

Literary analysis of stephen king's the stand



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

People behave strangely when more than ninety-nine percent of the population is dead. They behave even more strangely when they're the prize of a cosmic struggle. In Stephen King's fantasy/horror, *The Stand*, a plague created by the military decimates the modern world.

The humans that survived the plague are now the commodity of the personifications of good and evil, the troops in an epically proportioned conflict. The book begins with the spread and origin of the plague and the toll it takes on civilization and the population.

Its spread through the nation, and then throughout the world, brings chaos in martial law, with horrible atrocities being committed by many of those still alive and in power. Military brutality is rampant, and all human rights are being ignored or even deliberately violated; civilization and society are disintegrating in the face of mass death. Meanwhile, the survivors are struggling to endure the psychological burden of being alone and tending to the dead and dying. They begin to find each other, but are plagued by horrible nightmares, the embodiment of their worst fears come to haunt them in their dreamland.

These begin to be counterbalanced by dreams of a benevolent old woman, and all of the living and still-functioning coalesce around these two figures. A society forms around each: one of death, in Las Vegas around Flagg, and one of life, in Boulder, Colorado, around Mother Abigail. As powers converge and events unfold, the future fate of humanity is decided. The Walkin' Dude; the dark man; the man with no face; him; Randall Flagg.

The purest embodiment of evil, not only is he privy to an occasional demonic countenance, he is even sometimes allegorically referenced to the Devil.

He is depicted as sowing death and discord with his very presence, showing them to be integral parts of his nature: " when he grins, birds fall dead off telephone lines. The grass yellows up and dies where he spits. [. . .

]. His name is Legion. [. . .

]. He can call the wolves and live in the crows. He's the king of nowhere" (939). The dark man is terror personified, and even those that are loyal to him feel a primeval fear and animal loathing of him.

However, evil is a relative thing, and can only be named as such if there is a foil to it. In this case, it is Mother Abigail.

She is the safety and comfort of a mother's arms, the warmth and love of a good home: she is human in a way Flagg is not and therefore subject to the weakness of humanity. Wise and kind though she may be, she is understandably bitter about her fate to " go away with strangers from all the things you love best and die in a strange land with the work not yet finished" (607).

Eventually, she offends God with the sin of Pride, and must go on a pilgrimage out into the desert (a very appropriate biblical parallel) to " get right with God" (940), a pursuit which, in the end, results in her demise.

However, the divine wisdom she gained on this pilgrimage, she put to use in her ordering of the journey of the four to the West, resulting in the end of

Flagg's reign and freedom for the people of the aptly-named Free Zone. One-hundred-and-eight years old, Mother Abigail is both an icon of vitality and frailty: she represents the dual, paradoxical, and precarious nature of good present in both people and civilization as a whole.

Mother Abigail's final action was to send a quest: she began the group of people at her deathbed - namely Stu Redman, Glen Bateman, Ralph Brentner, and Larry Underwood - on a perilous journey West, to destroy Flagg. Of these four characters (though they are obviously the primary focus of the end part of the novel) Ralph is probably the least important, him and Glen being fairly minor characters that rarely if ever are given voice by King.

Stu, however, is the leader of both this group and the entire Free Zone, and also the first major character we are introduced to and the story's primary protagonist.

Through his eyes, we see the progenitor of the disease weave his car into a gas station and open Pandora's Box to the world, the struggle of a dying government to contain what is already far beyond its reach, and the eventual convergence of people and regrouping of society. He is the sturdy, masculine, and conventionally established image of new strength and hope arising from tragedy. Throughout the story, he serves as a voice of reason and calm diplomacy: he is a man who understands the world and people of it.

Often, Stu is characterized as "[a] man who doesn't talk much" (598) or "a man of few words" (402), and as being extremely perceptive and intelligent; he is quite skillful at inferring people's thoughts through his distinctive silent

observation. He is a stoic, strong character that embodies the spirit necessary to thrive and survive in this strange new world. Glen Bateman is a sociologist, an invaluable asset to the construction of a new society. Though in and of himself a rather minor main character, he plays a hugely important role throughout the novel as the vessel of Stephen King.

When a point is to be made about the ramifications of the superflu or ensuing human behaviors, it is almost always done through Glen. Though often cynical (“[i]f you want to short-circuit the democratic process, just ask a sociologist”) (749), he provides analyses such as these: “ 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” (458) – ones that are incredibly valuable and insightful, and provide a unique but accurate viewpoint on the “ big picture”.

Glen provides an opportunity for King to force-feed readers the main ideas they may not have understood or picked up on for themselves. Larry is a tortured soul. A rising musician in the West, he gets involved with illegal drugs, loses the means to pay for them, and so flees to the East, joining his mother in New York.

He is constantly haunted by the condemnations of a woman he slept with and deserted: “ You ain’t no nice guy! ” (106) and the words of a friend of his from back West: “[t]here’s something in you that’s like biting on tinfoil” (817).

Without fail, these two phrases always accompany a Larry Underwood attack of conscience, most heavily when those he considers to be under his care

meet an unfortunate fate. A defining moment for him occurs when the woman he has been traveling with dies of pill overdose, and he is left alone; he traverses the northeast U. S.

on foot, too terrified by the thought of wrecking with nobody to help him to use the motorcycle he had been before. As he fights the terror and psychological torment of solitude, slowly unraveling, he meets others along the way, and begins to find the strength and good within himself to lead and help and heal.

After he has grudgingly taken on and essentially begun to head a group of twenty or so people, Judge Farris, an extremely intelligent old man that is traveling with him, calls him “ all the things the civics books tell us the good citizens should be: [. . .

]. They make the best leaders in a democracy because they are unlikely to fall in love with power” (728). Larry is the redemption that only comes through great suffering and turmoil. The Stand mostly takes place in a desolate, dead America of the 1990's. It's a place that is both promising in its opportunity and foreboding in its vast emptiness.

As the resultant of a non-cataclysmic apocalypse, there is very little damage to the infrastructure of the nation: “ All the machinery is just sitting there, waiting for someone to come along [. . .

. . .] and start it up again” (406). Several characters note consistently the dangers inherent in having all the old tools lying around; the temptation to resurrect the old, destructive ways is greatly increased by the sheer ease

with which it could be done. The empty, devoid-of-life landscape, coupled with the only temporarily dormant tools adds a new dimension of danger to the already unpleasant situation of those that survived the plague.

King prefers to make his characters the masters of their own fates.

Each is presented with his or her own choice, where, in that one and usually only instant, they are completely aware of the ramifications of their actions, which power they are aligning themselves with, and the consequences of doing so. Some manage to abstain from the allure of evil, while others succumb to it hopelessly: “” For just a moment part of his mind cried Harold! Stop! so strongly that he was shaken to his heels [. . .]. 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.

. . .] but maybe it was already too late” (663). Typically, those that fall are those that are particularly sad or lonely or felt themselves to be outcasts in the now-dead world.

The pain nurtures a destructive hate in their hearts, a pain that the dark man can speak to and win over. Evil is innately destructive, while good is naturally an assembling force. King describes evil as only capable of destroying, and therefore only able to cannibalize itself; nothing constructed by one of evil will endure: things fall apart, the centre does not hold.

Good being the complement to evil, it of course has a congruously opposite structure: though the edges may tatter and fray, the center is strong

because it is based on the people and what they wish to uphold in their deepest selves.

Stephen King's *Stand* is an all-encompassing work: it contains elements of social and religious commentary, supernatural creatures, romance, murder, insanity, loneliness, family, etc. These elements comprise a work detailing the human experience, viewed through the distorted lens of group and individual psychological shock.