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Monsters and Mayhem: Physical and Moral Survival
in Stephen King's Universe

Jaime L. Davis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Monsters and Mayhem: Physical and Moral Survival in Stephen King's Universe

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Master of Arts

The goal of my thesis is to analyze physical and moral survival in three novels from King's oeuvre. Scholars have attributed survival in King's universe to factors such as innocence, imaginative capacity, and career choice. Although their arguments are convincing, I believe that physical and moral survival ultimately depends on a character's knowledge of the dark side of human nature and an understanding of moral agency. I have chosen three novels that span several decades of King's work—*Salem's Lot*, *Needful Things*, and *Desperation*—to illustrate the relationship between knowledge and survival. In *Salem's Lot*, King uses the main character's interest in the horror genre to emphasize the importance of an exposure to the dark side of human nature. In *Needful Things*, King vividly shows the dire consequences of naiveté, or in other words, uneducated innocence. *Desperation* represents a culmination of King's ideas. The final novel in my analysis shows the power of youth tempered by knowledge of human nature and informed by religious conviction. King links religion and horror to show the power of both in religious survival and to show the ultimate morality of horror.

Keywords: Stephen King, morality, survival, innocence, religion, *Salem's Lot*, *Needful Things*, *Desperation*

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Introduction

From myths and fairy tales to Greek tragedies, literature has grappled with the “deathless struggle to define morality or what it costs to choose good over evil (and vice versa)” (Magistrale *Moral Voyages* 80). Horror tales intensify the struggle between good and evil, showing the extremes in each. The extreme conditions often result in terrible punishment or gruesome death. In the horror genre, failure to make moral choices results in swift and harsh consequences. Horror tales and films celebrate emotion, sensuality, and chaos—qualities often viewed as disruptive of social norms or harmful to moral development. Horror embodies Dionysian impulses that overturn our notions of a tidy, sensible, and ordered world.

In the past, the horror genre has been dismissed as juvenile or lowbrow, lurid and sensational, a “genre of serious interest only to adolescents and developmentally arrested adult males” (Magistrale, *Abject Terrors* 1). And, in some instances, this may be true. For example, films such as the *Saw* franchise and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) seem to capitalize on the gory, the random and the meaningless for titillating effect. Gianluca Di Muzio goes so far to argue that horror films are immoral because spectators risk “atrophying [their] capacity for appropriate compassionate reactions and [their] ability to appraise correctly situations that make moral demands on [them]” (285).

However, in recent years scholars have demonstrated convincingly that the horror genre is well equipped to deal with timeless questions of good and evil. Rather than retarding moral development as some fear,¹ horror tales allow readers to work through their own notions of

¹ Even during the heyday of the Gothic novel, writers cautioned against reading horror fiction claiming the tales were dangerous, especially for women and children: “These fictitious [sic] narratives so commonly told in nurseries, called ghost stories, or other horrible recitals of the same kind, are decidedly injurious under all circumstances. I know children in the habit of hearing these follies, grow up fearful, and in some measure in want of moral courage...a person,

morality, helping them understand the consequences of choosing good over evil. Philip Nickel, for example, responds to claims of the immorality of horror by illustrating that the experience of watching horror films (*Saw* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* included) “essentially involves the engagement of one’s compassionate attitudes” (Fahy 16). Similarly, Philip Tallon asserts that horror “can inform and enlighten our vision of the world by reminding us of our inner moral frailty and by forcing us to take seriously the moral reality of evil” (Fahy 36).²

Stephen King reigns as the contemporary king of horror, achieving success by exploring the Dionysian side of human nature and the reality of evil. King’s successful career and prodigious output (over four dozen novels, about a dozen novellas, over one hundred short stories, two nonfiction books, several screenplays and a comic book, to name a few) testify of the genre’s popularity and power. King himself believes in the power of the horror tale. In *Danse Macabre*,³ King’s treatise on the horror genre, he writes:

Here is the final truth of horror movies [and fiction]: They do not love death, as some

however strong in mind naturally, cannot wholly divest himself of the paralyzing effect of these injurious influences inculcated in his youthful days, even when he attains mature age” (Rendle 219).

² How audiences interpret or enjoy horror is a complicated issue. Horror can be destructive, as Di Muzio fears, and some viewers may experience a type of *schadenfreude* in witnessing the misfortune of others. Like Nickel and Tallon believe, horror can also be redemptive. It can engage viewers’ compassion, and be a tool to explore their notions of right and wrong. However, it is simplistic to argue that all responses to horror fall on one side of the spectrum or the other. Responses to horror are, in reality, as varied as its audience. Much of the interpretation depends on the viewer and their willingness to engage critically with what they are viewing.

³ *Danse Macabre* is an in-depth study of the horror genre in which King discusses the last 60 years of horror film in relation to the cultural milieu which created it. King believes that the horror genre taps an artesian well of our deepest fears and anxieties. His analysis draws attention to the value of the horror genre in the study of popular culture and the history of the 20th century. Bernard Gallagher argues that *Danse Macabre* “not only brings an interesting and sometimes incisive critical vision to the work of horror, it also reveals an implicit critical method which opens up a realm of interpretative possibilities for popular fiction, film, and television” (Bloom 35).

have suggested; they love life. They do not celebrate deformity but by dwelling on deformity, they sing of health and energy. By showing us the miseries of the damned they help us to rediscover the smaller (but never petty) joys of our own lives. (198)

As scholars have argued and King ably demonstrates, horror can reveal the Dionysian side of the world and human nature to help its audience cope with the horrors of real life and to explore their legitimate fears.⁴ The horror story forces us to acknowledge the existence of evil within ourselves and in the world around us, which in turn helps us solidify our definition of morality and understand the consequences of our choices.

My thesis focuses on the self-reflexive depiction and role of the horror genre within three of King's works: *Salem's Lot* (1975), *Needful Things* (1991), and *Desperation* (1996). I've chosen these three works because all three feature young boy protagonists of roughly the same age and social background, who nonetheless experience differing degrees of success in the fight against evil. Each faces real, tangible evil, but their responses vary: Mark Petrie (*Salem's Lot*) and David Carver (*Desperation*) courageously confront and vanquish evil, while Brian Rusk (*Needful Things*) succumbs, allowing evil to conquer and eventually destroy him. So why do some characters survive an encounter with the reality of evil while others perish?

The goal of my thesis is to show that a character's interest in the horror genre—and the knowledge such an interest brings—is inextricably linked to survival in King's universe. King deftly inscribes his characters with strong personalities expressed through their thoughts, their speech and dialect, and their hobbies. Characters' knowledge and training often correlate with their physical survival and their moral choices. Mark and David share an interest in horror fiction

⁴ King believes deeply in the power and critical importance of the horror genre. As a prominent writer of horror, however, King does have a vested interest in justifying and legitimizing the genre and, by extension, his own work. Rather than argue the morality or immorality of the genre, I am interested in King's personal view of horror, and its redemptive role within three of his novels.

and film. Their interest allows them to confront “unpleasant truths of the human condition” in relative safety (Bloom 38). They learn of the inherent duality of human nature, and of their moral agency to resist or succumb to evil. When evil appears, whatever its form, Mark and David are prepared to take a moral stance and fight. On the other side of the spectrum, Brian’s interest in baseball and daydream fantasies teaches no such lessons and he is ill-equipped to deal with evil when it appears. In *‘Salem’s Lot*, *Needful Things*, and *Desperation*, each character’s exposure to and attitude towards horror is a key factor in their physical and moral survival or lack thereof, providing them with adaptive mechanisms that enable them to recognize and confront the nature of evil.

King’s treatise on the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*, showcases the depth and breadth of his knowledge of horror. King has devoured the highs and the lows of the genre from classics like Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw* to the not-so-classic film *Robot Monster* (1953). King explains his interest in the genre and the reason he writes the stories he does:

The tale of the irrational is the sanest way I know of expressing the world in which I live. These tales have served me as instruments of both metaphor and morality; they continue to offer the best window I know on the question of how we perceive things and the questions of how we do or do not behave on the basis of our perceptions. (*Four Past* 608)

King describes the world as he sees it, exploring questions of morality and character in the best way he knows how: through the horror genre. Horror explores the Dionysian side of human nature. It is untidy, emotional, and chaotic. Horror unflinchingly and often graphically shows its audience the depths to which humanity can sink and reminds us of our own frail mortality. Horror relies on excess and exaggeration to widen the gap between life and death, and good and evil.

Horror relies on the polarization of good and evil, which allows audiences “to learn to deal with emotional and moral distinctions” (Badley 25). In addition to intensifying the difference between moral and immoral behavior, horror, Magistrale argues, invites viewers or readers to explore their own fears and anxieties. Magistrale contends:

Not merely a genre for exploiting pure sensationalism and sensory induration, at its best the horror film is perhaps most like a visit to a trusted psychoanalyst: We reveal something of what is troubling us, and in return we get the opportunity to explore its meaning to our lives—and maybe, if we are lucky, to leave less anxious than when we arrived. If nothing else, future horror films will continue to provide us with insights about what it means to be human. (*Abject Terrors* 18)

In other words, the horror genre vividly showcases the darker side of human nature allowing audiences to examine their own fears and anxieties as well as their deeply held notions of right and wrong. Within King’s universe, horror serves the same function. Characters gain a window into human nature and moral agency through their interest in horror which affects their actions when facing evil.

In *Dissecting Stephen King*, Heidi Strengell analyzes the influences that have helped King develop his unique brand of horror and which inform his work. Strengell identifies the Gothic mode as a major influence on King’s writing. King reinterprets Gothic conventions and philosophies for a modern audience, allowing him to explore good and evil in a contemporary setting. In *Moral Voyages*, horror scholar Tony Magistrale connects the Gothic tradition to morality in King’s oeuvre. Magistrale argues that King’s horror fiction is didactic, exploring questions of morality and human choice. King places his characters in situations where they must confront the reality of evil, but ultimately they have the freedom to choose how they respond to

that evil.

The Gothic mode operates on two levels; it is a well-balanced blend of reality and the supernatural and has a “pleasing allegorical feel” (King, *Danse Macabre* 5; Strengell 29). As such, Gothic conventions and philosophies are well suited for adaptation to a modern audience. Horror looks for our secret rooms, where our fears lie while the symbolic context allows us to confront these fears from a safe distance. This isn’t to suggest that authors put on their “allegorical caps” when they write. Rather, “it is simply to suggest that sometimes these pressure points, these terminals of fear, are so deeply buried and yet so vital that we may tap them like artesian wells—saying one thing out loud while we express something else in a whisper” (King, *Danse Macabre* 6).

The symbolic capacities of the Gothic mode enable writers to explore individual and societal pressure points through the use of Gothic conventions. Early writers of the Gothic including Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe used haunted castles, secret passageways, murky pasts, and diabolical villains. King avails himself of similar techniques, but in a contemporary setting. Instead of haunted castles, King uses supermarkets, schoolhouses, and hotels located in small town Maine or Colorado, for example, instead of in an exotic Italian castle. The contemporary setting updates King’s work for a modern audience and allows him to explore metaphysical questions dealing with the individual such as “...how much do we know about reality, about life and death, about the universe and God, about human personality and motivation, and about the course of our destiny? How much do we know about good and evil, about what we should do and what we ought not do?” (Benton 7-8). Using supernatural monsters and intensifying the gap between good and evil, the Gothic mode confronts audiences with their own mortality and explores human nature. As Richard Benton points out, the Gothic makes us

questions ourselves and tests definitions of morality.

Horror tales show audiences the darker side of life and serve as a graphic reminder of our mortality and imperfections. Modern horror deals more overtly with these themes than did Gothic fiction. During the 1960s and 1970s, horror was reinvented as contemporary with local settings and monsters much closer to home. Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (1960) marked a change in the way horror tales were constructed. Instead of monsters in far off places, the horror came home to our own backyards. Frankenstein's monster and the wolf man no longer scared us. Instead, we faced more realistic characters like Norman Bates who looked ordinary and harmless, but hid dangerous obsessions and predilections. Tales were rooted in the horror of personality, exploring the unknown and forbidden in psychological rather than physical ways. Monsters were no longer identified by their grotesque exterior, but by a twisted and distorted interior. Mental deformity replaced physical deformity, making it difficult to know exactly who or what to fear. We as audiences and readers looked in the mirror and saw the monster in ourselves.

Both the Gothic tradition and modern horror deal with questions of monstrosity and the human condition. Stories such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* make visible our inner corruption (Fahy 38). While modern horror stories like Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets* (1968) and Robert Bloch's *Psycho* hide inner deformity under a mask of harmless normalcy. Comparing tales of psychological and physical grotesquerie, King delineates the difference between "inside evil" and "outside evil":

All tales of horror can be divided into two groups: those in which the horror results from an act of free and conscious will—a conscious decision to do evil—and those in which the horror is predestinate, coming from outside like a stroke of lightning. The most

classic horror tale of this latter type is the Old Testament story of Job, who becomes the human Astroturf in a kind of Superbowl between God and Satan.

The stories of horror which are psychological—those which explore the terrain of the human heart—almost always revolve around the free-will concept; “inside evil,” if you will, the sort we have no right laying off on God the Father. (*Danse Macabre* 62)

Shelley’s horrific monster has been immortalized by numerous Hollywood adaptations of the novel. Everyone recognizes the shambling creature patched together from parts of rotting corpses with a protruding brow and bolts sticking from his neck. Yet, despite the monster’s prominence in popular culture, according to King’s division of horror tales, the actual monster of the novel is Dr. Frankenstein, after whom the novel is named. Subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*, the very title of the novel indicates that Frankenstein (the doctor, not the monster despite common references otherwise) is the monster to be feared. Frankenstein’s monster begins with a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate with the mind of a child, innocent until corrupted by mankind. Dr. Frankenstein, on the other hand, tries to play God, then compounds his *hubris* by refusing to take responsibility for his actions. The character of Dr. Frankenstein shows that despite our success in taming nature with science and logic, at the end of the day, we may have “mastery” over nature, but not of ourselves. Like Dr. Frankenstein, each of us can choose to do good or to do evil.

King deftly uses both inside and outside evil in much of his work. Examples of outside evil show the range of King’s imagination and the frailty of the human condition. In *The Shining* (1977), for example, the Overlook Hotel menaces its guests; in *From a Buick 8* (2002) a car mysteriously arrives from an alternate dimension; while “The Mist” (1985) shows a government experiment gone awry, unleashing terrible creatures on a group of supermarket customers. Sentient hotels, alien cars, and supernatural creatures indiscriminately threaten whoever crosses

its path. On the other side of the spectrum, inside evil exploits takes advantage of character's weaknesses turning them into agents of evil. *Needful Things* (1991), for example, features an evil storekeeper who exploits the secret desires of common townspeople using their own weaknesses to destroy them. Though the array of evil is interesting and enlightening, King feels that where the evil comes from is less important than the characters' reactions to it: "My work underlines again and again that I am not merely dealing with the surreal and the fantastic but, more importantly, using the surreal and the fantastic to examine the motivations of people and the society and institutions they create" (Magistrale, *America's Storyteller* 12).

Though King writes about fantastic creatures and supernatural occurrences, what interests him most is character. For King, then, inside and outside evil are inextricably connected. Outside evil creates opportunities for inner evil to emerge and for character's convictions to be tested. King seamlessly melds inside and outside evil by putting characters in extreme and often supernatural situations outside their control. These situations try their personal beliefs and force them to confront their own inner weaknesses. Although my thesis focuses on three of King's works (*Salem's Lot*, *Needful Things*, and *Desperation*), moral agency in the face of evil is a significant theme throughout King's entire oeuvre.

King's oeuvre abounds with characters who come face to face with the reality of evil; and the results are as varied as the forms of the evil. Perhaps one of King's best-known examples is Jack Torrance from *The Shining*.⁵ The novel traces Jack's descent into evil, but holds out hope in the end for Jack's soul. The Overlook represents a source of outside evil, which comes in contact

⁵ Jack Torrance takes the job as caretaker of the Overlook Hotel out of desperation. He's been fired from teaching and his family is nearly destitute. Once the family moves to the hotel, the hotel awakens and begins to menace the family by exploiting Jack's weaknesses (alcoholism, anger control problems) in an attempt to get to Jack's son, Danny. Jack succumbs to the hotel's influence, but in the end sacrifices himself to allow his family to escape and to destroy the evil of the Overlook.

with the Torrance family through no evil choice of their own. The evil of the Overlook preys on Jack by working on the worst parts of him and nurturing the inside evil within Jack. It senses that he is the weakest member of the family and stokes his anger towards his family for the demands they make on him. The hotel attempts and finally succeeds in shattering Jack's fragile sobriety. As the Overlook awakens and begins to threaten his family, Jack refuses to accept what is happening, even when confronted by it directly. For example, Jack investigates Danny's claim that there is a dead woman in the bathtub of the stateroom, and is horrified to find that Danny is telling the truth. Yet despite the concrete evidence, Jack chooses to remain at the Overlook. He passively denies what is happening, instead choosing willful ignorance.

Buckling to the continual influence of the Overlook, Jack moves gradually from passive to active participant in the events. He makes a conscious decision to damage the snowmobile and throw away the key so his family cannot escape. At this point, the novel illustrates inside evil through Jack's character. Encountering the Overlook and its taint were cruel acts of fate, but Jack's response constitutes "an act of free and conscious will" (King, *Danse Macabre* 62). Jack gives in to the influence of the Overlook, allowing its evil to take hold and exploit the darker side of his nature.

Human choice, then, is the primary factor dictating the degree of influence evil has over a character. Like Jack Torrance, Louis Creed⁶ in *Pet Sematary* faces evil and gives in. Creed's desire for his son to live again mirrors Jack's desire for success and respect. Both Louis and Jack

⁶ Louis Creed finds an ancient Micmac burial ground, which rumor says empowers those buried there to come back to life. Though warned to avoid the burial ground, Creed decides to bury the family cat there after it is run over and killed. The cat is resurrected, but where it used to be friendly and vibrant, it now smells of death and acts contrary and sly. When a speeding truck kills Creed's son (Gage), Creed again decides to ignore his friend's warnings and his experience reviving the cat. Driven by guilt and grief, he buries Gage in the Micmac burial ground. Gage returns possessed by the Wendigo, a demon of the forest. Louis kills his son and descends into insanity.

let their overwhelming desires subvert their moral conscience and both ultimately give in to evil (Jack to the Overlook and Louis to the Wendigo). However, Jack saves his family and Louis destroys his.

King's novels are populated with flawed, everyday characters like Jack and Louis who are susceptible to the initial attractiveness of evil. King's accessible protagonists make it possible for the reader to easily identify with them. This is a key factor to King's success. In their desires for potential good, King's characters seem real to life, making it easy for readers to see themselves in the protagonists. And, as in everyday life, sometimes people triumph and sometimes they fail, though the consequence in horror are much more immediate and permanent (usually resulting in a horrific death). For King, the seriousness of the consequence and immediacy of the judgment are what make a good horror story:

I think it's important that the reader knows that the writer is not playing. There isn't going to be a Hardy Boys story where everybody survives at the end and there never was any real danger. I think that you know you've grown up when you say to yourself, "I don't want to read any more Supermans because he is the man of steel and he's always going to get out of this jam, whatever it is, and nothing really serious is really going to happen to him." (qtd. in Bloom 10)

Without real danger and real consequence, a horror story loses its impact.

King believes that "the best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event, which is to say character-driven" (*On Writing* 190). For King, stories that are plot based end up being pedantic and boring. Instead of plotting out a novel, he puts real characters with whom the reader can empathize in a situation to discover how they might act then lets the story develop itself. The character of John Smith, from *The Dead Zone* (1979), serves as a prime

example. John Smith is an ordinary, likeable young man who develops an unusual ability to see the future. He feels a moral responsibility to act upon his visions, despite the fear and distrust of those around him. Despite his extraordinary ability, readers easily identify with John's good natured personality and desire to do what's right.

The character of Carrie White represents another of King's accessible characters. Carrie has telekinetic powers, but despite this unusual ability, her character still resonates with the reader. King describes her as a combination of "the two loneliest, most reviled girls in my class—how they looked, how they acted, how they were treated" (*On Writing* 78). Carrie is slightly overweight, shy, and stifled by an oppressive, hyper-religious mother. Because of her looks and her strange mother, Carrie's high school peers mercilessly ridicule her until she's pushed over the edge and exacts revenge on her tormentors. Carrie is not exactly likeable, but she is a powerful, sympathetic character. She represents that girl in everyone's high school who was tormented and teased for four long years. King describes his reaction to her character: "I never liked Carrie...but through Sondra and Dodie [two of King's classmates in high school] I came at last to understand her a little. I pitied her and I pitied her classmates as well, because I had been one of them once upon a time" (*On Writing* 82).

Jack Torrance, Louis Creed, Carrie White, and John Smith are a representative sample King's characters. He writes about small town, blue-collar people, because that's what he knows. King draws upon his upbringing and life experiences as a writer, teacher, and father to create believable characters. He repeatedly uses characters types he is familiar with including authors and children. My thesis focuses primarily on pre-adolescent boys in three of King's novels. King's personal experiences and talent as a writer makes his characters (even the minor ones) richly nuanced, holding the readers' interest and sympathy. Because of this "readers are not

frightened by monsters; rather their fear is an expression of empathy with the main characters” (Strengell 4).

King’s view on these issues seems opposite of what we expect. Horror films and stories normally revolve around the monster, as reflected in the titles: *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Dracula*, *Carmilla*, *Psycho*, and *The Candyman*, to name a few. But King posits that even when a horrible monster occupies center stage, and menaces the characters, a story is neither effective, nor scary if the characters are not believable. If characters are lackluster or wooden, we do not fear for them and may even rejoice when they are finally removed by the monster. In *Friday the 13th*, for example, an entire group of high school students is killed and the viewers don’t really care because the characters have no depth. The film focuses primarily on the shock value and gore of the deaths, and less on creating sympathetic characters. The one survivor is an innocent young woman who has developed more personality and camera time than the other characters. In contrast, Strengell argues, effective stories like King’s, with characters that the reader or viewer cares about, require more of their audience: “When identifying with the characters, the reader fears for them, feels sympathy, and takes a stand—that is, actively participates in the development of King’s stories” (4). A more invested audience means that a character’s choices become of the utmost importance: will a character choose good or ill, and what will be the consequences of those choices?

With life and soul on the line, how a character reacts to an encounter with evil becomes crucial. A character’s ability to survive depends greatly on what they learn in their fall from grace, and from their deepened awareness of sin and evil. Magistrale argues that King’s characters, upon encountering the reality of evil, respond in one of two ways:

The awareness of sin forces...characters to proceed in one of two possible directions. The

first is toward moral regeneration, a spirit of renewed commitment to other human beings that is born from an acceptance of the devil's thesis as postulated in "Young Goodman Brown," that "Evil is the nature of mankind" (98), and that the failure to acknowledge either the existence of evil or its nexus to mankind results in spiritual death. On the other hand, the discovery of sin can frequently be overwhelming; it does not always lead to a higher state of moral consciousness. (Bloom 77)

Magistrale warns that the discovery of evil "often takes a violent shape—destructive of the central character or of those around him" (*Landscape* 21). Characters like Jack Torrance and Louis Creed struggle with their own weaknesses and ultimately surrender to evil. Characters like Mark Petrie (*Salem's Lot*), Marty Coslaw (*Cycle of the Werewolf*), and Danny Torrance (*The Shining*), in contrast, exert self-discipline and emerge triumphant though shaken. Marty Coslaw, though confined to a wheelchair, identifies the Reverend as the werewolf and courageously battles him despite his physical limitations. Danny Torrance uses his "shine" to resist the influence of the Overlook hotel and to summon help. These young characters exert their moral agency to combat evil's influence. King's oeuvre is filled with characters who succumb and triumph to varying degrees.

Characters who triumph seem to understand that humans have the potential for both evil and good. For these characters, facing evil forces them to acknowledge their own fallibility and mortality, yet they make the conscious choice to resist and act morally. They suffer intensely but "learn that they have within themselves the capacity for making ethical choices, and that these decisions will either enhance or retard their adjustment to the reality of evil" (Magistrale, *Landscape* 22). These characters "emerg[e] with a greater degree of independence and moral resolve" (Magistrale, *Landscape* 91). Magistrale comments on the role of encounters with evil by

quoting Miriam from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* saying "sin—which man chose instead of good—has been so beneficently handled by omniscience and omnipotence, that, whereas our dark enemy sought to destroy us by it, it has really become an instrument most effective in the education of intellect and souls" (*Landscape* 22). Encounters with evil, as Hawthorne and Magistrale assert, can educate and strengthen us. Strength can come from a descent into darkness. These characters illustrate the ideal. They show moral strength and courage in the face of despair and death.

Stories of characters who yield to evil are just as morally instructive as stories of characters who triumph. For some, the discovery of sin can be overwhelming, leading to self-destruction and despair. These characters "commit their worst transgression in refusing to recognize the evil in themselves, and in failing to exert a greater measure of self-discipline" (Magistrale, *Moral Voyages* 57). Each of us, at some point, faces these same discoveries and decisions.

King's universe is filled with a spectrum of characters who respond to evil with various degrees of success, many of which are children. Magistrale notes "the vast majority of King's heroes and heroines are either adolescents or adults who have refused to forfeit their childhood bonds. This alone suggests that in King's mind it is the child who remains most capable of surviving a horrific experience and channeling his terror into something useful" (*Second Decade* 33). King himself notes the unique capacity of children for dealing with horror. He contends "A certain amount of fantasy and horror in a child's life seems to me a perfectly okay, useful sort of thing. Because of the size of their imaginative capacity, children are able to handle it, and because of their unique position in life, they are able to put such feelings to work" (*Danse Macabre* 102). For King, children possess the ability to fight against death and despair, using

their terror and helplessness to channel their resolve. They can accept the reality of evil without being consumed by it.

Scholars (including King himself) have analyzed youth and its relationship to survival in King's work, attributing its value to resiliency, innocence, and imaginative capacity, to cite a few.⁷ It is important to note, however, that many of King's children are endowed with special powers or abilities in addition to youth that are key to their survival. Danny Torrance from *The Shining* and Charlene "Charlie" McGee from *Firestarter*, for example, use their extraordinary powers to combat and ultimately defeat the evil they face. Yet despite their fantastic powers, their deeply held notions of right and wrong guide their actions and are ultimately the more powerful keys to their survival.

More often than not, the children in King's oeuvre can only rely on their own moral strength and courage when facing malignant forces far more powerful than themselves. Magistrale visits this theme in *Landscape of Fear*, attributing the survival of King's child protagonists to an innate moral compass that helps them recognize and resist evil. "Children possess elements of endurance and innate goodness," he argues, "which qualify them for hero status...Children may eventually grow up to become adults, but before the process is completed, King implies...they gain insight into a set of intuitive ethics that adults eventually forfeit" (Magistrale, *Second Decade* 7).

In addition to an innate moral compass, childhood imaginative capabilities help children accept and cope with the existence of evil. Children have a fluid worldview that allows for things

⁷ One of the best discussions of the role of childhood in King's work can be found in Magistrale's *Landscape of Fear* (1988). Tony Magistrale analyzes a variety of King's child protagonists and looks at how they represent the full spectrum of human experience. He discusses children as healing forces of forgiveness (*The Shining*, *Pet Sematary*, *Cujo*), testing grounds for moral capacity (*Salem's Lot*, *The Talisman*), but also as destructive forces (*Carrie*, *Firestarter*). For other good discussions on the role of childhood in King's horror, see Jonathan Davis' *Stephen King's America* (1994).

intangible and irrational. Adults, on the other hand, adhere to belief in reason and logic resulting in catastrophe in King's fiction (Davis 49). Jonathan Davis believes that it is only when adults return to a childlike view of the world, regaining imagination and innocence that they can combat the evil they face (Davis 49). Davis attributes Ben Mears' success against the vampires of 'Salem's Lot'⁸ to Mark Petrie, the child protagonist, and his belief in monsters. Mark's belief in the world of the supernatural "becomes the connection with childhood Ben needs in returning back to his own youth to understand death and dying. Ben then becomes emotionally equipped to combat the league of vampires presently spreading death throughout 'Salem's Lot'" (Davis 65).

Davis and Magistrale argue that imaginative capacity and moral absolutism are important factors in a character's survival and triumph over evil, but I believe that there are more complicated factors in a character's survival than mere age. King's fictional universe is populated with children who share innocence and an innate moral compass, yet their responses to the evil are as varied as the forms evil takes. Mark Petrie from *'Salem's Lot* recognizes the vampiric threat that has invaded his hometown, takes personal responsibility to fight the evil, and triumphs (albeit at great loss). In *The Shining*, the Overlook Hotel attempts to beguile then force Danny Torrance to give in to its influence and join its ghostly guests forever. Danny resists, saving his own life and helping his father find redemption. In *Desperation*, David Carver almost single-handedly saves a group of travelers held captive by an ancient evil force, and destroys the monster. In *Needful Things*, on the other hand, Brian Rusk meets with evil and succumbs, starting a chain of events that ends in the destruction of Castle Rock and the violent death of many of its inhabitants. I believe it is no coincidence that many of the characters who survive

⁸ In *'Salem's Lot*, master vampire, Kurt Barlow, and his minion, Richard Straker, invade a small New England town under the guise of antiquities dealers. Barlow commences to spread his evil throughout the town turning nearly all the citizens into vampires. Mark Petrie, Ben Mears, and a few others band together to defeat the vampire. Mark and Ben are the only ones to survive.

and triumph over evil in King's fiction share an interest in the horror genre. King repeatedly draws attention to his characters' interests and hobbies to make them accessible and realistic, but, more importantly, to illustrate the power of the horror genre in moral instruction. I believe that a character's exposure to and attitude towards the horror genre—and by extension to death and the dark side of human nature—make the individual more likely to survive an encounter with evil.

My thesis is interested in physical and moral survival in King's universe. Of all the possible permutations, I focus primarily on how King develops the relationship between youth and survival. Although King's oeuvre is filled with characters who face evil, I've chosen these three particular novels because they span several decades of King's career and represent a progression in his exploration of physical and moral survival in relationship to youth. Chapter 1 discusses *'Salem's Lot* (1975), in which King combines the power of youth and innocence with the knowledge Mark Petrie acquires from his interest in horror fiction and film. Mark Petrie's youth gives him a fluid worldview that allows for the existence of the supernatural. Mark's exposure to the horror genre graphically illustrates the inherent duality of human nature and the consequences of choosing evil over good. The combination enables Mark to defeat the vampire Barlow who has invaded *'Salem's Lot*, and to exercise moral courage in the fight against evil.

Chapter 2 is a study of *Needful Things* (1991) in which King revisits the themes of *'Salem's Lot* while reversing the youthful protagonist's reaction to evil. *Needful Things* follows essentially the same story line as *'Salem's Lot* and even shares similar character types. However, King leaves innocence uneducated and explores instead the deadly consequences of naiveté. Brian Rusk, like Mark Petrie, is young and innocent but lacks an understanding of human nature. Whereas Mark's horror hobby prepared him to confront evil, Brian's baseball obsession gives him no protection against evil's machinations. *Needful Things* graphically emphasizes the

importance of the moral education gleaned from horror fiction and film by showing the disastrous outcome when that knowledge is lacking.

Chapter 3 addresses *Desperation* (1996) which represents the momentary culmination of King's ideas on this theme of innocence and education. *Desperation* presents a character, David Carver, who is the same age as both Mark and Brian, but who adds the dimension of personal religious convictions. Through David's character King links the horror genre to religion. He connects the lessons learned from each arguing that both horror and religion enlighten our vision of the world. After all, "to remember the Holy is to acknowledge its horror as well" (Ingebretsen xii). From the Bible and Boris Karloff, David learns of the inherent duality of human nature, and of the importance of moral agency. Throughout the novel, David faces overwhelming evil and chooses to actively fight evil rather than merely escape and save himself.

Although my thesis focuses on only three of King's works, King's interest in physical and moral survival spans his entire career. In King's universe, evil takes myriad forms that all function to test characters' moral strength and courage. Each novel offers a slightly different perspective on survival. Whether facing vampires, a Mephistophelian devil, or a cosmic evil force, those characters who are equipped with a fluid world view, knowledge of the dark side of human nature, and personal moral convictions are more likely to survive an encounter with evil. Characters learn of their moral agency and the consequences of immoral action primarily through exposure to the horror genre. As King asserts:

The horror story, beneath its fangs and fright wig, is really as conservative as Illinois Republican in a three-piece pinstriped suit; that its main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to venture into taboo lands. Within the framework of most horror tales we find a moral code so strong it would make a

Puritan smile. The horror story most generally not only stands foursquare for the Ten Commandments, it blows them up to tabloid size. (*Danse Macabre* 368)

King believes that horror is conservative and deeply moral, graphically portraying the consequences of choosing evil over good. It shows us in stark relief our own dual nature and potential for evil, our mortality and weakness. In real life and in King's fiction, horror can prepare readers to face their own demons.

Chapter 1—Monster Models and Moral Survival in ‘*Salem’s Lot*

Written in 1975, King’s second published novel and famous vampire work, ‘*Salem’s Lot*, doesn’t actually mention vampires until well over one hundred pages into the story. Instead, King devotes the first section of the book to the development of the characters in the novel. As such, the novel seems to be less about vampires and more about the townspeople of ‘*Salem’s Lot* and their responses to the reality of evil. In ‘*Salem’s Lot*, the majority of the characters bow to their human shortcomings and allow evil to exert its power. At this point in King’s career, physical and moral survival comes down to the innate power of youth tempered by knowledge gained through exposure to the horror genre. Youth and innocence, when informed by moral education, is able to fight evil when adults fail.

In King’s universe, evil functions as a test of characters’ morality, and his endless imagination has created myriad iterations of the embodiment of evil. Yet I argue that what King is truly interested in is how characters respond to an evil force greater and more powerful than themselves. In *Moral Voyages*, King’s most prolific critic Tony Magistrale explores the vital importance of moral agency in King’s universe. Magistrale points out that confronted with evil, King’s characters make choices that “influence the remainder of their lives” (*Moral Voyages* 57).

In King’s universe, human choice seems to be an important factor in dictating the degree of influence evil has over a character. In King’s horror, evil cannot exert power without first gaining influence through human agency. It is only when characters make a conscious, deliberate choice in the rejection of good that evil can manifest its authority (*Moral Voyages* 25). The American Gothic mode effectively deals with questions of monstrosity and the human condition, and of people’s capacity for evil. Although King frequently uses outside evil in the form of aliens, ghosts, vampires, and ghouls, his tales are rooted in the horror of personality, exploring

the unknown and forbidden in psychological rather than physical ways. His heroes look normal, but sometimes fail to exert self-control over the baser side of their nature. “Evil can be resisted,” horror scholar Tony Magistrale states, “but those who are attracted to, and ultimately subsumed within, impenetrable malevolent forces are doomed because of their failure to recognize and regulate corresponding urges within themselves” (*Landscape* 65). King puts his characters in extreme and often supernatural situations that try their personal beliefs and force them to confront their own inner weaknesses.

In *‘Salem’s Lot*, for example, King uses the vampiric threat to test the characters and underscore the inherent duality of the human condition. Man has the potential for both good and evil. Evil forces characters to choose between opposite sides of their nature. The majority of the citizens of *‘Salem’s Lot* choose evil and in fact have been choosing to give in to the darker side of their nature long before the vampire Barlow comes to town.

King describes the ironically named *‘Salem’s Lot* (short for “Jerusalem,” which means “peace,”) as a town that knows about darkness (*‘Salem’s Lot* 208). King spends multiple chapters illustrating the dark secrets the town hides behind its closed doors: murder, arson, pedophilic fantasies, pornography, adultery, and child abuse. The evils of the townspeople create an environment that welcomes the evil of the vampire; the dark secrets of the town make *‘Salem’s Lot* susceptible to the invading vampires. The vampire’s success in spreading his evil throughout the town, according to Magistrale, is due in large part to “the omnipresent evil that has always existed as a shared condition among the Lot’s human community” (*Hollywood’s Stephen King* 178). By and large, the choices of the townspeople allow the vampire’s evil to flourish. Few have the moral courage to resist evil’s influence. Mark Petrie (the young protagonist of the novel) and the small band of vampire hunters are the few citizens of *‘Salem’s Lot* who recognize the threat

and take action. They willingly face death rather than ignoring their moral conscience and submitting to Barlow. Mark Petrie and his companions triumph in part because of their knowledge of the horror genre and the moral courage such knowledge brings.

Despite the public's changing views toward the horror genre, there are those who still believe that horror celebrates death, destruction, and devil worship and that those who watch and enjoy horror are somehow morally deficient or disturbed. King articulates this view through the characters in *'Salem's Lot* (1975). Written at a time when King was still making a name for himself, *'Salem's Lot* provides a stark contrast between characters who embrace horror and those that view it with distaste and suspicion. As such, *'Salem's Lot* can be read as an attempt by King to justify to his readers and critics the value of the horror genre, and also to assert his belief in its power.

King uses Mark's parents, June and Henry Petrie, to represent what he calls the Apollonian side of human nature. They believe in the power of logic, science, human intellect, and nobility (*Danse Macabre* 75). They cling to their faith in an ordered and sensible world. The following passage introduces Henry Petrie and illustrates his stubborn practicality:

Henry Petrie was an educated man. He had a B.S. from Northeastern, a master's from Massachusetts Tech, and a Ph.D. in economics...His son's fey streak had not come from Henry Petrie; his father's logic was complete and seamless, and his world was machined to a point of almost total precision...He was a straight arrow, confident in himself and in the natural laws of physics, mathematics, economics, and (to a slightly lesser degree) sociology. (*'Salem's Lot* 346-47)

Henry Petrie's world is Apollonian: clear-cut and sensible, logical and ordered. With his training in hard sciences, Henry places his confidence in what is observable and concrete. There is no

room in Henry's worldview for anything outside his normal sphere of understanding, for anything supernatural that doesn't fit into his ideas of how the world is or should be. The quote implies that Henry believes his son's "fey streak" is deviant and unnatural.

Henry Petrie represents a typical adult who relies on logic and "reality" to guide his worldview, an attitude that Ernest Becker believes is dangerous and unhealthy. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker explores the role of death in human culture. Becker's ideas help illustrate the importance of illusion in our lives. Without it, we leave ourselves vulnerable to evil. Becker posits that "...modern man is the victim of his own disillusionment; he has been disinherited by his own analytic strength. The characteristic of the modern mind is the banishment of mystery, of naïve belief, of simple-minded hope. We put the accent on the visible, the clear, the cause-and-effect relation, the logical—always the logical" (200). The danger seems to be that modern humans have lost the capacity for illusion. We see things too "realistically" without an "aura of miracle and infinite possibility" (Becker 257). Becker's writing poses the question of the "best quality of work and life" and "highest actualization" that man can achieve. For Becker, self-actualization seems to involve opening ourselves to the fantastic, to things that cannot be explained logically.

The horror genre represents a journey into the fantastic and the supernatural. In King's fiction characters can only reach the highest actualization and moral potential through exposure to the fantastic, or in other words, to horror. Characters such as Henry Petrie cling to their faith in logic and scientific fact, refusing to allow for the possibility of anything outside the realm of everyday life. This is most apparent when Father Callahan and Mark confront Henry with the vampire infestation of 'Salem's Lot. Father Callahan and Mark present their thought process and the reason they believe vampires are overrunning 'Salem's Lot. As evidence they tell Henry of

Susan's transformation into a vampire and how they participated in staking her.

Despite the evidence of eyewitness accounts, Henry summarily dismisses their account as a hallucination. Henry's rigid world is "complete and seamless...machined to the point of almost total precision" (*Salem's Lot* 346). The machinelike precision of Henry's worldview refuses to acknowledge the possibility of the supernatural. Science declares the existence of vampires to be impossible, thus they do not exist. Henry refuses to believe his son, declares the story impossible, and, in doing so, leaves himself vulnerable to Barlow.

Henry blames Mark's obsession with monster movies and models for Mark's impossible story. "I think a lot of this comes from Mark's hobby," Henry scoffs, "collecting masks, assembling monsters from kits" (Hooper *Salem's Lot* miniseries). Henry's attitude seems to indicate that he finds Mark's hobby irrational and unhealthy. Because his son Mark spends his time assembling monsters and constructing horror scenes, Henry believes Mark cannot separate fantasy from reality. He refuses to believe that Mark is telling the truth. June Petrie, Mark's mother, takes it a step further, declaring: "He's always been preoccupied with them [the monster kits and masks] and it's not healthy" (Hooper *Salem's Lot* miniseries). In June's estimation, well-adjusted children don't spend their time constructing monsters and dwelling on death and deformity. She believes that horror films, stories, and Mark's hobbies are unwholesome and aberrant (King, *Salem's Lot* 69).

Rather than being harmful, Mark's hobby widens his worldview and ends up saving his life. This is fairly typical of King's approach. From *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* to *Desperation* to *Needful Things*, King's characters' interests either prepare them to confront evil and deal with its consequences or leave them defenseless. The protagonists in these stories share youth, innocence, and a flexible world-view, but differ in interests and hobbies. Therefore, they

face evil with varying degrees of success. Mark's hobby gives him the skills and knowledge he needs to protect himself and vanquish Barlow.

Henry and June's reliance on logic and "reality", on the other hand, proves fatal. Jonathan Davis suggests that, like many adults in King's fiction, these adults' inability to acknowledge the irrational or supernatural leaves them vulnerable to evil's design: "Because evil in itself is intangible and cannot be reasonably rationalized, it is often both adults' adherence to their belief in reason and their insistency on literalizing reality and unreality that often result in a catastrophe in King's fiction" (49). Since Henry refuses to accept the warnings of both Father Callahan and Mark, he fails to take precautions. Ironically, Barlow appears as Henry attempts to convince Mark his story is just a dream. He kills Henry and June while Mark helplessly watches. Henry's Apollonian worldview failed to prepare him to face the reality of evil and resulted in his death.

Though Henry is described as a "straight arrow" with good moral values, his overwhelming reliance on logic puts him in physical and moral danger (*Salem's Lot* 346). Evil strikes randomly, irrespective of a person's social standing, background, gender, or morals. Henry's narrow worldview fails to prepare him to face evil. Henry commits no glaring sin but his refusal to trust his son directly causes his own death as well as that of his wife.

Unlike his father Henry, young Mark willingly accepts the possibility of the supernatural and the irrational. This willingness comes in part because of Mark's age and in part because of his interest in horror. Mark Petrie's exposure to horror, rather than retarding moral and psychological development as his mother fears, is a key contributor to his physical and moral survival.

On a purely practical level, the knowledge Mark acquires from his exposure to horror

makes him one of the first to understand that vampires have come to 'Salem's Lot and, consequently, leaves him one of the only survivors at the end of the novel. King purposeful draws attention to Mark's interest in horror to assert its role in Mark's subsequent decisions and survival. King mentions Mark's monster models, magazines, or movies roughly a dozen times in the novel. In fact, the first introduction to Mark Petrie is through his monster models. The Glick brothers walk over to Mark's house for the sole purpose of viewing his "entire set of Aurora plastic monsters—wolfman, mummy, Dracula, Frankenstein, the mad doctor, and even the Chamber of Horrors. [His friends'] mother thought all that stuff was bad news, rotted your brains or something" (*Salem's Lot* 69). Mark meticulously works on his plastic models, constructing each monster, then rearranging scenes each time a new element is added. Tobe Hooper's television *Salem's Lot* miniseries underscores Mark's fascination with horror by plastering his room with horror movie posters and monster masks. Essentially, Mark is surrounded by the evidence of evil's existence long before Barlow comes to the Lot.

When Mark faces his first real-life vampire, he instantly understands what he sees. He recognizes the vampires as something real and tangible, not a mere figment of his imagination. While sleeping one night, Mark awakes to Danny Glick scratching at his second story window: "Mark Petrie turned over in bed and looked through the window and Danny Glick was staring in at him through the glass, his skin grave-pale, his eyes reddish and feral. Some dark substance was smeared about his lips and chin, and when he saw Mark looking at him, he smiled and showed teeth grown hideously long and sharp" (*Salem's Lot* 239). Danny's glowing eyes and long fangs clearly signify his transformation into a vampire.

Within seconds of seeing Danny Glick, Mark knows exactly what he faces and what the consequences are. "His mind, still that of a child in a thousand ways, made an accurate judgment

of his position in seconds. He was in peril of more than his life” (*Salem’s Lot* 239-240). Mark’s youth and his interests have created a fluid worldview that allows for the supernatural, for chaos, and for evil. When Danny scratches at the window, pleading to come in, Mark refuses. Reading the monster magazines and watching horror films have prepared him to face evil in his own life. He realizes that to allow Danny entrance would mean death and, possibly, damnation but that he has a defense: “*Of course. You have to invite them inside.* He knew that from his monster magazines, the ones his mother was afraid might damage or warp him in some way” (*Salem’s Lot* 240). Mark’s monster magazines have exposed Mark to vampires and other creatures of the dark and have given him knowledge vital to his survival.

Despite the fact that Mark recognizes what Danny has become and is aware of the danger, Danny almost triumphs over Mark. As Danny pleads to be let in, Mark looks into his eyes, which gives Danny the hold he needs to overpower Mark. As Mark walks towards the window he thinks “...if you looked in the eyes, it wasn’t so bad. If you looked in the eyes, you weren’t so afraid anymore...*No! That’s how they get you!*” (*Salem’s Lot* 240). Mark is familiar with vampires and knows they can exert power over you through their gaze. “He dragged his eyes away, and it took all of his will power to do it” (*Salem’s Lot* 240).

King focuses on Mark’s conscious decision to fight against Danny’s power emphasizing that survival is not merely contingent upon knowledge; it requires action as well. Mark has to make the choice to resist evil and then to do something about it. He has to banish the vampire, however difficult:

[Mark] was weakening. That whispering voice was seeing through his barricade, and the command was imperative. Mark’s eyes fell on his desk littered with his model monsters, now so bland and foolish—

His eyes fixed abruptly on part of the display, and widened slightly.

The plastic ghoul was walking through a plastic graveyard and one of the monuments was in the shape of a cross. (*Salem's Lot* 241)

Mark picks up the cross and uses it as a weapon against Danny. Danny flees and Mark is safe...for now. In this instance, Mark's monster models and the knowledge he gained from his exposure to horror are directly responsible for saving his life. Despite being in thrall, the graveyard scene on Mark's desk reminded Mark of what Danny was and gave him the tools necessary to save his life.

More important than physical survival, however, is Mark's moral survival. Faced by the vampire invasion of his home, Mark understands that he has two choices: he can save himself and risk moral and spiritual degeneration, or he can take responsibility and risk his life fighting to vanquish the evil that threatens 'Salem's Lot. Reading monster magazines and watching horror movies educates Mark about the darker side of humanity. It introduces him to the reality and consequences of evil. It gives Mark insights into his fears and provides him with coping mechanisms that enable him to confront and best the vampire Barlow. "Part of having moral order in the world," Tallon argues, "necessitates having a real understanding of evil" (Fahy 39). Understanding and acknowledging evil in the world and within ourselves helps us to explore our deeply held notions of right and wrong. It helps us learn to act morally.

To make a case for the morality of the horror tale, Tony Magistrale makes a connection between horror and classical tragedy: "...the horror story, like classical tragedy, frequently educates us morally, suggesting vicarious methods for avoiding a correspondingly tragic fall in our lives while inspiring a feeling of relief that we have been spared the actual experience" (Bloom 62). The best classical tragedies (and horror tales) affect a catharsis on the audience.

Watching, or reading, the protagonist's experience helps the audience work through their fears and helps them avoid the same pitfalls. In the horror tale, these pitfalls often include coming into contact with evil and giving in to its influence.

Horror, then, focuses on the discovery of evil and the consequences of coming into contact with it. "Horror provides a dark mirror in which we can examine ourselves by honestly facing the shadow side of the human condition as well as our deepest intuitive (and inviolate) sense of right and wrong" (Fahy 36). Despite the fears of Mark's parents that his Aurora monsters are "bad news" that "rotted your brain or something", they are morally instructive, forcing Mark to consider his notions of what is right and wrong (*Salem's Lot* 69). Mark's hobby exposes him to the reality of evil. It reminds him that the world is not always kind or just, that it is sometimes irrational and corrupt. He becomes aware of the darker side of the world, but more importantly, he has watched and read about characters and their responses to evil. These stories help Mark accept that evil exists and to guide his actions when he encounters it

Mark's Aurora monsters such as the wolfman, Dracula, Frankenstein, and Mr. Hyde, illustrate the moral lessons that can be learned from a brush with evil. In particular, the stories of the wolfman and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, "focus on the duality within a single character, in which the duality revolves around the poles of good and evil" (Strengell 69). In *Danse Macabre*, King's analysis of the horror genre, King writes, "What we're talking about here, at its most basic level, is the old conflict between id and superego, the free will to do evil or to deny it...the twinning of Jekyll and Hyde suggest another duality: the aforementioned split between the Apollonian (the creature of intellect, morality, and nobility, "always treading the upward path") and the Dionysian (god of partying and physical gratification; the get-down-and-boogie side of human nature)" (75). The tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian teaches that

monsters can be external threats, but also that the evil can lurk within us. King paraphrases Shakespeare: “The fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves” (*Danse Macabre* 77).

In King’s universe, it is vital to a character’s physical and moral survival to acknowledge and to understand his or her potential for darkness. “Darkness has a place in all of us,” Barker claims, “a substantial place that must, for our health’s sake be respected and investigated” (Bloom 33). Reading or watching horror allows individuals “to remain relatively safe and comfortable when confronting unpleasant truths of the human condition” (Bloom 38). Mark’s hobby gives him a healthy respect for the darker side of human nature. As Mark reads his monster magazines and watches horror films, he comes to understand the nature of evil, his own susceptibility to it, and how to resist or combat its influence. Mark’s hobby, then, acts as a sort of trial run for his encounter with real evil. Mark’s monster magazines and love of horror films allow him “to see real-life evils becomes distorted and then sorted out...to find a safe medium to explore the dark side of his...own personality and to come out of the experience being grateful that he..., like the protagonists of the horror novel, has the choice to choose the correct path toward a peaceful, moral existence” (Davis 15).

In Davis’ discussion of the power of childhood in King’s fiction, he acknowledges that children without an understanding of human nature are vulnerable to evil’s influence. Innocence and youth are not enough. “While a child is often aware of an adult’s misunderstanding of the supernatural and imaginable realm,” Davis argues, “an adult is cognizant of a child’s inability to estimate human nature. This concept would tend to argue that a child who has not yet been exposed enough to the evil ways in which the world operates, is vulnerable in his or her ignorance of adult human behavior” (58). Mark’s knowledge makes him strong enough to defeat Barlow because he believes in the supernatural and has been exposed vicariously to the spectrum

of human experience though his love of the horror genre.

By reading the monster magazines and sneaking in to see horror films, Mark learns of the potential for evil within himself, but also of the freedom he has to make choices to combat evil. This duality applies to Mark's life when he recognizes the vampiric threat that faces 'Salem's Lot. Like the characters in the magazines and films Mark watches, he faces evil and must make a choice. He's witnessed the depths of human depravity on the movie screen and has vicariously experienced evil's influence. He has been able to grow and mature to an understanding of his own frailty and mortality. He understands the consequences of choosing good over evil and vice versa. Mark takes responsibility for his choices and risks his life to fight Barlow.

Mark's acceptance of responsibility can be seen most dramatically when Mark decides to deal with Barlow. 'Salem's Lot faces a threat right from the pages of the monster magazines Mark reads. He understands that vampires represent the most dangerous of all supernatural threats because vampires reproduce easily and their evil spreads like a disease. Although only twelve and small for his age, Mark knows that vampires are infesting 'Salem's Lot and feels that he has the responsibility to take care of it. Mark fears that no one will believe what is going on until it's too late. Armed with his father's target pistol and a yellow ash stake, Mark heads up to the Marsten House, Barlow's lair, prepared to take on the master vampire alone. Crouching in the bushes preparing to enter the Marsten House, Mark sees Susan Norton sneaking up to the house to investigate. Mark matter-of-factly tells Susan of seeing Danny Glick and of his plans to kill Barlow:

“And you came here alone?” she asked when he had finished. “You believed it and came up here alone?”

“Believed it?” He looked at her, honestly puzzled. “Sure I believed it. I saw it, didn't

I?” (King, *Salem’s Lot* 278)

Susan is incredulous that such a young boy would be willing to believe in vampires then face the threat head on, and alone. Susan, like Mark, is faced with evidence of vampires, but has a difficult time believing until she unintentionally comes face to face with Barlow and becomes a vampire herself. Mark, on the other hand, immediately accepts the truth the moment he sees Danny at his window. Mark knows the risk and, because of that knowledge, understands that he has the moral responsibility to take action. He knows that if he refuses to try to fight the vampire, the townspeople will all fall victims to Barlow and become vampires themselves. He will be guilty for doing nothing. “Can’t you *feel* how bad he is?” Mark asks Susan, “Doesn’t that house make you afraid, just looking at it?” (*Salem’s Lot* 279). For Mark, the choice is simple. Barlow is evil and needs to be destroyed. Mark’s hobby and interest in horror helped him solidify his notions of morality and make moral choices when faced with evil.

Mark, though just a child, feels a sense of moral responsibility that is conspicuously missing in Constable Parkins Gillespie. Gillespie is the constable of ‘Salem’s Lot and has the responsibility to protect and care for its citizens. He acts as an adult foil for Mark because of his exposure to and attitude towards horror. Gillespie lacks the innocence and youth of King’s child protagonists, rather he has been exposed to the gamut of human experience. In everyday life, he is the one who enforces the law and punishes the offenders. When a supernatural threat faces the town, it seems natural that Gillespie would be the first one to turn to for help. He has dealt with the petty evils of human existence in his role as town constable. Yet, he fails to exert self-discipline and through passive acceptance, he allows evil to flourish. When Mark and Ben Mears (Mark’s vampire fighting ally) tell Gillespie what’s going on and ask for his help, he informs them that he’s packed and leaving town.

“You two fellas want to get in that car and hit it out of here,” Parkins said. “This town will go on without us...for a while. Then it won’t matter.”

Yes, Ben thought. Why don’t we do that?

Mark spoke the reason for both of them. “Because he’s bad, mister. He’s really bad. That’s all.” (*Salem’s Lot* 401)

When faced with the reality of evil, Gillespie decides to take the cowardly way out. Gillespie places his own physical survival over helping those he’s taken an oath to protect. “[‘Salem’s Lot] ain’t alive...” he claims, “It’s dead, like him...They prob’ly like bein’ vampires” (*Salem’s Lot* 401). He accepts that vampires have invaded his town, but chooses to save his own life and consigns the town to Barlow. Gillespie’s actions prove Magistrate’s claim that “evil thrives when individuals surrender their moral conscience” (*America’s Storyteller* 58). Gillespie acts contrary to what he knows is right, placing his own needs above others’, and condemns his friends, neighbors, and those he’s responsible for to eternal damnation. Gillespie even chooses to leave his badge behind when he flees, symbolically relinquishing his claim to responsibility while acknowledging his complicity and moral degradation. Though Gillespie escapes becoming a vampire, he becomes something worse. He makes a conscious decision to reject what he knows is right and stands by as ‘Salem’s Lot suffers. He becomes as culpable as Barlow for the town’s eventual destruction.

The townspeople that Gillespie deserts are also culpable in the fall of ‘Salem’s Lot. Davis cites the people’s selfishness as a key factor in their susceptibility to evil. “The novel is not so much about vampires” he claims, “as it is about the fall of a community resulting from a breach of faith among brothers and sisters...Rather than utilizing their energies to identify and change their own imperfections, they highlight those of others” (Davis 47). They are so involved in their

own concerns and their own lives that they fail to respond when others are in need. Gillespie and other characters who act immorally and deny their conscience “succumb to deeper evil and lose their identities as well as their ability to possess control over their destinies” (Strengell 47).

King’s universe is populated with Parkins Gillespies and Mark Petries. Through such characters, King emphasizes the importance of human agency and of understanding our own potential for evil. “Darkness,” Barker claims, “has a place in all of us; a substantial place that must, for our health’s sake, be respected and investigated” (Bloom 33). In King’s universe, darkness is inextricably entwined with the human condition. It must be respected, as Barker believes, but more importantly, it must be explored in order for us to gain mastery over ourselves.

Failure to exert mastery results in moral degradation and tragedy. Davis asserts “[t]he tragedies in King’s fiction lie not so much in the victims of evil manifestations but in the stories’ central characters’ tendency to bow to their human shortcomings” (42). Characters are placed in positions in which they may follow their moral or immoral impulses. Parkins Gillespie and many of the townspeople consciously subordinate their moral conscious and succumb to evil. Mark Petrie’s youth combined with his knowledge of human nature gained through an interest in horror, allows him to recognize his own shortcomings and imperfections. This in turn gives him the “power to change [himself] and ultimately act in defense of moral righteousness” (Davis 44). Mark gains moral maturity and learns that he has within himself the capacity for retarding or enhancing evil’s power in ‘Salem’s Lot. Mark (and by contrast, Constable Gillespie) illustrates King’s thesis that innocence accompanied by moral education aids characters in the fight against evil.

Chapter 2—Evil Revisited: Desire and Moral Agency in *Needful Things*

In 1991, King published *Needful Things*, essentially revisiting the themes and storyline of ‘*Salem’s Lot*’ but in the town of Castle Rock. Although published almost two decades after ‘*Salem’s Lot*, King remains interested in characters’ varied responses to evil. In ‘*Salem’s Lot*, we see the importance of moral education combined with the resiliency of youth. Knowledge of the inherent duality of human nature enables Mark Petrie to resist and triumph over evil. Mark understands the relationship between inside and outside evil. Evil may visit any character at any time, but can only gain power when characters embrace and internalize the evil. By contrast, in *Needful Things*, King leaves innocent youth uneducated to illustrate the importance of education to physical and moral survival. Youth, left alone, is not enough to resist evil’s influence. In this chapter, I deal primarily with the character of Brian Rusk, the eleven-year old protagonist who fails to resist evil because of his naiveté.

The novel begins with the words “You’ve been here before.” King seems to acknowledge the fact that *Needful Things* is essentially an adaptation of his earlier work. Like the town of ‘*Salem’s Lot*, Castle Rock is a small, unassuming town in Maine. A strange visitor, Mr. Leland Gaunt, arrives, sets up shop, and proceeds to spread his evil throughout the town. Gaunt’s shop, *Needful Things*, offers customers the object of their heart’s desire in exchange for a small amount of money and a deed. The customers agree to play terrible tricks on their neighbors, which stirs up resentment and anger in the town. The novel culminates with a neighbors turning on neighbors in a bloody street war as Gaunt delights in his diabolical success. *Needful Things* has parallel characters with ‘*Salem’s Lot*, as one would expect, but with significant differences in the outcomes of events and in the survival of the characters. Youth fails and becomes complicit in evil’s designs, while the sheriff recognizes and actively fights evil’s power.

Because of the connections between the two novels, *Needful Things* can be considered an adaptation of the themes from the earlier novel, *'Salem's Lot*. Julie Sanders argues that an adaptation “transcends mere imitation, serving instead in the capacity of incremental literature, adding, supplement, improvising, innovating. The aim is not replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than contractions” (12). *Needful Things*, then, is not merely replicating the events and ideas from *'Salem's Lot*. *'Salem's Lot* and *Needful Things* have a deeply intertextual relationship, allowing King to offer slightly alternative perspectives on the same questions about evil and its nexus to mankind.

'Salem's Lot and *Needful Things* feature nearly identical child protagonists, but where one triumphs over evil, the other fails. Mark Petrie's counterpoint in *Needful Things* is the preteen Brian Rusk. Both Mark and Brian are among the first to encounter the evil that visits their respective towns. However, whereas Mark recognizes an evil for what it is and takes action to combat the vampire Barlow, Brian becomes fearful and ashamed from his brush with evil. He feels helpless and alone, and ultimately gives in to his fear and despair. He eventually chooses suicide as an escape.

King writes Brian and Mark to be alike: both are eleven years old, loners, and from a middle class background. Their differing hobbies, however, highlight the underlying reasons for their dramatically opposite responses to an encounter with evil. Where Mark spends his time constructing Aurora monster models and sneaking into horror films, Brian is a fanatical baseball fan and card collector.

Mark's and Brian's hobbies represent differing philosophical views towards mortality. Brian's obsession with baseball cards and hero worship of the player Sandy Koufax represents an interest in immortality through fame. Instead of acknowledging human frailty, he sees baseball

cards as representing fame and eternal glory, a desire to cheat death. In *The Denial of Death*, Earnest Becker writes of the irony of man's condition: "[Man] was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and his name. At the same time, he was given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay" (70). In other words, man is conscious of being simultaneously gods and worms, or as Becker puts it "gods with anuses" (51). We desperately try to repress the fact that we are mortal beings and by extension, deny and overcome death.

Horror, on the other hand, forces its audience to graphically confront their own mortality and see the consequences of moral and immoral decisions. Becker argues that the "urge to morality is based entirely on the physical situation of the creature. Man is moral because he senses his true situation and what lies in store for him" (154). Therefore, according to Becker, those who are fully cognizant of their mortal condition are more likely to act morally. Mark's hobby has made him aware of his own limits and weaknesses, giving him the knowledge and moral strength to triumph over the vampire Barlow and to cope with the destruction of his home and the death of his parents.

Brian's lack of understanding leaves him helpless when faced with the reality of death. Unlike Mark, Brian has had no exposure to the dark side of human nature. Leland Gaunt, the Mephistophelian villain in *Needful Things*, uses Brian's innocence and naiveté as weapons to destroy him and the town of Castle Rock. "[Brian's] belief in fantasy," Russell points out, "makes him a perfect subject for Gaunt, who uses Brian's imagination immediately" (Bloom 199).

King introduces Brian through his lack of grounding in reality and hints at the important role he plays in the events that destroy Castle Rock. An unnamed narrator describes Brian in the

introduction of the novel: “Look up the street one more time. You see that boy, don’t you? The one who’s walking his bike and looks like he’s havin’ the sweetest daydream any boy ever had? Keep your eye on him, friend. I think he’s the one who’s gonna get it started” (*Needful Things* 9). In a few short sentences, King captures Brian’s innocence and naiveté. Brian is associated with bike riding and sweet daydreams, a far cry from the ghouls and graveyards of Mark Petrie. Even more telling, Brian’s daydream is of his grade school teacher Miss Ratcliffe. He innocently dreams about taking her to the fair and kissing her. Brian desires a romantic relationship with his teacher, but only understands chaste Disney kisses exchanged over cotton candy.

Leland Gaunt, the strange proprietor of the new shop in Castle Rock takes advantage of Brian’s innocence and immaturity. In their first meeting, he comments: “I like you, Brian. I wish all my customers could be as full of wonder as you are. Life would be much easier for a humble tradesman such as myself if that were the way of the world” (*Needful Things* 30). But Gaunt is no humble tradesman; he deals in souls. Corrupting gentle, naïve souls like Brian’s is easy for someone with as much experience as Gaunt. Brian’s wonder is stronger than his instinct. When Brian first meets Gaunt, his unconscious mind warns him away from the danger that Gaunt represents: “A tall figure—what at first seemed to be an *impossibly* tall figure—came through a doorway behind one of the display cases. The doorway was masked with a dark velvet curtain. Brian felt a momentary and quite monstrous cramp of fear” (*Needful Things* 23). Brian’s physical reaction of fear is his mind and body revolting against the presence of evil. Unfortunately, he doesn’t recognize the message and instead willingly enters Gaunt’s lair.

Reinforcing his first physical reaction, Brian continues to have intimations that something is very wrong. Brian finds Gaunt’s handshake “unpleasant” and compares the sound of his hands rubbing together like the sound of “a snake which is upset and thinking of biting” (*Needful*

Things 23, 25). Whenever Gaunt touches Brian, Brian instinctively shrinks away. He even notes that Gaunt's eyes have a strange compulsive power, and finds that he can "hardly take his own eyes off them" (*Needful Things* 25). The power of Gaunt's stare is reminiscent of the vampiric gaze. In *'Salem's Lot*, Mark experiences the same compelling influence when he gazes into Danny Glick's eyes. However, where Mark immediately recognizes the danger of looking into Danny's eyes and forces himself to look away, Brian does nothing to counteract Gaunt's influence. Deep down, Brian knows that something is wrong, but ignores the warning signs.

By ignoring the warnings, Brian leaves himself vulnerable to Gaunt's machinations. Gaunt asks Brian what he wants more than anything in the world (a Sandy Koufax card) and Gaunt happens to have it. He hands Brian a mint-condition Sandy Koufax baseball card that's signed "To my good friend Brian, with best wishes, Sandy Koufax" (*Needful Things* 32-33). Such a coincidence would strike most as incredibly suspicious. Even a young boy might know that such coincidences simply don't happen, but Brian accepts his "good fortune" without hesitation. Gaunt baits his trap, Brian rushes into it, and they make a deal:

They apparently *had* made some sort of deal, although Brian could not for the life of him remember exactly what it had been—only that Wilma Jerzyck's name had been mentioned.

To my good friend Brian, with best wishes, Sandy Koufax.

Whatever the deal they had made, this was worth it.

A card like this was worth practically anything.

Brian tucked it carefully into his knapsack so it wouldn't get bent, mounted his bike, and began to pedal home fast. He grinned all the way. (*Needful Things* 38)

Brian relishes his new acquisition, but finds himself in a strange position. He knows he got it for

far below what it's worth and cannot show it to his best friend or his father without awkward questions. Instead of being disappointed, however, Brian "found himself not so much enjoying the card as *gloating* over it, and so he had uncovered another great truth: gloating in private provides its own peculiar pleasure. It was as if one corner of his mostly open and goodhearted nature had been walled off and then lit with a special light that both distorted and enhanced what was hidden there" (*Needful Things* 85-86).

Brian's experience illustrates the dual nature of humanity. Humans have the potential for good and evil which Brian discovers through personal experience rather than vicariously through horror stories. Whereas Mark has learned about evil and how to resist it, Brian's baseball cards have only given him an inaccurate and incomplete view of life, good, and evil. In exchange for the card of his dreams, Brian agrees to fling mud on Wilma Jerzyck's freshly laundered sheets.

Deep down, Brian senses that what he's doing is wrong. Brian rationalizes his actions as prank, as a deed, as a chore, "sort of a fun chore, actually" (*Needful Things* 109). He puts his own "needs" or desires above the welfare of others. In King's fiction, putting one's needs before others leads to moral degradation and death. "Those characters in King's fiction" Davis asserts, "who do not behave morally and rather surrender the well-being of others for evil or selfish motives are those who are ultimately destroyed" (Davis 37). Brian's conscience tries to warn him against these selfish actions, but his desire for the Sandy Koufax card is too strong: "An apprehensive voice suddenly spoke up in his mind. *Why not just climb back on your bike again, Brian? Go on back home. Have a glass of milk and think this over*" (*Needful Things* 111). Up to the moment that Brian actually starts flinging mud at the fresh sheets, his conscience struggles to convince him that what he's doing is wrong. Not terrible, but unkind and selfish. He understands, however, that if he reneges on his agreement with Gaunt, Gaunt will take back the Sandy Koufax

card. “He didn’t *want* to give back the Sandy Koufax card, that was the thing. He didn’t want to, because it was *his*” (*Needful Things* 111).

As Brian becomes more involved with Gaunt and tainted by his evil, Brian’s sexuality becomes an indicator of evil’s influence in his life. Before Gaunt’s arrival in Castle Rock, Brian’s daydreams were chaste and sweet involving holding hands and going on dates. After making a deal with Gaunt, Brian’s daydreams change to erotic fantasies of sex and violence. He imagines Miss Ratcliffe in the role of dominatrix, keeping him after school to punish him for being a “very bad boy.” Brian feels shame and excitement, and finds that “*there was at least one part of him that did not mind being bad at all. That in fact RELISHED being bad*” (King, *Needful Things* 83; italics and capitals in original). In addition, Brian experiences an erection as he flings mud at Wilma’s laundry, the “chore” required by Gaunt in exchange for the Koufax baseball card. King connects being bad to illicit sexual pleasure. Along with feelings of guilt and shame for acting immorally, Brian gets emotionally and physically excited.

Magistrale believes that sexuality is directly linked to a character’s decisions for good or evil:

...how King’s characters respond to the issue of personal sexuality is often the clearest indicator of a man or woman’s true nature. People of good will in his canon tend to gravitate toward sexual relationships that mirror their personalities: nurturing, open, and responsive to others. Correspondingly, the sexuality of evil is sterile and isolating. When King’s characters are seduced by the corruption of what the writer tends to view as warped sexuality, it is symptomatic of moral failing. Once they succumb, they eventually forfeit their identities and the ability to control their own destinies. (*America’s Storyteller* 75)

Brian's budding sexuality becomes distorted by his complicity in Gaunt's schemes. The longer Brian remains under Gaunt's influence, the more warped his notions of human sexuality become. As Magistrale rightly points out, the shift in Brian's daydreams marks his moral decay. Brian loses his ability to control his own destiny and ultimately looks to suicide as the only escape from his degeneration.

Brian's age, in this instance is not an asset, but a disadvantage. Brian's imaginative capabilities should help him cope with the reality of evil, but his ignorance of human behavior endangers him. Brian understands little of the adult world and, as a result, he is easily duped by Gaunt. His innocence is no protection (Bloom 202). Rather, Brian's innocence translates to vulnerability leaving him ill-equipped to deal with evil.

Brian's naiveté and susceptibility lead directly to Gaunt's triumph and Brian's death. The bad action seems small, but it starts a violent feud between Wilma Jerzyck and Nettie Cobb. Their feud escalates to physical violence, then murder. Brian quickly moves from being guilty of nothing more than a mean prank to guilt as an accessory to murder. Eventually, he comes to the realization that Gaunt has ensnared him, but he cannot find a way out. He cannot deal with the results of his actions—the deaths of Wilma and Nettie—and commits suicide. Brian points his father's hunting rifle at his face and warns his younger brother, Sean, about Gaunt and his shop: "Never go there," he said. "Needful Things is a poison place, and Mr. Gaunt is a poison man. Only he's really not a man at all. Swear to me you'll never buy any of the poison things Mr. Gaunt sells" (*Needful Things* 554). Brian's naiveté has been ripped away exposing him to the reality of evil in the world, and the potential for evil within each of us. With Brian's warning to his brother, he acknowledges the existence of the supernatural and the very real "poison" of a being like Gaunt. Unfortunately the knowledge comes too late.

Brian's final words are "Sandy Koufax sucks" (*Needful Things* 554). His words indicate that his idol has become his downfall. Because of his hero-worship, Brian was vulnerable to Gaunt's schemes. But more than that, Sandy Koufax represents a search for immortality, an escape from the mortality that is the burden of being human. Brian's childhood was spent daydreaming and collecting baseball cards. Without a grounding in reality, Brian was ignorant of his own mortality and potential for darkness. Brian selfishly put his desires above what he knew was right. Unable to deal with his guilt, and with the recognition of his own weakness, he shoots himself.

Brian illustrates the connection between inside and outside evil wherein an exterior force like Gaunt can nurture and strengthen a character's weaknesses and susceptibility to darkness. Evil may visit anyone without respect for age, gender, or goodness. Yet the forces of darkness can only gain power according to a character's choice embrace it. "As powerful a principle as evil is in King's universe," Magistrale points out, "it can establish dominion only at the expense of the individual's moral conscience" (*Landscape* 65). Brian's choice allowed Gaunt to manifest his authority and destroy the town. Gaunt plays on this character's weaknesses and selfishness to forward his malevolent designs.

But Brian isn't the only person destroyed by Gaunt, and youth isn't the only source of vulnerability. Most of the townspeople in Castle Rock, through their selfishness and moral immaturity, eventually become complicit in evil's designs. Each patron who enters Gaunt's shop faces a moral decision that will affect the remainder of their lives. They can deny themselves the object they desperately desire and refuse to risk injuring their neighbors, or they can take Gaunt's deal, abandoning any concern for others for the sake of personal fulfillment. Nearly all of the characters in *Needful Things* choose to ignore their moral compass in order to get the things they

“need”, be it Elvis’ sunglasses, a fox tail, a baseball card, or a fishing pole. Through manipulation of people’s selfish desires, Gaunt turns the entire population against itself and revels in the physical and moral destruction of the town and its inhabitants.

Yet not all of the characters give in to Gaunt’s influence. Magistrate points to the same duality of humanity that allows for evil can also accomplish good:

[W]hile we all share in the capacity for acts of evil, each of us is likewise endowed with the potential for performing good. To survive morally (and physically) individuals must cling to those human elements which thankfully distinguish us from the beast of the night and provide a sanctuary against the various terrors which threaten to isolate the mind...The moral heroes and heroines in King’s world represent the most enduring aspects of human life precisely because they have learned to “live among others.” This status is conferred by their resistance against selfish impulses, the will to control the urge for power, an awareness of the danger inherent in social entrapment, and most important, the ability to extend sympathy and love. Contact with worldly evil does not necessarily mean an infectious corruption of the same magnitude. (*Landscape* 106-107)

Where Brian’s brush with evil results in “an infectious corruption” and suicide, Sheriff Alan Pangborn resists selfish impulse and uses his will to defeat Gaunt. Just as Brian is the opposite of Mark in ‘Salem’s Lot, Sheriff Pangborn is the opposite of Constable Parkins. Parkins understood the evil and chose to save himself, leaving the town to the vampire. But Pangborn does everything he can to find out about Gaunt, then vanquishes him when he understands the threat Gaunt poses. King foreshadows Pangborn’s role in Gaunt’s banishment through one of Pangborn’s childhood memories. Polly Chalmers, Pangborn’s lover, tells Pangborn about her experience in Gaunt’s store that has a little bit of everything, including a trinket that alleviates

Polly's crippling arthritis pain. He's reminded of a store called Just the Ticket in the town where he grew up. When Polly asks if it had *his* ticket, Pangborn replies that he doesn't know. He never went in. Pangborn's refusal to enter the store reveals a subconscious suspicion of too-good-to-be-true deals like the one Brian and Polly got. Pangborn is content with his lot in life, understanding that uncontrolled selfish desires result in only pain and heartache.

Yet, Pangborn's brush with a similar evil as a child is not the only factor in his triumph over Gaunt. Like Mark, Pangborn is intimately acquainted with the nature of humanity, of human mortality and potential for evil. Pangborn was deeply affected by the loss of his wife and son in a car accident. He understands the ephemerality of life. Instead of desiring foolish physical things, Pangborn knows that the important things in life are love and relationships—those unselfish things that really matter. He is constantly reminded of his relationship with his family, yearning to change harsh words spoken or misspent time. Because of this, Pangborn acts as though each day may be his last. He stands for moral courage and rectitude in a selfish world concerned only with satiating physical desires. In addition, Pangborn has been the sheriff of Castle Rock for many years, enough years to be exposed to the gamut of human evil. From petty misdeeds to murder and pedophilia, Pangborn has seen it all:

In Castle Rock they knew about Frank Dodd, the cop who went crazy and killed the women back in Sheriff Bannerman's day, and they knew about Cujo, the saint Bernard who had gone rabid out on Town Road #3, and they knew that the lakeside home of Thad Beaumont, novelist and local Famous Person, had burned to the ground during the summer of 1989, but they did not know the circumstances of that burning, or that Beaumont had been haunted by a man who was really not a man at all, but a creature for which there may be no name. Alan Pangborn knew these things, however, and they still

haunted his sleep from time to time. (*Needful Things* 186)

Pangborn's intimate knowledge of the dark affairs of Castle Rock has prepared him to believe in each human's potential for evil, and thus he is better able to face it head on when it comes in the form of Leland Gaunt.

Gaunt, himself, an ancient purveyor of evil, knows that Pangborn is a threat the first time he sees him. When Pangborn visits the store, Gaunt closes the shop and uses his supernatural powers to make himself invisible and avoid meeting the sheriff. Unseen, Gaunt studies Pangborn as he peers into *Needful Things*:

Mr. Gaunt found himself disliking Pangborn's face on sight. Nor did this much surprise him. He was even better at reading faces than he was at remembering them, and the words on this one were large and somehow dangerous. Pangborn's face changed suddenly; the eyes widened a little, the good-humored mouth narrowed down to a tight slit. Gaunt felt a brief and totally uncharacteristic burst of fear. *He sees me!* he thought, although that, of course, was impossible. (*Needful Things* 222-223)

Gaunt's fear that Pangborn "sees him" has a double meaning. He's afraid that Pangborn can see him standing in the shop, but more importantly, it means Gaunt is afraid that Pangborn understands him. Gaunt's fear is valid. Because of Pangborn's brushes with immorality and mortality, he sees through Gaunt's façade and is therefore in a position to challenge it.

King uses Pangborn as a counterpoint to Brian. Youth and innocence cannot be a character's only protection against evil. Brian's youth, in fact, becomes a handicap in the showdown with Gaunt. It is knowledge, rather, that is the key, and this is why Pangborn, along with *'Salem's Lot's* Mark Petrie, survives malicious evil and acts morally when faced with tragedy and horror. The key factor for survival in King's universe seems to be exposure to horror

and knowledge of human duality. Pangborn and Mark illustrate Davis' thesis that "The function of horror fiction is to allow the reader to see real-life evils become distorted and then sorted out. It also allows the reader to find a safe medium to explore the dark side of his or her personality and to come out of the experience being grateful that he or she, like the protagonists of the horror novel, has the choice to choose the correct path toward a peaceful, moral existence" (Davis 15).

Chapter 3—Worlds Collide: The Intersection of Religion and Horror in *Desperation*

Written in 1996, *Desperation* is the most recent of the three novels I've chosen to analyze and represents a momentary culmination of King's thematic development of physical and moral survival. *Desperation* builds off King's earlier works, combining survival factors from *'Salem's Lot* and *Needful Things*—youth and innocence and the importance of moral education—with a religious angle. Through the events of *Desperation* and the character of child protagonist David Carver, King links the lessons learned from both horror and religion in enlightening our vision of the world and strengthening our moral conscience.⁹ This chapter deals with the importance of first-hand experience, religious conviction, and free will in triumphing over evil.

The events in the novel take place in the isolated town of Desperation just off U.S. 50 “The Loneliest Highway in America” (*Desperation* 4). Hapless travelers are kidnapped by Collie Entragian, the deputy in the mining town of Desperation. Entragian first abducts the Carver family: Ralph, Ellen, their son David, and their daughter Kristen (or Pie to her brother). He kills Pie and jails the rest of the family. Next he “arrests” Mary and Peter Jackson, a married couple on their way to New York. He then jails John Marinville, an aging author motorcycling across the country in search of material for a new book. Entragian, possessed by an evil being named Tak, has already slaughtered everyone in the town. He jails the travelers, keeping them for use as host bodies when Entragian's body wears out. Alone in the middle of the desert of Nevada and far removed from civilization or any outside help, the characters must rely entirely on themselves and each other for survival. The desert setting serves to intensify the characters' isolation and the

⁹ King's personal religious convictions and beliefs in the power of horror inform the events in *Desperation*. My argument focuses on King's ideas of the connection between religion and horror and how they express themselves in his work.

importance of their individual choices. Despite the temptation to escape and save themselves, the survivors ultimately band together and risk their lives to fight and vanquish Tak.

Given the strong ties between *'Salem's Lot* and *Needful Things*, *Desperation* may seem an odd fit. After all, it departs from King's traditional Maine setting and features an apocalyptic evil that seems a far cry from vampires and a Mephistophelian devil. Set in the desolate deserts of Nevada in an isolated mining town, *Desperation* is miles from the verdant forests of Maine. In addition, both *'Salem's Lot* and *Needful Things* explore the mentality and dynamic of small town America while King scales down his scope in the novel *Desperation*. Although the events occur in a small mining town comparable in size to *'Salem's Lot*, the entire population of the town has already been annihilated at the beginning of the novel by an "evil that infects the town like some viral hot zone" (*Desperation* frontispiece). King limits himself to a handful of characters instead of an entire town. Finally, both *'Salem's Lot* and *Needful Things* feature evils that focus on the individual. Barlow, in *'Salem's Lot* turns townspeople into vampires one by one while Leland Gaunt tempts each patron individually in *Needful Things*. *Desperation*, on the other hand, features a malignant evil force called Tak that revels in catastrophic disaster and destruction on a massive scale. But despite all the differences, *Desperation* embraces the thematic unity of King's multiverse in that it remains focused on the struggle between good and evil, and in characters' moral agency.

As in *'Salem's Lot* and *Needful Things*, King relies on a child protagonist to explore the moral issues. David Carver, the 11-year old boy, leads Tak's other prisoners (including his father) giving them hope and helping them defeat Tak. Like Mark and Brian in King's earlier books, David is young and innocent with a child's imagination and resilience. However, David is far better acquainted with death and evil than either of those characters. Though Mark Petrie

knows evil from monster movies and magazines, before the appearance of vampires in ‘Salem’s Lot, he has never encountered absolute, tangible evil. Brian Rusk is even more vulnerable: he has no experience with evil or the dark side of human nature either vicariously or in reality. He lives in a world of baseball cards and day dreams. David Carver, unlike Brian or even Mark, has a deeper understanding of death and evil through his interest in horror movies, his personal experience, and his religious studies.

In *Desperation*, King again emphasizes the importance of knowledge to physical and moral survival by focusing on David’s exposure to horror film. As the events in *Desperation* progress, David repeatedly flashes back to memories of watching late-night horror movies like *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy* with his friend, Brian. “Boris Karloff was our favorite monster” David tells Johnny (the famous writer also trapped in *Desperation*). “*Frankenstein* was good, but we like *The Mummy* even better. We were always going to each other, ‘Oh shit, the mummy’s after us, we better walk a little faster’” (*Desperation* 618). That phrase “The Mummy’s after us” echoes in David’s mind throughout his horrific experiences in *Desperation*: as he escapes the jail cell, as he fights Tak’s coyotes, and as he prays for divine help and guidance. What David saw and learned from the old horror films, is now directly applicable to his reality. He knows that evil is indiscriminate and that life is not fair. He understands that evil must be fought, even at the risk of his own life.

The role of the horror film is not limited to David’s recollections. After escaping Entragian’s jail, the small group seeks refuge in the old movie theater in the center of the town. Surrounded by cutouts of famous stars and posters of “an old but still vital Bette Davis torturing her wheelchair-bound sister”, David and the other survivors plan their next move (*Desperation* 456). Physically and metaphorically, the theater is a weapon in their fight against evil. It provides

them physical shelter from Tak while they regroup and plan their next move. More importantly, horror film reminds the characters of the danger of succumbing to their weaknesses as they face the reality of evil in their own lives.

The importance of horror film in David's life reflects King's own beliefs. In *On Writing*, King remembers spending the weekends of his childhood and youth going to the theater. Even then, King enjoyed the macabre and believed in its power. King remembers:

The Empire was a first-run house, showing Disney pictures, Bible epics, and musicals in which widescreen ensembles of well-scrubbed folks danced and sang. I went to these if I had a ride—a movie was a movie, after all—but I didn't like them very much. They were boringly wholesome. They were predictable. During *The Parent Trap*, I kept hoping Hayley Mills would run into Vic Morrow from *The Blackboard Jungle*. That would have livened things up a little, by God. I felt that one look at Vic's switchblade knife and gimlet gaze would have put Hayley's piddling domestic problems in some kind of reasonable perspective. (*On Writing* 45)

In King's own words, horror film puts life into perspective. David Carver, like King, learns this as a young age and is equipped with the necessary knowledge to act morally when facing evil in real life. David's exposure to vicarious horror through his interest in the black and white pictures of Boris Karloff prepares him to face death in his own life. King believes that horror accepts death but celebrates life and vitality. He writes "the horror movie is the celebration of those who feel they can examine death because it does not yet live in their own hearts" (*Danse Macabre* 199).

In a similar vein, Magistrale calls horror film and fiction "a survival exercise" wherein "the audience is provided with the opportunity to gain insights into its fears and, by extension, to

acquire an array of coping skills” (*Second Decade* 24). The posters from the real film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* hanging in the theater where David and the others take refuge are a subtle reminder of the power of horror in educating us and warning us against a tragic fall. Human potential for darkness is innate. In the fight against evil it is often easier to blame exterior forces rather than to “trace fault back to the original source, oneself” (Davis 44). Horror refuses to allow its audience to forget their weaknesses and forces them to acknowledge that darkness has a place in all of us.

King chooses the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* to aptly illustrate the inherent duality of human nature. In *Baby Jane* two sisters live alone in a decaying Hollywood mansion where Jane, a child star, abuses her crippled sister. Jane’s actions illustrate the twinning of the Apollonian and Dionysian sides of human nature. *Baby Jane*’s make-believe horrors warn audiences of our dual capacity for good and evil. King believes that “we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones. With the endless inventiveness of humankind, we grasp the very elements which are so divisive and destructive and try to turn them into tools—to dismantle themselves” (*Danse Macabre* 13). King uses the abandoned movie theater, film posters, and David’s memories to illustrate the power of horror film in reminding us of the dangers of feeding the darker side of our nature.

David comes to understand death through his love of horror films, and is prepared to face it despite his youth. Though only eleven, he gains firsthand experience with the horrors of death when his best friend, Brian, is hit by a car and thrown head-first into a brick wall. In *Danse Macabre*, King develops the idea that children are able to handle horror “because of their unique position in life...Even in such a relatively ordered society as our own, they understand that their survival is a matter almost totally out of their hands” (102). Ralph, David’s father, feels helpless

trying to explain death to a boy of eleven: “Ralph hadn’t even gotten around to telling him the facts of *life*, let alone those of death” (*Desperation* 159).

Although David’s parents worry about David’s reaction to Brian’s accident, they fail to understand that David already understands more than they think. His parents believe he is too young to confront death, but King suggests that it is precisely his youth and innocence that make facing death easier. Before David even talks to his parents, he and his younger sister Pie discuss death, “what had happened to Brian, and had it hurt, and what did David think it was like to die, did you go somewhere, and about a hundred other questions...But it was often best if you didn’t tell your parents everything. They were old and stuff got on their nerves” (*Desperation* 160). When faced with the tragedy of Brian’s accident, David’s mother wrings a dishcloth nervously while Ralph struggles to find words to explain, and Brian’s parents fall into hysterics to the point that a doctor has to give them sedatives. It’s clear that, for King, adulthood is a time of difficulty but childhood is a time of clear understanding and acceptance. David understands death and accepts that his friend may die.

David’s visit to Brian in the hospital explicitly links death to horror films and a character’s eventual survival in the face of evil. As David looks down on the still form of his friend, he remembers watching horror movies with his friend:

From beneath this cap, one long cut descended Brian’s left cheek to the corner of his mouth, where it curved up like a fishhook. The cut had been sutured with black thread. To David it looked like something out a Frankenstein movie, one of the old ones with Boris Karloff they showed on Saturday nights. Sometimes, when he slept over at Brian’s, the two of them stayed up and ate popcorn and watched those movies. They loved the old black-and-white monsters. (*Desperation* 162)

Like in the old Boris Karloff movies, death is a part of life and completely outside of David's control. Imagining Brian in a coffin, David feels despair "as if the image of Brian's fingers laced together in his coffin proved that nothing was worth anything, that doing never once in the world stopped dying, that not even kids were exempted from the horrorshow that roared on and on behind the peppermint sitcom façade your parents believed in and wanted you to believe in" (*Desperation* 164).

The phrase "doing never once in the world stopped dying" reflects a practical view of death in *Desperation*. Death doesn't care if you're old or young, good or evil. Mortality is an inescapable part of life. Entragian (Tak) mercilessly slaughters everyone in the town of Desperation. He pulls over random cars on the highway and kills whomever he pleases. He chooses to let Ralph, Ellen, and David live, but arbitrarily breaks Pie's neck. He jails Mary but shoots her husband three times and leaves him to die. Characters have the freedom to choose how they react to death, but they cannot stop death. The whims of chance take Ralph's wife and daughter, while he escapes. Instead of bravely facing death and trying to save his surviving son, he is crushed by the reminder of his own mortality and descends into hysteria. David, on the other hand, mourns his mother and little sister but refuses to allow their deaths to cripple him. He focuses on what he can control, namely, his own actions.

David Carver understands moral agency and the importance of what he calls the "free-will covenant" (*Desperation* 563). When Johnny Marinville wants to escape and save himself, David acknowledges that he can do nothing to stop him. The band of survivors could try to constrain Johnny, but "it wouldn't do any good" (*Desperation* 563). David explains that everyone can make their own choices, but must experience the consequences of those choices. Leaving would allow Tak free reign. It would mean saving themselves instead of trying to

prevent Tak from destroying others. More clearly than any adult, David understands the dire consequences of simple escape. He warns Johnny:

“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. *Can de lach*¹⁰ is what you’ll be, heart of the unformed. *Mi him can ini*. The empty well of the eye.” (*Desperation* 608-609)

Leaving means physical survival, but moral degradation. As David warns, Tak would metaphorically always be there. By choosing self over others, Johnny would be allowing the darker side of his nature to grow stronger. He would become *can de lach* and *mi him can ini*.

David’s description of those who invite evil into their hearts aptly describes the dangers of succumbing to darkness. “Heart of the unformed” implies a lack of moral strength and uprightness. As characters allow evil’s presence in their lives they become less able to withstand its influence until they *become* the evil. Similarly, David implies that those who allow evil to flourish become “the empty well of the eye.” Eyes are the proverbial window to the soul. In effect, characters lose their souls when they choose to align themselves with evil. David warns that those characters may live “unformed” and “empty” for a long time. He understands that there is a significant difference between physical and moral survival. Characters who survive physical death, by the very act may embrace moral destruction.

¹⁰ *Can de lach* and *mi him can ini* are examples of the language of the dead Tak uses throughout the novel. Entragian speaks in Tak’s language to command the coyotes, spiders, and other desert denizens. David uses the language of the dead in this instance to equate acting immorally to being possessed by Tak, body and soul. Refer to Elliot Koeppel’s website *The Language of the Dead* for a translation of King’s fictional language.

Johnny struggles with confronting the duality of his nature and deciding which side to give in to:

That sense of doubling, of *twinning*, was even stronger now, and he understood with both dismay and resignation that it was a true sensation. He was literally dividing himself in two. There was John Edward Marinville who didn't believe in God and didn't want God to believe in him; that creature wanted to go, and understood that Austin would only be the first stop. And there was Johnny, who wanted to stay. More, who wanted to fight. (*Desperation* 609)

David's words remind Johnny of such dangers and help him make the moral decision to stay and fight. Johnny comes to clearly understand the twinning of human nature and turns to David and to God for help in fighting his weak and selfish desires. "Help me, God," Johnny prays, "Oh God, please help me. Help me do what I was sent here to do, help me to be whole, help me to live. God, help me to live again" (*Desperation* 610). Johnny now understands that his previously dissolute celebrity lifestyle and poor moral choices have eroded his life and soul. Only through reasserting moral strength and turning to God can Johnny become whole.¹¹

Religion plays an important part in the novel *Desperation* and in the survival of the main characters, including Johnny and David. *Desperation* adds religion to youth and knowledge as facets of survival. David's knowledge of human nature and moral choice stems from the events surrounding Brian's nearly fatal accident and results in David's subsequent interest in religion, or as his mother calls it "David's God-trip" (*Desperation* 48). Shortly after Brian's accident, David has a powerful spiritual experience that influences his actions nearly a year later in *Desperation*.

¹¹ David's words reminding Johnny of his moral agency are so powerful that Johnny willingly chooses to sacrifice his life to save the rest of the survivors. Johnny takes dynamite into the abandoned mine shaft where Tak's essence dwells and sets off an explosion, killing himself to trap Tak deep in the earth and destroy Tak's power.

After seeing his friend in a vegetative coma in the hospital, David retreats to their hideout in the woods and prays. “God, make him better...” David pleads, “If you do, I’ll do something for you. I’ll listen to what you want, and then I’ll do it. I promise” (*Desperation* 174). And God answers his prayer. After his experience, David begins studying the Bible to understand what he’s promised and who he’s made a promise to. Throughout the novel, David remembers stories from the Bible; these help him understand how to act and why.

Since David can be read as a counterpoint to Mark Petrie, his interest in religion can be seen as functioning in much the same as Mark’s interest in horror. Religion and horror both demarcate in different ways moral boundaries and explore the duality of the human condition. Both illustrate the danger of immoral actions and serve to “scare the Hell out of a community” (Ingebretsen 79). Edward Ingebretsen notes this connection between horror and the holy in *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell*. He argues that “a map of Heaven could only be constructed, as it were, by inversion, beginning with Hell” (ix). Horror and Heaven are inextricably intertwined; there is an “almost necessary association of the Holy and the Horrible, the Deity and the Demonic” (xiv).

The Bible stories that David remembers and relies on are closely linked to the horror genre. Many of the stories David reads—particularly in the Old Testament—recount events that could be considered horrific. And both horror and the Bible teach of the harsh reality of this world, of our own mortality, of our potential for good and evil, and our ultimate freedom for moral choice.

David draws on the Biblical story of Daniel and the lions’ den as he awaits death in Entragian’s jail cell. As David strips off clothing and lathers himself up with soap to squeeze between the bars of his jail cell and escape, he remembers reading about Daniel. Daniel is innocent of wrongdoing, but is thrown to certain death in a den of hungry lions. David faces a

gruesome death as well, but gains courage and direction when he remembers King Darius's words to Daniel before Daniel was led away: "Thy God whom thou servest in your days and nights will deliver thee" (*Desperation* 241-242). David remembers Daniel's example, puts his faith in God, and acts according to his moral conscience. He prays "*Find innocency [sic] in me, God. Find innocency [sic] in me and shut that fleabag's mouth. Jesus' name I pray, amen*" (*Desperation* 244; italics in original). David trusts that the God who he believes in and serves will make escape possible and deliver him from evil. David's faith and subsequent action allows him to escape the jail cell, find the deputy's keys and return to save the other prisoners.

In *Danse Macabre*, King also links horror and religion, citing the story of Job as an example of Biblical horror. Job lives through the death of his family, the loss of all of his worldly wealth, and a painful disease, all as tests of his moral strength. Despite the horror occurring around him, Job refuses to act contrary to what he knows to be right. Job's story illustrates the fact that terrible things can happen to anyone. Job loses everything, but retains his freedom to choose how he responds to the tragedies that befall him.

King frequently uses religious figures and symbols in his work to further explore the duality of human nature and to look at the role of religion in a character's moral (or immoral) decisions. David Carver turns to the Bible and to prayer as he experiences the horror of losing his mother and sister, and in battling Tak. He believes in God's power and in revelation, trusting that God will direct him. "God, this David Carver again" he prays. "I'm in such a mess, God, such a mess. Please protect me and help me do what I have to do. Jesus' name I pray, amen" (*Desperation* 250). David's prayer clearly reflects his youth and desperation, but also his earnest belief. For King, belief followed by action is integral to survival.

Religion and religious figures figure prominently in many of King's novels; in many, the religious figures are the least tolerant and Christ-like of King's characters. *Carrie* and *The Mist*, for example, feature religious zealots whose unbending views taint and corrupt those around them. Both religious figures preach one thing, but live quite another. Father Callahan in *'Salem's Lot*, for example, goes through the motions, but has personal doubts about the Catholic church and his own faith. When Father Callahan and Mark confront Barlow, Father Callahan holds a crucifix that glows with power. Barlow challenges Callahan: "...will you throw away your cross and face me on even terms—black against white? Your faith against my own?" (*'Salem's Lot* 352). Father Callahan hesitates, worried about the consequences, and in that moment his faith fails. The cross becomes nothing more than a curio from a souvenir shop. Barlow exults:

You have forgotten the doctrine of your own church, is it not so? The cross...the bread and wine...the confessional...only symbols. Without faith, the cross is only wood, the bread baked wheat, the wine sour grapes. If you had cast the cross away, you should have beaten me another night. In a way, I hoped it might be so. It has been long since I have met an opponent of any real worth. (*'Salem's Lot* 355).

The power lies not in religious symbols but in profound faith and moral action.

Needful Things also addresses religion, showing the disparity between professions of belief and action. In the novel, the Catholics and the Baptists get "het up over religion" (*Needful Things* 8). They argue over the Catholic's Casino Nite plan and "rant and rave and tell each other they're goin to hell" (*Needful Things* 5). Through Leland Gaunt's careful manipulation, their disagreement escalates into a devastating physical altercation: "Castle Rock's Baptists, led by the Rev. William Rose, and Castle Rock's Catholics, led by Father John Brigham, came together near the foot of Castle Hill with an almost audible crunch. There was no polite fist-fighting, no

Marquis of Queensberry rules; they had come to gouge out eyes and tear off noses. Quite possibly to kill” (*Needful Things* 660). And they do. Many of the members of both congregations have purchased guns, but others rely on their rage and physical abilities to attack and murder their religious opposites. Despite their so-called religious convictions, they choose to act immorally.

In *Desperation*, David’s religious mentor, Reverend Martin, remarks on the difference between belief and action. Knowledge and belief are not enough if not backed up by action. “You’ve had a conversion...In fact, yours is the only genuine conversion I’ve seen, perhaps the only genuine one I’ll ever see. These are not good times for the God of our fathers, David. Lots of people talking the talk, not many walking the walk” (240; italics in the original). David acts on his convictions and is protected because of his moral righteousness.

His example inspires the adults as David receives answers to his prayers and leads them safely out of impossible situations. The novel ends with the Bible verse 1 John 4:8 which reads “God is love.” Mary asks David if he believes that to which he replies “Oh, yes...I guess he’s sort of...everything,” then closes his eyes and begins to pray (*Desperation* 690). By ending with these words and with David’s prayer, King seems to indicate belief in a God who directs actions. God is love, King says, but he’s everything else too. *Desperation* is one of King’s most overtly religious works. In it, King combines survival factors from his earlier novels with the power of religion to show the keys to physical and moral survival.

David’s youth combined with the knowledge of human nature gained from horror films gives him strength to combat evil. David’s abiding belief in God allows King to further explore complicated questions about life, death, and morality. “The subject of the afterlife,” King writes, “...has always been fertile soil for writers who are comfortable with the fantastic. God—in any

of His supposed forms—is another subject for which tales of the fantastic were made. And when we ask questions about God, one near the top of every list is why some people live and some people die; why some get well and some do not” (King, *Sunset* 366). For King, horror and religion go hand in hand. King seamlessly entwines David’s interest in horror film with his belief in God to explore the moral order of the universe and our place in it. David survives his encounter with evil because of his interest in both. Horror and religion teach him about evil and human potential for darkness while simultaneously giving him, and King’s readers, hope that we can survive and triumph.

Conclusion

The three novels I've chosen, *Salem's Lot*, *Needful Things*, and *Desperation*, represent King continuous interest in and development of themes of physical and moral survival, especially for youthful characters. King returns again and again to the same themes throughout his entire oeuvre. *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Silver Bullet*, and *The Shining*, are additional novels that feature young protagonists who discover the reality of evil and respond with varying degrees of success. As in the novels I've analyzed in this thesis, those characters who have innocence enlightened by moral knowledge and coupled with the moral will to act on their knowledge are more likely to survive the encounter with evil, whatever its form.

In *On Writing*, King recounts the development of his belief in the power of horror. Deeply affected by Roger Corman's 1961 adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, King decided to write a novelized version of the film, print copies, and sell them at school, charging 25 cents apiece. It turned out to be his first best-seller and King sold three dozen by the end of lunch hour. At the end of the school day, King's success came crashing down by a summons to the principal's office. "I was told," King recounts, "I couldn't turn the school into a marketplace, especially not Miss Hisler said, to sell such trash as *The Pit and the Pendulum*" (*On Writing* 49). His principal scolded him, asking why he wanted to waste his talent and abilities to write trash. King never forgot the experience. "I have spent a good many years since—too many, I think—being ashamed about what I write," King confesses (*On Writing* 50).

Since Miss Hisler, critics have questioned why King writes what he does. The answer seems to be that King writes what he loves. "I was built with a love of the night and the unquiet coffin, that's all," King says (*On Writing* 158). Part of that love stems from a childhood steeped in watching horror films, television programs (such as *The Twilight Zone* and *Tales from the*

Crypt), and reading horror stories. In addition to King's love of the genre is a deeply held notion of the power of horror. King asserts that "Horror isn't a hack market now, and never was. The genre is one of the most delicate known to man, and it must be handled with great care and more than a little love" (*Kingdom of Fear* 14).

King believes the horror genre is well-equipped to deal with contemporary societal fears as well as universal concerns about the nature of life, death, and what it means to be human. King spends over 400 pages in *Danse Macabre* academically dissecting the horror genre and its function in society. He believes in the redemptive power of horror and the necessity of it in our lives. The horror story, King asserts, is at its root a tale of morality.

Morality is, after all, a codification of those things which the heart understands to be true and those things which the heart understands to be the demands of a life lived among others...civilization, in a word. And if we remove the label "horror story" or "fantasy genre" or whatever, and replace it with "literature" or more simply still, "fiction," we may realize more easily that no such blanket accusations of immorality can be made. If we say that morality proceeds simply from a good heart--which has little to do with ridiculous posturings and happily-ever-afterings--and immorality proceeds simply from a lack of care, from shoddy observation, and from the prostitution of drama or melodrama for some sort of gain, monetary or otherwise, we may realize that we have arrived at a critical stance which is both workable and humane. Fiction is the truth inside the lie, and in the tale of horror as in any other tale, the same rule applies now as when Aristophanes told his horror tale of the frogs: morality is telling the truth as your heart knows it. (*Danse Macabre* 402-403)

King's attitude toward the horror genre is apparent throughout his oeuvre. I have focused

on three of King's works throughout the decades of his career to illustrate the role of the horror genre in each. In *'Salem's Lot* and *Desperation*, the child protagonists triumph over evil in part because of their interest in the horror genre. King uses the horror genre in the lives of his characters to prepare them for an encounter with evil. Mark Petrie and David Carver are vicariously exposed to horror long before they meet the respective evils in their books. Instead of being crippled by terror and the knowledge of their own mortality, both characters rise to the occasion and become heroes. They understand the fragility of life and their own potential for immoral action. Instead of caving to the weaker sides of their nature, both Mark and David courageously choose to fight evil despite the danger to themselves. They understand they must resist to survive morally as well as physically. King juxtaposes both characters with weaker characters in both novels to highlight the importance of moral choice. Other characters give in to evil's power and lose their souls.

Needful Things, on the other hand, provides a stark contrast to *'Salem's Lot* and *Desperation*, but addresses the same themes. Brian ultimately fails because of his lack of grounding in reality. He is ill-equipped to deal with evil when it arrives in the form of Leland Gaunt. A little bit of horror in one's life seems to be a healthy thing.

The real tragedies in King's fiction aren't the characters like Pie or Peter who are killed, but those who do not understand the importance of acting morally and choose, instead, to embrace evil. In King's universe, evil functions to allow characters to redefine themselves morally (Van Rijn 54). Characters either give in to evil or make a conscious choice to exercise self-discipline and resist. Characters' choices, then, either weaken evil or allow it to grow stronger. Davis points out "A majority of King's books place the central protagonists in positions to follow their moral or immoral impulses. Those who consider the implications of acting

immorally and act accordingly are those who overcome evil; those who succumb to the immediate gratification that evil offers are those who eventually fail” (42). Magistrale points to the inherent duality of the human condition to explain the moral order of King’s universe. “In practically every Stephen King tale good and evil are given body in the form of some figures and their actions, as good and evil are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in all of us. It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires a courageous struggle against what seems like overwhelming odds to solve it” (Magistrale, *Moral Voyages* 25-26). In other words, the manifestations of evil in King’s oeuvre raise the stakes and force characters to confront their own morality and mortality.

King’s universe contains ample evidence of human agency in action. Magistrale cites John Smith from *The Dead Zone*, Louis Creed from *Pet Sematary*, and Andy Dufresne from *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* as examples of free will and moral choice being “solidly within the individual’s purview” (*America’s Storyteller* 75). John Smith prevents an evil politician from gaining power. Louis Creed ignores warnings and brings his wife and son back from the dead with disastrous consequences. And Andy Dufresne tunnels out of Shawshank prison to “get busy living”, refusing to succumb to the injustice of his wrongful imprisonment. Each chooses his own actions and deals with the moral consequences.

Along with these examples, ‘*Salem’s Lot*, *Needful Things*, and *Desperation* all illustrate the importance of moral agency. In ‘*Salem’s Lot* the majority of the characters give into their shortcomings and ignore evil to the detriment of the town. *Needful Things*—even more than ‘*Salem’s Lot*—places human agency at the forefront of the story. Gaunt twists evil to look attractive. By promising the characters the objects of their heart’s desire, he easily turns the citizens into willing participants in his evil. They consciously reject what they know to be decent

and good, playing mean-spirited “tricks” on each other, feeding the flame of resentment and anger simmering in the town. If the townspeople had acted according to their moral conscience, Gaunt would have been powerless. The only control of the external monster is through control of the internal self.

Desperation, on the other hand, explores human agency and morality in a situation that seems to offer neither escape nor moral choice. *Desperation* shows a slightly alternative perspective on the role of human agency than either *Salem’s Lot* or *Needful Things*. *Desperation* features an evil more physically powerful and destructive than either the vampire Barlow or Leland Gaunt. Tak’s evil is like a virus that fills the area, ubiquitous and powerful. Tak uses coyotes, scorpions and other denizens of the desert as its minions, giving it eyes and ears throughout the town. When Tak possess a body, the person’s soul vacates the body. Unable to bear Tak’s overwhelming power, the body disintegrates as the insides turn to mush, and blood hemorrhages from every orifice. Whereas Leland Gaunt promises fulfillment of personal desires, complicity with Tak leads only to painful death and destruction. Tak’s evil is far from appealing yet his power for evil functions in much the same way as Leland Gaunt’s schemes and Barlow’s vampiric threat. The characters are faced with the choice to fight against seemingly indestructible evil to save others or to act selfishly and save themselves.

Because of horror’s ultimately moral message, King asserts “A certain amount of fantasy and horror in a child’s life seems to me a perfectly okay, useful sort of things. Because of the size of their imaginative capacity, children are able to handle it, and because of their unique position in life, they are able to put such feelings to work” (*Danse Macabre* 102). Watching horror films enable children to work through their anxieties caused by their lack of control. “Watching,” King writes, “the child awakes again and knows that this is what dying is like.

Dying is when the Creature from the Black Lagoon dams up the exit. Dying is when the monster gets you” (*Danse Macabre* 106). King connects watching horror film and understanding death in many of his stories.

The characters in *‘Salem’s Lot*, *Needful Things*, and *Desperation* all illustrate this theme, but King’s interest in the connection between an understanding and acceptance of the dark side of human nature is not isolated to these three works. Although King has written hundreds of novels and short stories, King critics such as Tony Magistrale, Michael R. Collings, and Heidi Strengell have noted the continuity in his work.¹² Strengell aptly points out that most of King’s stories are interrelated; they consistently reference or build from earlier works. Strengell cites the events of *Gerald’s Game* (1992) and *Dolores Claiborne* (1993) as evidence. Both novels feature the same total solar eclipse which “plays a decisive role in the lives of the female protagonists, Jesse and Dolores” (Strengell 5). Stephen Spignesi goes a step further by asserting that King “has been writing one massive book his entire life and just breaking it up into individual volumes” (103). *Dreamcatchers* (2001), Spignesi argues, can be considered a “spin-off” of the novel *It* (1986) because King returns to the town of Derry to recount later events. Similarly, *The Dead Zone* (1979), *Cujo* (1981), “The Body” (1982), “Uncle Otto’s Truck” (1985), *The Dark Half* (1989) and *Needful Things* (1991) are all set in the fictional town of Castle Rock. More than just location, however, they even share some of the same characters. Sheriff Alan Pangborn, John “Ace” Merrill, Frank Dodd, Evelyn Chalmers, and George Bannerman, for example, feature in several of King’s novels set in the fictional town of Castle Rock. Their palimpsestic relationship

¹² Strengell gives an insightful overview of the various critical responses to the continuity of King’s universe, concluding that it is unlikely that “King would deliberately have been building his empire from the days of *Carrie* (1975)” but that there does seem to be an “integrated view of the way in which things in life happen and why they happen” (5).

creates a tightly woven history of the town where echoes of past events haunt the residents directing their present.

These examples are not isolated. King's *The Dark Tower* series, which tracks the heroic journey of Roland the Gunslinger, is the most obvious example of the intertextuality of King's universe. The worlds of *The Dark Tower* series "contain all the others of his making," and Strengell argues "all of King's characters seem to finish up in Mid-World" under the "blue gaze of Roland's bombardier eyes" (4). These examples are indicative of King's "multiverse" as Stanley Wiater, Christopher Golden, and Hank Wagner label it (xiii).

Though the cross-referencing and character sharing is persuasive evidence of an underlying order to King's work, more important is the thematic unity of King's fictional universe. Wiater, Golden, and Wagner believe that "there is a seemingly eternal struggle between good and evil, chaos and order taking place throughout the Stephen King universe and its myriad parallel realities and dimensions" (xiv). Strengell comments on King's interest in evil by pointing out that "King reverts again and again to the duality between good and evil and the fact that human beings personify both" (179).

Just as the characters in King's novels find salvation through their interest in horror, King's readers return again and again to his novels and are justified for their interest. Readers may enjoy horror, Andrew Greeley believes, not because of the terrors that they experience vicariously, but for the reminder that they are capable of surviving and even triumphing over evil.¹³ "In reading the story," Greeley asserts, "we reassured that there is hope that we may continue to survive the forces of evil a little bit longer" (*Kingdom of Fear* 22). Greeley praises King for his matter-of-fact view of life. He doesn't promise any "cheap of easy hope" or have

¹³ Reasons audiences and readers enjoy horror may include, as Greeley believes, the joy in being reminded of human resiliency and potential to triumph over evil. But responses depend greatly on each individual person. Despite Greeley's assertions,

miraculous endings where everyone survives. “People are badly hurt, they suffer and some of them die, but others survive the struggle and manage to grow. The powers of evil have not yet done them in. It is little enough, but it is all there is, Mr. King seems to be saying...In this respect, at any rate, the horror story is profoundly religious. It celebrates sometimes only tiny smidgens of hope, but hope, like goodness and love, needs only to exist to finally win” (*Kingdom of Fear* 22)

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