Monsters in a Shrouded World: A Critical Study of Apocalyptic Themes in Stephen King's *The Mist*

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ABSTRACT

A terrible thunderstorm lashes a quiet New England suburb, leaving in its wake an impenetrable mist and the beginning of the world's end. In *The Mist* (1980), Stephen King brings the apocalypse to the doorstep of his protagonists' lives. This paper is a study of *The Mist* within the framework of apocalyptic fiction. As the characters struggle to survive outer monsters, psychological stress begins to wear on inner group dynamics. Boundaries shift when civility and civilization fall apart. Paranoia and eroding social morality cause fractures within the group. This paper will look into the ethical dualism that often arises in apocalyptic crises and how such warring ideologies are an added threat to survival in a dystopia. The essay will attempt a critical textual analysis with an emphasis on existential crisis, dystopian symbolism, eschatological frenzy, and human resilience in the face of insurmountable odds. *The Mist* (1980) is a deeply complex study of dystopian themes that lays bare the fragility of social constructs in the face of incomprehensible existential threat. Various points in the narrative force one to think: is there any hope left, at the end of all things? It will be the aim and focus of this paper to examine if the novella provides a conclusive answer to this question.

KEYWORDS

Apocalyptic fiction, dystopian symbolism, ethical dualism, existential crisis, monsters, human resilience, hope.

In the aftermath of a terrible heatwave, a quiet North England suburb falls prey to a series of terrible thunderstorms. When the storm passes, however, the mist lingers and the residents of this idyllic haven soon find themselves thrown headfirst into horrors they can neither see nor fathom. This is Stephen King's 1980 novella, *The Mist*: an eclectic mix of apocalyptic themes set within the frame of psychological and Eldritch horror. While *The Mist* is only one among King's many apocalyptic narratives, it represents a distinctive experiment that combines psychological horror with dystopian allegory. The author has repeatedly returned to the theme of apocalypse. In *The Stand* (1978), the end of the world is caused by a breach in a medical facility and the subsequent spread of a severely mutated flu virus. Cell (2006) is another novel by King that is built around the frame of a digital apocalypse, focusing on a New England author's race against time to save his son from "The Pulse", a corrupted phone signal capable of turning users into murderous, non-human zombies that form the "flock". In *Under the Dome* (2006), a classic alien invasion tale, King relies on science fiction to create a localized dystopia with the threat of full-scale destruction looming large over the plot. Later, in *Insomnia* (1994), an elderly couple must face an unlikely adversary in Fate itself to prevent a cataclysmic disaster; *Desperation* (1996) is the story of a small desert town that is turned into a hell scape through the ministrations of the Eldritch demon haunting it and in the short story, *I am the Doorway* (1971), an astronaut comes back to earth as the human spyglass for an unknown alien race planning an invasion. The author's apocalyptic world building is fascinating. His dystopias are rich with their own lifeforms and ways of life: twisted, violent and otherworldly antagonists act as overlords in the ruinous wastes of fallen worlds.

Within this larger body of work, *The Mist* stands out for its claustrophobic setting, its incomprehensible monsters, and an emphasis on the collapse of human rationality. This paper examines how King constructs the apocalypse through a mix of external threats

that are put into motion through the internal breakdowns of known structures of power, belief, and morality. Through a critical analysis of the text situated, the discussion will evaluate how the setting of the Federal supermarket is a microcosm of failed governance, how cult psychology thrives within dystopian environments, and how King subverts typical alien invasion themes from pop-culture, thereby complicating ideas of good and evil.

A dystopian world embodies what Amis had called a "new map(s) of hell".[1] Dystopias overthrow the known and accepted order of human civilization, replacing it with a reality that is grotesque and unstable. A select few wield power over the hapless multitudes and jealously hoard what little remains of the earth's meagre resources. This is the basic skeletal frame of these stories. Over the years, the literary dystopia has evolved. There is the totalitarian dystopia seen in George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Margaret Atwood, characterized by fascist regimes, totalitarian dictatorships and brutality on oppositions. There is scientific apocalypse and dystopia: from H.G Wells' invading Martians in *The War of the Worlds* to the cold, desolate wasteland witnessed by the Time Traveller in the eponymous 1895 work, to Frank Schätzing's parasitic "yrr" in *The Swarm* (2004), to Herbert's hostile and inhospitable world of Arrakis, in his dystopian saga *Dune. The Maze Runner* trilogy, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and the *Divergent* series are newer, relatively younger takes on dystopian fiction. As humanity's priorities change, so does dystopian fiction. Our present crises are reflected in these works: like our futures, the literary apocalypse is not set in stone. Yet, despite the diversity with which authors—and King, in particular—have approached apocalyptic fiction over the years, we can trace, in all of these texts, a few recurring themes. For the present discussion we will be looking at seven themes that are definitive of the genre and feature most prominently in *The Mist*: namely, the novella's apocalyptic framework; the setting as a microcosm of human civilization; the monsters inhabiting the mist; the ideological conflicts that arise within a

dystopia; the overwhelming sense of paranoia and existential crisis permeating the text; the rise of eschatological madness and frenzy; and finally, the theme of human spirit and resilience as witnessed through the accounts of the last survivors.

Foremost in this study, is King's use of the apocalyptic framework in the novella. *The Mist* is an expansive take on the psychological and social ruptures that affect people in a crisis, and there can hardly be a crisis more pressing than the end of the world. The work is a fascinating exploration of a wholly man-made apocalypse, achieved through the plot's incorporation of the cryptic "Project Arrowhead". The entire story is narrated to us as a flashback from the perspective of the protagonist, David: writing about his experiences at an abandoned gas station. The choice of the intimate first-person narratorial voice and David's meticulous recording of the incidents that have happened to the residents of this small English town serve to personalize the apocalypse to us: by sharing in his confusion and fear, we are made vicarious participants to all that he and the Long Lake civilians have endured. From David, we learn that only four days have passed since "the storm that seemed to signal the beginning of it all".[2] From his story, it becomes clear that the mist was preceded by a seemingly normal if very severe, geological occurrence. We are told that a terrible heatwave had persisted in this Northern England suburb for over a month, eventually culminating in a series of vicious thunderstorms. On the surface, this is a relatively innocuous natural phenomenon. The mist that lingers over Long Lake in the storm's aftermath doesn't, at first, resemble anything unnatural. King's use of the mist as the harbinger of the apocalypse is ingenious. As far as geological phenomenon go, a mist conceals and obscures, leaving just the slightest veneer of visibility behind. This has great significance to the novel's building up of the apocalypse. The mist is a metaphor for the frailty of human civilization, especially when forced into a cataclysm we are ill-equipped to understand or handle. At first sight, David and the other residents of the Lake simply dismiss it

as a natural phenomenon: impenetrable, but nothing to be feared. However, its sinister nature is quickly revealed; first, through the sense of unease it evokes in the people seeing it and later, through more ferocious, direct violence.

The mist does not fully make an appearance until the third segment of the story. Once it does, it moves in on Long Lake with the startling swiftness of a catalyst at work:

> "It came on, eating up the blue sky and the fresh black hottop with equal ease. Even twenty feet away the line of demarcation was perfectly clear . . . It happened so quickly. The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe then to a pencil like. Then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window."[3]

The sudden, swooping way the mist descends on the town is neither geologically explicable nor natural. In fact, its arrival is akin to a predator's. Even before we understand that this mist is an otherworldly phenomenon, its unsettling sentience is palpable. The people who have come to the supermarket, including David and his young son, Billy, hesitate to walk out into the lingering semi-darkness. Their intuition is not wrong in warning them. The apocalypse, in *The Mist*, is not only brought to the characters' doorstep, but it acts with ruthless efficiency. As soon as the mist has solidified its presence in the supermarket parking lot, the chaos begins. A woman starts to scream, followed by a terrified man running out of the Federal Foods. This initiates a mini stampede and a few panicking residents run out into the mist, only to be briskly killed. We never see their deaths; David only describes their distant screaming. The death of Norm, a bag boy, is the first one with eyewitnesses in the form of David, Ollie, Myron and Jim. However, neither of the men are believed by the rest when they try to explain that "something from the mist"[4] has killed Norm. Much later, Norton's group decides

to venture outside. They tie themselves like a human chain with a laundry rope and leave but are viciously attacked by something unseen. What is left is a bloodied, bitten-off rope. The concealing nature of the mist makes it an apocalyptic event of truly unforeseen proportions. What appears to be a local incident soon reveals itself as an apocalypse that relies on stealth to bring about destruction. Concealment is the spine of *The Mist*'s storytelling: the heart of its dystopian vision. We never fully realize what exactly the mist holds in itself, just as the remaining survivors, even at the novella's end, never truly realize that the mist is no localized event. It has, quite possibly, spread across the world, wreaking havoc. Glimpses are all that we get of this apocalypse, and they are horrifying enough to make us share in David's crippling anxiety at the thought of what other terrors a new day might bring. The concealment brought on by the mist does more than hide the monsters; it destabilizes perception itself, literal and moral.

The mist here is more than a meteorological or supernatural phenomenon. Rather, it is a symbol of epistemological rupture that conceals not only the monsters but also blurs clarity of thought, rational discourse, and ethical reasoning. Vision, both literal and metaphorical, is occluded through the opaqueness of the mist, forcing the characters into reactive, irrational acts of panic and violence. David reflects, "The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe . . .then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window".[5] This concealment destabilizes meaning itself: what is real, what is moral, and what can be survived are all hidden from sight. The mist thus becomes an obfuscating agent that destabilizes human certainties and accelerates paranoia among the people trapped within the Federal. By blotting out the sun, a source of physical light and symbolic vision, the mist suppresses logical reasoning, thus paving the way for the eschatological frenzy characteristic of apocalyptic environments. This aligns with literary traditions depicting mist and fog as liminal spaces where spatial

mapping collapses, creating Jameson's "unreality" of the apocalyptic imagination.[6]

The setting of the novella is crucial to King's apocalyptic world building and it makes up the second part of our discussion. An adversary as formidable as the mist, the story's restrictive setting acts as nightmare fuel for the characters. It provides a false sense of safety, increases psychological trauma, and keeps the characters trapped in a bubble of paranoia and helplessness. Apocalyptic fiction is characterized by the introduction of a world greatly altered from what we are accustomed to. Limited or no access to technological/scientific facilities—or its complete seizure by the dominant power faction—is a given. This is followed by a scarcity of basic amenities like food, water and healthcare. Survivors are often forced into situations that will make them fight over these limited resources, thus leading to the sense of moral dilemma that pervades in such a novel. Dystopian settings thrive on moral ambiguity and deterioration, and *The Mist* is no different. Long Lake, that forms the setting of the frame story, is a quiet, isolated suburb in England. The natural environment here is harsh and punishing. It suffers through a terribly difficult summer and, immediately after, is lashed by a series of dangerous thunderstorms. Moreover, it is cut off from the mainland and this isolation makes its ambience unnerving. The human community too, according to David, is close-knit but small-minded, bearing a fierce suspicion towards outsiders and new settlers. Long Lake lacks any of the idyllic charm and serenity one would associate with such a locale. In the aftermath of the storm, fallen trees, live wires and flooded streets ensure that there is decreased access to communicative services. Travelling to the mainland becomes extremely dangerous once the mist has settled in. The frame setting—which, in a different work would have been the perfect getaway—acts as a barrier between the survivors and their access to help. As the mist slowly reveals its unearthly horrors, the story moves into the secondary setting: Long Lake's singular supermarket, the Federal. The symbolism of

this setting extends further when we consider the ironic weight of its name. Naming the grocery store "Federal" is central to King's critique of institutional breakdown. While it initially stands as an emblematic site of nourishment and local social exchange, the supermarket degenerates into paranoia, communal fanaticism, and violence. By choosing the name "Federal", King demonstrates the fragility and unreliability of state authority and civic order. Parallelly, the Federal becomes a distorted miniature of governance itself: moral and legal systems are replaced by mob rule, and authority is embodied through charismatic zealots taking the place of rational leadership. As with other apocalyptic microcosms of King's fiction, what appears to be a sanctuary for the remaining survivors soon devolves into a crucible of mistrust and ritualistic violence. This reveals how established order and governance—whether institutional or local—fails in a crisis of apocalyptic levels. Moreover, the irony of the Federal's name gains greater resonance upon considering the federal character of the project that sets the wheel rolling for the novella's apocalyptic action. "Project Arrowhead,"[7] is the story's pivot: a *federal* military experiment that likely precipitates the catastrophe. It is crucial to note both the Federal as well as the federally sanctioned Project Arrowhead to understand how King condenses the dystopian world into a miniature version of itself through the supermarket as well as how institutional carelessness acts as a catalyst for an apocalyptic event.

The Federal features nearly throughout the entirety of David's flashback, and it is where we, the readers, and the characters alike, first witness the coming of the mist. The name of the place—the Federal, evoking explicitly polity and governance—immediately makes it an ideal microcosm for Long Lake, and for civilization, at large. With roughly eighty people stranded inside, the Federal becomes the perfect amalgamation of a diverse and heterogeneous human society. People from all walks of life find themselves stuck as unlikely allies in an unexpected crisis. Apart from David and

Billy, we see the retired schoolteacher, Mrs. Reppler; a new resident, Amanda Dumfries; the store manager and store hands; David's friend and a Federal employee, Ollie Weeks; the "Flat Earthers"[8] led by David's neighbour, Norton; two young soldiers; and, the overzealous antiquity storeowner, Mrs. Carmody, to name a few. As attempts to go out—either out of ignorance, or to get help—result in quick, merciless deaths, these people, who have known each other all their lives, soon understand that their brief grocery runs have now turned into a nightmarish period of confinement. The Federal has been described as a mirror for human society, but King intends it to be more of a fun-house mirror: what we see is a warped version of our reality. Confronted by extreme psychological stress and unfathomable horrors, the survivors grow increasingly suspicious of one other. In their desperation, many turn towards the occultist rhetoric of Mrs. Carmody. The internal situation of the Federal only worsens as the novella progresses. David recounts how his efforts to leave the supermarket are repeatedly thwarted by from Mrs. Carmody, right until an attempt, by her cult, to ritually "sacrifice" Billy and Amanda forces Ollie to shoot her. By the time David and a small group of defectors have managed to escape, the Federal has fully turned into a miniature replica of the destruction and madness outside.

The Federal is well-stocked and well-guarded. With a precious reserve of food and water, and a connected pharmacy, it can even be seen as a modernized war bunker that remains, mostly, untouched by the monsters. None of the mist's creatures ever infiltrate the supermarket, only attacking those who leave its apparent safety. David, and those with him, face an impasse: leaving the supermarket means risking the monsters outside, but staying inside is to inevitably run out of the store's limited resources, or, worse, to fall prey to the increasingly violent behaviour of the cultists. In an apocalyptic scenario, the Federal or any place like it, can only represent an *illusion* of security: false and fleeting. Though the mist has cut off visibility from the rest of Long Lake and beyond, the Federal remains

the only place we can truly see. The supermarket and its temporary inhabitants remain entirely on display for us and, presumably, for the creatures in the mist. In this, the Federal is almost reminiscent of the Tralfamadorian zoo:[9] a simulation of human civilization for aliens to watch, with none of the prelapsarian joy experienced by Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five.* The Federal is the dystopian counterpart of the zoo on Tralfamadore: the people being watched here are prey in a cattle-pen. The setting of the Federal enables us to witness, on a smaller scale, the complete collapse of civilization as we know it. If the supermarket reflects a collapse of social cohesion and order, the federal venture Project Arrowhead reflects a collapse of responsible state power and the aftereffect of scientific recklessness. The Project itself is never discussed beyond the speculations and rumours that the townsfolk have heard about it. An air of notorious secrecy surrounds it like a second mist: the two soldiers at the supermarket hang themselves fearing they might be tortured into revealing insider information, further revealing the insidious nature of this government experiment. However, the novella makes it clear that it was government interference with the natural order of King's horror multiverse that quite possibly created a rupture in space-time and opened a gateway to an alternate dimension inhabited by bizarre and hellish lifeforms.[10] This implication, that Project Arrowhead may have been responsible for the unnatural events in the plot, is made by Ollie after he and David have discovered the soldiers' bodies: "Some people claim they were messing with high-intensity lasers and masers. Sometimes I hear, fusion power. And suppose . . . suppose they ripped a hole straight through into another dimension?".[11]

The secrecy around this federal project and the element of anxiety surrounding the soldiers' suicides reflects the opaqueness of the mist. Further, it drives home how institutional hubris and secrecy can result in the loss of innocent lives as collateral damage. Together, the supermarket and Project Arrowhead operate as the dual symbols indicting the federal state: the same power that unleashes

the apocalypse is entirely incapable of containing it

This collapse of order is accelerated by the presence of the alien life form within the known reality of our world: a collapse orchestrated by otherworldly creatures. Just like the setting of the story, the monsters of the mist are a vital factor contributing to the dystopian theme. David talks about how the delicate, uneasy calm within the Federal snaps like a taut thread with the first appearance of the "pink bugs".[12] Though relatively more harmless than the other monsters, the mere sight of the bugs vanishes any sense of normalcy the survivors were clinging on to, replacing it with total "pandemonium".[13] Although these creatures are the active perpetrators of the apocalypse in *The Mist,* their arrival on our planet is entirely caused by man-made actions. Moreover, while they are active threats to human life, the mist's life forms primarily operate on instinct, not malice, making them an intriguing antagonistic force.

In the Hebrew Bible, the apocalyptic is written as a "foreign entity"[14] brought about by outer forces. Murphy goes on to write that "…apocalypses resulted from a complex interplay of foreign and domestic elements",[15] which is what happens in *The Mist.* The monsters are alien lifeforms, inhabitants of an alternate dimension. They find themselves in our world as a result of human experimentation with the forbidden.

At this juncture, it is useful to situate King's approach to the extraterrestrial entity alongside more familiar alien invasion narratives in popular culture. Jameson views the presence of the alien lifeform as highly significant to the dystopian genre.[16] Hollywood narratives have primarily relied on depiction of aliens as intellectually advanced, superior and coherent beings: these are stories where the defeat of an extra-terrestrial adversary reaffirms national unity and human resilience to overcome insurmountable odds. However, unlike cinematic alien invasions such as *Independence Day* (1996), *Arrival* (2016), *Life* (2017) or even Marvel's *Avengers* franchise with its vast repertoire of alien life forms and cultures, King's monsters are

not conquerors possessing intent or ideology. On the contrary, he actively resists such closure. Most of the monsters in his bibliography comprise of eldritch, trans-dimensional beings that *are shaped by their sheer incomprehensibility*. In *The Mist*, the creatures described embody what Card terms as "Varelse":[17] the truly alien. A being whose anatomy, psychology and motives cannot be comprehended. This incomprehensibility destabilizes the humanized narratives of resistance against alien invaders. Similarly, while films like *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) or *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017) dramatizes the apocalypse as a spectacular conflict between equally titanic forces, with massive stakes involved, King strips away spectacle of the dystopia by situating the apocalypse in the banal setting of a supermarket in a small suburb. In doing so, he subverts the genre's cinematic tropes: there is to be no cathartic victory, no heroic saviour rescues David and his son from the Federal. All that the novella offers is a slim possibility of survival and ambiguous hope, thereby offering a realistic portrayal of life within an apocalyptic system. King's alien invasion is a critique of anthropocentric narratives of triumph over external forces of disruption, suggesting the inevitability of chaos in the dystopia. The mist and its monsters are a meditation on fragility and moral collapse. The apocalyptic novel, like its counterparts from the science fiction genre, is " . . . shrouded in some of that same mist that surrounds the aliens, whose own improbable unreality is their only possible representation"[18] (Italics added). In *The Mist,* the monsters are unknowable on two levels: the mist hides them from sight and their own strange, unearthly anatomies make them impossible to comprehend. While David speaks of them being like "nothing that ever walked the earth",[19] horrible things out of a lunatic's nightmare, the monsters' behaviour throughout the story remains oddly similar to earthly predatory fauna. David's account goes on to talk about how, in some cases, these creatures seem to lack understanding of the planet they find themselves on. If we refer to King's prior fiction, it can be deduced that the monsters that

feature in *The Mist* are quite possibly Todash beings.[20] In Stephen King's literary universe, the Todash Space(s) is called the "Macro verse". Not a separate dimension by itself, the Todash is the vast endless void occupying the gaps between alternate dimensions. It can be used to traverse through different realities and is depicted as a dark, threatening space that traps those who have fallen into it without knowing the way out. Filled with monsters, demons and the varied dead, the Todash is a space that truly signifies Eldritch incomprehensibility. It was expanded upon in King's *Dark Tower* universe, which is inspired by Robert Browning's ballad, *When Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. The Todash, with its bizarrely hellish landscape and lifeforms, has formerly appeared in *The Dark Tower* series, *The Talisman* (1984), *Black House* (2001) and *From a Buick 8* (2002). The latter is an extensive exploration of the Todash, through its use of a Buick that is actually a doorway to this alternate dimension. The creatures that this Buick occasionally throws out—including a one-eyed and legless bat-like being, a misshapen fish, and once, a six-foot tall monstrosity with tentacles in place of its head—all bear similarities with the creatures described in *The Mist*. Contrarily, inspite of its hideous appearance, the tentacled creature does not initiate any form of violence, primarily exhibiting a passive curiosity towards it surroundings until attacked by a police. When it is finally found and battered to death by a group of terrified policemen, its bewilderment and terror at its fate affirms that the Todash beings, mostly, function on baser animal instincts.

As instigators of the end of the world, the creatures that King includes in *The Mist* form a nightmarish menagerie going far beyond what he has explored of the Todash in prior works. In order of how they appear in the story, there is the massive creature that kills Norm, and which we do not see beyond its giant tentacles.[21] There are the flying pink bugs and a flock of "albino birds"[22] that resemble pterodactyls and feed on the former. There are the black and yellow spiders, "the size of a big dog(s)",[23] that David's group runs into on

their trip to the pharmacy. A shadowy red creature, with the claws of a lobster and anatomy of a scorpion,[24] dismembers Ollie towards the end of the novella. As the small group of survivors drives towards the mainland, they encounter a giant green "dragonfly"[25] and finally, a six-legged monster so incomprehensibly gargantuan that it is simply called "Behemoth", or the "Thing".[26] Described as being the size of a cliff, the Behemoth collectively summarizes the Eldritch nature of the apocalyptic mist and its living nightmares. David writes: "There are things of such darkness and horror—just, I suppose, as there are things of such great beauty—that they will not fit through the puny human doors of human perception".[27] The Todash creatures' lack of comprehension about our planet mirrors our lack of understanding about theirs. Their greatest strength comes from the mist's cover and their own bizarrely dangerous physiologies, but even so, they are not invincible. Mrs. Reppler is successfully able to kill a pink bug with regular bug spray. The episode of the albino birds hunting the bugs further establishes that these creatures are part of a biological order similar to the food pyramids of earthly ecosystems. They are primarily seeking to survive on this new planet and ensure species continuity among their own. Their violence is clumsy, and often awkward, lacking any evidence of being calculated attempts at human extinction. To them, the stranded human beings are simply prey: no more and no less. Juxtaposed together, the unpredictable danger posed by the Todash is as terrible as Mrs. Carmody's suggestion of sacrificing Billy to the monsters as expiation. As the dystopian reality starts eating away at the vestiges of right and wrong, human panic and the need for self-preservation take precedence. There is a complete abandonment of social morality and this becomes as stark a threat to the survival of Long Lake's remaining residents as the monsters. The mist causes a rupture in the microcosmic society at the supermarket and divides the stranded group into polarized factions, thus giving rise to two key features of apocalyptic fiction: socio-ethical dualism and eschatological frenzy. This breakdown of moral

categories reflects King's broader interrogation of ethical dualism across his apocalyptic fiction.

King complicates ethical dualism by showing how the desperate need for survival disrupts conventional definitions of righteousness and wickedness. As already discussed, the monsters, grotesque as they are, act on instinct rather than malice: they are predators and the humans within their reach form easy prey. Moreover, unlike the stereotypical Hollywood extra-terrestrial, they do not belong to any moral, intellectually superior order: they are simply products of an alien ecosystem that recognizes only base instincts. In contrast, Mrs. Carmody and her cult demonstrate how human beings, under immense apocalyptic strain, willingly abandon morality and discard adherence to civilized codes of behaviour. Her call for "blood sacrifice"[28] how fanatical righteousness can mutate into a form of evil greater than the alien other. As Gammie observes, ethical dualism in apocalyptic literature pits the "righteous versus the wicked"[29] in a climactic confrontation. Again, King destabilizes this binary: in his dystopia, wickedness emerges from the supposed godly and righteous. Ethical dualism in *The Mist* therefore collapses into ambiguity: morality is no longer a matter of divine alignment and justice, but rather hinges on the element of human choice situated within a massive crisis.

As a phenomenon that smothers clarity, the mist is also a literary symbol for the loss of logical reasoning in an apocalyptic setting. By presenting it as a supernatural occurrence, King is able to portray the mist as possessing some level of mind control: it is able to awaken primal and atavistic impulses in human beings, alongside inducing a strange lethargy in them. Through prolonged exposure to the mist, the survivors start acting erratically: David, who is married and shown to deeply love his wife, engages in sudden and unprovoked sexual intercourse with Amanda, who he barely knows.[30] The encounter leaves them both shaken and confused, and David talks about how the mist seems to have created a sense of numb

complacency in everyone. There are six suicides. Worst of all, the increasing paranoia of the people causes them to grow dependent on Mrs. Carmody, whose prophecies turn increasingly violent with the passing of the story. By literally blotting out the sun—a source of light and vision—the mist causes a collapse of good sense. Dystopian environments are marked by a breakdown of existing power structures and their replacement by new hierarchies of (dis) order. Social propriety does not have a place within the apocalyptic framework: survival is the topmost priority. In *The Mist*, unlike many dystopian works, the survivors do not seek strength in unity, nor reach a consensus on the plan of action for survival the apocalypse. Instead, the revelation of the monsters and the tense atmosphere within the Federal eventually establishes a new pecking order, marked by mistrust, bigotry and violence. One group, consisting of David, Amanda, Ollie, Mrs. Reppler and Billy, proposes to try and escape from the Federal to seek help outside. The other, much larger group, are led by the zealot, Mrs. Carmody, who positions herself as a Messiah figure and calls for a sacrifice to appease the monsters. This difference is perspectives is a danger to the survival of both groups, but ultimately, not unexpected. Ethical dualism has always been acknowledged and utilized in dystopian works, dating back to the Bible, where it was divided into the cosmic, the eschatological and the ethical. According to John Gammie, ethical dualism is "an opposition between two classes or groups of human beings: the righteous versus the wicked; the godly versus the impious".[31] In King, the Biblical good versus evil argument is a paradox. Dualism becomes highly complicated because of the moral ambiguity that characterizes King's fiction. The "godly", in King, possess totalitarian power and exercise ideological extremism. Moreover, he depicts the innate impossibility of correlating power and justice within a dystopia. Similar paradoxes occur in his other novels. In *The Stand,* for example, the all-powerful Randall Flagg is an incarnation of the Devil. Those choosing to join him are rewarded with a life of excess, even as the other side,

led by the visionary Mother Abigail, must suffer the consequences of having chosen piety in a dying world. In *Cell*, ethical dualism is compromised by the "Raggedy Man", another Satanic overlord, and the overwhelming numbers of his undead "Flock". Our awareness of right and wrong grows hazy with the downfall of our civilization; the definition of what is morally "correct" becomes blurred by the mist. While she is initially dismissed as a batty old woman by most, more survivors are drawn by Mrs. Carmody's fanatical ravings with the story's progress. She speaks incessantly of an Old Testament apocalypse that can only be "sated"[32] through human sacrifice. She is the first to presume the mist to be dangerous, even before any lives have been claimed by it: "Don't go out there," Mrs. Carmody said in her best gore-crow voice. "It's death to go out there".[33] With the arrival of the pink bugs, the growing number of deaths, and the terror spreading among the survivors, Mrs. Carmody soon gains a cult that is desperately holding onto her every word. David reasons that fear psychosis and mob mentality allow Mrs. Carmody to manipulate the situation further. She exploits the fact that these people are "…eager to grasp at almost any straw. Maybe even the black comfort of a Mrs. Carmody".[34] Her leadership, however, is not an organized attempt of escape or rescue. Rather, thriving on the power that the ideological differences between the survivors has bestowed her with, Mrs. Carmody establishes herself as a totem god over the side governed by fanaticism, occult superstition and fear-mongering. Her madness ultimately drives her to try and sacrifice Billy and Amanda to the monsters, and at this point, it becomes clear that she will not stop unless she is killed. Human morality teaches us that murder, even of a person as vile and horrible as Mrs. Carmody, is essentially a crime and an unethical act. Mrs. Carmody's death[35] at the hands of Ollie Weeks—a religious extremist from the "bad" side, killed by a man belonging to the novella's "good" group—shows how the apocalyptic fiction of King views ethical dualism as being more than a simple good versus evil conflict. Conflict itself, King seems to be

saying, is a moot point in the twisted literary world of *The Mist*. Ollie's choice is merely between the greater of the two ills: killing Mrs. Carmody himself or allowing Billy to be taken by the cult. Once the apocalypse has wiped out all existing social structures, there are no plausible definitions left for either good or evil, ethical or unethical.

The Mist blurs the lines keeping human beings in check, including those that protect us from our own darkness and capacity for evil. Even religion, which is a beacon of hope for many in their everyday lives, becomes warped in the shadowy darkness of the apocalyptic mist. Characterized by ideological frenzy, rather than comfort or stability, religious zeal is what causes the final collapse of all law and order in *The Mist*. Eschatology is depicted in King's dystopian horror with the same ambiguity as ethical dualism. Religion and religious ideologies embody a grey, if not completely black, area. Traditionally, the association of eschatology with the apocalypse dates back to the Torah and the Bible. As per Abrahamic beliefs, religion and the apocalypse are inextricably tied together because the former is a harbinger of hope and the path to the eternal salvation of humanity. In the Bible, we have the stories of Noah—who survives the Great flood—or, of Lot, who is able to escape the ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Book of Revelation, we have St. John's account of witnessing the end of the world, and later, the establishment of God's kingdom, the "New Jerusalem", on earth.[36] Theological apocalypses testify that those who obey the word of God will receive salvation, while the disobedient, like Lot's wife or the people who take the mark of the Beast,[37] will suffer eternal damnation. An all powerful, all-knowing God presides over the Biblical end times, and in King's fiction, this role is assumed often, and with deviant tenacity, by figures who are either morally grey, or outright evil. Power corrupts and if a god is "all powerful, He can't possibly be all good and if He is all-good, He can't possibly be all-powerful".[38] Frederick J. Murphy writes that power struggles in crises are appealing

to readers: "Apocalypses concerned with politics can allow readers to perceive their struggles with evil rulers as a part of a larger struggle between good and evil forces".[39] Moreover, this power struggle has great relevance to the eschatological focus of apocalyptic novels: "All apocalypses involve eschatology, bur some forms of apocalypticism have a strong(er) eschatological focus".[40] The victory of good, like it is written in the Gospels, symbolizes hope, renewal and new life. In The Mist, however, the closest one gets to victory or renewal, is survival. The mist and its creatures are not of this world. As an alternate reality entirely independent of our world and its beliefs, it has no room for any conventional, Biblical definitions of eschatology. In the insane dystopia of *The Mist*, religion represents madness, and eschatology wears the horrific mask of fanatical ritualism.

The theological end of the world witnesses the rise to power of the Ten-Headed Beast. The Beast symbolizes tyrannical authority, persecuting the followers of God and branding its own followers with its mark.[41] The story of the Beast mirrors real-life dystopian situations. Likewise, many of King's apocalyptic antagonists bear a resemblance with the theological Beast, including their fashioning of themselves as faux-Saviour figures and their cults of fanatical believers. These characters, and regimes, like their real life counterparts, thrive off cultist popularity. The political jingoism and adulation that popularized Hitler and Mussolini in the war years is a perfect example of how the tyrannical rise with the downfall of civilization. In terms of eschatology, the modern apocalypse becomes a zone where pagan ritualism and atavistic frenzy replace Christian morality. King's dystopian antagonists situate themselves as dark saviours in a parody of organized religion: there is the instance, in *The Stand,* where the Satanic Flagg strings up naysayers on telephone poles, in crude mockeries of the Biblical crucifixion. In fact, these novels exemplify how religion often acts as a *deterrent* to good sense in an apocalyptic crisis, fuelling panic rather than offering salvation. Unlike the Bible,

religion does not assure safety, nor piety life: Mother Abigail, who stands in direct opposition to Flagg, is not beyond mortality. Nor are the four men who walk to Las Vegas as a final resistance against this Antichrist oppressor. Flagg, on the other hand, is a non-human entity. He simply cannot die. The nuclear warhead, that wipes out his followers, merely destroys his present vessel, forcing him to flee in search of a new one. There is no linear way of determining the "victory" of good, in eschatological terms,[42] in a modern apocalyptic story. Like Flagg, Mrs. Carmody posits herself as a Saviour figure in *The Mist*: not divinely ordained, but self-proclaimed. An intolerant zealot, her brand of religion is a convoluted mix of occult superstition, Mormon conservatism, and religious extremism. Initially appearing as a slightly eccentric and irritating individual capable of no real harm, Mrs. Carmody soon becomes a formidable force by manipulating the stress and fear present within the Federal's atmosphere. The ongoing assault by the mist's monsters turns her rhetoric into an infectious plague: blinded by their lack of understanding about the mist or its beings, the survivors turn to "Mother Carmody"[43] for help. The number of people willing to listen to her crazed sermons increases as the mist completely blots out what little remains of visibility and, with it, all common sense. The human dependence on religion as a crutch, even a dark religion, is reflected in the following she amasses within a single day:

> "She was tireless, apparently. And she was indeed talking about human sacrifice again, only now no one was telling her to shut up. Some of the people who had told her to shut up yesterday were either with her today or at least willing to listen—and the rest were outnumbered".[44]

Mrs. Carmody calls the mist a "will of God",[45] claiming that it is only through a sacrifice that they can all be saved. She goes on to say

that "un-believers"[46] like the Flat Earthers, are the true cause of this apocalypse. Later, this spiel extends to David and those who wish to leave the supermarket, with her insisting that a sacrifice from among them will save the rest. It is difficult to ascertain if Mrs. Carmody's "God" is the jealous and punishing Jehovah of the Old Testament, or some outer Eldritch force, especially when she mentions the "Old Gods"[47] and says that the mist is a consequence of their wrath. She is right in her deduction of the mist as an alien phenomenon, but one can hardly see in her a "Mother" figure, given her willingness to kill an innocent child. In fact, as her calls for sacrifice and bloodshed grow more vehement, one struggles to look at her and see *anything* but an already unstable woman worsened by the crisis she finds herself in. Her proclaimed religion offers nothing but blood and shallow reassurance. This is proved by her own death at the hands of Ollie after she orders that Billy and Amanda be seized, tied up, and thrown out defenceless into the supermarket parking lot. As readers, we cannot feel any sympathy for her, given the tyrannical manner in which she has terrorized those who refuse to join her dark congregation.

Eschatology, in *The Mist*, stands for complete psychological collapse. Mrs. Carmody's religious beliefs embody suspicion and violence. Her presence makes the supermarket equally dangerous to stay inside, especially for those who refuse to join her. Her "cult" chooses to stay back in the Federal after her death, showing that believing in her madness has effectively doomed them all to slow but certain deaths. As a cruel enforcer of ritualistic religion, Mrs Carmody's role, within *The Mist's* dystopian frame, is not to help avert the apocalypse, but to further the destruction caused by it. There is no eschatological hope to be found at the altar of her wrathful god, Eldritch or Biblical: the one who, she claims, has unleashed the apocalypse on Long Lake. This forms the conclusive section of our paper: is there any hope to be found in *The Mist*? Does the novella, at any point, reward the

human resilience to survive insurmountable odds?

At the end of *The Mist*, we are no closer to finding concrete answers about the apocalypse or the full extent of its impact. The final section, titled simply as "The End", commences with the death of Ollie, leaving behind only four survivors—David, Billy, Amanda and Mrs. Reppler—who escape the supermarket unscathed. Leaving the Federal behind is the last we see of Mrs. Carmody's cult and the drive to New Hampshire quickly reveals that the mist has enveloped the entire mainland. As they struggle to navigate their way to a silence of safety, David and his group encounter more of the Todash creatures and never run into other survivors. Even though the entire apocalyptic incident happens over a span of four days, *The Mist's* storytelling captures the seemingly endless passage of time that marks any calamity: from the coming of the storm to the novella's ambiguous ending. *The Mist* is a record of an apocalypse, *in medias res*, and as the story switches back to the present, with David coming to the end of his flashback, it becomes clear that there will be no conventional ending to this tale: "There is no "And then they escaped from the mist into the good sunshine of a new day"; or, "When we awoke the National Guard had finally arrived"; or, even that great old standby: "It was all a dream".[48] David never finds his wife, Stephanie, and seems to have accepted the fact that she has not survived. With the characters still completely in the dark about Project Arrowhead and the lengths to which the mist may have spread, the story has no certain or hopeful conclusion: only the chance of one. Given its open-ended climax, this chance is what serves as hope in The Mist.

Leaving the enclosed safety of the Federal, escaping Mrs. Carmody, driving safely to the gas station in New Hampshire are all chances taken by the protagonist to look for a way out. All of these chances lead up to the single radio transmission that David hears, right before the novella's end, at the gas station: "Hartford". This radio transmission is *The Mist's* version of chance and hope coalescing

to represent the irrepressible human will. David is so unsettled at receiving this tiny sliver of hope that he begins to wonder if it was not entirely his imagination:

> "I listened for an hour but there was no more. If there was that one word, it came through some minute shift in the clamping mist, an infinitesimal break that immediately closed again. One word".[49]

This single word, "Hartford", becomes a possibility of escape from an impossible situation. *The Mist* depicts hope as a fragile and fleeting portal within the space of absolute horror created by the Todash infiltrating into known reality.

In contemporary dystopian stories, hope is not signified by the intervention of divine heroes. No Saviour can help Winston's will from being broken and a Messiah does not come to Offred's aid. If help does come—as it does for the children in *Lord of the Flies*—it comes from a broken and war-torn world, a different kind of hell. In King's apocalyptic stories, the endings always possess a mood of ambiguity and apprehension. *Cell* never tells us if Clayton's attempt to neutralize the effect of the "Pulse" on his catatonic son is successful. Johnny's sacrifice in *Desperation* can only keep the trans-dimensional entity, Tak, temporarily sealed. Flagg, at the end of *The Stand*, is shown to have reincarnated in a different body. Even in *The Mist,* it is never revealed if Hartford offers safety and resistance or has been overrun by the monsters. Yet, a thread of hope persists and holds all these dystopian realities together. Such, King seems to be saying, is the impossible nature of human hope. Fragile, but unending, it seeks renewal at the end of all things. At the end of his story, David says that he has made the choice to travel to Hartford, if only to find safety for Billy. His decision is a tribute to the indomitable human spirit, and the novella ends on this note of tenderness and resilience:

"I'm going to kiss my son and whisper two words in his ear. Against the dreams that may come, you know. Two words that sound a bit alike. One of them is Hartford. The other is *hope*."[50]

On the treacherous journey that awaits them, hope is the only thing that can help these characters navigate through the mist and its many horrors. This hope is not otherworldly or divine. It is painfully and wholly human. Perhaps that is why it might live to see the light of another day, even within the dystopian darkness of *The Mist.*

NOTES

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2 Stephen King, "The Mist," in *Skeleton Crew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), 188.
3 Ibid., 57-58.
4 Ibid., 88.
5 Ibid., 58.
6 Frederick Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future : The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 80, https://files.libcom.org/files/fredric-jameson-archaeologies-of-the-future-the-desire-called-utopia-and-other-science-fictions.pdf.
7 Stephen King, "The Mist," in *Skeleton Crew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), 136.
8 Ibid., 111.
9 Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five Or, The Children's Crusade : A Duty Dance with Death* (Frogmore, St. Albans: Panther Books Ltd, 1972), 52, Internet Archive, https://www.google.com/search?q=https://archive.org/details/slaughterhousefiveorthechildrenscrusade_202003/mode/1up?q=Tralfamadore.
10 Stephen King, "The Mist," in *Skeleton Crew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), 137-39.
11 Ibid., 139.
12 Ibid., 124.
13 Ibid., 125.
14 Frederick J. Murphy, "Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 3,

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17 Scott Orson Card, *Speaker for the Dead* (New York, 1986), 38.

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20 Joe Retchman, "Todash and Time," *The Church of the Cosmic Turtle,* 202, https://churchofthecosmicturtle.com/2021/04/27/todash-time/1.

21 Stephen King, "The Mist," in *Skeleton Crew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), 73.

22 Ibid., 124.

23 Ibid., 160.

24 Ibid., 177.

25 Ibid., 183-84.

26 Ibid., 186-87.

27 Ibid., 186.

28 Ibid., 172.

29 John G. Gammie, "Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 3 (1974): 356-85, https://doi.org/10.2307/3263385.

30 Stephen King, "The Mist," in *Skeleton Crew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), 141.

31 John G. Gammie, "Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 3 (1974): 356-85, https://doi.org/10.2307/3263385.

32 Stephen King, "The Mist," in *Skeleton Crew* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012), 101.

33 Ibid., 60.

34 Ibid., 147.

35 Ibid., 176-77.

36 *The Bible,* "The Book of Revelation," in *The New Testament*, New Revised Standard Version (NSRV), Catholic Edition (India: HarperCollins, 1993).

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38 Zack Snyder, dir., *Batman vs Superman : Dawn of Justice* (2016; United States: Warner Bros. DVD).
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44 Ibid., 167.
45 Ibid., 100.
46 Ibid., 101-02.
47 Ibid., 100.
48 Ibid., 187.
49 Ibid., 189.
50 Ibid., 190.

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