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Imagining the Apocalypse in Stephen King's *The Stand*

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Abstract:

This thesis will study the representation of the apocalypse in Stephen King's *The Stand* through Lorenzo DiTommaso's definition of the apocalyptic minimum as formed of a number of propositions that distinguish a work of fiction as apocalyptic: the existence of a transcendent reality, the binary opposition between two antagonistic forces, and the imminent conflict between these forces that is both redemptive and meaningful, in that it gives purpose to and orients life. The apocalyptic elements of *The Stand* will further be discussed through the opposition between biblical and secular understandings of transcendent reality and the suggestion that works of fiction can contain both at the same time. Furthermore, the idea that secular depictions of the apocalypse can be revealing even if they do not acknowledge the existence of a higher power will be explored through the analysis of various elements which showcase the generational sensibility of the Cold War generation, spanning the writing of the novel in the 1960s to its definitive publication in the early 1990s. Stephen King's role as one of the eminent authors of the American Postmodern Gothic will be revealed through his desire to unearth the traumatic underside of prominent events and developments that were predominantly discussed in the media and the popular and theoretical literature of the times. These are: the development of technology and its implications in the sphere of nuclear power and bioweapons; the ascendancy of consumerist capitalism and the economic crisis caused by the shift in the system of production; and the Second Red Scare, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate Scandal. Furthermore, a more universal strain of American thought will be pinpointed through the study of various American myths and paradigms that reappear as apocalypse shifts society back to its sources. The thesis will explore whether Stephen King's apocalypse imagines the future of the United States as different from its pre-apocalyptic past, or whether it depicts a return to the established system as inevitable. The aim of the thesis is to present *The Stand* as a quintessentially American representation of the apocalypse.

Keywords: apocalyptic fiction, the Cold War, bioweapons, nuclear anxiety, consumerist capitalism

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I. Introduction

In an interview from 2020 for National Public Radio, Stephen King apologized to readers for feeling like they were living the plot of one of his horror novels ("Stephen King Is Sorry You Feel Like You're Stuck In A Stephen King Novel"). The fact that the novel in question, *The Stand*, was first published in 1978 and then republished twelve years later in its expanded, definitive edition, talks to the longevity of the ideas contained within. It is possible to note a certain similarity between the atmosphere of the mid-20th century, especially as felt in the United States, and our current reality: in her influential essay *The Imagination of Disaster* from 1965, Susan Sontag describes the Cold War period as an "age of extremity", in which people "live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror". The applicability of this statement to our everyday life, which combines the monotonous tedium of isolation with the fear of contracting or spreading the virus to one's loved ones, is immediately apparent. Furthermore, Sontag posits fantasy as the genre with the unique power to help us "cope with these twin specters", to provide us with an escape to a better reality, and to normalize the "psychologically unbearable". Therefore, Stephen King's post-apocalyptic epic, which features the outbreak of a deadly superflu and a Tolkienesque fight between good and evil in one, feels like an especially timely novel to discuss.

Yet, despite a claim to certain universal values, *The Stand* holds fast to its identity as first and foremost an American novel. By using an apocalyptic event to revert the U.S. to a state of "virgin land", Stephen King strives to lay bare the tissue that makes up the fabric of American mythology, as well as its contemporary realities. Like pre-colonial America, this post-apocalyptic land is not truly bare but holds a multitude of values and a fraught history that influences and effectively hinders any attempt to reconstitute a society from a *tabula rasa*. As one of the most representative authors of the Postmodern Gothic (Tibbets 284), Stephen King

uses The *Stand* to reveal how the "past constantly inhabits the present" and how "progress generates an almost unbearable anxiety about its costs" (Savoy 167). This revisiting of the past is doubly significant for a country theorized as possessing a "short-term memory" and an almost pathological turn towards the future (Grgas 32). *The Stand* points to those "areas of unease", or the "political-socio-cultural" pressure points (*Danse* 159) that persist in the American psyche and that have had a significant influence on the development of the country as we see it today. This feature of Stephen King's fiction is underlined by Tony Magistrale:

> The narratives of Stephen King are not merely excursions into a world that never was and never could be, but also serious social fiction. The latter comprises a commentary on, and a critique of, postmodern America's value system—our politics, interpersonal relationships, our most revered and trusted institutions. His work describes a particular matrix in time; it bears a direct association with significant aspects of American culture and the types of human relationships it has engendered. (54)

Using apocalyptic eschatology to unseat these deeply seated anxieties is particularly fortuitous, since

> [n]othing in itself is apocalyptic. Events, figures, and motifs acquire an apocalyptic valence only when they have been filtered through the lens of the worldview. For most people, the formation of the European Union and the 9/11 terrorist attack are historical facts. For a small minority, they are signs that the end is near. (DiTomasso 474)

In his imagination of the apocalypse, Stephen King uses various elements and plot devices that are seen as significant not only on a narrative front, but also on a sociocultural one. For example, the use of bioweapons as a trigger for the apocalypse and the utilization of nuclear

anxiety as the crux of narrative conflict are both seen as historically revealing apocalyptic elements. In order to properly portray all of these issues and their inclusion in the novel, it is necessary to start with the introduction of the term "apocalyptic fiction" and its biblical and secular implications. The main part of the thesis will look closely at how these apocalyptic elements reveal the "generational sensibility", or the "unique perspective of a group of people born in the same era and loosely cohering in confrontation with the exigencies of its historical moment" (O'Leary 393) of the Cold War generation – the echoes of significant events and developments in the history of the Cold War period will be identified and discussed within the backdrop of the novel. Throughout the thesis, the appearance of traditional American myths and paradigms within the text will also be studied as either subversive or affirmative. The aim of the thesis is to showcase *The Stand* as a quintessentially American novel through its depiction of an apocalypse that is firmly grounded in a particular sociocultural climate.

II. Apocalyptic Fiction

The term "apocalypse" comes from the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, a "late first century CE text of the end times [which] creates a scenario of God's final judgment of humanity" (Pippin 198). Etymologically, the term signifies primarily revelation, "specifically the revelation of the future granted to St John" (Banks 361). Though the Apocalypse presages the end of the world and the conclusion to history, it is understood as both terrifying and joyful – divine justice will be meted out to those who deserve it, and Rapture, i.e. ascension to heaven, will be the reward for the faithful (361). However, in secular belief and popular usage, the term signifies terror and destruction without the necessity of a revelatory dimension that would prefigure it as the plan of a higher force or being, as demonstrated by its general definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "[an apocalypse is] a disaster resulting in

drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale" (qtd. in Banks 361-362).

Another important text which illuminates the distinction between biblical and secular apocalypticism is Lorenzo DiTommaso's *Apocalypticism and Popular Culture*. In the essay, he prescribes an "apocalyptic minimum" that sets apocalypticism apart from other phenomena like prophecy, mysticism, or divination:

> Apocalypticism is a distinctive combination of axioms or propositions about space, time, and human existence. It presumes the existence of a transcendent reality, which defines the cosmos and everything in it, but remains almost entirely concealed from observation and beyond the grasp of human intellection. It contends that the present reality is constitutionally structured by two antagonistic and irreducible forces, which are typically identified with good and evil. It maintains that a final resolution of the conflict between these forces is both necessary and imminent, and that it is also redemptive, in the sense of a deliverance from the present reality. The apocalyptic worldview further assumes that the revelation of these mysteries orients existence, and gives life meaning and purpose. (474)

DiTommaso further distinguishes that the biblical apocalyptic mode translates this "transcendent reality" through the existence of God or heaven, while the secular mode sees it as pertaining "divinized humanity, super human agencies, a force of nature or history, or anything else that does not require a supernatural explanation" (479). However, he highlights that these two can coexist in a certain text (479), which is certainly the case for *The Stand*, as will be argued throughout the thesis. Equally important for the argument is Kathryn Banks' clarification that "modern fictions of apocalypse . . . may not reveal a divine plan" but "are revelatory in other senses" (362).

Finally, it should be noted that there is a fair amount of discourse surrounding the words "apocalyptic" and "post-apocalyptic". At times they are used interchangeably, while other times they are used as divided by a temporal distinction, in which "post-apocalyptic" is found as "denoting or relating to the time following a nuclear war or other catastrophic event" ("post-apocalyptic"). Lorenzo DiTommaso argues that the latter is an "oxymoron", as the biblical understanding of the apocalypse hinges on the fact that there is nothing coming after it (497); other scholars, such as Connor Pitetti, argue that the temporal distinction is inadequate. Pitetti suggests that the difference is found on the narrative level and involves the "ways in which different kinds of stories teach their readers to understand history and humanity's relationship to it, the kinds of engagements and commitment they encourage, and the politics they enable" (450). An apocalyptic narrative thus serves to provide a clean break with the old world system, while a post-apocalyptic narrative blurs "before/after distinctions" (437). During the length of this thesis, the term "apocalyptic" will be used to distinguish the events subsuming the world-ending catastrophe, while "post-apocalyptic" will be used to describe the post-catastrophe setting, as according to the temporal distinction in popular usage.

III. Articulating Cold War Realities

In his *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King states the following: "We were fertile ground for the seeds of terror, we war babies; we had been raised in a strange circus atmosphere of paranoia, patriotism, and national *hubris*" (23). This terror is ascribed to a sense of "fundamental instability" plaguing the era ("Protect-Protest" 19), caused primarily by the untrammeled development and refinement of science and technology in the realm of weapons of mass destruction. This is supported by scholars such as Robert Jay Lifton and Richard Falk, who associate a particular sense of "hopelessness" with the post-war generation, due to the nuclear

threat being connected not only to "the tremendous destructive power of the bomb but [also] with the perception that nuclear technology is unmanageable and beyond human control" (14); moreover, Stephen D. O'Leary states that "[e]specially when considered together, Hiroshima and Auschwitz threw the question of the ultimate end of humanity into sharp relief as never before. For while the Manhattan Project had made the extermination of life on the planet technically feasible by harnessing the power that fueled the stars, the Nazi factories of death revealed an apparently limitless impulse towards genocidal destruction unchecked – and even aided – by technocratic rationality" (397). The discovery and the utilization of nuclear weapons and the doctrine of mutually assured destruction drastically modified humanity's conception of the value and the precariousness of life itself ("Protect-Protest" 19-20). The effect of nuclear anxiety is clearly delineated by Stephen King: he selects the October of 1962, the month of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as the moment when "war babies" were rocked out of the cradle of their belief in the glorious American technological achievement, subsumed under the ideal of pioneer spirit – "two magic words glittering and glowing like a beautiful neon sign; two words of almost incredible power and grace" (*Danse* 25) – and into the knowledge of the nightmare it pertained. Nuclear weapons also heralded the fear of the invisible and insidious threat of radiation, described as having the destructive potential to render entire worlds "contaminated, burnt out, exhausted, obsolete" (Sontag 46).

The apocalyptic strain of thought was not left unchanged as well, as the proliferation of nuclear weapons "fuel[ed] fears of global annihilation and evok[ed] widespread fatalism about the future of humanity", and "initiat[ed] an era of nuclear apocalypticism that has flourished in American religious culture, folklore, and popular culture" (Wojcik 297). Moreover, Lorenzo DiTommaso classifies the "second period" of apocalyptic fiction as spanning the years from

1945 to the mid-1990s, featuring in its core the "nuclear holocaust, conceived in the shadow of the atomic bombings of 1945 and the Cold War doctrine of mutually assured destruction" (447).

Likewise, fears of the effects of radiation were echoed by advances in the field of virology and the introduction of an invisible threat that became "increasingly intertwined" with that of the atomic bomb: germ warfare (Wald 165). The ubiquitous, yet the concealed character of this dual threat found suitable expression in the realm of literature, modifying and inaugurating changes in certain genres; weapons, after all, "function as interpretive keys to a larger cultural and psychological subtext. . . they ignite our imagination by tapping unconscious intimations of personal extinction" (Cecire 41).

One of these genres is certainly horror fiction, underlined by King as particularly apt to express the "free-floating anxieties" which accompany "serious but not mortal dislocations" during periods of "fairly serious economic and/or political strain" (*Danse* 43), a good descriptor for the politically charged atmosphere of the Cold War era. As for science-fiction, it has been argued that "[t]he unique urgencies of the Cold War, and particularly fear of nuclear war, affected writers' perceptions of the changed status of science fiction. Asimov dated the shift precisely: 'The dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable'" (qtd. in Seed 8).

However, it was not only this element of precipitous technological progress that made the period a precarious one for American citizens. The Cold War era was a time of tectonic changes in the fields of American politics and economy, seeing the rise and the eventual prevailing of capitalism as an all-encompassing world system as opposed to the eventually defeated alternative of Soviet Marxism. Francis Fukuyama's influential essay *The End of History?* describes this

victory in markedly apocalyptic terms, as he speaks of "the end of history as such", or "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4). It was likewise a time fraught with significant events that linger in the American imaginary: the 1940s and 1950s era of repressive McCarthyism saw the sacrificing of traditional American values of personal freedom for the protection of public safety, the likes of which was repeated in the "post-9/11 assault on individual rights" (Schrecker 1042). The trauma of the Vietnam War, the most disastrous military conflict in U.S. history, challenged the American traditional notion of "exceptionalism" – the idea that the U.S. has a unique mission in the world and a responsibility to transform it in its image – and furthermore constituted a core part of the "crisis of spirit" of 1960s, which raised "profound questions about America's history and values" (Herring 117). The sixties are further described by Stephen D. O'Leary as a "generational apocalypse" (415) for the impact that the racial and civil rights protest had on the shaping of the "political consciousness of American youth" (416), but also as an apocalypse in a more generalized manner from 1968 onwards, as the population witnessed various acts of disaster and violence, such as "the eruption of cities across America after the assassination of Dr. King, Robert Kennedy's murder, escalations of the Vietnam conflict, the Soviet invasion of Czehoslovakia, the debacle of police brutality and rioting at the Democratic party convention in Chicago [etc]. . ." (420). O'Leary concludes that the period saw the destruction of the "millennial dream of a perfectly just and harmonious world", thus leading the generation into the "post-apocalyptic disappointment of the early 1970s" (421). Finally, in the 70s, the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation invited the doubts about the integrity of the figure of the president and the general well-being of the political system, and furthermore brought to light issues such as "the corrupting influence big money has

on the electoral process, the extent to which government secrecy fosters illegal and immoral behavior, and the threat our intelligence agencies can pose to civil liberties" (Smoller 225).

It is patent that Stephen King was influenced by these issues in the writing of *The Stand*, as he recounts all of these heartaches in his semi-autobiographical exploration of the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*:

> There was a feeling – I must admit – that I was doing a fast, happy tapdance on the grave of the whole world. Its writing came during a troubled period for the world in general and America in particular; we were suffering from our first gas pains in history, we had just witnessed the sorry end of the Nixon administration and the first presidential resignation in history, we had been resoundingly defeated in Southeast Asia, and we were grappling with a host of domestic problems, from the troubling question of abortion-on-demand to an inflation rate that was beginning to spiral in a positively scary way. (447-448)

However, some of these concerns are more directly expressed than others. King's disillusionment is keenly felt in the first part of the novel, in which he depicts the spread of an epidemic and the attempts to contain it, or in the case of *The Stand*, cover it up. The American government in *The Stand* actively suppresses news and hides the nature of the outbreak under a veneer of a natural epidemic, with promises of a nonexistent soon-to-be-released vaccine. Tony Magistrale further elaborates this motif of Stephen King's Cold War fiction: "King's governmental representatives and political agents are either directly responsible for releasing the dual genies of science and the supernatural, or bear culpability for heightening already dangerous situations in their misguided efforts to cover up mistakes, in their denial of responsibility, and in their failure to help citizens cope with the aftermath" (55).

King's critique of the military is even more acerbic, as it is shown as capable and willing to commit acts of atrocities against U.S. citizens: cities are quarantined by force, entire news stations attempting to give people the truth are butchered, and peaceful student protestors are massacred. In the words of a character from the novel: "These men are acting like Nazis, not American soldiers" (*The Stand* 262). The depictions of military violence, especially the student protest that is explicitly likened to the 60s protests in the quote "[t]hey've got signs, just like in the sixties" (*The Stand* 265), seem to call back to Stephen King's own involvement in the Students for a Democratic Society during his time as a student at the University of Maine in Orono from 1966 to 1970, a movement which protested both the Vietnam war and "other American social ills" (Magistrale and Blouin 287-288). Though a massacre on the scale shown in the novel never occurred in such protests, there were casualties, with four students reported as killed at Ohio's Kent State University following the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and two more in Mississippi at Jackson State University (Hall 15). Tony Magistrale and Michael J. Blouin conclude that "the crisis in Vietnam would prove to be King's crucible, the event that most dramatically transformed him into the contemporary chronicler of America's nightmares" (287).

The depictions of other anxieties require a more detailed look. Therefore, the following sections will focus on three crucial narrative elements that carry a distinctly apocalyptic charge: biological warfare, nuclear anxiety, and the ascendancy of consumerist capitalism.

i. Bioweapons and the Viral Metaphor

In her book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative*, Priscilla Wald dates the 1950s as the years of the institutionalization of virology, with the publishing of the first issue of the eponymous journal *Virology* and the proliferation of textbooks in and articles on

virology in both "mainstream and specialty press" (162). The discovery of viruses was significant in the field of medicine and biology, as it "raised questions that penetrated to the most basic taxonomies and classifications that structured scientific inquiry as well as human experience" (162); however, it was also significant for the ways in which it intersected with both domestic and international U.S. politics. A significant part of both scientific and social theories of contagion concerned the rise of city population: "For public-health officials . . . [t]he growth of cities gave rise to what they saw as 'promiscuous' social spaces: people literally and figuratively bumping up against each other in smaller spaces and larger numbers than ever before. Microbes thrived in such environments, producing widespread infections that, in turn, provided researchers with the opportunity to study them" (Wald 14). In the U.S., city population grew precipitously between 1880 and 1900, and problems like "[n]oise, traffic jams, slums, air pollution, and sanitation" became commonplace ("City Life in the Late 19th Century"). Virology also introduced germ warfare as a weapon of destruction potentially more powerful than the atomic bomb (Wald 165) and fostered a "connection between disease and warfare" that was "enhanced by their proximity in the media" (167).

The apocalyptic event which occurs at the beginning of *The Stand* is the outbreak of a highly infectious, pulmonary virus. It should first be underlined that communicable disease is in itself imbued with a particular religious value. Priscilla Wald comments on the pre-scientific role of the plague as used to denote divine displeasure (11), e.g. the Ten Plagues of Egypt in the Book of Exodus; furthermore, plague or "pestilence" is a well-known part of apocalyptic iconography, representing one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Moreover, Stephen King writes about his choice of an outbreak as partly religiously motivated in *Danse Macabre*: "We were living in Boulder, Colorado, at the time, and I used to listen to the Bible-thumping station which broadcast

out of Arvada quite regularly. One day I heard a preacher dilating upon the text 'Once in every generation the plague will fall among them'. I liked the sound of the phrase – which sounds like a Biblical quotation but it is not – so well that I wrote it down and tacked it over my typewriter. . ." (446).

While the explanation first given for the outbreak of the virus is secular, with the virus leaking out from a research facility in California due to human error, later in the novel the interpretation shifts to the biblical belief of divine punishment: "God had brought down a harsh judgment on the human race" (*The Stand* 559). A supernatural explanation is also given to the question of animal communicability; since wild animals and cats are not affected, it is inferred that "the plague had taken man and man's best friends" (575). Although these explanations, as given by the character of Abagail Freemantle, might be understood simply as a way of coping with the end of the world, the supernatural element in the novel is proven as undeniable by the appearance of Randall Flagg, King's Satan-like antagonist. We are obliged to acknowledge the workings of a higher power as the "dusty, rundown heels of his boots began to rise off the road" (*Stand* 224), thus confirming the shift from Todorov's "scientific marvellous", i.e. the genre in which "the supernatural [the extremely deadly and communicable virus] is explained in a rational manner, but according to laws which contemporary science does not acknowledge" (56), into the "fantastic-marvellous", i.e. "the class of narratives that are presented as fantastic and that end with an acceptance of the supernatural [of divine powers and beings]" (52).

However, Stephen King's depiction of the epidemic is equally influenced by secular matters, that of the development of bioweapons. Therefore, in his *Danse Macabre* he cites the so-called Dugway sheep incident another source of inspiration for the novel:

> . . . something . . . was nagging very quietly at the back of my mind. It was a news story I had read about an accidental CBW [Chemical and Biological Weapons] spill in Utah. All the bad nasty bugs got out of their canister and killed a bunch of sheep. But, the news article stated, if the wind had been blowing the other way, the good people of Salt Lake City might have gotten a very nasty surprise. (445-446)

The Dugway incident occurred as follows: on March 13, 1968, the US Army was conducting a routine test with a nerve agent known as VX at the Dugway Proving Ground in the state of Utah; a day after, shepherds with herds 27 miles or 43 kilometers away from the test site reported symptoms in their sheep which indicated damage to the nervous system (Allen). Although results were inconclusive and some indicators pointed to a different cause for the death of some 7,000 sheep, such as pesticides, the media was quick to blame the Army – moreover, though no humans were affected, the discourse was quickly shaped around the "ominous possibility that people, too, may be in danger from chemical and germ warfare experiments" (Allen). The media hubbub surrounding the event concluded with the Army accepting responsibility for the deaths of the sheep in spite of inadequate evidence (Allen). On May 9, the Federation of American Scientists "called for an end to U.S. production and development of 'biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction'" (qtd. in Allen). Finally, a year later, in 1969, President Nixon "renounced the use of biological weapons by the United States and set in motion the process that would lead to a complete international ban on such weapons" (Allen). The frenzy surrounding the Dugway sheep incident, despite its complex and inconclusive nature, points to the potential of bioweapons to become "quintessentially weapons of terror" (Wessely et al. 878), which cannot be understood or debated logically, yet create a sense of emotionally charged, epistemological terror. This quality makes them attractive material to be covered in

literature, especially fantasy, which can "rework[] key metaphors and narratives already circulating in the culture" (Seed 2) and face the terrors underlying them head-on. In *The Stand*, the devastating viral outbreak is depicted across all three different levels of horror according to King's delineation – terror, fear, and revulsion (36). There is terror in the insidious creeping of the disease through mundane symptoms like sniffles and coughing, fear as these symptoms turn into hallucination-induced fevers, and revulsion most of all, as the final stages of the disease cause a grotesque swelling and discoloration of the neck, inducing choking and finally, death. The explicitness with which the disease is described and the degree of horror present in the novel can be directly tied into the original text of the Apocalypse, with the latter's "similarities to the genre of horror literature in the splattering of blood and gore on the reader and on the intensity in which it draws the reader to gaze on the ripped flesh" (Pippin 204-205).

We can consider the spread of disease as a particularly terrifying notion for an insular country like the U.S. – escape is not possible as the country is devoured from the inside-out. This is particularly interesting seeing as it subverts the idea of isolation as a geographical advantage, which it has been throughout history, as elaborated by Neil Smith in his discussion of the trauma of 9/11:

> . . . through nearly a century in which the US rose to global hegemony, none of the brutal wars – 20 million in World War I, more than 30 million in World War II, and many tens of millions in other wars on four continents – seriously touched the national territory of the United States. Not since the war of 1812 was there a significant incursion on US soil (Hawaii in 1941 was not yet a state). No other country has been so immune to the terror that made the 20th century the most violent in history, yet so implicated in it. Nowhere

> else has a populace had the luxury of deluding themselves that geography is salvation, that geography protects power. (634-635)

Disease, as it pertains to urbanization, is also closely related to American mythology, as the image of the city has been solidified as a source of American exceptionalism in John Winthrop's sermon on the "city upon a hill" from 1630 (307). Later proponents of agrarianism, such as Thomas Jefferson, have expressed distrust towards big cities as "pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man" (Jefferson). In *The Stand*, the city fulfills both the former and the latter premise by functioning both as "womb and tomb" (Bartter 148), exemplified by Larry Underwood's escape from Manhattan Island and the good-aligned survivors' settlement in Boulder, Colorado. The choice of America's largest city for the function of the tomb is understandable, as underlined by Edward L. Glaeser's description of the issues New York City faced after World War II: "Crime skyrocketed between 1960 and 1975, and the increase . . . made wider social problems more visible. Bad urban governance, which in most cases had been going on for decades, became more obvious during a period of urban decline when steadily increasing tax receipts could not hide waste and mismanagement. Furthermore, decaying infrastructure made the city seem grungy" (20).

The idea of the city as representing "physical pollution of the landscape and moral pollution of its inhabitants through overcrowding, exposure to the peculiarities of other kinds of people, and forced interdependence" (Bartter 149) is mirrored in King's depiction of New York, the pre-apocalyptic first glance of which is dominated by a description of a rat eating the innards of a dead cat in an overturned trashcan. In the post-apocalypse, the entire city becomes a stinking death trap, with human bodies likened to the figure of the cat, rotting in their apartments and cars, blocking all exits from the city. On the other hand, we have the city of Boulder, Colorado,

which occupies a "remnant" function, i.e. serves as a "site where elements of an earlier America persist or survive under varying degrees of threat from foreign invaders or social dissolution" and is also prefigured as a "place to reconstruct a better social system" (Abbott 224). As a place that stands for the values of democracy and is in sharp opposition with Flagg's communist-coded Society of the People, Boulder becomes the new exemplary city from which traditional American values are disseminated over the newly reconstituted "virgin land". Furthermore, King exempts Boulder from the consequences of overcrowding with the narrative explanation of the majority of the pre-pandemic populace fleeing due to a rumor about a nearby virus spill, and thus explicitly underlines the role of Boulder as an exemplary city of the post-apocalyptic United States: "On his long journey from Shoyo to Boulder . . . he [Nick] had passed through tens of dozens of towns and cities, and all of them had been stinking charnel houses. Boulder had no business being any different . . . but it was. There were corpses here, yes, thousands of them . . . but there were not *enough* corpses . . . The awesome fact had remained that Mother Abagail, sight unseen, had managed to lead them to maybe the one small city in the United States that had been cleared of plague victims" (*The Stand* 765). Boulder's symbolic function in *The Stand* is not unconnected to the regional identities that Colorado has attained throughout history, including its touristic identity as the "most accessible western adventure land . . . that invites self-discovery", as well as a popular destination for health tourism due to its untrammeled wilderness and relative commercial isolation until 1979, "when the Interstate Highway builders shoved I-70 through the Eisenhower Tunnel" (Abbott 222-223).

Despite the securities that Boulder provides, King does not depict it as fully safe from infiltration. An element of anti-communist hysteria or the fear of communist infiltration in one's own neighborhood or even family life can also be detected in the novel. Stuart J. Foster talks of

anti-communist propaganda in the 1950s in his article on *The Power and Ubiquity of the Red Scare in American Post-War Culture*: “In television programs, spy stories proliferated, the news media used hyperbolic headlines to ‘inform’ and excite audiences about the Soviet threat, and political speeches displayed an obsession with issues of national security. Workers were subject to loyalty oaths and rigorous scrutiny. Even churches rallied around the American flag in an attempt to foil the advance of godless communism” (16).

Ellen Schrecker points out that these threats of “espionage, subversion, and sabotage” by the American Communist party were not “entirely fictitious”, yet were still largely exaggerated as “by the height of the McCarthyist furor, the KGB’s Washington networks were out of business” (1051). This fear of the insidious communist infiltration is embedded into the text of *The Stand* through the supernatural element of prophetic dreams/nightmares, which serves as a stand-in for ideological allegiance. Good-aligned characters have dream visions of Mother Abagail, and at times nightmares about Randall Flagg. These fade as they unite in Boulder, the democratic community representing a morally united and secure shelter from the evils of the Society of the People beyond the Rockies. However, the evil-aligned characters lurking among them still have nightmares about Flagg – they are sometimes caught sleeping restlessly, or looking poorly due to lack of sleep. A comparison can also be made to the trope of the zombie-bitten survivor in zombie fiction, a popular genre representation of the outbreak narrative (Wald 257): “In many zombie movies, the real threat comes as much from inside a group as from the outside. . . an infected member in the group that is supposedly secure in a protected place, the loss of control of one member who wants to break out, or . . . a group of humans from the outside who tear down the confines of the secure place” (Fehrle 529-530). In *The Stand*, nightmares of the Dark Man function like a zombie bite which allows the evil inside an individual to take over;

Flagg's influence over Nadine, one such evil character, is also described as zombification, i.e. the repossession of an individual's mental faculties and individuality:

> She felt a darkness creeping over her vision . . . soon she was lost in it. She was blind, she was deaf, she was without the sense of touch. The thinking creature, the Nadine-ego, drifted in a warm black cocoon like seawater, like amniotic fluid. And she felt him creep into her. (*The Stand* 1001)

Flagg's inculcation works not only on an individual level but also a societal one, thus showing the power of the viral metaphor in expressing fears and anxieties about Cold War espionage and brainwashing. The "virus of communism" (Hoover) was often depicted metaphorically, as a foreign agent with the power of infiltrating the "American body politics" prefigured as a "large-scale human immune system, placing under surveillance and effectively eliminating citizens suspected of foreign sympathies that might weaken internal American resolve to fend off the debilitating disease of communism" (Ogden 245-246). In *The Stand*, one particular passage depicts Randall Flagg as a malignant body or disease which enters America described as a living, breathing organism: "By dawn tomorrow or the day after that he would pass into Nevada, striking Owyhee first and then Mountain City . . . and then the country would come alive in all its glorious possibilities, a body politic with its network of roads embedded in its skin like marvelous capillaries, ready to take him, the dark speck of foreign matter, anywhere or everywhere – heart, liver, lights brain. He was a clot looking for a place to happen, a splinter of bone hunting a soft organ to puncture, a lonely lunatic cell looking for a mate. . ." (221).

The biblical and secular implications of disease are once again united in the novel as Randall Flagg fantasizes about the kind of biological terror he could unleash upon the Boulder Free Zone from underground research facilities in order to fully wipe out the survivors:

> There were beakers there, rows and rows of beakers, each with its own neat Dyno tape identifying it: a super cholera, a super anthrax, a new and improved version of the bubonic plague, all of them based on the shifting-antigen ability that had made the superflu so almost universally deadly. There were hundreds of them in this place; assorted flavors, as they used to say in the Life Savers commercials. How about a little in your water, Free Zone? How about a nice airburst? (*The Stand* 1126)

By combining elements of the supernatural and the rational, King also underlines his critique of modern science by suggesting that a display of divine (or satanic) power is not necessary: all of the world-ending apparatus have already been made by man, and are simply waiting to be used by whichever power deems it necessary, divine or otherwise. One of these "deadly toys" (*Danse* 451) is nuclear weaponry, an element that will be further discussed in the next section of the thesis.

ii. Nuclear Anxiety in the Cold War

In its treatment of the threat of nuclear weapons, Stephen King's *The Stand* could be described as part of a subgenre termed "nuclear anxiety fiction" ("In Dreams, In Imagination" 105). Although the old structures of American society have been dismantled and the tensions of the Cold War have been dissolved along with them, the threat of nuclear weapons is persistent. In the words of Glen Bateman, a sociologist from *The Stand*, who often serves as a stand-in for the messages King wants to impart: "All that stuff is lying around, waiting to be picked up . . . Just think, instead of six or seven world nuclear powers, we may end up with sixty or seventy of

them right here in the United States. If the situation were different, I'm sure that there would be fighting with rocks and spiked clubs. But the fact is, all the old soldiers have faded away and left their playthings behind" (*The Stand* 405).

The survivors in the Boulder Free Zone are constantly haunted by the possibility of a nuclear attack from Flagg's technologically advanced community. This anxiety is very much spatially motivated, as Flagg's community in Las Vegas is in close proximity to the Nevada Test Site, "one of the most significant nuclear weapons test sites in the United States", where nuclear tests occurred between 1951 to 1992 ("Nevada Test Site") – this is referenced in the novel by Lloyd Henreid, Flagg's right-hand man: "Most of western Nevada and eastern California was owned by the good old USA. It's where they tested their toys, all the way up to A-bombs. He'll be dragging one of those back someday" (*The Stand* 1087). During the beginning of the 1950s, the role that nuclear weapons occupied in the U.S. imaginary was antithetical, as atomic tourism in the form of the awe-inspiring "spectacle of atomic explosions as entertainment" flourished among the first publishing of photographs from post-bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima (Hales 24). In the words of Stephen D. O'Leary, "the threat of the nuclear weapons was balanced by bright scenarios of atomic-powered prosperity" (398), a dualism that was replicated both in the media and fiction of the time (399).

The conflicting sentiments towards the potential of atomic power are reflected in the twofold significance of Nevada deserts in the novel. As a previous testing grounds the desert is a site of potential terror for the survivors in Boulder, directly invoking the trauma of bombings, such as "Hamburg and Dresden in World War II" (*The Stand* 1155); however, it is also imbued with a spiritual charge, as Larry Underwood, Ralph Brentner, Glen Bateman and Stu Redman are sent onto a quest by God, speaking through Mother Abagail, to walk from Boulder to Las Vegas in

order to defeat Randall Flagg. This invokes the religious connotations of the desert as a "space in which protagonists are tested and emerge as transformed, in narratives that go back to the Bible and Jesus' forty days and nights spent in the wilderness" (Sargeant and Watson 14). Joseph Masco summarizes these two symbolical functions of the American desert landscape in the following quote:

> The desert has always captivated American imaginations by offering settlers the hope of leaving the past behind in favor of an endlessly renewable frontier, forever open to new possibilities. But this migration away from self and nation is now doubly fraught, as refugees to the interior run headlong into an equally imaginative military-industrial economy that constructs the desert as a hyperregulated national sacrifice zone, a proving ground for the supersecret, the deadly, and the toxic. (84)

The final sections of the novel are the most significant for the way in which the desert landscape is turned into visceral horror. The character Trashcan Man, a malevolent individual with a penchant for pyromania and an almost supernatural ability to locate abandoned pre-apocalyptic weaponry, finds himself in Flagg's disfavor. To redeem himself, he enters the Nellis Air Force Range in Nevada and finds the trump card that Flagg has been looking for – an atomic warhead. The military base is described very much in the terms of a "Terrible Place", a frequent element of "slasher" horror movies that is usually the stage for the final confrontation of the murder and the victim, usually a "house or tunnel" that is frightening in some way, either by their tight and sprawling corridors and layout or their "Victorian decrepitude" (Clover 197). There is a sense of palpable darkness and horror, as the

> . . . [Trashcan Man] came along a hallway deep underground, a hallway as dark as a minepit. In his left hand he held a flashlight. In his right hand he held a gun, because it was spooky down here. He was riding an electric tram that rolled almost silently along the wide corridor. The only sound it made was a low, almost subaural hum. (*Stand* 1183)

It is also in the character of Trashcan Man that we receive the depiction of a monster, a figure seen as a key element of not only horror fiction/movies, featuring beings like "vampires, trolls, gremlins, zombies, werewolves, demonically possessed children, space monsters of all sizes, ghosts, and other unnameable concoctions" (Carroll 51), but also the Apocalypse, the horror of which is "embodied in its monsters" (Pippin 207). Though Randall Flagg is also described in monstrous terms throughout the novel, it is the depiction of radiation sickness that feels particularly appalling by providing an exacerbated visual depiction of the consequences of radiation, an issue that many "downwinders" in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah were facing at the time (Taylor):

> He was in the last stages of radiation sickness. His hair was gone. His arms, poking out of the tatters of his shirt, were covered with open running sores. His face was a cratered red soup from which one desert-faded blue eye peered with a terrible, pitiful intelligence. His teeth were gone. His nails were gone. His eyelids were frayed flaps. (*The Stand* 1242)

Finally, the idea of nuclear weapons as ultimately unpredictable and uncontrollable is proven true by the fact that Flagg's supernatural blue energy ball, which he uses to murder one of his own dissenting citizens, ends up detonating the warhead and destroying his community and the people within. The force of the nuclear blast permeates the text by eliding the finishing line of Larry Underwood's dying inner monologue: "*Oh God, thank God*, Larry thought. *I will fear*

no evil, I will f' (*The Stand* 1244). The destruction and detonation are described in prophetical, symbolically-coded terms, rather than the gruesome detail which dominates the image of the radiation-sick body. This portrayal is in line with the idea of the so-called "atomic sublime", the "mythic embedding of the Atomic Bomb in the grandeur of Nature, as the manifestation of God's will", formulated in order to embed the arrival of the nuclear bomb in older American philosophical thought, made up of a "combination of nature worship, patriotism, and religious righteousness" (Hales 13). The following descriptions show us this equation between a nuclear explosion and divine power: "Silent white light filled the world. And the righteous and unrighteous alike were consumed in that holy fire" (*The Stand* 1244); "That thudding noise had terrified him – it was as if God had suddenly stamped His foot down on the desert floor somewhere not too distant" (1249); "The mushroom cloud stood out on the horizon like a clenched fist on the end of a long, dusty forearm" (1251); ". . . God fixed that bad man. I saw it. The hand of God came down out of the sky" (1258). By combining the image of God with nuclear technology, King continues the running theme of mixing biblical and secular apocalypticism to denote the terrifying power of Cold War technology. The next and final section discusses the most secular of King's themes – consumerist capitalism.

iii. Consumerist Capitalism

David Harvey dates the year 1973 as the defining line between the post-war Fordist system of capitalist accumulation and consumerism and the system of "flexible accumulation", which is defined by "the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation" (147). The period is also characterized by a vast surge in the service sector (147) as compared to the heavy industries of the post-war period, such as "[c]ars, shipbuilding, and transport equipment, steel, petrochemicals, rubber, consumer

electrical goods, and construction" (132). David Priestland succinctly summarizes the issues that Fordism was experiencing in the 70s:

> The devaluation of dollar caused worldwide inflation – reinforced by the oil price hikes of 1973 and 1979 – and this exacerbated the conflicts between workers and employers brought by full employment and 1960s radicalism. Increasing inflation led workers to demand higher wages . . . while capitalists refused to invest as profitability fell. And all of this was happening at a time of fundamental technological transition, when old, heavy industries were suffering from overcapacity and the future lay in new, high-tech technologies . . . The 1970s, then, saw a conflict between the old, state-dominated order – both domestically and internationally – and international and domestic financial interests . . . American governments began to depend on borrowing from international capital markets and pursued economic interests such as a high currency and low inflation, which benefited them, often at domestic industry's expense. (409-410)

Therefore, the 70s and the 80s mark a period of troubled "economic restructuring and social and political readjustment" (Harvey 145), the pains of which are felt right from the beginning of the novel. In the first passage of *The Stand*, King describes the circumstances facing the working population of the Midwestern town of Arnette, a region that was hit particularly hard by deindustrialization and the shift to "low paid labor power in the third world" (155): "In Arnette, it was hard times. In 1980 the town had two industries, a factory that made paper products (for picnics and barbecues, mostly) and a plant that made electronic calculators. Now [1990] the paper factory was shut down and the calculator plant was ailing – they could make them a lot cheaper in Taiwan, just like those portable TVs and transistor radios" (*The Stand* 11).

Economic issues are also mentioned by characters living in other cities, such as Larry's mother, a cleaning woman working in a business company in New York – "I'm working. Thousands aren't" (*The Stand* 63) – and Frances Goldsmith's father in Oguinquit, Maine: "Peter Goldsmith hadn't been content with Social Security; he had never trusted it, even in the days before the system began to break down under recession, inflation, and the steadily increasing number of people on the books" (*The Stand* 68). Therefore, the atmosphere of economic decline is pervasive and shared between King's characters – it is the thread that connects them. The apocalypse solves these difficulties by immediately dissolving the reigning world system, thus serving as an absolution on both an individual and societal level. On an individual, we have as example: Stu Redman, a blue-collar worker and budding alcoholic suffering from "small-town inertia" (13), who is transformed into a post-apocalyptic cowboy and a key figurehead for the restructuring of society; Frances Goldsmith, a pregnant college student suffering under the ire of her conservative and religious mother, who becomes a valuable and cherished member of a society that's working to repopulate the world, rather than a disenfranchised and disowned single mother; Larry Underwood, the up-and-coming musician that fled to New York from debt incurred from partying and drug abuse in Los Angeles, who learns how to take responsibility and accountability for his actions in order to rise up to challenge of post-apocalyptic survival, etc.

On a broader scale, the novel halts the evolution of capitalism and defamiliarizes the logic of money, consumer goods, and labor. King puts emphasis on the figure of the clock in the abandoned town of Stovington, where "[t]he town clock . . . had not tolled since nine this morning, when the little tune that preceded the striking had sounded draggy and weird, like a tune played underwater by a drowned music box" (*The Stand* 307). Capitalist time as strictly divided and seen as a commodity and a "tool of corporate power" (O'Malley 146) is now

abstract again; the concept of temporality itself is freed from capitalist subjugation in the post-apocalypse. Furthermore, a visually intriguing depiction of the destruction of capitalist power is seen from the following passage, where Tom Cullen, an intellectually disabled character, decorates his new home in Boulder with credit card signs: “In a large square block over the mantel in the living room were a number of credit card sigs, all of the centered and carefully mounted. YOUR VISA WELCOME HERE. JUST SAY MASTERCARD.WE HONOR AMERICAN EXPRESS. DINERS CLUB” (*The Stand* 936). Equally telling is Harold Lauder’s glib remark during a discussion of home decoration, which is now a matter of simply taking what you desire from leftover goods in abandoned homes and shops:

> I’m going to put some new furniture when I get around to it . . . Modern. Chrome and leather. As the commercial says. “Fuck the budget, I’ve got MasterCard”. (794)

The idea of the dissolution of the culture of debt is particularly interesting when taking into account the argument presented by Stipe Grgas that credit, especially credit cards, allowed for the bridging of the gap between what the middle-class could earn and what they could spend, and thus allowing for the continued prosperity of American consumerism (166-167). Another example of the culture of credit in the pre-apocalypse is the following quote which shows the “*nouveau riche*” Larry as quick to embroil himself into credit in order to enjoy the possession of a new car, itself an “exemplary artifact of Fordism and new information technologies” (Grgas 236):

> ‘Have they paid you yet, or did you get that little car on credit?’. ‘They haven’t paid me much . . . I made a down payment on the car. I’m financing the rest’. ‘Easy credit terms’, she [Larry’s mother] said balefully. ‘That’s how your father ended up bankrupt. The

doctor said he died of a heart attack but it wasn't that. It was a *broken* heart. Your dad went to his grave on easy credit terms'. (62)

Therefore, the sections in Ogunquit which depict the sixteen-year-old Harold Lauder taking a joyride in a deceased older neighbor's "brand new Cadillac Coupe deVille" (*The Stand* 296) show that the figure of the car as a status symbol is eroded – expensive cars are now available to all, free of credit and free of charge. In the section describing Larry Underwood's escape from NYC, the novel also destabilizes the popular post-apocalyptic notion of the car as a "means of connection to previous notions of safety and security" that allows the desolate landscape to be traversed and in a way "conquered", a motif that is "deeply rooted in American car culture" (Walter 141). Cars are symbolically turned into "hearses, their decaying drivers still leaning behind the wheels, their passengers slumped as if, weary of the traffic jam, they had fallen asleep" (*The Stand* 366). A particularly striking horror sequence comes from the section depicting Larry's exit from Manhattan Island via The Lincoln tunnel, transformed from a means to enable the flow of human bodies into a burial ground: "Ahead, he [Larry] could see four lanes of westbound traffic disappearing into the black arch of the tunnel, and with something like real dread he saw that the overhead fluorescent bars inside the Lincoln were out. It would be like going into an automobile graveyard. *They would let him get halfway and then they would all begin to stir . . . to come alive . . . he would hear car doors clicking open and then softly chunking closed . . . their shuffling footsteps. . .*" (*The Stand* 370). The turning of the mundane into horrific terror is revealing of the real-life phenomena of the work commute, described as a form of invisible capitalist exploitation (Swidler). By turning tunnels into graveyards, King is providing a hyperbolized representation of the hours wasted during long commutes and traffic jams; this is especially salient for New York City's Manhattan Island, as statistics show that over

a million commuters entered Manhattan Island on a daily basis as early as 1980 (Bram and McKay 2).

Moreover, other products of consumerist capitalism are revealed as functionally worthless in the post-electric world of the post-apocalypse:

> She [Abagail Freemantle] never did own a vacuum cleaner until the end of the Nazi war, when it seemed like all of a sudden anybody could afford anything and even poor white trash had a Mercury hidden away in their back shed. Now this house, which Nick had told her was in the Mapleton Hill section of Boulder . . . had every gadget she'd ever heard of and some she hadn't. Dishwasher. Two vacuums, one strictly for upstairs work. Dispos-All in the sink. Microwave oven. Clothes washer and dryer . . . a 'trash masher' . . . Wonders never ceased. But come to think of it, some of them had . . . With their potency taken away, you might as well use all those gadgets like the microwave oven and the 'trash masher' to hang your hat and coat on . . . Her own little house had been better equipped to handle the death of those little switchplates than this one was. (752)

This is an especially interesting reflection of the Cold War period, where one of the facets of American consumerism was the glorification of "model houses and kitchens, full of consumer appliances and price tags showing how many days it took American workers to pay for them" (Priestland 405). Paul Schrader's *Blue Collar* from 1978 depicts this exact sentiment towards the overwhelming amount of consumer goods that were pushed onto the working class during the Cold War period, while also iterating upon the aforementioned reliance upon credit:

> Credit's the only thing you can get free from the company. Got a house, fridge, dishwasher, washer-dryer, TV, stereo, motorcycle, car . . . buy this shit, buy that shit. All

> you got is a bunch of shit. You don't even own it. You can't get it back 'cause it's already broke down. (00:33:00-00:33:20)

This idea of quantity over quality also brings up the concept of "planned obsolescence" or "progressive obsolescence", as introduced by Justus George Frederick in 1928, denoting the idea of discarding products before they are worn out in order to stimulate "an economic habit that would sustain America's economy by means of perpetual repetitive consumption and growth in all industries" (Slade 58). Therefore, the paragraphs in which Mother Abagail vaunts the merits of pre-modern tools like the "hand-pump", "washtub" and a "scrub-board" (*The Stand* 752-753) seems to point to the lasting value and usefulness of these inventions compared to the quick obsolescence of modern consumer goods. In the words of the eminent early 19th-century writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau in his seminal work, *Walden or Life in the Woods*:

> As with our colleges, so with a hundred "modern improvements"; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end . . .

Expanding on the first line of Thoreau's quote, *The Stand* also provides a critique of modern education. Liberal arts degrees which make individuals eligible for employment in the "knowledge-based industry sector" which subsumes branches like communication services and finance (Caffentzis 99-100), but do not teach practical ingenuity, are directly mocked and criticized in a situation where a man is dying from appendicitis:

> 'A liberal arts education teaches you how to think . . . The hard facts you learn are secondary to that. The big thing you take away from school with you is how to induct and deduct in a constructive way'. 'That's good, Harold said. 'I like that' . . . 'But it isn't good,' Peri said fiercely . . . 'He's dying . . . He's dying because we've all been spending our time learning how to bullshit each other in dorms and the living rooms of cheap apartments in college towns. Oh, I could tell you about the Midi Indians of New Guinea, and Harold could explain the literary technique of the later English poets, but what good does any of that do my Mark?' (*The Stand* 628)

This critique of modern education is combined with the renewed valorization of know-how, which "came into popular usage in the wake of the Second World War" and "summed neatly the American inventive ingenuity, from . . . the invention of the first refrigerated railway cars for keeping fruit fresh during . . . the American Civil War, up through the zipper and on into the rip-roaring improvisations of the Second War" (Cooke). This is seen through King's description of Ralph Brentner, which puts in contrast his handiness – putting the "right sort of valve on your bicycle pump when it wouldn't mate", knowing "what was making the funny buzzing noise in your oven just by looking at it" (*The Stand* 727) – with his inability to understand the "red tape" surrounding modern life, such as car loan agreements, job application forms or filling in your employment history. Kings affirms his valorization of know-how with the concluding paragraph of the description: ". . . when the very fabric of the world began to tear open, it was the Ralph Brentners who were not afraid to say, 'Let's slap a little epoxy in there and see if that'll hold her'. And more often than not, it did" (757). Further fortifying this change is the conspicuous section of the novel depicting young characters studying various types of practical knowledge and skills: "She [Fran] had spent the morning at the library, reading up on

gardening. Nor was she the only student. She saw . . . a bespectacled young man of about twenty-five poring over a book called *Seven Independent Power Sources for Your Home*, and a pretty blond girl of about fourteen with a battered paperback titled *600 Simple Recipes*" (831). Like Glen Bateman states, "[i]n the post-flu world, technological know-how is going to replace gold as the most perfect medium of exchange" (407); thus, the novel portrays a return to the ideal of "mechanical ingenuity" as one of the "defining characteristics of American society" (Nash Smith 3).

However, a pervasive sense of the glorification of capitalist growth and expansion can also be detected in the novel. King's characters exhibit the confusion between the ideal of an America as a "Nature's nation", identified through the wilderness of the land (Miller 209), and an America that is characterized by its know-how, the development of technology, and the destruction of nature that comes along with it. This is best seen in the following passage depicting post-apocalyptic Ogunquit, Maine:

> On either side of them [Larry and Nadine] the essence of honky-tonk beach resort had now enclosed them: gas stations, fried clam stands, Dairy Treets, motels painted in feverish pastel colors, mini-golf . . . [p]art of him clamored at their sad at blatant ugliness and at the ugliness of the minds that had 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 the road during other summers . . . They were American people and there was a kind of dirty, compelling romance about them whenever they were in groups . . . [a]nd now all those Americans were gone. A thunderstorm had ripped a branch from a tree and it had knocked the gigantic plastic Dairy Treet sign into the ice cream stand's parking lot.

> . . [t]he grass was starting to get long on the mini-golf course. The stretch of highway . . . had once been a seventy-mile amusement park and now it was only a haunted funhouse where all the clockwork had run down. (*The Stand* 535)

In this quote, the people of the U.S. are symbolically connected to the products of their labor and instruments of leisure, this time the paraphernalia of tourist capitalism, the upturned ice-cream chain store sign and the mini-golf course falling into disrepair, both entirely devoid of aesthetic pleasure. Larry bemoans their destruction, as he bemoans the loss of the entrepreneurship that made it happen: “Not very pretty, no . . . but once it was ours . . . Once it was ours, even though we were never here before. Now it’s gone” (*The Stand* 535). The atmosphere of nostalgia that surrounds this passage overrides any sense of satisfaction at nature reclaiming its own, and echoes Robert Frost’s idea of a land that is “unstoried, artless, unenhanced” (line 15) without the influence of the American, an influence that is in the end capitalistic.

Larry's statement about true democracy is also shown as tied to the logic of consumerism, which is itself paradigmatic of the Cold War period: “It used to be root, hog, or die – and the hog who rooted the hardest ended up with the red, white, and blue Cadillac and the Pulsar watch. Now, true democracy. Any lady in America can have a Pulsar digital watch and a blue haze mink” (*The Stand* 731-742). In another section, he grieves for the “runaway” American dream, described as “chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected” (*The Stand* 871), epithets that link the ideal of Americanism to car culture, and thus consumerism. Therefore, even though the novel is in some ways critical of consumerism and its products, it shows that the capitalist thought is rooted too deeply to be eradicated simply by its sudden extinction – it is, in a sense, integral to the

American spirit. This brings into question the possibility of Stephen King's apocalypse to be either redemptive or to orient existence, as will be argued in the conclusion of the thesis.

IV. Conclusion

Analyzed through Lorenzo DiTommaso's concept of the "apocalyptic minimum", *The Stand* is shown to fully satisfy three of the five given propositions. It confirms the existence of a transcendent reality, first through the use of the Cold War development of virology and germ warfare as a secular explanation for the apocalypse, and then as biblical, with fantastical elements like prophetic dreams and supernatural powers and beings entering the fabric of the text. The opposition of two antagonistic forces, one of good and one of evil, is also handled with a twofold significance: in *The Stand*, this opposition is religious through its depiction as a battle between Mother Abagail Freemantle, the messenger of God, and Randall Flagg, the messenger of Satan. However, it is also secular through its connection to the Cold War opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union which is visible through the establishment of the democratically-coded Boulder Free Zone and the communist-coded Society of the People, as well as the viral metaphor that dominates descriptions of Flagg's influence. It depicts the conflict between the two surviving societies as inevitable and imminent through the use of nuclear weapons and nuclear anxiety as a psychological burden, explained as paradigmatic by Lorenzo DiTommaso: ". . . many Americans of the period found it easy to grasp the binary reality of the Cold War in biblical terms of absolute good and evil (the "Evil Empire"), framed as a cosmic struggle between god-fearing and godless populations and viewed against an apocalyptic (nuclear) horizon" (447).

However, although the first stages of this conflict are redemptive, in that they dissolve the reigning world system and rescue the surviving characters from their pre-apocalyptic situations,

it is impossible to say that the post-apocalyptic landscape of *The Stand* is truly divorced from pre-apocalyptic realities. Although the characters do not return to a monetary system or to the exchange of labor for capital, this is not a conscious choice, but one made out of convenience. They do not have to produce or trade because they are able to exploit the leftover fruits of consumerist capitalism – as such, they do not only become implicated in it, but their inability to structure their economy on different terms also points to the inevitability of the resurgence of old forms of labor in the future, as resources are depleted and the population of the U.S. grows once more, presaged by the birth of healthy babies by the end of the novel.

Although the characters are aware of the unique role they occupy in post-apocalyptic America, that "[t]he *ideas* [are] free" (*The Stand* 766), the conclusion of the novel is ultimately defeatist. Even though the Boulder Free Zone is truly different at the beginning of the novel, "a small-town society like no other in American pre-plague society" (*The Stand* 787), with men and women living in communities resembling communes and working together without internal strife, this changes as the population of the city grows and old institutions start to reform themselves. King sees the authorization of the police to carry arms in Boulder as the beginning of the end of the utopian dream of post-apocalyptic America:

> What happens after you give guns to the deputies? . . . You give them bigger guns. And police cars. And maybe you discover a Free Zone community down in Chile or maybe up in Canada . . . and maybe you start sending out search-parties, because after all – *That stuff is lying around, just waiting to be picked up.* (*The Stand* 1319)

As Stu and Frances leave the ever-growing Boulder Free Zone to settle in Maine they embody the paradox of Daniel Boone, the frontiersman who blazed a trail through the American

wilderness, all the while fleeing the civilization he was leaving in his wake (Nash Smith 56). This original ending is compounded by the epilogue added in the extended version from 1988, wherein Randall Flagg returns as Russell Faraday and promises to teach a tribe of indigenous people "how to be civilized" (*The Stand* 1325), thus adding explicit emphasis to King's final premise that life and civilization are a wheel that "at the end, c[omes] round to the same place again" (1325). Therefore, the novel does not imbue its narrative course with a sense of meaning, but rather the antithesis of such by depicting the apocalypse as ultimately meaningless, and the apocalyptic events as doomed to repeat themselves. It is not redemptive because it does not imagine a different future, but rather a return to the past state which was never truly eradicated. It also fails to orient existence by plunging the characters into an atmosphere of defeated resignation, as expressed by Frances' and Stu's final dialogue which, barring the epilogue, serves as King's final message:

> 'Do you think . . . do you think that people ever learn anything?' She opened her mouth to speak, hesitated, fell silent. The kerosene lamp flickered. Her eyes seemed very blue. 'I don't know,' she said at last. She seemed unpleased with her answer; she struggled to say something more; to illuminate her first response; and could only say it again: *I don't know*. (*The Stand 1320*)

King's reluctance to depict life as purposeful makes the novel diverge once again from biblical representations of the apocalypse as oriented and controlled by higher forces. By showing that "cutting the Gordian Knot simply destroys the riddle instead of solving it" (*Danse* 451), Stephen King stands as a representative of the secular strain of thought that can be described as "capitalist realism", or the idea that "it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to [capitalism]" (Fisher 4). Therefore, the novel proves Martin Walter's

argument that “once the apocalypse has become reality the overall temporal structures of society (and thus arguably also its ideologies) are shown to remain intact” (135).

Finally, though King touches upon generalized issues of precariousness and instability in an age of extremity, his depiction of the apocalypse remains firmly tied to his sensibility as an author writing in a certain location and during a certain period of time. The choice to render certain places or concepts horrific is best understood through the knowledge of the experiences and the anxieties felt by the author and his generation. Therefore, the horror of the mobile vehicle transformed into a coffin touches more deeply the culture which valorized it as a means of self-identification. Likewise, the Nazification of the American government and its armed forces, as well as the subsequent suppression of the freedom of speech, is best understood as a byproduct of the post-Vietnam/Watergate atmosphere of disillusionment. Thus, by fulfilling the function of an author as a “part of an aggregate that is considered a generation” (Meyer-Wolf 13), King shows the power of apocalyptic eschatology to modify itself in order to intimately represent the experience of a particular group of people in time, as well as those myths and paradigms which make up the very foundations of that society. By depopulating the land and returning it to the wilderness of nature, Stephen King sets the stage for the old American tradition of rendering the land tame and civilized once more and lets his survivors decide whether this is the path they want to take. By their inner thoughts and their actions, the survivors of the post-apocalypse prove that the logic of civilization, indelibly linked to expansion, technology, production, trade, and finally capitalism, is the dominant force that structures their everyday existence, if not their imagined self-identification. All of these elements make *The Stand* a uniquely American vision of apocalypse.

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