of the 108-year old devout Christian woman Mother Abigail, the epicentre of the good, the Apollonian of the tale; and the rest wending a path to Las Vegas, Nevada, where the man of many names and shifting shapes, Randall Flagg, the Dionysian representative of disorder, intends to build a meticulously controlled 'technological community' (Russell 152).

The initial spread of the virus starts in the small town of Arnette, Texas, when a former security guard of the military facility (who's a carrier of the strain) crashes his vehicle at a filling station. Thereafter the other characters are introduced, each in their own particular peril. The common thread that binds them all is the origin of the conflicting dreams they share. The topography of the dream state is either the farm/homestead of Mother Abigail, where they can come together as a group and decide on the path of future action, as opposed to the technological haven of Randall Flagg, where every instruction originates in the person of the dark man himself. Nietzsche writes of Apollo as being the 'soothsaying god', the god of shaping energies, a one who embodies a higher truth (28). The African-American Mother Abigail is the measure of that Apollonian yardstick, because her

strengths are associated with traditional values and Christian religion. As the crux of the text deals with the showdown betwixt the powers of good and evil, of order and chaos, we can infer that the shape-shifter Flagg is the representative of the Dionysian essence, in that he inspires forgetfulness and the loss of subjectivity in his followers, mainly the pyromaniac The Trashcan Man and the mass-murderer Lloyd Henreid. If, as Nietzsche asserts, the influence of Bacchus extends to 'extravagant sexual licentiousness' (29), then King's reader will remember the rite of impregnation in the desert that Flagg forces on his chosen bride, Nadine Cross, a woman who used to be a teacher in her previous (now shattered) life, and one who was essentially a vessel of chaste restraint. By choosing one such woman to be his partner, Flagg depicts the qualities of the feverish 'detestable mixture of lust and cruelty' (Nietzsche 30) that the unquestioning followers of Bacchus are supposed to display.

Apollo, as prefiguring an ethical duty, demands the same of his devotees, the confrontation and examination of self-knowledge. Similarly, the deaf-mute Nick Andros, who avows to be an atheist, and is one of the first guests at Mother Abigail's homestead, is forced to confront his inner misgivings and accept the logic of the old woman's existence. Since he is an atheist and is still visited by the oneiric visions (that are shared by all the chief survivors of the pandemic, the ones who move away from the big cities towards the smaller towns), he tries to rationalize the existence of the dark man and the Mother. This metaphysical aspect is segued into the text of King's novel in many multifarious layers, as Nick is forced to evaluate the meaning of reality as he knows it. He is the first who has dreamt of the two opposing forces of the text (Abigail and Flagg) who then comes in contact with the dream figures. Nick, like Stu Redman, Fran Goldsmith, Larry, Ralph and Tom, soon has to make a choice between these once abstract-now concrete dream notions.

It is said that 'wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was routed and annihilated' (Nietzsche 48). The storyline of the Trashcan Man mirrors this line of thought because he is attracted to and by fire, and this results in the massive destruction of the Las Vegas complex, turning Flagg's very own recruit into his biggest mistake. One can argue that the Trashcan Man serves as a model of vandalism and an acute commentary on the nature of evil, because it is the very thing that he espouses as his specialty that makes him deface the techno-city of Flagg. I would assert that The Trash, as he is sometimes referred to, exercises his own Dionysian free-will and temperament when he reverts to his unending need for fire and pyrotechnics. He is therefore a model of rash behaviour in a story of rash behaviours, of excess and spoliation.

In the person of Harold Lauder the readers of King's text are challenged to varying, conflicting interpretations. He is an intelligent man, a 'nerd', an intellectual, but one who equivocates between a

choice of good and evil. Harold is contradictory, caught in the essence of the 'grotesquely uncouth' (Nietzsche 47) Dionysian essence, because he cannot let go of his past, the injustices he had to face in the former, undestroyed, pre-pandemic world, and so he seals his fate when he chooses to serve the wishes of Flagg. When at the very last, Harold starts to realize that he could be of more value by serving the Free Zone of Boulder, Flagg further enchains him by sending him Nadine Cross as a temptation offering, as the readers know he has a particular fascination with women and power. What King calls Harold's 'limerence' towards Fran Goldsmith, is, I'd argue, a sort of unhealthy cathexis, glimpsed when he snoops into Fran's journal and private belongings, something that he justifies to himself as a cause long past its availing point. He is 'emotionally unstable and likely to fragment at any time' (King, *The Stand* 524) and it is therefore his instability and paradoxical nature that leads him to make false choices, resulting in his ultimate death via the means of Flagg's bait.

The prime mover of chaos is Randall Flagg, a shape-shifting entity in line with the powers of Bacchus. He is more powerful than Mother Abigail, because that noble woman chose her own path to the afterlife, but Flagg banished himself to the wilderness, there to be reborn into the greater universe of King (the narrative link/key that runs throughout his novels and his Dark Tower series) known as the Multiverse. Flagg supports the more radical elements of society, has connections to anarchic sources, and very akin to Dionysus, has an association with the natural world and wild beasts (Russell 154). He attracts the seamy side of humanity, or those who bear a prejudice or swear vengeance against others of their kind (Lloyd, Freeman, *The Trash*, Harold). The text goes to show that suffering, in the end, holds forth meaning, even when it's achieved at a high cost, with questions of justice and accountability thrown asunder in the 'barque' of chaos. This is the manner in which the Hellenic will asserted itself 'in which the Hellenic will held up before itself a transfiguring mirror' for the wisdom of the suffering (Nietzsche 78).

Summation:

Nietzsche's discussion pertains to what he observes as the dichotomy in Greek society between order and chaos, the counterbalancing influences of Apollo in an ordered reality as against the spirit of Dionysus which is given to revelry and disorder. Nietzsche asserts that in the Greek tragedy of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, there is a unification of both strains, which helps attain a semblance of normality in order to fully articulate the kernel, the upheavals of the necessarily fragmented human condition. Neither one nor the other, neither order nor chaos, can prevail alone without the concomitant indispensability of its distinctive opponent. This primary conflict can be adapted to a study of the major characters of King's text, those who ring a defining knock towards

the events in the novel. The people band together in small groups, drawn by the oneiric nature of their connecting, patchwork dreams, in the direction of Mother Abigail's Old Testament god, or in the contradictory evil nature of Randall Flagg's dark vision of America, in line with King's reference to his uncut version as the 'long dark tale of Christianity' (*The Stand*, 12). The dream vision is akin to the one that Nietzsche foregrounds as emblematic of Apollo and Dionysus, in that they visit the actors and the chorus, preliminary to inducing the plot of the drama. The major actors come to terms with their sudden and permanent dismembering from the larger fabric of society. The loss and rupture mirror the suffering of human existence, much as omophagia is employed in Greek tragedy, as the ritualistic feasting of the body of the God, that of Dionysus. Pessimism, found by Nietzsche in the Greeks, is rampant in *The Stand* (Russell 167). There is, famously, a rebirth of tragedy as the characters are first expected to give up the world they know followed by the people they know, and the new world they have tried to build from scratch (the destruction/demolition wrought inadvertently by the Trashcan Man). The perfervid religious imagery in the text, as seen in the quest undertaken by the major actors to establish their own post-pandemic world, mirror the story of the settler pilgrims who travelled west against great odds to create and birth new lives. Through the tragedy visited on King's characters by the manmade pandemic, the survivors of the deathly plague rise to forge order from chaos, albeit at a wholesome cost. The eucatastrophe (after the detonation of the Trashcan Man's nuclear warhead rid the remaining handful of people from the depraved/demonic ascendancy of Randall Flagg) and the subsequent rebirth of Flagg in the wilderness is suggestive of the constant tussle and power play of the Apollonian and Dionysian will, one that will ensure the longevity of the future, post-pandemic world in King's narrative, so that no one axis of influence exerts the utmost upper hand.

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