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Morality in the American West: The Origins of Evil in Stephen King's *The Stand* and *Desperation*

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PROJECT TITLE: MORALITY IN THE AMERICAN WEST:
THE ORIGINS OF EVIL IN STEPHEN KING'S
THE STAND AND DESPERATION

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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Morality in the American West:
The Origins of Evil in Stephen King's
The Stand and *Desperation*

Sam Morris

April 30th, 2001

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And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

-Genesis 2:7

Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? . . . The madman jumped into their midst. . . . "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Sometimes you wonder, I mean really wonder. I know we make our own reality and we always have a choice, but how much is pre-ordained?

-John Lennon

Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson

And on their promises of paradise
You will not hear a laugh
All except inside the Gates of Eden.

-Bob Dylan

Morality is herd instinct in the individual.

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Oh shit, the mummy's after us, let's all walk a little faster.

-Stephen King

Introduction:

The "New" American Morality

The motion picture was perhaps the greatest innovation in entertainment since the printing press. Once it became economically viable for publishing houses to mass-produce novels, it became possible for a larger readership to be entertained. At the point when the motion picture became an accessible form of entertainment, not only could a large audience be entertained, but they could ingest an entire story in under two hours. As time and convenience became a trademark of the modern era of the early twentieth century, cinema slowly started to replace literature as the preferred means of entertainment, especially in America. By the 1970's, movie theaters consistently drew big business despite what the fare to be had was. Meanwhile, it took something remarkable for a publishing house to be guaranteed large sales. And while a remarkable work of fiction may still come along several times a year, the novel's overall appeal is no match for the movies' all-encompassing dominance in American society.

One of the few standout literary phenomena of the late twentieth century was an author by the name of Stephen King. From his 1974 debut novel *Carrie* onward, King consistently yanked his audience away from the movie theater and back into a comfortable chair with each of his journeys into the world of horror fiction. While there may be a few contemporary authors that can consistently compete with the movies, Tom Clancy or John Grisham hardly provide the best means of comparison for the subject matter of Stephen King's novels. As it is, to find a form of entertainment comparable in overall popularity as well as subject matter to King's fiction, one must turn to cinema.

Stephen King operates in the realm of horror, a genre he learned to love as a child (through both film and text) and mastered as an adult. As an art form, horror has been around at least since Oedipus gouged out his eyes after learning he violently murdered his father and slept with his mother. Suffice it to say, the genre of horror has thrived through almost all permutations and periods of art that have existed over the years of human existence. In America, horror demonstrated its ability to captivate audiences in no better way than through film. The first part of this project deals with America's fascination with the horror film--why Americans have consistently shown interest in horror films and what these films give to their audiences.

This discussion of horror as a genre readily lends itself to a discussion of evil, which is a problematic term. In a perfect world (i.e., Eden), evil is an unnecessary term as there is nothing to embody it. Only in an imperfect world where morality becomes a concern does evil become a necessary discourse. Even then, evil is only used to describe things that are not good; that is, anything that keeps humankind from striving to return to a perfect world. The unfortunate result of this binary relationship is that evil is constricted to being diametrically opposed to good, when, in fact, evil is much more multifarious than that. As is the case for many things not based on corporeal reality, perhaps evil does not have a graspable essence.

The truth of the matter is that the definition of evil is largely, if not wholly, contingent on the society that defines it. One society's mode of operation can very easily be considered the very embodiment of evil for another. For the sake of this study, the definition of evil will be limited to the definition characterized by American society, which is based on two underlying principles: Christian morality and civil freedom. Both of these principles and

their supporting codifications of law, the Ten Commandments and the Constitution (also the Declaration of Independence), define evil as the act of *taking away*. In American society, ultimate good is defined by Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." And, essentially, any violation of the Ten Commandments, which has been adapted nearly verbatim into American law, readily ensures that someone's life, liberty, or happiness has been taken away. Thus, violating the ultimate good of American society by disobeying the underlying ideology of the law is the American embodiment of evil. The second chapter of this project deals with where evil comes from--at least in a society based on individual rights and Christian morality. This chapter concerns itself with three main sources of evil--God, Satan, and the individual--and how each of them has contributed to form a working conception of evil. Further, this chapter deals with some of the inconsistencies and problems that the American conception of evil creates.

The third and fourth chapters, which comprise the majority of the project, concentrate on how Stephen King combines America's fascination with the genre of horror and his mastery of the genre in order to create a forum to discuss anything he wishes. In the case of two of his novels, *The Stand* and *Desperation*, King discusses the Christian/American conception of morality, where evil comes from, why evil exists, and how people react to evil. In these novels, King not only demonstrates his ability to capture and hold an audience, he also shows his keen understanding of Judeo-Christian and American traditions. Primarily, he shows this understanding through a reevaluation of the Judeo-Christian deity, a demonstration of the kinds of evils that tempt individuals within the American society, and a characterization of an innate sense of morality.

Monsters, Science Fiction, and God:

The Morality of Horror

During the Great Depression, despite widespread financial woes, Hollywood managed to create two wildly popular mainstays: Shirley Temple and the Universal Monsters. Both franchises had their own particular way of cheering people up through distraction, but only Universal intentionally used horror for this purpose. *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932) all drew heavy box office numbers, as well as spawned sequels that did just as well (sometimes better). Even after the Depression ended, the sequels to these films, hackneyed and mediocre by that time, still retained their audiences--possibly due to Americans' loyalty to the movies, being one of the few things that made such difficult times more bearable.

Monsters such as those in the 1930's Universal movies are an ever-present force in the horror genre; however, another force just as pervasive as the monsters (and often responsible for the existence of the aforementioned monsters) is science fiction. Science fiction's two main tenets are technological advancement and the exploration of futuristic territories. Technological advancement can be seen in horror films (and novels) as early as Victor Frankenstein's manipulation of science in order to play God and create life. As for futuristic territories, Fred Botting points out that "the future only presents a dark, unknown space from which horrors are visited" (163). H.G. Wells is the undisputed master of these futuristic territories, and it is worth note that most of his novels have been turned into fairly successful films. Many creators of horror, including Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, were entranced by ideas that the genre of science fiction adopted. Two of the most successful horror films, *Alien* (1979) and

Jurassic Park (1993), are, in fact, more accurately described as horror/science fiction hybrids through their reliance on technology and new territories.

Financially speaking, the most successful horror movie ever made is *Jurassic Park*. In its run at the box-office, *Jurassic Park* grossed over nine hundred million dollars worldwide--and that does not even include the profits made from merchandising and video sales. As with the Universal monster movies of the 1930's, audiences craved a sequel. Much to the chagrin of the original creator, Michael Crichton, a sequel, *The Lost World*, was released in 1997 that almost doubled *Jurassic Park's* opening weekend numbers. Currently, Universal Studios is producing a second sequel, no doubt hoping that it will do as well as the first two movies in the series.

The reason that people come to see these movies as regularly as they do is simple: they want to be scared. People do not normally like to be scared; however, when they go to see movies, things are a bit different. For one, there does not seem to be much of a chance that cloned dinosaurs, vampires, parasitic aliens, or Egyptian mummies will be chasing anyone down a dark alley anytime soon in real life. Moreover, if the events and creatures on the movie screen motivate the fear displayed by the audience, then the audience is effectively distracted from anything frightening actually occurring in real life. This fact is the essence of why the horror movie is popular--in most cases, the audience can be scared without any real-life ramifications. In the Great Depression, for example, people were so scared that things might get even worse in their real lives that it must have been a great relief to see Victor Frankenstein or Jonathan Harker be terrorized for a little while.

Within the vast quantity of horror movies, many archetypes have emerged as particular favorites among audiences. One such archetype is the "bad trip" scenario. Basically, a character or group of characters goes someplace away from home and bad things begin to happen. The best example of this archetype is Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film, *Psycho*. In the film, Janet Leigh's character, Marion Crane, flees her job with an armload of cash, determined to make her and her lover's life better. Driven off the road by a fierce storm, she ends up booking a room for the night at the Bates Motel. During the most studied scene in the history of cinematography, Norman Bates viciously murders the film's "heroine." While making a point about morality, Hitchcock also strikes a nerve in every audience member who has ever left home.

At this point, it is beneficial to mention that the genre of horror is very much concerned with questions of morality. In the "bad trip" archetype, most characters are not victimized until they leave home, which acts as a safe center of sorts. What Hitchcock so deftly demonstrates in *Psycho* when Marion Crane flees the city is that she is not just fleeing from home, but also from conventional morality. In this way, horror often verifies the conventional morality of the society in which it is created by showing that there is no need to be scared if one simply stays within the bounds of safety created by society. Wes Craven, the master of the slasher movie, a movie that specifically punishes teenagers who step outside of the bounds of conventional sexual morality (i.e., by engaging in pre-marital sex), even went so far as to parody his own earlier movies that perpetuated this connection between (sexual) morality and horror. Ironically, the *Scream* trilogy (1996, 1997, 2000) has proven to be Craven's most lucrative endeavor to date.

There are several other examples of this archetype, some that explicitly reveal this connection with morality, and others that do not. *Jurassic Park* demonstrates essentially what happens when an overzealous entrepreneur lures two hapless paleontologists, a lawyer (audiences cheer every time they see the t-rex kill him), a scientist, and two innocent children to an island where science meets bad judgment. Perhaps initially more realistic than all these examples is the 1997 movie *Breakdown* (1997). The plot begins rather simply (and believably): a couple's car breaks down in the middle of the desert. It turns out that their car was sabotaged by a group of men who take great joy in kidnapping tourists. These men kidnap Jeff Taylor's wife, and the rest of the movie revolves around his slow realization of what is happening and the subsequent rescue of his wife. It is this same stranded-and-kidnapped-in-the-desert motif that fuels Stephen King's 1996 novel *Desperation* (currently being made into a movie). The story begins with a deranged cop trapping random people as they drive by a small town in Nevada called Desperation and then progresses into a story of survival and escape (and morality).

Another, and perhaps the most recognized, archetype of the horror movie is the "humans go too far" story. In this scenario, a group of humans do or create something that threatens their existence and, sometimes, the whole of humankind. *Jurassic Park* happens to be an excellent example of this archetype. Scientific curiosity and breakthroughs in paleontology and genetics make it possible for a private corporation to clone dinosaurs from petrified DNA. Instead of using this new technology for legitimate scientific research, the corporation decides to see how much it can profit from having actual dinosaurs to display to the public. The plot of the story surrounds what happens when a select few preview the new theme park that houses

the dinosaurs and the dinosaurs begin to run amok. Most of the humans escape and the island is napalmed; but as one learns in the sequel, no one thought to do the same to the island where the corporation conducted its research. Apparently, despite the disaster on Jurassic Park, someone still thought that live dinosaurs were marketable.

Additionally, all the Invisible Men, the Mr. Hydes, and the Dr. Frankensteins of the horror genre owe their success to this archetype. They are all confirmations of conservative ideology in that they show the negative effects of humans stepping outside of their own bounds as mortals and trying to affect something best left to a higher power. One of the most recent examples of this personal overreaching is *Hollow Man* (2000). Here, Sebastian Caine is an overzealous scientist obsessed with the idea that a man can be rendered invisible and, moreover, the idea that he will be the first to do so. Ethics and morality never enter his mind. In fact, one of his assistants even jokingly brings up the subject from his overhead perch, nicknamed Heaven: "You are disturbing the natural order of things and will be severely punished for all eternity. God has spoken." The mad scientist replies, "How many times do I have to tell you, Frank? You're not God. I am." It is only after the threat of the government revoking his funding that Caine decides to undertake the experiment himself. Now invisible, Caine comes to think that conventional moral codes do not apply to him and he eventually goes on a killing spree, killing all of his coworkers except for ex-girlfriend Linda McKay and her current lover, who manage to kill him first.

Since many Americans view the government as Big Brother and fear that it has its hands on everything, it makes sense that the government often falls into stories categorized by this overreaching archetype. Especially during the atomic years of the 1950's, many horror films

were concerned with the fact that the United States could not get enough of nuclear research and experimentation. Mutated ants and other insects became commonplace in horror movies as a result. Stanley's Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) is the ultimate exemplification of the fear of nuclear holocaust--what many feared would be the final result of nuclear "development." In the film, the Cold War, fueled by atomic unrest between the United States and the Soviets, results in a system of defense and retaliation so complicated that one man's insanity ends up causing the end of the world. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) combines the paranoia not fully demonstrated until *Dr. Strangelove* and, once again, the genre of science fiction. Klaatu comes to Earth to offer it and its people a place in an interplanetary council of peace-loving societies. Before Earth can join, Klaatu warns, the planet must cease and desist all atomic functions--or else. "Your choice is simple. Join us and live in peace or pursue your present course and face obliteration." This message relates back to the irrevocable connection between morality and horror: Klaatu essentially tells the people of the Earth that they had better step back in line and behave or be destroyed. Additionally, Klaatu, acting as both a God-like (in his issuance of ultimatums) and a Christ-like (in his death and resurrection) figure, establishes another connection between Christianity and the issues of morality ever present in horror.

In *The Stand*, first published in an abridged edition in 1978, Stephen King uses this nuclear-age American society, where global destruction is a reality, to continue the archetypal discussion of the government going too far. Another thing the government enjoys besides nuclear research is germ warfare. The United States government develops a superflu virus named Project Blue that is 99.4% communicable and 100%

fatal. Through a series of miraculous coincidences, the virus is accidentally unleashed and wipes out almost the entire American (and global) population. The novel was developed into a miniseries in 1994 that enjoyed high television ratings as well as exorbitant video and DVD sales, proving that the horror genre is compelling enough to captivate an audience for eight hours over four consecutive nights.

The greatest testament to the genre of horror is that directors and writers rediscovered what Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker always knew: one can scare, educate, and offer social commentary at the same time. Directors like Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick and writers like Michael Crichton and Stephen King realized one can inject morality into a story and it will most likely not register consciously with the audience--they are often too scared to notice. And even if the morality takes over, as it does in *Jurassic Park* and *The Stand*, the audience will still stay with the story, if for no other reason than to see how it all will end.

In this way, Stephen King is the literary equivalent of Alfred Hitchcock. By the time Hitchcock attained real popularity, audiences would flock to see his movies no matter what they were about or how good they were as films. Stephen King is currently in the same enviable position. If he wants to write a novel like *Desperation*, a work that is explicitly concerned with morality and faith, which thinly operates under the guise of a horror novel, he can. His real genius, though, lies in the fact that he mastered the genre of horror and all of its facets, which now leaves him free to explore any avenue of the human experience that he chooses, with the assurance that Constant Reader will always read anything he writes.

God Is Cruel or God Is Dead:

A Biblical History of Evil

In American society, Satan tends to shoulder a lot of blame for things that happen that we deem evil. From the days when playing cards was considered "the devil's game" to the modern day defense of "the devil made me do it," American society has purported that Satan is an ever present mischief-maker. However, when people utter curses, they generally invoke God's name. Whether or not it is a matter of second nature to assume that only God has such power or the phrase "God-damn" has simply become an overused cliché, it is always God, the purveyor of good, rather than Satan, the entity commonly associated with evil, whom people ask to damn those whom they want evil to be wrought upon. In fact, the Puritans, whose ideas form the moral base of American society, were the ones who thought it was God, not Satan, who kept people out of the pure and good heaven through the idea of the "elect." However, somewhere down the line of Judeo-Christian tradition, Satan became the whipping boy for everything that is evil; but does he deserve the blame? Perhaps Satan is not quite the sole progenitor of evil that American society over time has made him out to be.

The Judeo-Christian personifications of God and Satan are largely based on the Old Testament because, other than the first four books of the New Testament, it is the only primary written account of their actions. The very first words of the Old Testament are "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"--and this creation is immediately followed by the further creation of everything else known to humankind (Gen 1:1). When God created man, He did so "in his own image" (Gen 1:27); and, furthermore, after God had done all the creating He intended to do, He considered it all to be "very good"

(1:31). Thus, by playing the role of creator, in which things that He creates He deems good, God becomes a good deity by default. Later on, in the New Testament, this view of God's goodness is clarified, most readily by His willingness to sacrifice His own son in order to cleanse humankind of its sins. Additionally, in his first epistle, John is very explicit about God's nature: "God is love" (I John 4:8).

If God is characterized as a loving deity deserving of respect and devotion because of His goodness, then Satan's characterization is the exact opposite. Though Satan is never actually connected with the serpent at the time of Eve's temptation in the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, Judeo-Christian tradition cites Satan as the impetus behind the temptation and the subsequent "Fall of Man." The second key appearance that Satan makes in the Old Testament is in the Book of Job. At the beginning of the book, God calls all of His sons to Him, "and Satan came also among them" (Job 1:6). He convinces God that it would be a good idea to make Job's life a living hell and see if his faith still remains steadfast. God succumbs to Satan's baiting if for no other reason than to prove that His creation will do the right thing, even with pesky free will and severe degradation factored into the equation. Nonetheless, Satan ends up being proved wrong when Job remains faithful. Later, in the Gospel according to Matthew, Satan appears while Jesus wanders in the wilderness before beginning his ministry. Satan tries to get Jesus to prove that he is the Son of God by accomplishing things that no mere mortal could do, but Jesus refuses. Through these primary instances, Satan becomes characterized as the force that attempts to tempt humans away from what is good, thereby being canonized as evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition by way of his attempts at taking away humankind's relationship with God.

But Satan's role in the exemplification of evil falls far short of the entire sum of evil things that happen in the Old Testament. In the Book of Job, for example, it is God, not Satan, who allows Job's life to be made a living hell by Satan--for seemingly no better reason than Satan dared Him to allow it. It was a great opportunity to prove a point to Satan, true; however, evil means (the taking away of *everything* that Job held dear besides his life) had to be employed to prove this point. Also, as the result of human disobedience, God throws Adam and Eve out of Eden, floods the earth in order to kill all of humankind, turns Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, forbids Moses from reaching the Promised Land, and allows His son to be savagely murdered. While God is capable of doing and creating beautifully good things, He is also quite adept at manipulating evil by taking things away from people which they hold dear (i.e., punishment) in order to effect a *greater good*--which makes sense because, without a working conception of what is evil and the ability to effect it, how could God judge what is good in the first place? And, besides, if God created everything with the express purpose of creating good things, it stands to reason that He understands good and evil and would know how best to manipulate them to His advantage.

From the existence of Adam and Eve, God has always instilled humans with the power to think for themselves--free will. Additionally, when Adam and Eve fall by disobeying God's one simple rule, they also take the power to discern good and evil from the tree of knowledge, sacrificing any future existence in Eden at the same time. In Judeo-Christian theory, free will and the ability to discern between good and evil give each individual the power to make his or her own choices independent of what God wants. Of course, this theory relies upon the idea that what God wants *is* what is right, but each individual should

have the necessary tools to come to that decision for himself (or herself). Even as early as the Old Testament, though, not all of God's creations do what is right. Relatively early on in the existence of humans, their collective decision-making abilities were so poor that God felt the need to kill them all (except for Noah and family). Even before that, Cain, the third human to exist, kills his own brother, even though he had the inherent means to reason that jealousy is not something one should indulge. Also, the Israelites, even after being saved from the cruel Egyptians by God, make idols to worship after God specifically told them not to do so. The Old Testament aside, there are countless examples (the Inquisition and the Crusades, for instance) of humans not discerning between good and evil the way God would like. Of course, the latter two examples are the result of what happens when God becomes quiet and people (especially the Church) have to make decisions for themselves. Unfortunately, it seems as though some decided to act as they think God would by acting in judgment instead of following His rules and allowing Him to judge those who do not.

Of these three sources of evil--Satan, God, and the individual human--only the evil of the individual appears to regularly manifest itself. Occasionally, people rally around a God-like authority such as Adolf Hitler, but it is their own individual senses of what is right and wrong that lead them to such a figure. Satan never really played an extremely extroverted role in the Old Testament, so the lack of any substantive presence on his part outside of the Old Testament is no real surprise. And as for God, the last time one hears of His really doing anything substantial that promotes His will is when He resurrects Jesus after he has been crucified. God's absence as an active force has led many to suppose that God is dead, on an extended sabbatical, or never existed in the first place. In any case, humans today are very

much left to themselves to decide what is good and what is evil, which is perhaps why Christianity remains so popular: people can adopt a previously articulated statement of moral ethics based largely on faith and little substantive proof. That way, people do not have to trouble themselves with deciding whether or not good and evil exist--and if good and evil do exist, what exactly they are.

This modern American society that still has a notion of the concept of "good and evil" but has forgotten what it means is the one that Stephen King uses as the base of his two tales of morality, *The Stand* and *Desperation*. In these novels, King creates characters that are creations of the society in which they live. Therefore, some are close to God in a Christian sort of way, others have the equivalent of an indifferent nodding acquaintance with Him, and others are set on the moral path that leads away from God's intent (e.g., faithfulness, love for God and fellow humans, etc.). What King wants from these characters is a representation of how they will act if they are put into a certain situation. The two situations that King chooses seem entirely different at the outset--one has the majority of the world's population being wiped out, and the other has characters being stranded on the side of the road in the middle of the Nevada desert. King then inserts a malignant evil into each situation that the characters must deal with; and by doing so, King creates two different scenarios that both involve characters having to deal with their own inherent codes of good and evil.

In order to further accomplish his intentions, King introduces one of the other two sources of evil into these novels: God. If one works within the Judeo-Christian conception of morality, which King does, there is no better way to test faith than the way God does in the Old Testament. This God is the same God who commanded Abraham to

sacrifice his firstborn son in order to test his obedience (once Abraham passes the test, however, the son does not have to die) and allowed Satan to strip Job of everything he loved and valued in order to prove to Satan that Job really was faithful. These may seem to be rather extreme and harsh means to a positive end, but all the examples given in the Old Testament demonstrate that they are very effective means nonetheless. At any rate, while Satan may have a place in *The Stand* and *Desperation*, his part is no bigger than it was in the Old Testament. When it came to evil things not brought about by humans in the Old Testament, it was God who was most visible--and that is how King portrays Him in these two novels.

In *Desperation*, King constantly points out that "God Is Cruel," going so far as to title the section that contains the climax as such (509). In fact, through one of his characters, he goes even farther in asking the following question: "'Do you know how cruel your God can be. . . . How fantastically cruel?'" (658). After all, the idea that evil in the form of suffering can be used to accomplish good does take a bit of acclimation. In *The Stand*, God asks some of King's characters to stand against evil with little to no hope of reward or even survival. King creates these characters in order to demonstrate his view on Americans' modern morality, which is a morality based on a theoretical conception of good and evil that American society still uses in order to enforce its laws and other codes of morality--all without anyone who bothers to try and understand the theory any longer. Further, King uses the God of the Old Testament to effect this demonstration. King invokes this ancient God because He has a history of not making His tests easy to pass. Ironically, in the case of Job, it is Satan who estimates the value of testing an individual's faith: "Does Job fear God for nought.

. . . But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face" (Job 1:9, 11).

An Unheralded Return:
God in the Late Twentieth Century

One of the key differences between the Old and New Testaments of the Bible is the role of God. In the Old Testament, He was one of the main characters, always playing an active part in what transpired; whereas, in the New Testament after the Gospels, He is relegated to the background--in favor of epistles concerning conversions and discussions about Christianity as a faith--where, except for a few notable exceptions (e.g., *Paradise Lost*), He has stayed. In *The Stand* and *Desperation*, Stephen King brings God back to the fore as a character. While His motivations are still best characterized as "mysterious ways," and even though King might not make it clear to the reader for quite some time, God plays a large role in the events of both novels and in determining how they will end.

On an exterior and somewhat fundamental level, there is an underlying question that plagues *The Stand* and *Desperation*: Why do such bad things happen? It would be difficult to characterize the American government creating and accidentally allowing a superflu virus that kills almost everyone in the country (and the world) as anything but evil in the sense that the government certainly robs the people it represents of their freedom. The same reasoning applies to a cop infected with a deranged entity killing or taking hostage innocent (for now, anyway) bystanders in the Nevada desert. As King writes in his recent "memoir of the craft," *On Writing*, these things happen because of a "What if" mechanism in his mind that creates all sorts of scenarios and tangents (169). However, as he later goes on to admit, the particular "what ifs" for *The Stand* and *Desperation* are ones motivated by a particular thematic concern; namely, "the question of

why, if there is a God, such terrible things happen" (207). With God playing a definite role in both novels, these two fundamental questions of *why* combine to create another, more powerful question: What *kind* of God *allows* such bad things to happen?

The God that appears in King's texts appears to be consistent with the Judeo-Christian God, and the characters with whom He speaks recognize Him as such. Thus, it would be reasonable to return to the Old Testament in order to ascertain whether or not He allows bad things to happen. The cases of Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, and especially Job are consistent with and give credence to the idea that the Judeo-Christian God does allow bad things to happen to good people. But before one can consider God's role in King's novels, one must establish from where the evil that creates these bad situations originates. Then, who or what, if anything, controls the two loci of evil, Randall Flagg and Tak? And only then can one return to the original idea of God as a character with another question: What does God do about these situations?

The first step in this analysis is to pinpoint what precisely are the "bad things" that happen in both novels. In *The Stand*, the Bush-era government saw fit to create a series of indestructible viruses. To what end were they constructed? Certainly not to create a happier global community, that much is for certain. At any rate, a series of security and protocol breaches allows one of these viruses to contaminate a military base in Nevada, from which a soldier named Champion flees into the night with his family. Before he dies, Champion manages to infect a few unsuspecting natives of Arnette, Texas. Pretty soon, the whole country is infected with a virus that has no cure. (In an effort of goodwill, American operatives share the wealth with the rest of the world, effectively bringing about the end of the world--as

far as humans and other domesticated animals go, that is.) Basically, "this was a chain of coincidence on the order of winning the Irish Sweepstakes. With a little incompetence thrown in . . . but mostly it was just a thing that happened" (Stand 31).

In *Desperation*, the ramifications are global in a different sort of way. In 1858, miners refused to dig any deeper in the tunnel called Rattlesnake Number One being mined in Desperation, Nevada. "It wasn't a strike for better pay; they just didn't want to die" (425). Not that they could be blamed--the tunnel was just plain unsafe. Then, the mining company, presented with a tunnel fraught with unharvested potential and an unwilling work force, did what any truly capitalistic American corporation would do: It hired Chinese laborers to do the job. Due to the mining company's greed and crapulence, the Chinese laborers come across a cave that houses a malignantly evil entity that goes by the name of Tak. Two of the laborers, Ch'an and Shih Lushan, manage to collapse the tunnel before Tak can escape and wreak havoc. Years later, mining for copper instead of gold, another mining company recommences work in Desperation. They accidentally reopen Rattlesnake Number One, renamed the China Pit, and, this time, Tak makes it out into the world. Tak quickly eradicates nearly everyone in the town, and it then begins to cruise U.S. 50, "The Loneliest Highway in America," for more victims (4).

At first, it might seem that the events that lead up to these two crises are not caused by anything out of the ordinary. In the cases of the superflu and the mining "accident," little else appears to be involved besides unfortunate coincidences and a small group of powerful people making everyone else miserable (or, to be more specific, dead). Even so, King never really specifies how or why Project Blue went awry or who created Tak and how he came to be buried in Desperation, Nevada;

since King never deals with those issues, it is impossible to purport anything substantial concerning these questions. Instead, focusing on events subsequent to these mishaps will lead to much more doubt as well as call into question the unfortunate-coincidence aspect of these disasters.

In *The Stand*, not everyone dies from Captain Trips, which (in the great tradition of the Grateful Dead) is what the general population on the West Coast calls the superflu. At first, there seems to be no pattern among the people who survive. In fact, the only thing that they all have in common is that none of them seem to be the least bit affected by the virus. Eventually, though, they all begin to have dreams. These dreams are all about a dark man--Randall Flagg. Flagg's "presence--at least in dreams--produces feelings of dread, disquiet, terror, [and] horror'" for everyone (895); ironically, even the people who end up joining Flagg associate these same feelings with him. Later, some of these people begin to have other dreams. These dreams, depending on how strongly the individual dreams them, take place in the middle of a cornfield in Nebraska with an old black woman named Abigail Freemantle. These dreams serve as a compass to draw roughly half of the survivors to Abigail, thus creating a mass rendezvous point out of the chaos. The other half, who flock to Flagg in Las Vegas, have a distinct feeling of revulsion towards Abigail, exemplified by the thoughts of the Trashcan Man: "*Oh please get me away from her, I don't want no part of that old biddy, please oh please get me out of Nebraska!*" (573).

If the breach of Project Blue that resulted in nearly nationwide eradication was simply the result of a non-divine series of coincidences, then what is the rational explanation for the dreams and the fact that several thousand people had localized in Boulder and Las Vegas in a matter of months? For the people who make the pilgrimage to

Boulder, their impetus is based on Mother Abigail. When King first introduces Abigail to the reader, two things become apparent rather quickly. First, Abigail is a Christian. Second, she knows that people will be rallying around her. How does she know? Her God told her so-- not that she is too terribly excited at the prospect. "*My Lord, my Lord, take this cup from my lips,*" she asks repeatedly, hoping to be relieved from the duty of playing a 1990's version of Moses (480). If He knew to tell Abigail that these people were going to rally around her, it is not such a far stretch to reason that He created the dreams that would draw the people to her. Sociologist-at-large Glen Bateman points out that "these dreams are a constructive force," and not just coincidence (538). Interestingly, though, Mother Abigail had no knowledge of the fact that God planted her image in the minds of thousands; apparently, God did not think it necessary for Abigail to have all the details.

In *Desperation*, David Carver also does not receive crucial information he feels necessary from God until God deems it necessary. Aside from the appearance of Tak, the most crucial event in the novel is the near-death of David's friend, Brian Ross. On his way to school one day, a drunk driver plows his car into Brian, leaving him with absolutely no chance of surviving. After visiting Brian in the hospital, David goes to their usual hangout, auspiciously dubbed the Viet Cong Lookout. There he begins a conversation with a mysterious voice. Deciding that this voice is God (a quite momentous decision, one that will warrant further discussion in a moment), he makes a hackneyed, yet fateful plea: "God, make him better. If you do, I'll do something for you. I'll listen for what you want, and then I'll do it. I promise" (174). Miraculously, Brian makes a full recovery and David becomes not just a firm believer in God, but a fully converted

Christian, having weekly spiritual discussions with the local alcoholic reverend. Little does David know that some time later, his family will just happen to get stranded in a small mining town that is being terrorized by an evil entity named Tak and that he will play a key role in defeating Tak.

Of course, to automatically propose that God takes advantage of David's promise and sends him into the desert is to base one's thinking on circumstantial evidence. However, John Marinville, who used to frequent an establishment during his stint in Vietnam also called the Viet Cong Lookout, also finds his way to Desperation. And then there is the matter of the Excused Early pass. David gets the blue pass from school the day he goes to visit Brian in the hospital. After his conversation with God, the pass goes missing, only to turn up halfway across the country in Desperation (in the hands of John Marinville, complete stranger to David Carver). These instances go far beyond the realm of coincidence--so much so that it begins to appear as if some force is manipulating David and John.

The question becomes what is this force that manipulates David and John as well as Abigail and the survivors in *The Stand*. Many of the main characters of both novels assume it is God, but one wonders if it could not be chance, fate, a God or gods not of the Christian making, Satan, or simply some force completely outside of man's conception. If one is concerned with an absolute truth, then any one of these forces might be responsible. However, is a work of fiction based on a real society that predates the work of fiction in question the most appropriate place for a discussion of this kind of absolute truth? Moreover, the characters convince themselves that God is involved in these situations. And even if God is truly not involved (or if the deity or force involved is one of the aforementioned alternatives),

that makes no difference to the story as, textually, it will always end the same way. It may even be possible that God has been created by man to fulfill a need for explanation; even so, since it is impossible to determine the absolute truth of a fictional world, it may be best to adhere to the system that this world is based on as well as the one in which the characters believe. And that system is Christianity with the Judeo-Christian God at the helm.

God's involvement, though, goes beyond making the best out of a bad situation. Is it possible that God manipulates the existing evil in these situations, as well as creates some of His own, in order to further His will? In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Satan usually takes the blame for temptation and other kinds of evil. Randall Flagg and Tak both use temptation as their primary form of evil. Therefore, the simplest assumption (as Occam would say) is that Satan is responsible for the creation of Flagg and Tak. And, furthermore, their ultimate defeat speaks to God's glory and goodness. To be discussed later in greater detail, giving God the credit for foiling Flagg and Tak would seem to be saying that the mortal players in both novels have no free will at all. Second, and more to the point of this discussion, whereas God plays an important role in both novels, King never once overtly brings Satan into the story. In fact, in the voluminous pages of *The Stand* and *Desperation*, Mother Abigail is the only character to mention Satan in conjunction with the forces of evil. Of course, the lack of an overt presence by Satan is consistent with the Old Testament--which is the same body of evidence being used here to define and discuss God and His behavior. After all, just because he was not consistently mentioned as present in the Old Testament does not mean that he was not around, covertly making trouble the whole time. Perhaps the same is true in *The Stand* and *Desperation*.

Mother Abigail repeatedly refers to Randall Flagg as the "Imp of Satan" (492). That description gives the impression that Flagg is a creature ultimately, whether he knows it or not, serving the will of Satan. Flagg himself has no conscious recollection of how or why he was created. Actually, Flagg remembers little of his early years; the first clear memory he has is creating trouble during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. "He certainly could not remember much that had happened to him before that, except that he came originally from Nebraska . . ." (174). Of course, Flagg could be little more than a randomly malignant evil created by Satan; thus, he would not necessarily need any memory of his creator. Again, though, the flamboyance of Flagg's character, quite frankly, is not Satan's style. The only two times Satan appears in the Bible in a less-than-surreptitious manner is when he challenges God in the case of Job and when he tempts Jesus in the wilderness. When Satan deals with mere mortals, he tends to adopt a more serpentine guise. Besides, the fact that Flagg originates from Nebraska, the same place that Abigail resides, appears a bit suspicious.

Along with his origin, there are other aspects of Flagg's character that raise suspicion. During his journey to Las Vegas, he recruits a couple of key individuals: Lloyd Henreid and Donald Elbert. While Henreid serves Flagg with an unflagging loyalty, one has to question the selection of Elbert, otherwise known as the Trashcan Man. In his hometown of Powtenville, Indiana, the Trashcan Man was well known for being a pyromaniac. Before he developed his affinity for fires, however, he had an extremely rough childhood. One day his father got into an argument at a bar, killed the bartender, then killed Trash's two brothers and his sister. Then, the sheriff gunned down Trash's father before he could do any more damage. About four years

later, the sheriff married Trash's mother--which is about the time Trash started lighting fires. Not only was Trash subject to endless ridicule for the fires, his stepfather sent him down to Terre Haute (against his wife's wishes) for electroshock treatment. Trash is the kind of mentally unstable figure that Flagg approaches, saying, "*I will set you high in my artillery. You are the man I want*" (569). It is not just when the Trashcan Man brings the atomic bomb to Las Vegas, which results in the end of the Flagg's society, that the reader questions Flagg's intelligence in regards to his decision-making skills.

Meanwhile, there are also mysteries that surround Tak. If it is clear that Flagg's immediate goal is to wipe out all of the good people of Boulder as soon as possible, Tak's purpose is infinitely muddier and incomprehensible. "'What does Tak want? To get out of its hole in the ground and stretch its legs? . . . Ask Bob Dylan what the lyrics to "Gates of Eden" really mean? Rule the earth? What?'" (562) At first, Tak only wants one thing: to find a strong human host. Tak acts as an extremely strong parasite, wearing out the body and accelerating any affliction the body might have. In retrospect, Tak makes it difficult, as Tak itself says, to "*rule as it has always ruled,*" when it is constantly having to worry about shifting from body to body (559). Also, the fact that Tak tends to take great pleasure in killing every human in sight seems rather shortsighted since it is the live human hosts that perpetuate Tak. Yes, Tak might be extremely dangerous, but, like Flagg, he also appears to be a bit on the stupid side.

When David gets to Desperation, however, Tak's immediate motivation changes: "*Foolish prayboy trying to make at least some part of it come right, as if any part of a thing like this ever could be. . . . It was the boy who was the dangerous one*" (379-80). Tak would then go after David Carver single-mindedly except for one small

problem: its host body has a yeast infection and will not last much longer. Tak appears to be stupid and unlucky; but it also appears that it has been placed into a situation that it has no control over. And, as David tells his fellow travelers, Tak does not even have control over the things that it does: "He thinks he [brought us here], but he didn't. . . . God brought us. To stop him.'" (519).

Again, it *could* be coincidence that Brian Ross named his and David's tree house the Viet Cong Lookout, the same name of the bar John Marinville frequented while in Vietnam. But how unlikely is it that David and John both happen to be driving by Desperation at the exact time that Tak breaks loose from its cave? And, furthermore, especially since God has designs on David and John (to be discussed later), how unfortunate is it for Tak (appearing as Collie Entragian) that it pulls over and brings the two people into town who will serve in its destruction? The whole situation appears to be entirely too manipulated at Tak's expense for one to think that Tak ever had a chance at winning the day. And in the Old Testament, it is God, not Satan, who has a long-running habit of sending things like locusts, frogs, storms, floods, and fire and brimstone when He wants action taken. Satan tends to be a more hands-on mischief-maker.

It might be a bit difficult to accept the possibility that the good entities and evil ones come from the same place; although, Mother Abigail and Randall Flagg *did* both come from Nebraska. One argument might be that, if God is the purveyor of both good and evil, then Satan either does not exist or has no place in this world that King creates. That might not be entirely true. A man named Charles Impening does happen to appear in the Boulder Free Zone. He appears to be little more than a mischievous creature whose sole purpose is to create trouble-- basically, an imp. According to Mother Abigail, God had chosen Boulder

as a place for the survivors to stand. Maintaining a group of newly banded-together people in one place is difficult enough as it is, but Impening's doom crying does not make it any easier: "Impening seemed determined to stir up unrest. He was going around telling people . . . that by November it would be cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey" (653). Later, after Mother Abigail leaves the Zone to "find herself," Impening suggests, "if Mother Abigail had bugged out, maybe that was a sign for all of them to bug out" (729).

In a way, Impening represents Satan better than Randall Flagg or Tak ever could. In both *The Stand* and *Desperation*, God uses a situation created by man's own capability of causing evil and manipulates it to some purpose. That is fine and good; Satan never has seemed to show too much interest in God's big projects while they were under construction. It was not until *after* God created the world and its inhabitants that Satan decided to have his fun. It would be much more Satan's style to let God play around with Abigail and Flagg, and then throw in a monkey wrench like Impening when God was not looking--much like Eve and the serpent. The point is that Satan tends to be a little bit slyer in his escapades than God with his heavy-handed manipulation of the superflu and Tak.

Another key aspect of Flagg and Tak's characters is that they do not tend to see very well. In *Desperation*, Tak often proves clueless in regards to what is going on behind its back. After Tak returns to the *Desperation* police station, having newly inhabited Ellen Carver's body, it is clearly outraged at what happened while it was away. "They should not have dared to run from (*Entragian her it them*) even if their cell doors had been standing wide open. Yet they had. Because of the boy . . ." (379). Tak had left a wolf in charge of its captives while it was gone, true; and Tak apparently does have the power to see through

the eyes of the lower creatures that it commands. Nonetheless, one of Tak's shortcomings is that, while concentrating on transferring from old host to new, Tak has to take its eyes off of what is going on around it. And after David killed the wolf, Tak would have no possible way of knowing what happened anyway. Fortunately for Tak, a group of fiddleback spiders come to tell their master where the group has gone for refuge. "It couldn't see the old movie house, but that was all right. . . . she now knew where *they* were" (381-2). In addition to stupidity, another of Tak's flaws is that it tends to assume too much.

Randall Flagg also has vision problems of his own, despite claims from various individuals that he "might be *anywhere*" at anytime (917). He claims to be on top of everything at his own establishment and, until the end, Trash notwithstanding, he does pretty well at that. For some reason, though, he never seems to be able to get a look inside the Boulder Free Zone--sort of an evil no-fly zone. But the second the Judge and Dayna Jurgens strike out on their own as spies, Flagg spots them. As for the Zone's third spy, he is impervious to Flagg's roving eye--a fact that irritates Flagg to no end. When Dayna presses Flagg as to why he cannot see visions of Tom Cullen as the third spy, he throws her across the room, yelling, "*Because I can't see it!*" (950). All in all, it does not appear that Flagg is a very cool, calm, and collected Walkin' Dude. His visual lapses are more egregious than Tak's, if for no other reason than Flagg is not merely an entity bent on destroying everything in sight for the pure enjoyment of it. Rather, Flagg seems to take genuine pleasure from the fact that he is destroying a set adversary. There is nothing worse for an organized, motivated creature than to see one's organization fall to pieces because of something like poor eyesight. Tak and Flagg hardly seem to be the best choices to lead the fight for evil in the consumption of the human race. Instead, they

appear more as hastily thrown-together machines: they are meant to serve a purpose regardless of their shoddy workmanship. If one considers Flagg and Tak as devices employed by God to serve a specific purpose (to be discussed in the next chapter) and nothing more, their nature makes a lot more sense.

Perhaps the most difficult thing about the system that Stephen King sets up, though, is the idea that God is evil just as He is good. In the Bible, John writes, "God is love" (I John 4:8). Nowhere does John write that God is hate or evil or anything bad. It seems that Christians as a community have an easier time dealing with good and evil by dichotomizing them and assigning the latter to Satan than trying to comprehend the idea that God might be representative of good and evil. Even the Puritans, who characterized God as an awfully mean-spirited deity, believed that evil and temptation were ungodly things. But then, is this not the same God who made a bet with Satan at the expense of poor Job? Or, to return to the Puritans, many of whose beliefs form the base of American society, is this not the same God who only let a select few into heaven, regardless of whether or not that few lived good, wholesome lives? Apparently, in His infinite goodness, God is not very consistent. There is an alternative explanation, though, given by David Carver at the end of *Desperation*. When Mary Jackson asks David if God really is love, he replies, "'Oh, yes. I guess he's sort of . . . everything'" (690).

Establishing that God can manipulate these elaborate scenarios that incorporate elements of evil is one thing, but it does not explain why God manipulates these scenarios. In *The Stand*, one can argue, as Mother Abigail does, that the superflu is the descendant of the flood that made Noah a household name. "He had done it once with water, and sometime further along, He would do it with fire" (467). Again,

operating under the terms of American society and Christianity that King founds the novel on, Abigail's interpretation is a very plausible one. Of course, it may not necessarily be the correct interpretation, but enough of the main characters in *The Stand* go along with her interpretation that it might as well be the truth. Regardless, God does not destroy humankind and its toys; in fact, by the end of the novel, the implication is that society will pick up right where it left off and things will probably become just as bad as they were before the superflu. God is interested most in what happens in between: how the people He has chosen will react. Basically, the events in *The Stand* are a test of faith reminiscent of those found in the Old Testament.

The most prominent example of a test of faith on the level of those in the Old Testament is found in the life of Stuart Redman. Stuart Redman had a rough life before the superflu. His father died when he was seven, and he was forced to work to help support his family from the age of nine. He began to play football in high school and it appeared that he would get a scholarship and be able to attend college --until his mother developed cancer and died. It was Stu's brother that managed to go to college, leaving Stu behind to work at the calculator factory--until production began to slow down. His wife of eighteen months had one miscarriage before she died--also of cancer. Through all this strife, Stu, who was not much of a religious man, bore it all in stride. And then the superflu killed off society, giving Stu a chance to start all over again. He meets the woman of his dreams, has the chance to start a family, surrounds himself with friends who really care about him--in short, he has the chance to live the life he has always deserved. And then God, through Mother Abigail, asks him to go into the desert in order to put a stop to Randall Flagg.

Larry Underwood led a much different life from Stu Redman; however, he also faces a remarkable test of faith. In the words of his mother, "I think you're a taker. You've always been one. It's like God left some part of you out when He built you inside of me. You're not *bad . . .*" (88). However, as Larry is constantly reminded throughout the novel: "*You ain't no nice guy!*" (82). Larry also has one of the most popular songs on the radio, and he definitely lets success go to his head. He succumbs to every temptation offered to a famous musician with money to burn; if it was not for a friend that had not become utterly fed up with him yet, he might not have ever gotten away from the scene he created for himself. Then, the superflu wiped out nearly everyone and Larry had a chance to start over. Like Stu, he makes a complete success out of it and it looks like he is on the way to becoming a nice guy. And then God, through Mother Abigail, asks him to go into the desert in order to put a stop to Randall Flagg.

God presents even Mother Abigail with a test. Deeply religious throughout her entire life, God requests (or demands, really) that Abigail take on a role, much like Moses, of the leader of His chosen people. Reluctantly, she accepts the role, but that is not where God tests her faith. When group after group of people make it to Boulder, the first thing they invariably want to do is go to Abigail and tell her how they dreamed about her. At this point, God tests Abigail and her sense of pride. Abigail faced the same struggle that Moses faced: knowing when to take credit for a situation and when to defer the credit to God.

The events of *Desperation* unfold in a similar manner. When David comes to God of his own volition and makes his request to make Brian Ross well again, God fully intends on seeing whether or not David will make good on his promise. David's tests are even more reminiscent of

the Old Testament (especially those in the Book of Job) than those of *The Stand*. First, he has to watch as his own sister is brutally murdered. Then, naked to the world, he has to face evil embodied by a large, snarling wolf. Eventually he has to see his own mother die and be used as a host by Tak. And then, just when he thinks that it is over, he has to *walk away* from the monster that killed his only remaining family, his father. It seems that God is really serious about people keeping their promises.

John Marinville, on the other hand, faces almost the exact same challenge that Larry Underwood faced. Instead of a musician, this time King presents the reader with an author who has succumbed to every temptation offered to a famous musician with money to burn. He began a cross-country road trip on a Harley-Davidson to "find himself." It was a valiant plan, even if it was inspired by his ex-wife, whom he did not think "had the slightest idea of what she had said, which meant he wouldn't have to share any of the proceeds with her, if proceeds there were" (73). Apparently, in God's eyes, this revelation was not enough. Or, one might say, God sealed John's fate when he stepped into the Viet Cong Lookout many years ago during the Vietnam War. Either way, much as He did for Larry Underwood, God gives John Marinville the chance to become a nice guy, if only for a little while in Desperation, Nevada.

In the end, the answer to the question posed earlier is that God does not simply allow humans to do bad things; instead, He allows humans to be evil and then He takes advantage of the situations this evil creates in order to accomplish His will. He takes advantage of the situations by using His own brand of evil (as necessary) to further take away the things that the characters hold most dear. His overall motivation for using these situations and taking things away from the characters lies in testing people who have genuine worth inside of

them. After all, what is the use of having a talent, like goodness, if one never has the chance to use it? In the end, there are really only two questions that remain, both of which are dealt with in the next chapter. First, why does God feel the need to test these people? And secondly, why does King have his characters react the way that they do to God's various impositions?

A Progression of Morality:

Apathy, Action, and Ennui

The Stand and *Desperation* are the result of Stephen King using the genre of horror in order to create two different scenarios based on a system of good and evil manipulated by God. To what purpose (besides monetary) does King create these scenarios? The answer is simply to see what his characters will do. In *On Writing*, King admits, "I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things *their way*" (164-5). In a way, King plays the same role as God in his novels: King/God allows the characters to do what they want to do, provided it jives with their character, but King/God ultimately knows how the events will end.

The concept of free will might seem an odd one to consider from the author/character standpoint, but returning to the God/human relationship discussed in the previous chapter, the concept is one that warrants discussion. If God has control over the situation He creates and knows how it will ultimately end, do any of the human players really have any free will? According to King, the answer is yes--but that does not mean that his characters have to be happy about it. After Mother Abigail has relayed the directive from God that Stu, Larry, Ralph, and Glen are to travel to Las Vegas, the discussion of free will presents itself. When Larry Underwood asks the question, Abigail replies, "'A choice? There's always a choice. That's God's way, always will be. Your will is still free. Do as you will. There's no set of leg-irons on you. But . . . *this is what God wants of you*'" (905). Frannie Goldsmith, who would be quite happy to live the rest of her life with Stu Redman, becomes quite agitated when she hears what God

expects Stu to do: "I won't see my man sacrificed to your killer God. . . . He's no God. He's a daemon, and you're His Witch'" (903). Meanwhile, in more silent disbelief, Lucy Swann, who has managed to cultivate a relationship with Larry, collapses on the floor.

The same type of discussion takes place after David Carver wakes from a dream where God, disguised as a young man from the 1960's, tells David what he and his fellow travelers are to do about Tak. When David tells the group that God wants them to stay instead of taking off in Steve Ames's Ryder truck, John Marinville tells David, quite frankly, that he does not give a damn what God wants. "I can't stop you if you mean to go," David said. "Maybe Steve and my dad could, but it wouldn't do any good. Because of the free-will covenant'" (563). For what it is worth, the rest of the group appear resigned to doing what God asks, but that does not stop John from leaving. David catches up to him and tells him the punch line of free will, the one that King leaves out in *The Stand*:

"If you leave now, Tak will be waiting for you in a lot of places. . . . Not just Austin. Hotel rooms. Speaking halls. Fancy lunches where people talk about books and things. When you're with a woman, it'll be you who undresses her and Tak who has sex with her. And the worst thing is that you may live like that for a long time." (608-9)

While the path of least resistance may be to leave, leaving is a very non-productive choice. What God offers John (and the rest of the characters) is an opportunity to endure and defeat evil, thereby accomplishing a greater good: gaining a much stronger sense of self.

The characters of both novels end up doing what God wants them to do, a decision that, for the most part, they come to on their own. Most of the characters in *Desperation* feel that little discussion is

necessary--David appears to be a very effective prophet. Stu, Larry, Ralph, and Glen all accept God's proposition without discussion in *The Stand*. In either novel, none of the characters (except for David Carver and Mother Abigail) appear to be very religious before the events of the novels take place. It would be foolish to assume that they take God at His word merely because He is God; rather, there are different reasons why each of the characters feels the compulsion to do things God's way.

After the superflu has pretty well run its course, Frannie finds that the only person left alive in her hometown of Ogunquit, Maine, is Harold Lauder. Despite the fact that Frannie views Harold as the annoying little brother of her (now dead) best friend, Amy, she quickly warms to his idea of venturing to Stovington, Vermont, where there is a center for the study of communicable diseases. "She thought it was a wonderful idea. It appealed to that uncoalesced need for structure and authority" (320). Of course, as Stu Redman later attests, there is nothing good that will come from going to Stovington, Vermont. Nonetheless, the need for authority dominates all of the survivors' lives in *The Stand*. When the first meeting of the Boulder Free Zone is held, one of the first things that they do is sing "The Star-Spangled Banner." The song is essentially meaningless in that the government that the American flag represents is totally defunct (not to mention the fact that it is responsible for Project Blue in the first place); however, it remains a symbol of order and the ideas that originally brought America together. Not surprisingly, the next thing that happens at this meeting is the reading and re-ratification of the Constitution of the United States as well as the Bill of Rights. More importantly, this re-edification of American law confirms that evil is still defined as the taking away of rights and liberty.

American values may be well and good in the new civilization of the Boulder Free Zone, but they surely are not what got the people together in the Zone in the first place. The direction provided by the dreams of Mother Abigail is the sole force that fed the survivors' innate desire for structure and authority that led them to congregate in Boulder, Colorado. And who provided the dreams? God did. None of the survivors were forced to go to Boulder, Colorado. Many people chose Las Vegas instead, and there is even room for speculation that some people did not go to either site. But for those people who came to Boulder, they came on their own terms. Essentially, God provided these survivors with a service, and as David Carver finds out, God is not beyond asking that His favors be repaid.

The issue is not as clear-cut in *Desperation* as it is in *The Stand* because not all of the characters come to God in the same way. David Carver comes to God in a moment of desperation, asking that his friend Brian be healed. Part of him might have understood that there would be more to the story when he discovered his Excused Early pass from school had disappeared, but he accepts God's terms when it really begins to matter. Mary Jackson, about to become Tak's next host, comes to God for help, also in a time of desperation, and He helps her escape from Tak. At the end of the novel, there is no hesitancy on Mary's part to take care of David. She could have been resentful and angry that God allowed Tak to kill her husband; instead, she takes care of the boy who saw the group through their "bad trip." These two characters, though admittedly put in desperate spots, came to God of their own volition to ask for help. God helped them and then asked for a favor in return. Perhaps God is guilty of a little arm pulling in these two cases, but the novel is called *Desperation*.

King also uses temptation as a tool to motivate his characters. Temptation appears to be Randall Flagg's primary way of operating. He offers his followers in Las Vegas a very orderly society. They have power, fresh water, and even telephone service. Sure, they all have to work rather strict workdays, but Flagg's leadership has them a lot further down the road of restoring technology than the citizens of the Boulder Free Zone. In a way, Flagg's Las Vegas is not much different from Hitler's Germany: the trains run on time and all one has to put up with is the evil genius behind it who happens to think it is a good idea to exterminate everyone that is not like him. Additionally, while the folks in Boulder are having the beginning of a crime problem with the likes of Rich Moffat, the town alcoholic, Flagg already has a crime prevention system in place. Simply put, if one does something one should not be doing, one will be crucified. Flagg catches Hector Drogan freebasing, which is "not allowed in this Society of the People because it impairs the user's ability to contribute fully to the Society of the People" (615). As sure as humans seem to have an innate need for structure and authority, order can be a strong enough temptation to blindly follow someone who can offer that order.

For a more classic case of temptation, Flagg uses Nadine Cross's body to get Harold Lauder to sabotage the Boulder Free Zone Committee. Harold begins his adventure from Maine desperately in love (or so he thinks) with Frannie Goldsmith. He becomes insanely jealous when they meet Stu Redman; this jealousy turns to rage when he sees that, not only have Frannie and Stu become an item, Frannie has also been keeping a journal, a large part of which she devotes to writing how immature Harold is. This jealousy, along with the fact that he does not dream of Mother Abigail, presents a very susceptible, as well as intelligent, Harold who could make a lot of trouble. That is, until his evil scheme

to make people like him backfires, and he actually derives pleasure from people liking him. His friends even affectionately nickname him Hawk. Everything seems to be going right for Harold until Nadine shows up on his doorstep. She offers to do anything for Harold that does not result in her losing her virginity, which is really just "one little thing" (794). And just like that, because of the temptation of lust, "Harold Lauder succumbed to his destiny" (795).

Flagg also uses power as a temptation, which proves to be, in the end, stronger than any other temptation Flagg has to offer. When Flagg approaches him, Lloyd Henreid has been reduced to munching on the calf of his long-dead cellmate. Flagg not only saves Lloyd from this ghastly position, he offers Lloyd a much better position: "I'm going to make you my right-hand man, Lloyd. Going to put you right up there with Saint Peter. When I open this door, I'm going to slip the keys to the kingdom right into your hand" (356). Flagg gives Lloyd this power because he feels that Lloyd is, above all else, loyal. And as many times as Flagg underestimates or overestimates people and situations, his judgment is dead-on with Lloyd Henreid. Because Flagg gives Lloyd power, he trusts Flagg and is loyal to him until the end. When everything that Flagg touches begins to go bad and most of his people already have deserted or are planning to desert him, Lloyd stays by his side. When Whitney Hogan asks Lloyd if he will desert with him, Lloyd replies, "I owe him something. I owe him a lot. . . . He's done something to me, made me brighter or something. I don't know what it is, but I ain't the same man I was, Whitney" (1014). When Glen Bateman tries to show Lloyd the error of his ways, Lloyd says, "He told me more of the truth than anyone else bothered to in my whole lousy life" (1057). Lloyd Henreid is one of the true victims in *The Stand*: it is

truly sad that a man with so much trust and loyalty to give succumbed to temptation and gave all he had to give to a false idol.

Back in the world of *Desperation*, King uses temptation in a more positive way. Steve Ames and Cynthia Smith willingly accept their roles (albeit smaller roles than the others) as members of the group because of how they nearly succumbed to Tak's method of temptation, *can tahs*. Not unlike the golden calves of Old Testament lore, *can tahs* are idols that take their worshippers away from God. Once a person touches a *can tah*, a small statue in the shape of a lower animal of the desert, he or she begins to be tempted with thoughts of lust, murder, and other unhealthy things. The longer one is in contact with a *can tah*, the more difficult it is to fight it. Steve and Cynthia both touch one only once, and they are strong (and lucky) enough to fight off the temptations it emits. Unfortunately for Audrey Wyler, though, she, as well as the Chinese laborers buried by the Lushan brothers, fell completely under the control of its temptations. And once that happens, much like the animals that the *can tahs* represent, the holder of a *can tah* is completely under the control of Tak. The *can tahs* do ruin the body as a host for Tak; but a human body completely under the control of Tak can be good for other things. For example, Tak sends Audrey Wyler to infiltrate the group and kill David Carver before he can do anything to hurt Tak. She nearly succeeds, yet if it were not for her dying words, Steve and Cynthia would never know how grateful they should be for resisting the draw of the *can tahs*. And gratefulness tends to go a long way in terms of motivation when it comes to helping out others.

None of the examples of temptation mean anything, though, without one element inherent in all characters previously discussed: a moral compass. Without some knowledge of what is fundamentally right and

wrong, temptation ceases to be temptation and becomes just another sensation without any real ramifications. Harold Lauder experiences a brief touch of remorse before he succumbs to Nadine Cross's charms. Intuitively, he *knows* that staying with his friends in Boulder is a better thing to do than keeping company with Nadine--he just is not strong enough to resist the temptation. After his attempt to blow up the Boulder Committee and subsequent escape that sees him at the bottom of a ravine on the verge of dying courtesy of Flagg, he writes out an apology, knowing that what he did was wrong. "*I was misled,*" he writes, cutting to the core of temptation's nature (964). It is this same intuitive code that keeps Steve and Cynthia away from Tak's *can tahs* in *Desperation*: "Steve reached out to touch the thing himself. She grabbed his wrist before he could. 'Don't. It feels nasty'" (256). The nasty feeling comes courtesy of the intuitive moral compass.

The idea of a moral compass may seem a bit hokey (and overly dogmatic), but the fact remains that most of the characters who King spends any time with in *Desperation* and *The Stand* know right from wrong. And, besides, without knowledge of evil (or good), how does one know what good (or evil) is? The simple idea that one extreme must define the other for either to exist is necessity enough for a moral compass--a compass being an object that determines direction by use of extreme points. Moving back to topics discussed in the previous chapter, there is another way to prove the existence of a moral compass. If God is in conscious control of good and evil, then it follows that He has some inherent knowledge of the two and their relationship with each other. And one of the basic precepts of humankind's existence according to Judeo-Christian tradition (the tradition that King uses) is that "God created man in His *own* image" (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, if God has an inherent knowledge of good and

evil, then so should man. Of course, Adam and Eve had no need of "knowledge," and it was not until they transgressed God's one rule (which brings up the idea of whether or not Adam and Eve knew what they were doing was wrong) that they acquired knowledge. Regardless, the only knowledge God can impart to anyone reflects, in some measure, His own knowledge. The difference between deity and mortal is the element of control: God has it and humans only manage to display it sporadically. Another trait of the Judeo-Christian God is His infinite wisdom, which makes Him, unlike humans, unsusceptible to the various forms of temptation that evil sports.

One thing that *Desperation*, unlike *The Stand*, lacks because of its strict dichotomous nature is any character whose moral compass shifts dramatically. In Flagg's Las Vegas, all the people are initially united in the common goal of wiping out the Free Zone. In this respect, ethics are not a concern for King; it is simply enough to know that all the people are working devotedly for Flagg. When his establishment is the epitome of success, no one questions him, despite all the bad vibes he gives off to anyone around him. But once things begin to go downhill, Flagg's masses start to become a little edgy. They sneak off during the night, headed for South America or some other place where they think Flagg will not bother to look because, however conscious the realization is, they know something is wrong. And, interestingly, towards the end, these people manage to get away in droves because Flagg is too busy dealing with the problems he has created to watch over his no longer united flock.

As mentioned earlier, Whitney Hogan is one of these people who have come to the decision to desert. Before he manages to do so, however, Larry Underwood and Ralph Brentner wander into town and are scheduled to be put to death. It is the sight of these two about to be

executed in a style reminiscent of drawing and quartering (not crucifixion, there will be no likening of these two to Christ for Flagg) that gives Whitney the compulsion to speak: "*This ain't right. You know it ain't! . . . We was Americans once! This ain't how Americans act'*" (1066). If God had anything He wanted the characters to prove besides the fact that His faithful would stand up to evil as Larry and Ralph and their fallen compatriots did, then Whitney exemplified it. In the face of what he *knew* was wrong, he stood up to the terrifying Flagg in front of everyone and said that what Flagg was doing was wrong. Not only had his moral compass righted itself, but he was also brave enough to speak out rather than sneak away later in the night. Flagg even says that he would have let Whitney go if he had merely fled, but, of course, once Whitney spoke up and denounced Flagg, Flagg had no choice but to annihilate Whitney.

Donald Elbert, also known as the Trashcan Man, is another individual whose moral compass eventually rights itself, but for radically different (and unconscious) reasons than Whitney Hogan's compass does. About the time that Trash's mother married the sheriff who gunned down his father, Trash started to light fires in mailboxes. After he set fire to a mailbox that had an old lady's pension check in it and began setting fires to abandoned houses and such, his stepfather sent him to Terre Haute for shock treatments. When he returned to Powtanville, Indiana, he did not start lighting fires again right away, but that did not stop people from jeering at him. One particular antagonist that Trash remembered was Carley Yates. After he burnt down the Methodist church, it was Carley's voice that remained lodged in his head for the rest of his life: "*Hey, Trashcan, whydja wanta burn up a church? Why dintcha burn up the SCHOOL?*" (283) Or, "*Hey, Trash! What did ole lady Semple say when you torched her pension check?*" (608).

What drew Trash to Randall Flagg and the folks in Las Vegas was that they treated him nicely. They never jeered at him or treated him badly because he looked and acted a little different; rather, they accepted him as one of their own.

That does not mean that Trash had no qualms about what he was doing. Before they crucify Hector Drogan, Trash thinks to himself, "*This is my last chance. My last chance to be Donald Merwin Elbert*" (613). Much like Harold Lauder, Trash knew that there might be a better alternative to Flagg; nonetheless, Flagg's charms draw Trash in just as they did Harold. Again, like Harold, Trash also finds out how false Flagg's charms really are. One day, after making one of his many runs into the desert to find leftover United States weapons, Trash returns to Indian Springs to be greeted by someone saying, "'People who play with fire wet the bed, Trash'" (1005). Instantly remembering Carley Yates, Trash realizes that these people are no better than the ones in Indiana. In a fit of rage, Trash wires everything around with explosives, the end result being that several vehicles explode, killing all of the pilots Flagg planned to employ in the preemptive destruction of the Free Zone before winter. Trash's actions make it effectively impossible for Flagg to launch a strike against the Free Zone--all because of one insensitive lout.

Trash is almost immediately regretful for what he has done, so he goes off into the desert looking to find something that will grant him "*REDEMPTION . . . [or] perhaps ATONEMENT*" in Flagg's eyes (1007). Of course, by this time, Flagg has heard about what happened at Indian Springs and has given the order for Trash to be executed. Horribly burned and dehydrated by the desert, Trash, as if by divine intervention, manages to come across one of the great technological advancements of the past century: the atom bomb. Trash thinks that the

bomb will get him back in Flagg's good graces, so he hitches it to his land rover and drives it back to Las Vegas. When he arrives, Larry and Ralph are about to be ripped apart and Whitney is speaking out against Flagg. What Trash adds to the equation is the means for God to end the threat that Flagg poses to the Boulder Free Zone. God ends the threat because Larry and Ralph have proved their faith and Whitney has claimed moral righteousness, but also because Trash, in his incomprehensible and unknowing way, has also redeemed himself. Trash spent his entire life surrounded by people that he *knew* were bad, so it seems fitting that he be the one responsible for putting an end to these people--even if he still has an odd, abject affection for Flagg. Trash may have gone out and found the bomb for the wrong reasons, but at least when it comes to humanity, he knows the difference between right and wrong.

Meanwhile, the principle behind God resolving the Las Vegas/Boulder conflict is the same principle behind Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. When God sees that Abraham will remain faithful and good under such adversity, He spares Isaac's life (if He ever intended to take it in the first place). When Larry, Ralph, Whitney, and Trash--all from different moral pasts and presents--prove that they have good within them, God saves Boulder by ending the threat from Las Vegas. There is also a parallel between the aforementioned characters' actions and when Abraham argues with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham convinces God not to destroy the cities of the plain if He can but find ten "righteous within the city" (Gen 18:24,32). God does not find these people in the cities of the plain, and both cities are leveled. However, He does find enough righteous people in the post-superflu America to warrant the sparing of the city in the mountains, Boulder (although, Las Vegas, the modern city of the plain, still gets leveled).

The moral wavering of the inhabitants of Las Vegas speaks to a larger sense of ambiguity in *The Stand*--something that *Desperation* lacks. Nearly all of the inhabitants of *Desperation* are dead before the events of the novel occur. Thus, each character who appears in the novel is essential to the events in some form. *The Stand*, however, sprawls with nameless, faceless people. There are several broad assumptions that King invites the reader to make about the people who reside in Las Vegas and the Boulder Free Zone. For example, one might reason that since the people in Las Vegas were not drawn to Boulder by the dreams of the comforting Mother Abigail, then there must be a reason that they were not attracted. The simplest assumption would be that their moral compasses were pointing in the wrong direction and thereby had no use for Abigail or what she represented. As mentioned above, these are the types of people who would make cruel and insensitive jokes about someone who was less fortunate than they were, like the Trashcan Man. There are exceptions, like Whitney Hogan, but King gives the reader no reason to believe that these people have any real redeeming qualities as a whole.

Ironically, though, King would have the reader believe the exact same thing about the people in the Boulder Free Zone. After Harold and Nadine manage to kill two members of the Free Zone Committee, a mob mentality manifests itself at the next Zone meeting, giving Stu reason to mentally comment: "*These are the good guys? They don't give a shit about Nick and Sue and Chad and the rest*" (891). In fact, these people want to do the exact same thing to Harold and Nadine that Whitney Hogan stands up against in Las Vegas. These people also seem like the type who would make cruel and insensitive jokes about someone who was less fortunate than they were, like Tom Cullen. Before the Committee sends Tom to be a spy in the West, they give him a cover story: "'They drove

Tom out because Tom is feeble-minded'" (808). One wonders how far this piece of fiction is from the truth. In any case, it appears that King suggests that, while the moral compass generally directs individuals in the right direction when it is absolutely necessary, under normal circumstances, it is part of human nature to become morally lax. Again, this tendency towards laxness may be the reason why the Christian Church is so popular: it encourages people not to become lax. Unfortunately, in some cases, such as the Crusades and Inquisition, the Church appears to have gone so far as to have encouraged overzealousness.

When Stu and Tom manage to make it back to Boulder after Las Vegas has been demolished by Trash's bomb and the hand of God, they are given a rather strange welcome: a sentry. "*They've posted sentries. Be funny to come all this way and get shot by a sentry. . . . Real funny. That's one even Randall Flagg could appreciate*" (1117-8). It is only when Stu can remember the name of the picture that was on the wall of his apartment that the sentry allows him back in to the Free Zone. King makes sure to point out at different times in the novel that most of the military-minded survivors gravitated to Las Vegas; however, it did not take but a couple of months without the leadership of God's chosen few for the population of the Free Zone to adopt basic military practices. By May of the following year, the Zone is already beginning to resemble the old America at its most mediocre. A man named Hugh Petrella, who "was a hard, puritanical fellow with a face that looked as if it had been carved by licks of a hatchet," had taken the job of marshal that Stu vacated (1130). Petrella appears to have no qualms in beginning the "endless American struggle between the law and freedom of the individual . . ." (1130). And with that, Stu and Frannie decide to leave the Zone, and society, behind. During their journey to Maine,

Frannie asks Stu, "Do you think . . . do you think people ever learn anything?" (1135) Stu ponders for a moment, and can only reply, "I don't know" (1135). With this kind of moral ambiguity, it seems difficult to believe that God created this scenario in order to affect a cleansing of humankind.

As a final testament as to whether or not the moral compass has a truth north to it, King presents a character in both novels who has to overcome one of the most trying sets of temptations in modern American society: an artist who has profited from his work and used that profit to indulge in every evil temptation that fame has to offer. The events of *The Stand* and *Desperation* catch both of these characters at a point where they have hit rock bottom and are struggling with where to go from there. The situations that they are placed in give them a chance to decide what kind of people they truly want to be; and with such extreme situations, there is little room for vacillation. The two characters are John Marinville from *Desperation* and Larry Underwood from *The Stand*.

King describes John Marinville as "the writer Norman Mailer always wanted to be, the man Shelby Foote had once called 'the only living American writer of John Steinbeck's stature'" (67). But after all the drugs and the alcohol and the wives, no one really had much use for him anymore. Like King, Marinville is the kind of writer that could write mediocre fiction for the rest of his life and people would buy it simply because he had "been accepted as a bona fide literary lion" (72). However, John decided that he did not want to live the rest of his life as a mediocre hack; instead, he wanted to resurrect his career and maybe garner another precious sound byte from Shelby Foote. His first wife, Terry, suggests that he write some new essays, combine them with some old ones, and publish a work of non-fiction. This train of

thought is what eventually leads John Marinville to be riding past Desperation on a Harley-Davidson.

John makes it clear from the start that fighting a maliciously evil spirit was not part of his plan to re-achieve greatness. Arguably, though, the opportunity to help defeat Tak is one that has its own special brand of moral greatness. Still, he wants no part of it. "Tell you what, sport: what your God wants doesn't matter in the least to me. . . . Frankly, David, I trust God about as far as I can sling a piano" (563). Gradually, that thing that some people call conscience started to work on John--only it sounded like his ex-wife, Terry. Then, God, through David, really gives John something to consider: David's tree house and the bar John frequented in Vietnam are both called the Viet Cong Lookout.

"The Rascals," David said. "Only back then they were still the Young Rascals. Felix Cavaliere on vocals. Very cool. That's the song that was playing when you died, wasn't it, Johnny? . . . [Vietnam] was the Land of the Dead--you even said so, Johnny. . . . You died . . . when? 1966? 1968? I guess it doesn't matter. When a person stops changing, stops *feeling*, they die." (607)

With that speech, John begins to remember all the things he saw in Vietnam, and realizes that what David says is true. He then implores God to help him become a better person. He comes to God and asks Him for help, and God is more than obliged to provide it--that was really all God wanted in the first place. Unfortunately, God decides that it is in John's best interest to be the one to finish Tak once and for all. John dies in the process, but he proved, with a little prodding, that his moral compass was weighted towards good.

At the beginning of *The Stand*, Larry Underwood has just become famous. His first hit sing, "Baby, Can You Dig Your Man," a song Larry cannot stand, is climbing the charts, most likely destined to hit number one. There is a little-known fact about hit singles: the artist who performs the hit single gets paid little money from the revenue that the single generates. Regardless of whether Larry knew this fact or not, he went and threw a huge party, spending nearly all of his money on drugs and alcohol. Taking the advice of one of the few friends still speaking to him, Larry flees to New York City to take refuge in his mother's apartment. Larry's mother, like his friends, does not have a very high opinion of him, even though she loves him all the same: "I think you're a taker. You've always been one. It's like God left some part of you out when He built you inside of me. You're not *bad* . . ." (88). But he is not what one would describe as good, either.

A few nights into his stay in New York, he has a one-night stand with a dental hygienist. As he flees her apartment in the morning, she shouts at him, "*You ain't no nice guy!*" (83) Later, he receives good news regarding his financial situation and he goes home to find his mother seriously ill. One of the first thoughts that goes through his head is not how to take care of his mother, but how inconvenient it is that she is sick: "*These things always happen to me. And: Why did it have to happen after I got the good news? And most despicable of all: How bad is this going to screw up all my plans? How many things am I going to have to change around?*" (155). But then the world all but ends, and Larry has a chance to change.

And after some brief encounters with his old self, Larry really does start to change. Initially, he starts out as the same selfish guy he used to be, but the fact that he still acts selfish really starts to bother him. After Nadine Cross refuses to sleep with him, he begins to

sleep with Lucy Swann. He hates the fact that he is still attracted to Nadine, and he knows that Lucy hates him for it, but he cannot seem to do the right thing. Judge Farris, one of Larry's biggest supporters, offers the opinion that

"Larry is a man who found himself comparatively late in life. . . . Men who find themselves late are never sure. They are all the things the civics books tell us the good citizens should be . . . uncomfortable in positions of leadership but rarely able to turn down a responsibility once it has been offered . . . or thrust upon them." (619)

And that is precisely what happens to Larry--he comes to resemble a moral compass set on autopilot.

This moral ambiguity lasts in Larry until the night Nadine Cross comes to Larry and begs him to sleep with her. She does this because she knows that Flagg will have no use for her, since he wants her for her virginity, if she sleeps with Larry. Despite the fact that this was what Larry thought he wanted ever since he met Nadine, he tells her no. Then, he goes back to Lucy and tells her that he loves her--for what that is worth. From that point on, Larry takes control of who he is. He realizes that he has a chance to begin anew and be the kind of person that people admire for the right reasons. And when Mother Abigail tells him that God wants him to go to Las Vegas and put an end to Randall Flagg, he agrees outright. Why? Because it was the right thing to do. A few nights before Flagg's men take Larry, Glen, and Ralph, Larry has a dream where his mother is accusing him again of being a taker. He responds to her accusation, saying, "*No Mom--no I'm not. I don't do that number anymore. I stopped doing that one when the world ended. Honest*" (1046). Just like in John Marinville's case, God provided Larry Underwood with the chance to really redeem himself and prove that he

really was a "nice guy" under extreme duress. Unfortunately, this opportunity also leads to Larry's death.

In the end, *The Stand* and *Desperation* are little more than scenarios created out of evil (by humankind and God) that God manipulates in order to test certain individuals' faith and moral compasses. In all cases, faith is proven and good proves to be stronger than evil. Like King himself said, it really is all a matter of "what ifs," whether it is God or Stephen King asking the questions. The great thing about these novels is, unlike the local preacher's sermons, people flock to bookstores and libraries in droves to hear what King has to say. They come to be frightened, true, but when the frightening is over, they tend to stay for the preaching. And if all that an audience wants is to be scared in order to feel good that bad things are not happening to them, they will be satisfied. But for the reader who is plagued with the question of "why," Stephen King provides a legitimate answer: God is a character in the story of the world, just with a little more power, control, and influence than everyone else. Thus, He has motivations and thoughts just like every other character does. He does what He does to make sure His entire creation has not turned into Sodom and Gomorrah, where there is no one righteous enough to warrant the existence of God's creation any longer.

Conclusion:

Popular Culture in America

When the Europeans came to "settle" America, religion (and survival) largely determined the impetus of daily life--especially since it was religious oppression that drove colonists to America in the first place. By the time of the American Revolution, society's emphasis had shifted away from Puritanical ideals to those of independence, liberty, and Lockean democracy. These were two active times in America's history where ideas and values were emphasized in their pure forms in order to establish the workings of a fledgling society.

Today, popular culture is the emphasis of American society. Whether this shift in emphasis is a result of cultural complacency or not, celebrities often eclipse politicians and religious leaders in stature and influence. Part of this shift in cultural importance has to do with the ease of access to entertainment and the willingness of American society to only focus on the big picture rather than the smaller details. For example, in the year 2001, an American no longer needs to study the history of World War II or the Cold War. Instead, all one has to do is go to the movie theater and see Ben Affleck in *Pearl Harbor* (2001) or Kevin Costner in *Thirteen Days* (2000), and then one has a working knowledge of two of the most significant events of the late twentieth century.

Horror has always been a genre that has lent itself to the re-edification of morality, but it was not until the beginning of the Cold War that horror explicitly became a significant moral presence in America, largely due to the shift in society to an entertainment culture. From *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to *Jurassic Park* and

beyond, horror as entertainment has played a significant role in sparking discussion of various moral questions that affect America as a country and as a society. And even though Americans as a whole do not favor reading as they once did, Stephen King is one author who can still draw as big an audience as the average Hollywood blockbuster. Additionally, he is one of the few people in the horror genre today who tackle questions of morality shamelessly and unflaggingly.

In *The Stand* and *Desperation*, King proves Nietzsche's madman wrong by writing that God is *not* dead. Then, King brings Him back to American society--the society in which, during the time of the Puritans, He played so large a part in helping to create. King has God reenter society in order to attack the complacency and overall laziness that plagues late twentieth century America as well as challenge modern morality that has grown sluggish with apathy and self-interest. King presents these two novels in much the same way as the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah: God enters the society to determine whether or not there is anyone righteous enough for His creation to be worth saving. By the resolution of both novels, God appears satisfied that, while human society-at-large may always be one of petulance, there are enough good people still around to warrant the continuance of the human race.

King, like God, surely realizes that most of his audience wants nothing but a good story and an occasional scare. A little preaching here and there is okay, but, overall, King's novels are for entertainment purposes only. Many of his novels, though, like *The Stand* and *Desperation*, reaffirm the fundamental moral ideas of good and evil and right and wrong; specifically, they emphasize the loss of these ideas in the late twentieth century. King is very steadfast in the opinion that his role as an author of horror novels is *not* one of a

moralist. In *On Writing*, he addresses this issue in terms of whether humans ever learn anything, the philosophical question embedded in the conclusion of *The Stand*:

Sometimes the book gives you answers, but not always, and I didn't want to leave the readers who had followed me through hundreds of pages with nothing but some empty platitude I didn't believe myself. There is no *moral* to *The Stand*, no "We'd better learn or we'll probably destroy the whole damned planet next time"--but if the theme stands out clearly enough, those discussing it may offer their own morals and conclusions. Nothing wrong with that; such discussions are one of the great pleasures of the reading life. (206)

And while King may refuse the title of moralist, he nonetheless plays an extremely important role in providing the means for discussion of American morality at the end of the twentieth century. As a final testament to King's worth, the great defender of the Western canon, Harold Bloom, who has nothing but negative things to say about King, grudgingly has to admit that even he can find "redeeming social values in [King's] narratives" (Bloom 2).

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