

# Stephen King's "The Dark Tower"

- a Modern Myth

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**Stephen King's**  
***The Dark Tower***  
*– a Modern Myth*

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## Introduction

“The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.”<sup>1</sup> Stephen King’s seven-volume epic *The Dark Tower* begins and ends with the same sentence, the protagonist having come full circle, like Gilgamesh praising the walls of Uruk in the ancient Sumerian myth. *The Dark Tower*—which Stephen King labels his magnum opus—can, in fact, also be regarded as a myth, though with modern content.

In King’s epic tale, the world has “moved on”<sup>2</sup>, and the whole multiverse is in danger of collapsing. The protagonist, Roland Deschain of Gilead, is on a quest to find the Dark Tower, which supposedly exists at the very center of creation. Unlike the companions he picks up along the way, his purpose is not primarily to save the world, but to ascend the tower in order to find out if the room at the top is inhabited by God or if God has abandoned his creation. Roland’s obsession takes him beyond moral concerns. Nothing may stand in his way, as he guns down a whole village, allows a young boy to fall to his death, and even forsakes his one true love for the Tower (which results in her being burned at the stake.) In this way, Roland keeps blackening his soul as he wanders the wastelands, and while he gradually finds some redemption in his newfound “ka-tet” of companions—and the world is eventually saved—his own personal quest fails. Roland climbs the tower alone, his companions all dead or gone, only to find it filled with mementos from his own life. There is no room at the top, only a passage back in time to the beginning of his journey, where he loses his memory and is doomed to repeat his

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* (1982; Sphere Books, 1989) 3.

<sup>2</sup> A term frequently used throughout the seven novels, meaning that the world has changed in fundamental ways. Civilization is crumbling, science is a lost art, and even the laws of physics seem different.

travails (for who knows how long). His failure signifies that the end did not, in fact, justify the means.

Though Roland does not understand it, his lifelong goal of reaching the physical Dark Tower is irrelevant. It is what happens along the way that really matters; this is the true quest for the Dark Tower, or the Holy Grail (a more familiar concept). Roland's strange tale is a modern myth with a poignant moral fit for our times.

Joseph Campbell spent his life analyzing myths from various cultures around the world. He discerned a pattern—which he called the “monomyth”—in most ancient myths, regardless of origin. Elements of the monomyth are almost inevitably present in every story, ancient and modern alike. To be a proper myth, however, a story needs to fulfill at least one more criterion; it needs a powerful moral. This essay will explore the elements of myth within *The Dark Tower* using Joseph Campbell's “monomyth” concept, with special focus on the moral theme.

## Background

Stephen King is probably best known as a prolific horror novelist, but, while he remains fascinated by the horrific, he has written many other types of stories as well, particularly in later years. *The Dark Tower* defies easy classification, but can be described as a kind of dark post-apocalyptic fantasy with elements of science fiction and horror.

The massive seven volume epic was written over the course of Stephen King's career. He began writing the first book, *The Gunslinger*, right after graduating from the University of Maine in 1970. *The Gunslinger* would not be finished for twelve years, but King's thoughts kept going back to it even while he was writing other novels, like the contemporary *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*. The remaining six volumes of *The Dark Tower* took another 22 years to complete, published at very irregular intervals to the dismay of the readers. All this time, Roland's world waxed and waned in King's mind, influencing many of his other works to varying degrees. Some, like *Insomnia*, are very closely related. Others make only passing reference to places, characters or concepts from *The Dark Tower*. Still other works by the prolific author were tied to *The Dark Tower* retroactively, by writing characters or concepts from them into that great overarching story.

King's primary sources of inspiration were Sergio Leone "spaghetti westerns" and a poem by Robert Browning—*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*—which King had studied in a university course two years prior to commencing work on *The Gunslinger*.<sup>3</sup> He also claims to have read and been impressed by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the*

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<sup>3</sup> King, *The Gunslinger* 246.

*Rings*, which inspired him to venture into fantasy fiction<sup>4</sup>. Stylistically, *The Lord of the Rings* has nothing in common with *The Dark Tower*, but there are certain archetypical parallels. There is a dark tower in both, a satanic evil incarnate, and a fragile fellowship embarked on a quest to save the world. Moreover, King's gunslinger, Roland, has very much in common with Tolkien's Aragorn. Both are rough figures, old bachelors hardened by long lives in the wilderness, princes in exile.

In contrast to Tolkien's works, the Sergio Leone movies lend some style, atmosphere, and props to *The Dark Tower* (especially the first volume) but very little of plot. Roland is a supreme gunslinger, like Clint Eastwood as the Man with no Name, but with very different priorities. He is not out to make a few dollars, but is driven by a single-minded purpose bordering on insanity; to reach the Dark Tower and ascend to the room at its top. Even though Roland is essentially a chivalric knight with double six-shooters instead of a sword, he is a tormented soul and a vastly darker character than the opportunistic and lighthearted Man with no Name.

Robert Browning's odd poem truly seems to have little in common with *The Dark Tower* except for some names (Roland, Cuthbert), locations (the Dark Tower, a bleak wasteland) and secondary characters (Dandelo, called "that hoary cripple" in the poem, and his incredibly sickly old horse). It seems King was more inspired by the concept of a knight traveling through a bleak, even grotesque, wasteland than by the plot (inasmuch as the poem has a plot).<sup>5</sup> It is still worth noting that Browning himself drew on yet older sources, like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where Edgar madly raves that

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen King, *Wolves of the Calla* (2003; Hodder and Stoughton, 2005) ix.

<sup>5</sup> In much the same way, King also borrows from T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Some lines from that poem appear in the *The Dark Tower* novels, and it is no coincidence that the third volume is titled *The Waste Lands*. Eliot's and Browning's poems both share the Arthurian connection.

“Childe Rowland to the Dark Tower came, His word was so still – fie, foh and fom / I smell the blood of a British man.” Shakespeare’s character, in turn, was likely referring to an old Scottish ballad called *Child Rowland and Burd Ellen*. In the ballad, Rowland, the son of King Arthur, rescues his sister Ellen from the King of Elfland’s dark tower, armed with his father’s sword Excalibur. However, even the Scottish ballad is not the original source; it was inspired by a Scandinavian fairy tale and fused with Arthurian legend and the famous (in medieval times) name of Roland.<sup>6</sup>

While he hardly mentions it in his notes, King does not need to bring attention to the many and strong Arthurian connections. For example, Roland Deschain is descended from his world’s version of King Arthur (Arthur Eld), whose sword Excalibur was, at some point in family history, melted down to make Roland’s two massive six shooters. As another example, Susannah gives birth to a demonic being called Mordred, whose sole purpose is to slay his “white father”. Most importantly, the Dark Tower itself is an obvious analogue to the Holy Grail, with all the connotations that has for Roland’s chance of success.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The historical Roland was a lord of Brittany under Charlemagne who died in battle fighting Basques in AD 778 and whose life eventually turned into a medieval legend. In the French eleventh century poem *La Chanson de Roland* (The Song of Roland) he is equipped with a signalling horn called the Olifant and a sword enchanted with Christian relics named Durendal. The poem was enormously popular and widespread, and is actually regarded as the first major French literary work.

<sup>7</sup> Though there are several different endings to the Arthurian Holy Grail legend, the most pertinent one states that Sir Galahad was the only knight to eventually achieve the Grail. Galahad was different from his peers in that he was free of sin, like Jesus himself.



## The Elements of Myth

Without a doubt, *The Dark Tower* is—like most fantasy literature—written in the same vein as ancient myths, albeit with updated prose. This is true not just in the sense that it is unrealistic, full of larger-than-life characters and deals with the supernatural, but also in its moral content and structure. In his monumental work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell provides the following definition of mythology:

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these.<sup>8</sup>

For modern myths, however, Frazer's definition and church doctrine are hardly appropriate. Joseph Campbell describes a basic pattern present in virtually all myths, which he calls the "monomyth", or the "hero's journey". The monomyth seems to lurk in the collective unconscious of humanity, because many or even most stories—for better or worse—follow this pattern rather closely. The pattern can be broken down into three

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; Fontana Press 1993) 382.

main phases; *initiation*, *separation* and *return*. A more detailed representation with examples of ancient mythical plot elements looks like this:

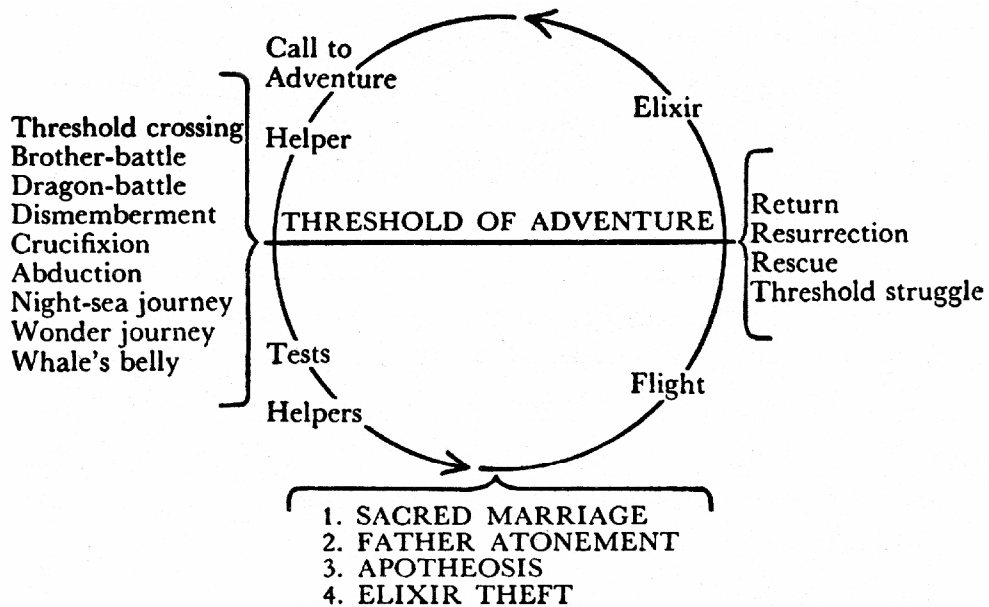


Figure 1 – the hero’s journey, a.k.a. the monomyth.<sup>9</sup>

The monomyth is circular in nature, with the hero being “called to adventure” (*initiation*), crossing the threshold to a world very different from his mundane existence (*separation*), having an adventure there and finally returning back home (*return*) greatly changed by the experience, typically having gained special insights, powers or a boon to bestow on humanity (called “elixir” in the figure.) In ancient mythology, the cyclic, circular nature of the monomyth pattern conveyed profound and mystical truths about human life itself, its stages and purpose: birth, childhood, passage to maturity, enlightenment, death and, sometimes, rebirth. As such, the hero’s journey is perfect for any moral story about the role of the individual in society, or of spiritual maturation. (See Durkheim and

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 245.

Coomaraswamy's definitions above.) However, Joseph Campbell argues that society has changed fundamentally from times past:

Then all meaning was in the group, none in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group—none in the world: all in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two.

The hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo. Where then there was darkness, now there is light; but also, where light was, there now is darkness. The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul.<sup>10</sup>

Myths teaching us to be content with our lot in life—be it as thief, brick maker, merchant or king—and trust in the will of the ever-present gods would not be very popular, or even fully comprehensible, today. Instead, modern myths should strive to guide the lost souls of our individualist culture through a new type of philosophical or spiritual hero's journey.

The heroes of old were typically brash young men of great power and prowess (often demigods), cunning and intelligent, but lacking in wisdom and failing to understand their limitations and their place in creation. Gods and demons were commonplace and the order of the universe never in doubt. Gilgamesh, the Sumerian

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 388.

king—and the first hero in written tradition—seeks immortality from Utnapishtim and the Gods but fails miserably, greatly humbled. Returning to Uruk he takes comfort in the grandeur of its city walls, built by mortals.

In contrast, Roland Deschain is already old when *The Dark Tower* begins—very old—having wandered for centuries or more in an age when time has grown strange. (He even starts showing signs of arthritis as the story progresses.) Roland is, in his own way, a wise man who knows how people think and is mindful of the workings of “ka” (fate). Even so, he is plagued with doubts that gnaw at him and drive him onwards to find his answers at the top of the Dark Tower. In essence, he seeks a solution to the problem of theodicy (the problem of evil.)<sup>11</sup> Roland’s greatest fear is that God is dead, or even worse; that He has become feeble-minded and malicious. This is why saving the world from the “breakers” is secondary to Roland. Yet he has to do it, for otherwise he will never reach the tower and find his answers. Roland’s hero-deed is precisely “to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul”<sup>12</sup>; though his tale is a cautionary one.

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<sup>11</sup> This is a recurring theme in many of Stephen King’s novels.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 388.

## **The First Cycle – Roland’s Youth**

Stephen King describes Roland’s childhood and youth with flashbacks scattered throughout *The Dark Tower*. In *Wizard and Glass*, Roland tells his companions the story of his lost love Susan Delgado, a retelling which takes up most that volume. Taken together, these events, which occurred centuries before *The Gunslinger* commences, comprise a prior hero’s journey myth; a myth within the myth. This first cycle is important because it foreshadows what is to come.

### ***Initiation***

There is turmoil in the barony of Gilead. Traitors led by John Farson, “the good man”, plot revolution to overthrow Roland’s father, Steven Deschain. In reality, the rebels are controlled by the same dark forces that strive to bring down the Dark Tower and end the world. The opposition is thus the same in the first cycle as in the main cycle. Likewise, the stakes are similar, for John Farson’s revolution will signal the end of one of the last bastions of civilization in this world. However, Steven Deschain, and most of the gunslingers, believe that preserving and protecting the Tower is of paramount importance. It is the sacred calling of their order, which they pass on to Roland. The events in Gilead and the other baronies are deemed unimportant in comparison; a terrible mistake as it turns out, for the Tower is upheld by order and goodness everywhere.

Though Roland is the heir to the baronial throne, his upbringing is no different from that of any other aspiring gunslinger (that is, knight.) Under the brutal tutelage of Cort, Roland is forced to grow up very quickly. Goaded by the evil court magician Marten, he chooses to undergo his gunslinger trial at the exceptionally young age of 14.

The stakes are high, as failure would mean permanent exile. The duel with Cort for his spurs is Roland's *initiation* in his first hero's journey cycle. It also corresponds to *threshold crossing* in figure 1. (Rites of passage and trials of manhood are classic and essential elements in mythology.) In choosing his falcon as his weapon he is able to win by demonstrating exactly the kind of cunning required of mythical heroes.

As he enters manhood, Roland's soul is still unsullied. However, he has been schooled to become a killer and a "hardcase", albeit with a somewhat warped code of honor. These character flaws are actually encouraged by his father: "it is not your place to be moral. In fact morals may always be beyond you. You are not quick, like Cuthbert or Wheeler's boy. It will make you formidable."<sup>13</sup>

## ***Separation***

The morning after his victory against Cort, Roland tells his father about his mother's indiscretion with Marten. Steven reveals that he has known of his wife's deceit and Marten's duplicity for two years. Suspecting that Marten will attempt to assassinate Roland, Steven sends him off to Mejis with his two friends and future gunslingers Cuthbert and Alain. (*Call to adventure* in figure 1. His friends are his *helpers*.) In the barony seat of Hambry, the boys find out that John Farson is using the distant colony as a staging ground, amassing horses and oil for the coming revolution. Meanwhile, Roland falls in love with Susan Delgado, who is already promised to the mayor of Hambry, her purity guaranteed by the village witch, Rhea of Cöos. Unfortunately, the evil witch sees their lovemaking and decides that Susan needs to die for breaking her pact with Rhea and the mayor. (Roland and Susan's love correspond to *Sacred Marriage* in figure 1.)

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<sup>13</sup> King, *The Gunslinger* 112.

The three boys are also hounded by Farson's regulators in Mejis; the Big Coffin Hunters. Their leader, Eldred Jonas, decides to murder the mayor and his chancellor and frame the boys for the deed. Roland tells Susan to flee west to Gilead, but instead she lingers and breaks the young men out from jail. Again he makes her promise to flee west; this is the last time the two lovers meet.

Roland's little ka-tet burns down Farson's oil fields and ambushes the Big Coffin Hunters and their posse; within minutes, those not dead flee in panic. Roland wrests the Wizard's Glass Rhea has been using from Eldred Jonas before he kills him. (*Elixir Theft* in figure 1.) The gunslinger promptly has a vision of the future and of the Dark Tower (*Apotheosis* in figure 1). He swears to reach the tower and conquer the wrongness within. His destiny is now clear to him; if he and his friends survive the turmoil in Gilead they will search for the Dark Tower. When his companions ask him about Susan's part in this future, he responds:

When we finish with yonder men and she finishes with Mejis, her part in our *ka-tet* ends. Inside the ball, I was given a choice: Susan, and my life as a husband and father of the child she now carries... or the Tower. [...] I would choose Susan in an instant, if not for one thing: the Tower is crumbling, and if it falls, everything we know will be swept away. There will be chaos beyond our imagining. We must go... *and we will go*. [...] I choose the Tower. I must. Let her live a good life and long with someone else—she will, in time. As for me, I choose the Tower.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen King, *Wizard and Glass* (Signet, 1997) 605.

Believing Susan to be safely on her way to Gilead, the ka-tet proceeds to deal with the rest of Farson's men. These are tricked to ride into a *whinny*—a kind of dimensional rupture—an early sign of the deterioration of the Dark Tower.

Afterwards, when the blood red moon rises, Roland realizes that Susan is far from safe. In the Wizard's Glass, he watches how the frenzied and superstitious townspeople of Hambry “celebrate” the reaping festival by burning Susan at the stake. With her dying breaths, she screams her love for Roland. Though Roland is not directly responsible, he did abandon Susan for his “greater quest”, thus allowing the evil Rhea to exact her gruesome revenge. Fate teaches him a horrible lesson, but it is one that he still does not heed, for he will keep sacrificing friends and companions in order to reach the Tower.

## ***Return***

In a shocked trance, Roland returns to Gilead with his ka-tet and his *elixir*—the Wizard's Glass. As boons go, it is a dubious one, for the pink crystal ball likes to deceive and hurt with its addictive visions. The ball reveals an assassination plot against his father: an agent will pass a poisoned dagger to the assassin, Roland's mother. He decides to give her one last chance before exposing her to his father, and confronts her in her chamber. In a scene out of Greek tragedy, his mind is clouded by the Wizard's Glass and he kills his mother with his father's guns, believing her to be Rhea of Cöös. (This is the *threshold struggle* of the *return* in figure 1.)

The actions of Roland's ka-tet have postponed the fall of Gilead, and with the costly help of the Wizard's Glass, Steven Deschain's life has been saved (somewhat corresponding to *father atonement* in figure 1). This is the boon that Roland brings back from his hero's journey, but two years later the revolution finally arrives. At Jericho Hill,



the last gunslingers are all killed, except for Roland, who is preserved by fate. Fate, *ka*, guides and goads Roland on towards the Tower. It preserves him for his future task through his long, untold wanderings before *The Gunslinger*—and the main cycle of Roland's saga—commences.

## **The Main Cycle – The Dark Tower**

The main cycle of *The Dark Tower* is a sprawling tale with frequent flashbacks and sidetracks running off into the stories of secondary characters. Stephen King seems to revel in his chance to revisit locations and characters out of his other novels; some of whom are on their own hero's journeys, such as Father Callahan, whose faith was found lacking in *Salem's Lot*. Furthermore, each volume on its own usually comprises a more or less complete cycle of the monomyth. In fact, four of the middle volumes, from *The Waste Lands* to *Song of Susannah*, are just a long succession of adventures and trials along the road to the apotheosis of the last volume.

### ***Initiation***

The apotheosis of the first cycle—Roland's vision in the pink Wizard's Glass—is also his call to adventure for the main cycle. As a gunslinger, the protection of the Dark Tower is Roland's sacred charge, and when Gilead falls there is nothing to hold him back from his destiny. However, he had not envisioned himself alone on the quest, but rather accompanied by the others in his gunslinger ka-tet: Alain, Cuthbert and Jamie. Alone, he wanders for centuries, though for him it does not seem that long; like an astronaut traveling at relativistic speeds. When Roland enters the village of Tull in *The Gunslinger*, he is far from the teenager who watched his friends die at Jericho Hill, appearing now to be in his middle or late fifties. He has been hardened by life far beyond the endurance of most people. "The only contingency he had not learned how to bear was the possibility of

his own madness.”<sup>15</sup> In Tull, the gunslinger quickly realizes that the man in black has laid a trap for him, planted a murderous seed in the minds of the villagers. Yet, he does not seek to avoid it, but fatalistically waits for several days for the trap to spring, confident he can handle it. When the villagers eventually rush him, wielding anything that comes to hand, he guns them down and does not try to spare anyone. He kills 39 men, 14 women (including his brief lover) and 5 children. In telling the story to Brown, he shows no remorse:

Brown said, ‘There. You’ve told it, do you feel better?’

The gunslinger started. ‘Why would I feel bad?’

‘You’re human, you said. No demon. Or did you lie?’

‘I didn’t lie.’<sup>16</sup>

The incident is descriptive of Roland as he is at the start of his hero’s journey, a ruthless hardcase; beyond morality and formidable—as his father predicted—yet not a step closer to the Tower. The hard surface receives a crack when he picks up the boy Jake at the way station. Jake forces Roland to regain a measure of humanity. The boy is his first *helper* (see figure 1) and the kernel of a new ka-tet. However, Roland fails the test that ka has placed in his path, choosing the *initiation* into the Dark Tower mysteries that Walter offers over the boy’s life.<sup>17</sup> (*Threshold crossing, wonder journey* in figure 1.)

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<sup>15</sup> King, *The Gunslinger* 15

<sup>16</sup> King, *The Gunslinger* 65

<sup>17</sup> King, *The Gunslinger* 211

## **Separation**

Roland makes a pact with evil, and the price is the life of an innocent child. In true satanic fashion, it turns out to be a poor bargain. The answers he receives from Walter are vague, twisted, or possibly outright lies. Walter exacts another price, for Roland wakes up after his long night of revelations aged ten years. But the cost runs higher still, for ka punishes him for his unforgivable transgression by letting “lobstrosities” take two fingers off his right hand, inflicting blood poisoning (*dismemberment* in figure 1.)

The “drawing of the three” through the doorways on the beach signifies Roland’s *separation* from his long, familiar but lonely existence. The three are his new *helpers*, and new ka-tet. While Roland mainly views them as tools to reach the tower, ka has placed them in his path to help him regain his humanity. The journey will be long and hard. *The Waste Lands* contains the first set of trials on the long road towards Roland’s apotheosis. *Wizard and Glass* is a long flashback, mostly concerning his first monomyth cycle. *Wolves of the Calla* is a rather self-contained story, but also opens up the final approach to the Tower and brings Stephen King himself into the story in a meta-fictional twist. *Song of Susannah* contains more meta-fiction, as Roland confronts Stephen King and urges him to finish writing *The Dark Tower* epic. The abomination Mordred is born (out of a reversed, unholy, *sacred marriage*, figure 1), and Father Callahan gains his final redemption. Roland’s apotheosis does not come until the final volume, *The Dark Tower*. Saving the world is a three part business: protecting the Rose in New York City, stopping the unwitting psychic “breakers” and saving Stephen King’s life so that he can finish writing the story. Eddie dies stopping the breakers and Jake dies saving Stephen King’s life in a fictional account of the car accident that almost killed the author in reality.

The death of his two companions—whom Roland has come to view as his sons, and they him as their father (*father atonement*, figure 1)—is the gunslinger’s apotheosis. Jake’s death especially touches Roland to the core. The boy he once sacrificed for the Tower, then regained, is irrevocably dead again, this time having willingly chosen to die for Roland’s quest. When Jake lies dying and Stephen King is gravely injured on the road, Roland thinks “Good! If someone has to die here, let it be you! To hell with Gan’s navel, to hell with the stories that come out of it, to hell with the Tower, let it be you and not my boy!”<sup>18</sup> A far cry from the gunslinger who felt no regret after the massacre at Tull; the villain who let Jake fall to his death. When Roland has dug a hole to bury Jake in, he

...began to weep again. He put his hands over his face and rocked back and forth on his knees, smelling the sweet aromatic needles and wishing he had cried off before ka, that old and patient demon, had taught him the real price of his quest. He would have given anything to change what had happened, anything to close this hole with nothing in it, but this was the world where time ran just one way.<sup>19</sup>

Roland, it seems, has finally regained his humanity:

He knelt a moment longer with his hands clasped between his knees, thinking he had not understood the true power of sorrow, nor the power of regret, until this moment.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen King, *The Dark Tower* (2004; Scribner, 2005) 452

<sup>19</sup> King, *The Dark Tower* 473

*I cannot bear to let him go.*

But once again, that cruel paradox: if he didn't, the sacrifice was in vain.<sup>20</sup>

## **Return**

The *return* phase begins when Roland, Susannah and Oy are drawing close to the Dark Tower. Finally, Roland listens to his conscience and—though he begs her to stay—allows Susannah to depart, knowing full well she would not survive the final confrontation. For the first time ever, Roland willingly decreases his chance of success in order to spare a friend's life. Perhaps this is a contributing factor to ka granting him a boon (the horn of Eld) on the next turn of his cycle.

Roland faces two return *threshold struggles* (see figure 1); Mordred and the Crimson King. With the help of Oy—the last remaining member of the ka-tet—who heartrendingly sacrifices himself fighting the demon, Roland defeats his infernal offspring. Even though the ka-tet is gone, Roland is not alone when he reaches the Tower, for he still has the mute artist Patrick Danville (whom they rescued at Danelo's hut) from *Insomnia* at his side. This recent companion, present only for the very resolution of the long tale, is somewhat out of place. Clearly his presence has a special meaning. According to Stephen King scholar Bev Vincent; “The boy stands for all the murders and betrayals that brought Roland to the Tower.”<sup>21</sup> That is possible, but it also demonstrates that Roland is never alone for any of his significant struggles, not even in the end. It could signify that ka, providence, or God keeps providing Roland with the

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<sup>20</sup> King, *The Dark Tower* 474

<sup>21</sup> Bev Vincent, *The Road to the Dark Tower* (New American Library, 2004) 186

assistance he needs. Perhaps more to the point however, being formidable is not enough; Roland is still always dependent on others.

Patrick has the power to draw a perfect image of the Crimson King and then erase it—and with it the actual personage—from existence. Patrick's survival represents another step in the right direction for the questing knight whose friends all tend to die. The Gunslinger, in reaching the end of his long, grueling journey, has saved the universe; a boon for mankind (*elixir*, figure 1) if ever there was one. However, there is no peace for him in the clearing at the end of the path, for Roland Deschain of Gilead journeys on the wheel of the monomyth. The end must bring him back to the beginning. Roland carries no horn, but a horn is sounded and the door to the tower opens up. King reluctantly allows the reader to follow Roland inside to see the bitter failure of his personal quest.

The tower is full of mementos from his life. The symbolic meaning is clear: it is the way you get to the Tower that determines what you find inside. Roland does not find God at the top and receives no answer to the theodicy problem. Instead he is sucked into his own past (*resurrection* in figure 1). But, as he returns to the desert landscape of *The Gunslinger*, there is a difference, a new hope, for this time he carries the horn of Eld, which he will need when he reaches the Dark Tower again.

Roland has come full circle. The end of his myth, of Stephen King's "magnum opus", carries strong hints of karma and reincarnation; a proper ending for a myth in the ancient tradition, an appropriate hero-deed for our times, and, perhaps, an insight into the author's own spiritual beliefs. The last sentence of *The Dark Tower* is the same as the first: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> King, *The Dark Tower* 830

## Morality

Roland seeks an answer to the theodicy problem (though he would not know the word.) Although he does not receive any answers in the end, through Roland's myth the reader might. In *The Dark Tower* there are three metaphysical forces for good: *God*, *Gan* and *ka*. *Ka* is more or less identical to fate, but the word also seems to imply a purpose and a plan (the similarity to the word karma is certainly not coincidental.) *Gan* is more or less the living essence of creation.

Roland never questions the existence and omnipotence of *ka*, like he does God. He also believes in *Gan*, but he does not connect either *Gan* or *ka* with God. In the end, however, the nature of God—even His existence—matters little. *Ka* is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. It is harsh, even cruel, but never malicious. *Ka* puts certain people into Roland's way, forces him into situations where he will have to make crucial choices. Yet, he always *does* have a choice. It is Roland Deschain who always takes the straightest route towards the Dark Tower; not circumstance, destiny or God. The gunslinger is ultimately responsible for his own damnation. *Ka* even allows him plenty of second chances, such as the resurrection of the boy Jake through a temporal paradox—a boy Roland has already willingly sacrificed so that he could have his palaver with Walter, the man in black. Roland is destined to reach the Dark Tower, and *ka* ensures that he does, but the path there, and the ultimate state of his body and soul, is of Roland's choosing.

Again and again, Roland is presented with the same essential choice; taking care of people (himself included) here and now, or abandoning them for the Great Quest. Like his father and the gunslingers before him, Roland prefers minimal involvement with local



matters. Yet in all the centuries that Roland wanders alone, between his first and second monomyth cycles, he never gets one step closer to the Tower. Everything he ever accomplishes he does with the help of others; from his falcon at his gunslinger trial through his first and second ka-tets of companions, to Patrick Danville at the foot of the Dark Tower. Except for Susannah and Patrick, they all end up dead. Just before she leaves Roland, Susannah realizes the true meaning of ka-tet: “Dear God, had she been here so long and been through so much without knowing what ka-tet *was*, what it meant? Ka-tet was family. Ka-tet was love.”<sup>23</sup> Roland is only too aware of the importance of his companions, and is tormented by their willingness to die for him: “Here is another one ready to die for you, Roland. What great wrong did you ever do that you should inspire such terrible loyalty in so many?”<sup>24</sup>. Still, he does not spare any of his friends until Susannah departs.

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<sup>23</sup> King, *The Dark Tower* 733

<sup>24</sup> Stephen King, *The Drawing of the Three* (1987; Sphere Books, 1990) 150

## Conclusion

The format of a myth, the monomyth structure, serves perfectly for Stephen King's magnum opus; primarily, of course, to convey a profound moral and spiritual message, but also as a means for the author to integrate many of his other novels and characters into one huge, truly epic overarching tale. *The Dark Tower* myth does not slavishly adhere to the phases and sub-phases of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, but the main characteristics are all there, including its poignant moral. The inclusion of a previous monomyth cycle—of Roland's youth—elegantly provides the hero's background while at the same time foreshadowing future events.

Roland is a hero representing everyman, his quest parallels our ambitions and obsessions on a mythical scale, and his hero-deed is exactly—in the words of Joseph Campbell—“that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul”<sup>25</sup>. For Roland's myth, and his ultimate fate, dares to suggest that there is something greater than one man's quest, that past deeds and misdeeds are never forgotten, that *ka*—karma—sees all and governs all.

The human individual is the centerpiece of our society. Celebrating that individuality by expressing ourselves, by being seen and heard by others, has become a virtue. But there are places even formidable individuals cannot go; paths we cannot bear to walk alone. In the face of suffering, death and evil, we blanch and turn our faces away, unable to put into context that which we have not directly caused ourselves. The light of science and reason guides our conscious minds, but night has fallen on our souls. Recall Joseph Campbell's words: “One does not know toward what one moves. One does not

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<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 388.

know by what one is propelled.”<sup>26</sup> One does not know. Nor does one bear to think of it, for in the modern world, there are no answers; answers that, in times past, were readily provided by myths, by rites and by seasonal celebrations.

The Dark Tower, which stands at the nexus of all worlds, represents our souls, and death is the end of our journey, when we finally behold the Tower as it truly is, like Roland did at the end of his “hero’s journey”. It is our ultimate destination, with absolute certainty, but what it will look like depends on how we choose to live our lives. Along the road, fate is our teacher and taskmaster (and it is a cruel one); conscience our guide. What we call evil—impersonal evil—exists to tempt, test, and refine us. To pass these tests, we will need the help of fellow travelers; family, friends, *ka-tet*. Setting lofty goals and pursuing ambitions to the exclusion of all else will yield poor results—they are false towers—and in the end, it is the present, the everyday affairs, which matter. The heart of man has not changed in the four and a half thousand years since Gilgamesh walked the Earth, and will still remain the same in the distant future, when the world has moved on, for some truths are eternal.

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 388.

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