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Abstract

This essay has two major goals. Its general aim is to join the growing body of scholarship that takes Stephen King's work seriously as literature in its own right and in conversation with other, traditionally canonical, works. This essay specifically does so by examining the apparent, though unreferenced, influence of William Butler Yeats's poems "The Tower" and "The Black Tower" on King's longest, strangest, most challenging and most self-referential work—the Dark Tower series. King references Yeats elsewhere in his fiction, and a rich, non-linear intertextuality connects the Dark Tower series to much of the rest of King's work. Taking this connection as a structure for analysis begins a fruitful search for Yeats's influence in the Dark Tower novels and for a broader notion of literary influences on King's work. There has been some past critical discussion of King's use of Yeats; this essay also seeks to continue that work.

Cover Page Footnote

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GUNSLINGER ROLAND FROM YEATS'S
TOWERS CAME(?):
A LITTLE-STUDIED INFLUENCE ON
STEPHEN KING'S DARK TOWER SERIES

ABIGAIL L. MONTGOMERY

STEPHEN KING DESCRIBES HIS 1978¹ classic *The Stand* as the book “people who like my books seem to like the most” (xiv). It is also of consistent interest to King scholars, garnering over 800 hits in one popular academic database—more than four times as many as another popular King classic of similar age, *The Shining*, and quite healthy indeed in comparison to the all but non-existent results for a more recent work like *Duma Key*. Given these facts, *The Stand* is a strong, accessible entry point for the kind of work in King studies that Michael A. Perry calls for: “blur[ring] boundaries between popular and literary fictions [and] hav[ing] a ripple effect within broader literary studies for years to come” (38).

Throughout *The Stand*, direct references to William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming”² appear in both narrative passages and the words and

¹ *The Stand* was originally published in 1978, King’s third novel. At this stage in his career, his publisher asked him to cut his manuscript about 400 pages for budgetary reasons (xiii). Years later, his popularity enabled a re-release of the novel “as its author originally intended for it to roll out of the showroom” (xiv). That is the version commercially available since 1990, and the version most fans have read—all direct quotations in this essay are from this edition. Several of the Yeats allusions discussed below are present in the original publication, which establishes the Yeats-King influence before the 1982 publication of the first Dark Tower novel, *The Gunslinger*.

² King first introduces “The Second Coming” early in *The Stand* through Starkey, one of the high-level army officers working on the secret military project that accidentally releases the super-flu and kills 99 percent of the population. Starkey pronounces Yeats as “Yeets” and recalls, “He said that things fall apart. He said the center doesn’t hold” (167). This moment is so integral to the story, it even makes it into the 1994 television mini-series, with Ed Harris as Starkey quoting the poetry of “Yeets.” As the story unfolds, Yeats’s poem remains influential. Trashcan Man dreams of “a rough beast of an army whose time had come round at last” (569). Nadine Cross wonders “if the dark man’s time had come around at last” (630) and later accepts that “the time had . . . well, it had slouched around at last, hadn’t it?” (770; ellipses original). Larry Underwood imagines troll-like monsters “Waiting until *his* time came around—the time of the dark man” (757). Flagg himself believes “he would know the right time when it came round at last” (969).

thoughts of various characters. Despite this connection, the popularity of *The Stand*, and the large-for-King body of academic criticism on *The Stand*, very little critical attention has been paid to Yeats's influence on King overall. King's direct use of Yeats in *The Stand* is itself grounds for more fruitful analysis than the note I allow here. It is also an exciting starting place for Perry's boundary blurring both between King and more traditionally literary fiction and within the various projects and eras of King's own work.

Parts of this wide-open field have been explored here in the pages of *Mythlore*. Emily Auger's recent essay ties the Dark Tower series firmly and excitingly to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." The third Dark Tower novel, "not incidentally titled *The Waste Lands*" (Auger 201), is an obvious namesake of Eliot's poem. Just as King and his characters quote Yeats throughout *The Stand*, "King himself pays direct homage to both Eliot and Robert Browning" (Auger 187) several times in *The Waste Lands*. Auger uses this clearly labeled door as an entry point to apply "The Waste Land" to the entire Dark Tower series; she uses Eliot both as a familiar text to guide readers through the deeply strange worlds of the Dark Tower and as a sort of map to organize a thorough catalogue of King's allusions to a recognized canonical text. It is this kind of work I aim to continue here with Yeats's poems as familiar guides.

If *The Stand* is the novel most popular with King's fans, the work that most intrigues and challenges fans and scholars alike is his eight-volume Dark Tower series, which spans a multiverse of both its own settings and increasingly complex allusions to the rest of King's fiction. These self-allusions exist alongside allusions to other works, from the Arthur legend (also present in Roland's world) to the Western films that also inspired King's Dark Tower worlds, and much in between. One self-allusion in the Dark Tower series brings together *The Stand* and one of those in-between allusions, in subtle ways open to exciting, speculative analysis. In the fourth³ Dark Tower book, *Wizard and Glass*, Roland, Eddie, Susannah, Jake, and Oy find themselves in the Topeka, Kansas, of a world very much like our own. This world seems to be the world of *The Stand*⁴ or one very like it, with the population having been all but wiped

³ The Dark Tower series was ostensibly complete with the 2004 publication of the seventh volume, *The Dark Tower*. In a closing note, King proclaims, "In a sense, there's nothing left to say now that Roland has reached his goal" (1048). In 2012, however, King published *The Wind through the Keyhole: A Dark Tower Novel*, which he refers to in a brief Foreword as both possible to read on its own (ix) and in relation to the overall series chronology as "I suppose, *Dark Tower 4.5*" (x). Boxed sets reflecting this positioning—and complicating certain structural features of the series—are now available.

⁴ The worlds of *The Stand* and *Wizard and Glass* share another intertextual connection through *The Wizard of Oz*. King alludes to *The Wizard of Oz* in various ways in *The Stand*. Nick Andros and Tom Cullen are caught in a tornado (398). Larry Underwood opines that

out by a strain of flu and Randall Flagg, *The Stand's* anti-Christ figure, making an appearance. In this deserted Topeka, they find many abandoned cars, a few corpses, and a newspaper clipping reporting the "'Captain Trips' Superflu" (*Wizard* 76), the same nickname used for the apocalyptic illness in *The Stand*. They find graffiti warning to "Watch for the Walkin Dude" (95), one of Flagg's epithets, and eventually meet Flagg himself. A terrifying version of the Emerald City's palace is in this Kansas, and in its throne room Roland's ka-tet—King's Dark Tower terminology for a group brought together by destiny, or ka—meets Randall Flagg and learns that he is also Marten Broadcloak, the court magician whose affair with Roland's mother led to her death, Roland's exile, and the fall of Gilead⁵ (672-674).

If *The Stand's* major villain can visit the Dark Tower multiverse, then certainly we may seek one of *The Stand's* strongest literary influences there as well. It would be an unforgiveable strain on the intertextuality between *The Stand* and the Dark Tower series to argue for straightforward influence of Yeats on the longer work, yet the central importance of Yeats in *The Stand* places him firmly on the list of acknowledged influences on Stephen King. Just as Yeats is directly referenced in *The Stand* and *The Stand* is directly present in the Dark Tower series, another intertextuality-at-one-remove link also connects Yeats to the Dark Tower multiverse. King has acknowledged his debt to Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" in introductory author's notes from the earliest days of the Dark Tower series; the poem is printed in its entirety as an appendix to the series's final volume.

"the Wicked Witch of the West, or some Pentagon assholes, visited the country with a great plague" (663); his is one of several such casual Oz allusions by characters in *The Stand*. When Stu Redman, Larry Underwood, Glen Bateman, and Ralph Brentner head west to face Randall Flagg, traveling on foot and accompanied by Glen's dog, Kojak, theirs is a near-recreation of the party that travels the Yellow Brick Road in Baum's classic tale. Roland's traveling party even more closely replicates Baum's, and as the title suggests, the connection in *Wizard and Glass* is more overt and extensive still. In *Wizard and Glass*, Roland, Eddie, Susannah, Jake, and Oy all receive special red shoes to wear into a green glass palace that appears in Kansas and features a rainbow (649-659).

⁵ There are other echoes between *The Stand* and *Wizard and Glass*. Moments before the explosion that destroys *The Stand's* Las Vegas, "Flagg was no longer there. [...] Flagg's clothes—the jacket, the jeans, the boots—standing upright with nothing in them" (1072). Flagg reawakens on a remote island in the book's final pages. In *Wizard and Glass*, too, Roland attempts to shoot Flagg at close range, only to find that "[h]is shots had shattered the back of the throne into thick green slabs of glass, but the man-shaped creature which had called itself Flagg was gone" (*Wizard* 674). Flagg reappears again in the Dark Tower series, this time finally meeting his violent-yet-anti-climactic doom at the hands of Mordred, the half-spider, half-human son of Roland, Susannah, and the Crimson King (*Dark Tower* 227).

Richard Fallis argues that “Yeats’s last poem, ‘The Black Tower,’ is an imitation in the most creative sense of ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’” (100). For Marvel Shmiefsky, “What surprises one is the extent to which Browning anticipated Yeats thematically and stylistically” (701)—under this model, an allusion to Browning leads directly to consideration of Yeats. Yeats’s “Tower” seems to be a site for consideration of some of the largest theoretical issues at play in King’s *Dark Tower*. For Yeats, “The self, representative of the creative power of the poet, is allowed to triumph over the soul, which is struck dumb by the thought of transcending life” (Manganiello 14). This in-poem attention to the creative process parallels nearly perfectly King’s and his characters’ encounters and engagement with creative anxiety when he writes himself into the latter novels on the journey to the Dark Tower: “it is less and less likely that Roland will complete his quest as it becomes simultaneously less and less likely that King will ever finish writing about it” (Auger 209). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, several interesting points of contact between Yeats’s poems “The Tower” and “The Black Tower” and the world of Roland’s *Dark Tower* become apparent upon considering the works in parallel. I divide these connections into three categories: incidental, structural, and thematic.

Incidental Connections

These connections are surface-level links that in the absence of the structural and thematic connections would suggest no intersection at all between Yeats’s poems and King’s saga. As it stands, they offer surprising moments of recognition to a reader attuned to the Yeats-King influence, and they parallel characters’ use of our world’s literature to understand their own circumstances (King, *Wizard* 652-657). The man “so harried” (Yeats “Tower” 76) by life’s troubles finds an echo in King’s repeated use of “harriers” throughout the *Dark Tower* series as a term for roving outlaws who weaken the fabric of Roland’s world. When Yeats’s “The Tower” invokes the familiar symbols “sun and moon and star, all” (152), the attentive reader of Yeats and King can hear a rhythmic resemblance in the “bird and bear and hare and fish” (*Wizard* 634) formula by which Roland and Susan swear their love and other promises in *Wizard and Glass*. Like the “sun and moon and star” in ours, the “bird and bear and hare and fish” are both familiar and flexibly symbolic in Roland’s world—where they appear as geographic guides, astronomical markers, and nursery rhyme characters. Yeats’s “Tower” speaker wishes to “call / Images and memories / From ruin or from ancient trees” (21-23); in our world, Eddie and Roland see “thickening shadows in the trees, where a million faces and a million stories lurked” (King, *Dark Tower* 40). Such minor connections can certainly be found between just about any texts, yet *The Stand* establishes King as a reader of Yeats years before the *Dark Tower* series appeared in print. Moreover, in the

Dark Tower series, with all its resonances between worlds and circumstances, "'Coincidence has been cancelled . . . What we're living in these days is more like the Charles Dickens version of reality'" (Wolves 356).

Structural Connections

While the above echoes are certainly interesting and serve to suggest an influential role for Yeats in the Dark Tower multiverse, those that I consider structural bear more clearly, if not deeply, on elements of setting and plot in King's sprawling multiverse. When Yeats writes of "a sooty finger" ("Tower" 20) or "the old black tower" ("Black Tower" 1), one need only glance at *The Dark Tower* cover art to see a strikingly similar setting. King repeatedly describes his Dark Tower with Yeats-echoing language: "a sooty-gray black cylinder" (*Dark Tower* 682); "sooty gray-black stone" (878); "that gray-black column" (1017).

"The Black Tower" resonates with another significant setting from Roland's journey. The repeated line "*Old bones upon the mountain shake*" (Yeats "Black Tower" 10, 20, 30; italics original) would be a fair description of the hillside where Roland and the man in black meet in *The Gunslinger*: "a golgotha, place-of-the-skull. And bleached skulls stared blandly up at them—cattle, coyotes, deer, rabbits, bumbler" (271). What Roland and the man in black do on this site also has a parallel in Yeats: "Good fellows shuffled cards in an old bawn; / And when that ancient ruffian's turn was on / He so bewitched the cards" ("The Tower" 65-67). The man in black, who like Roland has had a magically elongated lifespan and could certainly be termed an "ancient ruffian"—tells Roland's future with "Tarot cards, gunslinger—of a sort. A mixture of the standard deck to which have been added a selection of my own development" (*Gunslinger* 275). One might even say that the man in black has "bewitched the cards."

There is also a potential long-distance sighting of another major Dark Tower antagonist in Yeats's "The Tower." Yeats's speaker wishes for a visit from "The red man the juggler sent / Through God-forsaken meadows" (92-93). The immediate reference is to an earlier Yeats character, Red Hanrahan (Pethica 82n8, 83n2), but there is a rather important red man in the Dark Tower series: the Crimson King. The Crimson King is a mysterious, insane being, the power behind many of Roland's adversaries, who wants to topple the Dark Tower, "*destroy all the light there is, and then rule the darkness*" (King, *Dark Tower* 938; italics original). Yeats's "God-forsaken meadows" find an echo in the vast distances Roland travels through decayed, often empty, landscapes before the defeat of the Crimson King at the Dark Tower itself (994).

The penultimate verse of Yeats's "The Black Tower" contains elements that recur in both minor and major plot points along Roland's journey to the Dark Tower. Yeats writes, "The tower's old cook that must climb and clamber / Catching small birds in the dew of the morn / [...] Swears that he hears the king's

great horn" (21-22, 24). The "old cook" and "small birds" are also motifs in a violent episode of betrayal in Roland's youth. Roland learns that Hax, a cook in his father's palace, plans to supply poisoned meat to an entire village as part of the rebellion that ultimately brings down the social order of Roland's world (King, *Gunslinger* 139-141). Huge numbers of birds gather at the gallows for Hax's execution (146), and Roland and Cuthbert follow their tutor's instructions to leave bread for the "thousands of birds" (153) who descend on the hanged corpse afterwards.

If an "old cook" and "small birds" (Yeats, "Black Tower" 21-22) parallel the youthful beginning of Roland's journey, Yeats's reference to "the king's great horn" ("Black Tower" 24) parallels the end of both Browning's poem and King's series and signals the debt that he, Browning, and King all owe to a much older, much more famous Roland. Two important examples point with near certainty to influence from *The Song of Roland*. Perhaps the most famous moment in *Song of Roland* occurs when Roland blows his horn too late to summon help, having specifically declined to do so earlier, while he and his men are terribly outnumbered at the Battle of Roncevaux (1099-1101; 1170-1174). Charlemagne arrives in time only to find Roland and his men dead, and then takes up and blows the Oliphant to spur to his army on to victory and revenge for Roland (2397-2480).

In the Dark Tower series, this horn from the 12th century, from Browning, from Yeats, returns as the Horn of Arthur Eld. He is the same or almost the same man of legend known in our world as King Arthur. This horn has been handed down through Roland's family—they are illegitimate descendants of Arthur Eld (King, *Wizard* 192), and that lineage secures their power in Gilead. It is Cuthbert who blows the horn while they—much like the hero of *The Song of Roland* at Roncevaux—are outnumbered at the Battle of Jericho Hill (*Wolves* 222). Their loss ends the rule of Gilead and the world as they have known it—another situation of which Yeats offers a serviceable description: "Who, when his own right king's forgotten / Cares what king sets up his rule" ("Black Tower" 13-14). Of his army, only Roland survives this battle, blessed and damned to continue his quest for the Dark Tower. Unlike Charlemagne, and despite Cuthbert's dying request that he do so, Roland neglects to take the Horn of Arthur Eld with him from the battlefield, a decision that haunts him throughout his long life: "*Cuthbert raises the horn to his bloody lips and blows a great blast—the final blast, for when it drops from his fingers a minute later . . . Roland will let it lie in the dust. In his grief and bloodlust he will forget all about Eld's Horn*" (King, *Wolves* 222; italics original).

At the end of *The Dark Tower*, once again alone, with all the members of his ka-tet gone from him to death or other worlds, Roland finally reaches the Dark Tower. He climbs to the top, visiting en route a series of rooms that

represent the major moments of his life. King's Dark Tower may be fairly described in words written about Browning's poem that inspires Yeats and King: "a 'psychogeography'—a landscape which is an amalgam of a character's sensory impressions, memories, and projected fears and desires, all transformed through the act of poetic narration" (Bolton 15). Roland completes this physical and mental journey, opens the door of the final room, and finds himself cast back to the desert where readers meet him at the beginning of *The Gunslinger*—the story's final, shocking revelation is that the quest is cyclical, one Roland has made many times before and must now make again (King *Dark Tower* 1028–1029). King even begins and ends the series with the same line: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed" (*Gunslinger* 3; *Dark Tower* 1031). King points readers to this circularity early on. Each of the original seven Dark Tower novels features at least one key word on its front end pages, and the word for *The Gunslinger* is RESUMPTION. Amid Roland's—to say nothing of the reader's⁶—agony at the end of *The Dark Tower* (key words REPRODUCTION REVELATION REDEMPTION RESUMPTION), there is still hope. We learn that on this particular RESUMPTION of his quest, Roland has retrieved the Horn of Arthur Eld: "when Cuthbert fell, Roland had paused just long enough to pick it up again, knocking the deathdust of that place from its throat" (1030). The novel's—the series's—antepenultimate sentence re-emphasizes the horn: "Roland touched the horn again, and its reality was oddly comforting, as if he had never touched it before" (1031).

Indeed, in prior journeys to the Dark Tower, Roland has not had the horn of Arthur Eld after the battle of Jericho Hill, having failed to collect it in the moment of Cuthbert's death (*Wolves* 222). Roland has truly loved Eddie, Susannah, Jake, and Oy, truly understood the risks he poses to them—"Susannah Dean needed Roland of Gilead back in her life almost as much as nursery bah-bos needed rat poison added to their bedtime bottles" (*Dark Tower* 603)—and truly accepted responsibility when he has not treated them properly—"He felt angry and ill at ease with himself, feelings he had never suffered before hauling Eddie, Susannah, and Jake from America-side into his life" (943); "I'm sorry I spoke rough to'ee, fella [Oy]" (945). Roland has corrected the major mistake of his past, valuing his quest to the exclusion of his relationships with loved ones. Late in this journey to the Dark Tower, Roland recovers the horn of Arthur Eld as evidence that he has remembered what he forgot when he initially lost it. On the particular iteration of the quest that series

⁶ This ending is a topic of great debate and commiseration among King fans. I personally love it, even as it breaks my heart on every reading. King even structures the final chapter in parts that allow the reader to stop before Roland enters the Dark Tower, warning that "Should you go on, you will surely be disappointed, perhaps even heartbroken" (*Dark Tower* 1016).

readers share with him, “Roland has developed an emotional life, which may have been the purpose of his rotation through this cycle of his Tower quest” (Braun 73). Because of this change along the most recent journey, he is given a “promise that things may be different, Roland—that there may yet be rest. Even salvation” (King, *Dark Tower* 1031; italics original). Browning’s Roland inspires both Yeats and King; we may argue for King’s Roland as well as Browning’s that “[t]he fact that he does not [give up] and tries ‘one time more’ [...] is all that is necessary” (Garratt 124-125). Alongside the stunning disappointment of being cast back to the beginning of their journey, the audience has hope, concretely represented by the horn, that Roland “may finally be on the way to his own resolution” (King, *Dark Tower* 1048).

Late in “The Tower,” Yeats’s speaker anticipates “The death of friends, or death / Of every brilliant eye” (189-190). This prediction finds an echo in *The Gunslinger* when the man in black tells Roland that his future includes “Death [...] Yet not for you” (277). Roland’s quest indeed sees—perhaps causes—the deaths of his parents, his childhood friends, Susan, Jake (twice), Eddie, and Oy, among others. As the man in black prophesies, Roland is left standing at the end, resuming his quest for what may be the final time. Like Yeats’s speaker, Roland suffers more over the deaths of others than through the ever-present prospect of his own. Perhaps both would prefer death to the courses and losses they see set before them.

Circumstances of composition also link *The Dark Tower* and “The Black Tower.” “The Black Tower” is Yeats’s final poem, completed shortly before he died. King writes his own famous brush with death, a 1999 car accident, into the *Dark Tower* series (*Susannah* 541-542; *Dark Tower* 559-561). King also considered retiring after the completing the series (*Susannah* 537), though 13 years and 16 novels later he seems to have changed his mind on that point. It remains an interesting point of resonance, though, that Yeats’s final poetic contribution was “The Black Tower” and that King put in print the possibility of retirement once he reached his own *Dark Tower*: “In a sense, there’s nothing left to say now that Roland has reached his goal” (*Dark Tower* 1048).

Thematic Connections

These connections often overlap with the two previous categories, but they offer more multi-faceted close reading experiences and the strongest evidence for considering “The Tower” and “The Black Tower” as yet-unacknowledged influences on *The Dark Tower*. These are also the connections that allow us to read Yeats into Roland’s world similarly to how Roland and *Susannah* read Robert Browning late in *The Dark Tower*, to be discussed below. In “The Tower,” Yeats asks, “Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or woman lost?” (113-114). It is a fair guess that Yeats has Maud Gonne in mind

here; it is an even fairer guess that if Roland were to read this poem his thoughts would go straight to Susan Delgado. Susan, Roland's youthful first love, is also one of the first people to die because Roland chooses his quest for the Tower over his connection to a loved one (King, *Wizard* 605). Roland never forgets Susan or his culpability in her death and never truly connects with anyone else until Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Oy. Roland also does not have much imagination, but he does finally learn the lesson of Susan's and so many other deaths. When Roland reflects on the loss of his ka-tet after Susannah chooses to leave his world for one very close to ours, "It occurred to him that if he had never loved them, he would never have felt so alone as this. Yet of all his many regrets, the re-opening of his heart was not among them, even now" (*Dark Tower* 931).

Roland and Susannah encounter Browning's poem very near the end of the quest. One of the last major obstacles on the journey to the Dark Tower is Joe Collins of Odd's Lane—really Dandelo, a psychic vampire that they resist and defeat. In his house, Roland and Susannah find an envelope addressed to them by Stephen King himself,⁷ containing a copy of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." When the full ka-tet visits an Emerald City-like palace in *Wizard and Glass*, Jake, Eddie, and Susannah trade amused *Wizard of Oz* references. Roland is not familiar with the story—unlike many other pieces of our world's popular culture, it does not seem to have a presence or counterpart in Roland's—but he is attuned to his friends' accounts of its similarity to their situation and quite ready to take a children's story seriously as a source of information and guidance. He demands, "'Explain this to me [...] I would hear. I would share your *khuf*. And I would share it *now*'" (King *Wizard* 653; emphases original). Yeats would likely approve of this approach, given his "urge to read the imaginary past in terms of present need" (Fallis 100). Much later in the quest, Roland and Susannah repeat this literary practice. Rather like both Yeats and King, the last two gunslingers make Browning's "Childe Roland" a tool for interpretation of and guidance in their own experiences. Browning's is "a poem that provides an excellent example of the Romantic conceit in which the landscape mirrors the emotional state of the speaker who beholds it" (Braun 71-72). It certainly becomes such a reference for Roland and Susannah.

After reading the first stanza, with the famous line "My first thought was, he lied in every word" (Browning 1), Roland connects the poem to his most recent adversary: "Whoever wrote that spoke of Collins as sure as King ever

⁷ Earlier in the series, Eddie and Roland visit King in our world and discuss King's struggles with writing the Dark Tower series. He promises to give his best effort to finish the series, and Eddie and Roland promise to do what they can with their ability to travel between worlds to keep him safe (*Susannah* 362-402).

spoke of our ka-tet in his stories!" (King, *Dark Tower* 860). Susannah agrees that "*it was a description of what had just happened to them*" (861; italics original). Roland connects other passages in Browning's poem to Collins/Dandelo's horse (862) and to his own first quest and true love (863). Roland also adopts Browning's poem as a source of practical guidance for completing the last leg of the journey to the Dark Tower—"There's something writ in here about remembering the old times before coming to the last battle . . . or the last stand. . . I believe we'll go on foot" (892; first ellipsis original)—and emotional guidance for understanding his experience once he arrives at the Dark Tower—"He remembered a line from Browning's poem: *One taste of the old times sets all to rights*" (1018; italics original). Susannah takes the interpretive project a step further in an analytical direction, getting at questions of influence and inspiration that connect both Yeats and King to Browning: "It was this poem that got King going! *It was his inspiration!*" (861; italics original). Effective, attentive, creative reading of imaginative literature is an essential tool for understanding, even survival, on the way to the Dark Tower.

In addition to both Yeats's and King's clear debts to Browning, there is further intriguing evidence of a specifically Yeatsian influence on the deepest levels of King's *Dark Tower* multi-verse. In "The Tower," the speaker describes "send[ing] imagination forth / Under the day's declining beam" (20-21). The concept of Beams is central in the quest for the Dark Tower. As briefly referenced above, the geography of Roland's world consists of the Dark Tower at the center, twelve animal Guardians spaced around the edges of a circle, with six Beams connecting various pairs of Guardians, all passing through the tower, holding up the Tower itself—and all existence (King, *Waste Lands* 57-61).

Beams are much more than infrastructure, however vital, in Roland's world. After defeating the Bear Guardian of one end of a Beam, Roland remarks, "we will finally have a course to follow. We must set the portal to our backs and then simply move straight ahead" (*Waste Lands* 61) to reach the Dark Tower. Nor are they on their own to navigate, as the Beam makes a visible path through the world: "The effect of the Beam was everywhere along its course, but it was subtle. The needles of the pines and spruces pointed that way. The greenberry bushes grew slightly slanted, and the slant lay in the direction of the Beam" (*Waste Lands* 119-120). When various obstacles make them deviate from their course, the ka-tet seeks such visual markers to enable their return to the literal and figurative path of the Beam. A Beam can provide more types of information, even direction: "We saw what the *Beam* wanted us to see. Where it wants us to go" (*Dark Tower* 38; emphasis original).

Yeats's image of a specifically "declining beam" ("Tower" 21) also maps onto King's saga. All throughout the series, Roland and the narration refer to Roland's as a world that has "moved on." What this means is never fully

explained, but the consistent suggestion is that Roland's world was once a highly technological society much like our own. That society of Roland's youth has collapsed far in the past, much of the land is infertile and uninhabitable, paper is a rare and precious resource, and working electricity is similarly rare and occasionally suspicious. The beams themselves have decayed and even been directly attacked over this same time span. Early in *Song of Susannah*, a Beam breaks and Roland concludes that there may be only two Beams left (18-21). Yeats's "declining beam" ("Tower" 21) uses the sunset at the end of the day as a metaphor for old age, the end of a life. The Beams in Roland's world are not bound by a linear timescale; their decay does not have to move one way, to only one possible outcome. These Beams, once Roland and his friends put an end to the Breakers' work, will restore themselves and rebuild the other four, holding up the Dark Tower and preserving existence as we know it (King *Dark Tower* 753).

OTHER WORLDS THAN THESE

Jake's words before his second death (of three in the series) in *The Gunslinger*, "Go then. There are other worlds than these" (266), convey recognition of the interconnected multiverse that King develops throughout the rest of the Dark Tower series and much of the rest of his fiction. Travel between Roland's world and our own is possible, if rare, and many cultural references from our world—including Jesus, King Arthur, and the Beatles—have their own near-exact echoes in Roland's. As we see with *The Wizard of Oz* and "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," Roland and his ka-tet find our world's imaginative literature a useful practical and theoretical guide on their adventures. Stephen King is a character in the Dark Tower series, and we know that he is a reader of Yeats. Another truism of Roland's world is that "*All things serve the Beam*" (*Susannah* 21; italics original), and ka-tet members learn not to disregard any names, references, sights, or sounds that connect in any way to the goals they seek or the experiences they have already shared. Roland tells King, "'You'll write many stories, but every one will be to some greater or lesser degree about this story'" (394). This attempt to craft a set of career-unifying texts is another echo of Yeats: "All of Yeats's fiction was designed to appear as part of a sacred book: Irish, pagan, occult" (Hirsch 56). King's use of Browning in the Dark Tower series is deliberate; the influence of Yeats at micro- and macro-levels may be one of which even King is not consciously aware.

If all of King's work can fit under the Dark Tower umbrella, perhaps all of his own readings and allusions can fit there too. Scholars are coming to recognize that "many of Stephen King's 'sources' are of a higher literary quality than his critics might suspect" (Miller 107). The acknowledged and explored influence of Browning in the Dark Tower series, together with knowledge of

King's allusions to Yeats elsewhere and the well-established evidence of Browning's influence on Yeats, opens a door between the imagined worlds of Yeats and the Dark Tower. Yeats is just one influence that will reward further attention, in King studies and beyond. Roland's ka-tet would not find it at all odd to discover apparent references to their story in works with Tower in their titles from a poet King is known to have read and referenced. If we, like them, can accept that when it comes to the Dark Tower, "[c]oincidence has been cancelled" (*Wolves* 356), the number of potential paths for King studies grows exponentially, and the expansion of interpretive possibilities for both King's works and their literary ancestors is exciting indeed.

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