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## **EXPLORING *THE DARK TOWER*: STEPHEN KING'S POSTMODERN EPIC**

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the postmodernist conceits of Stephen King's postmodern epic, *The Dark Tower* series. In his septimology, King examines the very foundation of literary fiction as well as criticism by combining metafiction, intertextuality and the contemporary scientific multiple-worlds theory into a postmodernist chaos of information. King essentially presents a universal model which is composed of purely symbolic composites that encompass the four basic pillars of creating a written text, i.e. the author, objective reality, fictional universe, and language as a medium of written discourse. Furthermore, by dividing intertextuality into its intrinsic and extrinsic form, in combination with the multiple-worlds theory, King renders the opposition of high vs. low culture literature inert. He does so through the element of colliding fictional universes, therefore an act he positions in parallel with the flattening of the worlds of high and low culture, thus creating a vision of culture which functions on the principles of equality.

**Key words:** Stephen King, *The Dark Tower* series, metafiction, intrinsic intertextuality, extrinsic intertextuality, multiple-worlds theory

### **Introduction**

This paper deals with the culmination of King's postmodernist literary tendencies in one ultimate literary piece. Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series is comprised of several of the main characteristics of postmodern fiction. He combines elements of metafiction and intertextuality<sup>1</sup> with the scientific concept of the multiple-worlds theory<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information linking these two concept to postmodernist literature, see Waugh (1984) and Kristeva (1980).

<sup>2</sup> The multiple-worlds theory, widely known as the multiverse theory, is a concept known to theoretical physics. For further discussion on the subject, see Greene (2011), among others.

What stands at the centre of this literary series is metafiction. It is a very flexible and creative literary practice which permeates all of the postmodernist concepts employed by King in his writing. Therefore, it could be stated that his magnum opus, *The Dark Tower* series, does not merely incorporate the phenomenon of self-conscious fiction, but centres on it. Metafiction serves as the central pillar around which each and every postmodernist element present in the series revolves.

By embedding all of these postmodernist tendencies deep within the layers of his epic story, King manages to merge together the classic Victorian Arthurian legend with elements of epic high fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien (Waller, 2008:2), and uses aspects of the Victorian poetry of Robert Browning and the modernist impulses introduced to poetry by T.S. Eliot as an ever-resonating refrain for his literary epic. All of these and many more literary and cultural references are connected and combined into a constructive composite which is under the dominion of postmodernist thought.

*The Dark Tower* series is first and foremost overshadowed by chaos and confusion. It is essentially a never-ending sea of information which is comprised of intrinsic intertextual relations inherent solely to King's literary body of work, several extrinsic intertextual connections, as well as various pop-cultural references. They coexist side by side with an extensive classic heroic quest tale which, however, incorporates very non-traditional characters and settings. This postmodern series centres on Roland Deschain, a gunslinger, who wanders the world in search of the illusive Dark Tower, which King always describes with exceptional vagueness. The Dark Tower is the core of Roland's world and, as he comes to realise, not only his own world. During Roland's travels he encounters and ventures into several other worlds, which represent parallel universes. He does so either by encountering doors leading directly into them or through so called 'thinies' which are transparent and permeable membranes between realities and also gateways to other worlds. During his travels he encounters three very strange and surreal characters not akin to any form of an epic fantasy novel. Roland is drawn to three doors through which he pulls three different people into his world, namely Eddie Dean, a recovering drug addict, a little boy named Jake Chambers and a legless, schizophrenic African-American woman, Odetta Holmes (at times Detta Walker), whose personalities during the course of the story merge together, forming a new persona of Susannah Dean. All of these three characters are pulled by Roland from this world, our objective reality, although each of them from their respective time-lines. Eddie is transposed to Roland's world from the 1990's New York City, and Susannah comes from the 1960's. Jake is a unique case because he is pulled from his own world twice, both times in 1977; the first time is when he dies of the wounds inflicted by a car accident and the second time, he is saved by Roland right before this car accident. The first time Jake encounters Roland, in the first book of this septimology, entitled *The Gunslinger*, he dies in Roland's world. He subsequently reappears in King's third book *The Wastelands*.

## Confusing Fictional Realities

In his literary epic, King very skilfully mirrors the chaos inherent in postmodernist writing. King adds to the confusion expressed by the quantity of textual information present in the tale by introducing a strange style of storytelling, a vision *he neither understands nor precisely knows where or how to pursue* (Magistrale 1992:142). Whenever a writer engages in metafictional practice, the *disorder, randomness, and nonlinearity [...] of a metafictional text's understanding of language* (Stoicheff, 1991:88) essentially creates its own order. The nonlinearity inherent in metafiction is employed by King in his storytelling; however, it is imperative to understand that it is not presented here in the sense of an anachronic narrative. The metafictional nonlinearity is, at its core, chaotic but in the end creates its own system. King thus explores the chaos of metafiction while maintaining linguistic and chronological order, however, the narration is mystified by his unclear vision of the story itself.

The confusion thus felt by the reader is uncanny, as it is never clear in which universe the characters find themselves, not to mention the alienation represented by the shroud of mystery surrounding the illusive quest for the Dark Tower which is not cleared up until the very end, if that. The various perplexing and disconnected images within the story itself exemplify and mimic the collision of universes into one another. King is remarkably synchronized with the contemporary multiple-worlds theory that is predicated on the notion that *there may be an infinite number of parallel universes containing space, time, and other forms of exotic matter* (Gresh and Weinberg 2007:192). King offers a model known to theoretical physics as a multiverse which is a theoretical concept where a *universe is a part of a gigantic [structure called a] multiverse* (2007:193). The multiverse is exactly what King tells us the worlds involved in the landscape of *The Dark Tower* series are. When we examine the case of Jake being pulled from his timeline twice, we can conclude that each time, he was pulled from two separate universes. Therefore, the Jake who appears in the third volume of the series is Jake but in his core, he represents a different version of the person who had already been killed twice (once in his world by a car and once in Roland's world, also called Mid-world). The two versions of New York thus represent separate worlds which contribute to the Kingian multiverse of *The Dark Tower* series.

Furthermore, Roland's and the rest of his companions' journey takes them to different histories and thus parallel universes which are only slightly different than their counterparts. For example, in the fourth volume entitled *Wizard and Glass*, the group derails a train which they have taken in a desolate city in Mid-world and arrive through a 'thinnie' into present day Topeka, Kansas but in an alternate reality. The confusion is apparent when Eddie tries to make sense of the place where they are: *Are we back home? If we are, where are all the people? And if something like Blaine [a train] has been stopping off in Topeka – our Topeka, Topeka, Kansas*

[...] (King 2003b:186). The very fact that there are no people present at a railway station serves as an indicator that they have arrived in a parallel universe. These are just two cases of many in a myriad of confusing images which the author employs in his postmodernist narrative. The collision of worlds in King's *The Dark Tower* series, the interconnecting realities, universes as well as histories which form a titanic multiverse, is mirrored in King's brilliant interpretation of universal history, metafiction and cultural fragmentation.

### A Never-ending Cycle

The different historical periods of Eddy, Susannah, and Jake combined with the non-traditional and non-cathartic ending of *The Dark Tower* series coincides with King's belief in the concept of the cyclical model of history. King renders the whole concept of history inert. In the seventh and last book of the series, called *The Dark Tower*, Roland is finally at the end of his quest and steps through the door he has always been searching for. The gunslinger

*paused for a moment, swaying on his feet. He thought he almost passed out. It was the heat of course; the damned heat. For a moment he had felt he was somewhere else. In the Tower itself, mayhap. But of course the desert was tricky, and full of mirages. The Dark Tower still lay thousands of wheels ahead* (King 2004b:828).

History seems to be non-existent in this epic. King continually toys with his characters as well as the reader by rendering the central and most important symbol of the whole series a useless husk. The Tower becomes a symbol for nothing. It defies explanation, continuity, time as well as space. The Tower is all powerful, yet arbitrary. After more than four thousand pages, King's protagonist is precisely where the epic began with memories of his adventures fading away. This existential issue dominated by fragmentation, alienation and isolation of the main character is what lies at the core of postmodernist thought. As Butler notes in his *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, human beings in the postmodern era *live, not inside reality, but inside [their] representations of it* (2002:21). Reality as a whole thus becomes inert and fragmented, much like Roland's quest which is full of twists and turns, and in the end, amounts to nothing. King utilizes this knowledge and strengthens it by mirroring Roland's personal repetitive hell, in the form of his journey repeating itself over and over again, with the disillusionment felt by the postmodern man.

By the collision of worlds and his interpretation of the concept of history, King skilfully parallels the phrase which reflects the cultural zeitgeist of postmodern times: everything has already been done. Furthermore, he adamantly reaffirms this claim during the course of the whole literary epic by juxtaposing the collision of

worlds inside the multiverse with the cultural confusion and fragmentation present in today's world. King's employment of several historical periods characteristic of our world is an attempt to *establish an explicit narrative link between the reader's and the writer's present and the older historical reality* (Jameson 1992:21). This link is realized through various intertextual references inherent in high-culture literature as well as pop-culture which, together, form a chaotic composite that mirrors the fragmentation of today's culture. King is thus able to give a diagnosis of the problem which contemporary culture faces nowadays.

## **Remedying the Problems Faced by Contemporary Culture**

*The Dark Tower* series is riddled with intertextual references not only to literature but also pop-culture. Ranging from Shakespeare and T.S Eliot to the Rolling Stones and Z.Z. Top, King mashes together the elements of high and low culture not only of contemporary origin but also of different cultural periods (Waller, 2008:19). In the same way as King's fictional worlds collide via overlapping with one another, despite the fact that they are fundamentally different and separate realities, so do the cultural references present in the narrative. Therefore, the confusion in the multiverse of worlds becomes the mirror image of present day culture, a cultural multiverse. King not only gives a diagnosis of the problem in contemporary society but also tries to remedy the situation. In the same way as the worlds in his *The Dark Tower* series exist side by side, with exact equality, so should culture be viewed as unitary. In the same manner as he thins the barriers between realities in his fiction, so does he tear down the contemporary distinction between high and low culture. King is in concordance with Ursula Le Guin who thinks that:

*The trouble with the Litfic [academically acclaimed fiction] vs Genre idea is that what looks like a reasonable distinction of varieties of fiction always hides a value judgment: Lit superior, Genre inferior. [...] But still the opposition of literature and genre is maintained; and as long as it is, false categorical value judgement will cling to it, with the false dichotomy of virtuous pleasure and guilty pleasure* (Le Guin 2012).

The only way out from the fragmentation of today's cultural world is in what King suggests through him intertwining cultural references, and that is by simply flattening the two existing plateaus of high and low culture into one giant cultural multiverse which functions on the basis of equality rather than animosity. The very fact that King manages to create a literary epic by bringing together the high and low in culture and using it to point out existential, societal and cultural problems of contemporary society, suggests the possibility of minimizing the differences between high and low culture and, consequently, flattening its worlds.

## Dividing Intertextuality

The multiverse comprised of various fictional realities, and cultural references opens the door to one of the strongest elements of postmodernism present in King's epic, intertextuality. The collapse of distinctions is described by Christopher Butler in his *Very Short Introduction to Postmodernism*, where he asserts that *all texts are now liberated to swim, with their linguistic or literary or generic companions, in a sea of intertextuality in which previously accepted distinctions between them hardly matter* (2002:24). As can be seen in connection with the flattening of cultures, as proposed by King in *The Dark Tower* series, by including the notion of intertextuality in literature, not only does literary criticism become ineffective, but this literary fact also dispels the traditional notion of two separate worlds in the literary tradition. Therefore, the distinction between high and low literature is rendered mute.

*The Dark Tower* series envelops two distinct plains of intertextuality. The first is the traditional form of intertextuality, i.e. the written form of a text with either explicit or implicit allusions to some other extrinsic texts previously written by other authors. The second plain is introduced by King's employment of various intertextual relations within his own literary corpus, which makes *The Dark Tower* series a veritable nexus of intrinsic intertextuality as well as his crowning achievement.

The extrinsic intertextuality expressed in *The Dark Tower* series has a deliberately explicit form. King does not stray from the works that influenced the creation of his postmodernist epic, on the contrary, he pays homage to the authors thanks to whom he was able to write it. In the afterword to the first of seven books, *The Gunslinger*, King acknowledges that the idea comes primarily from Robert Browning's poem *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, parts of which frequently and purposefully appear in the course of King's epic. He calls Browning's poem *gorgeous and rich and inexplicable* (King 1988:221), and continues by saying that he wishes to write *a long romantic novel embodying the feel, if not the exact sense* (1988:221) of the poem. As may be seen by the sense of constant confusion and the richness of textual information which King presents in his epic, he has kept his promise. But Browning is not by any means his only literary source.

The title of the third book of the series is *The Waste Lands*, which in itself does not directly suggest T.S. Eliot's involvement but taking to account the names of the two parts into which this book is divided, namely "Fear in a Handful of Dust" and "A Heap of Broken Images," directly points to T.S. Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land*. Furthermore, Eliot's portrayal of the world after the destructive World War I is directly mirrored in King's description of the area of Roland's Mid-land, also known as the Waste Lands. Later in the story, it becomes known that Mid-land, just as our world around the time when modernism emerged, had been subject to a great war, which has destabilized the land and destroyed a vast majority

of its dwellings. And finally, as Robin Furth notes, the character of *Roland, the isolated individual, is a survivor, but he is no more than a fragment of a larger, lost mosaic. He has no meaning. Like the landscape he travels, his soul has become a wasteland* (Furth 2006:7). As Furth aptly points out, Roland's soul is equally, if not even more barren, than the desert and the waste lands which he wanders. This is one of numerous examples of King being a skilful writer. He combines Eliot's disillusionment of the self with a Poesque tendency of paralleling the environment to the state of the character's mind and thus reinforcing the desperation, isolation, and ultimate futility of both Roland and Mid-world itself, though it is not only Mid-world which is in jeopardy in this story.

The complicated nature not only of the story, but the very essence of King's literary fiction is fully realised through his employment of elements of intrinsic intertextuality within *The Dark Tower* series itself. It becomes further entangled when a strong metafictional element which permeates the intrinsic intertextuality is realised. The postmodernist epic is fully exposed when taking into account that King combines the previously discussed themes of intertextuality and the scientific notion of the multiple-worlds theory and binds them together under the bulwark of metafiction.

When Roland and his companions venture to Topeka and realize that it is abandoned, King speaks to the readers of his novels by making an allusion to one of his earlier works, *The Stand*. When the quartet comes to the abandoned Topeka, Jake picks up a newspaper with the headline: '*Captain Trips' Superflu Rages Unchecked, Govt. Leaders May Have Fled Country Topeka Hospitals Jammed with Sick, Dying Millions Pray for Cure* (King 2003a:196). 'Captain Trips' is the name of a genetically engineered superflu virus which has wiped out a vast majority of civilization in the literary world of *The Stand*. Furthermore, in *The Gunslinger* and other books within the series, a recurring character by the name of Walter (at times Randal Flagg) appears. Walter is one of the chief antagonists in this epic, but it becomes clear that he, rather like the Dark Tower itself, is a transdimensional and transuniversal being. First of all, he is the reason for Jake's car accident and subsequent death in his original world; therefore he possesses the ability to pass into different realities. Second of all, the character of Walter makes an appearance in several of King's other novels, for example, in *The Stand* as the infamous Randal Flagg, in *The Dead Zone* as well as *The Eyes of the Dragon*, and finally as Andre Linoge in King's screenplay entitled *The Storm of the Century*. He serves as a reader's conduit to various fictional universes created by King before the conception of *The Dark Tower* series. There is one more character who may be found in a different novel and that is father Donald Callahan, who *came to [Mid-world] from another reality, one in which the events described in Salem's Lot actually took place* (Wiater and Golden 2006:40). Combined with the multiple-worlds theory, these examples supporting the claim of intrinsic intertextuality illustrate King's practice of metafiction par excellence.

For King, as it could be suggested, it is not just about introducing a few migrating characters into his fiction; what he does in his literary epic is the active reconstruction of fictional reality, and the examination of *the structure of the represented world itself* (McHale, 1987: 59). In the past, many critics have termed King's work as science fiction, and nothing more. According to McHale, however, there is a fine line between science fiction and postmodernist fiction. *By staging "close encounters" between different worlds, placing them in confrontation, [science fiction] foregrounds their respective structures and the disparities between them.* (1987:60) This phenomenon can be found all throughout King's literary epic, and it is akin to *the ontological poetics in postmodernist fiction* (1987:60), more specifically, to metafictional practice. King is in accordance with Patricia Waugh who first proposed the notion of metafiction. According to her, metafictional practice can be defined as a style of writing which *self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as a literary artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality* (Waugh 1984:2). King abides by the rules of metafictional practice to the letter when he draws attention to the status of *The Dark Tower* series as a literary artefact. He does so by the aforementioned inclusion of the intrinsic and extrinsic literary references which greatly undermine the whole story-line as well as the continuity of the narrative itself.

## **A Crash Course in Postmodernism: How Literature Works**

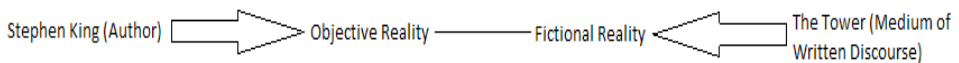
In the course of this article, the multiverse has been described in relation to extralinguistic reality as well as intertextuality. *The Dark Tower* series is first and foremost a metafictional epic; the multiverse, which King's fiction undoubtedly is, becomes entangled in the confines of literature itself. There is a distinct *interconnectedness between [King's] previous literature, his own work, and the world of the readers* (Waller 2008:32). By transferring and combining both previously described notions of intertextuality and the multiple-worlds theory into King's literary fiction, it can be said that *The Dark Tower* series represents an advanced form of metafictional practice.

In *Song of Susannah*, the sixth book of *The Dark Tower* series, King performs yet another act of metafiction when he incorporates himself into his postmodernist epic. Eddie and Roland venture into our world to come and meet Stephen King himself, because they realize that they are mere pawns in the hands of a god. Before they meet King, Roland feels as though they are *approaching the centre of everything – the Tower itself, mayhap. It's as if, after all these years, the quest itself has become the point for me, and the end is frightening* (King 2004a:266). King thus reasserts and acknowledges his presence as the creator of his own literary fiction and not just *The Dark Tower* series, but all of his works, because



he creates a metafictional and intertextual literary multiverse. By performing this metafictional act of writing himself into a very important position within the constraints of his fiction, he places authority and meaning into his hands, thus making himself into a metaphorical gravitational source around which each and every literary text he has ever written revolves. He basically becomes the medium for the intrinsic intertextuality which dominates this postmodernist epic.

*The Dark Tower* series thus becomes a very convoluted, remarkable, and fitting account of the intricacies under which literary fiction as a whole operates. Both King and the Tower are static elements around which the story slowly develops. Therefore, it can be claimed that Stephen King's postmodernist epic is a description of the complex relations which subside in the background of literary fiction itself. On the grounds of this claim, the symbolism of King incorporating himself into his fiction in his own time and reality on one side, and the Tower inhabiting Mid-world on the other, it can be stated that King and the Tower are physically static, but internally very fluid counterparts. In this sense, the character of Stephen King represents the writer as the creator of fictional universes, his own world represents objective reality, Roland's Mid-world symbolizes the world in which narratives are realised (fictional reality) and finally, the Dark Tower stands for the medium of written discourse itself, the written language.



Having said that, King's epic allows this interpretation, much like Roland's quest, to wander a bit farther. When we consider this interpretation, we can expand it not just within King's literary body of work, but rather within the whole world of literature. In *The Waste Lands*, Eddie has a dream in which he sees the unattainable and illusive Dark Tower surrounded by blood, but *then he realized that it was not blood he was looking at, but roses. The field stretched on for miles, climbing a gentle slope of land, and standing at the horizon was the Dark Tower* (King 2003a:378).

In this epic, the rose takes on many levels of symbolism, encompassing the Tower as well as the character of King himself. If a rose may be perceived as a writer and assuming that the Tower represents the medium of written discourse, it can be categorically stated that the sea of roses present before the Tower in Eddie's vision is a symbol of each and every writer who has ever lived and bestowed his/her gifts upon literature. And although all writers strive to achieve linguistic perfection, it is unattainable in the same way as it is impossible for the roses to envelop the Tower itself. The only way to the Tower, paved with roses, could be perceived as a physical representation of intertextuality in writing because in order to get closer to the Tower, it is absurd to assume that you will not scratch yourself on a few thorns.

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis given above, *The Dark Tower* series appears to be the apex of Stephen King's postmodernist writing. It serves as an ultimate representation of every postmodern tendency, theory and also practice embedded within his fictional corpus. King incorporates many elements native to postmodernist fiction and creates a postmodern narrative which is well worth studying. In his series, King explores various literary concepts by immersing his own past novels into the world of *The Dark Tower* series while applying the contemporary multiple-worlds theory into their very foundation. Through this act, he explores the intricacies of intertextuality as a driving force behind postmodernist literary discourse. Furthermore, King's approach to intertextuality results in the splitting of this concept into its intrinsic and extrinsic forms which, in his hands, has the capacity to bring forth another important issue inherent to his analysis which is the problem of the contemporary distinction between high and low literature as well as culture as such. King not only identifies this problem but also offers a solution in the form of flattening the plateaus of high and low culture into a postmodern composite which is characterized by equality. Lastly, King's magnum opus, *The Dark Tower* series may be interpreted as a kind of a model of literature presented as a synthesis of four main elements pivotal to King's story itself, namely the author as the creator of a fictional universe, objective reality from which authors draw their ideas, fictional reality which is the practical realization of written discourse, and, finally, the written discourse itself, a medium which ties together all of the three aforementioned pillars of literature as such.

Therefore, ranging from the multiple-worlds theory, through intrinsic and extrinsic intertextuality culminating in King's understanding of literature realized through his practice of metafiction, *The Dark Tower* series becomes an utterly singular and new form of literature: the Postmodern epic.

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