

# The Dark Tower Series Short Guide

## The Dark Tower Series by Stephen King

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Dark Tower Series Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>

# Characters

Both *The Gunslinger* and *The Drawing of the Three* have a relatively small cast of characters. The central figure in both books is Roland, the last gunslinger.

He is a quester who appears to have emerged from a western movie but who seems to come from a post-apocalyptic future. Because he saw the changes in the world—from the electric lights of civilization to the darkness of a wasteland—he has a compulsion to seek the Dark Tower and to restore the world. He is prepared for this task by his training as a gunslinger. As an efficient killer, he is practical, intelligent and tough—tough enough to make callous decisions, which could lead some readers to think he is slightly mad or satanic.

In *The Gunslinger*, the other major character is the Man in Black. Dressed like a priest in a black cassock and hood, and wearing black square-toed boots, this figure displays some magical powers and knows about the Dark Tower. Roland follows him across deserts and mountains to learn from him. The Man in Black reads Roland's fortune with tarot cards, which directs Roland's future path and foreshadows the actions of future novels. Finally, the Man in Black displays to Roland the creation of the worlds—a vision that collapses reality's distinctions between time, space, and dimensional size—all held together by the Dark Tower.

In the process of pursuing the Man in Black, Roland encounters the boy, Jake, who was brought to this future from the present time. Jake's last memory was his own death under the wheels of a Cadillac. Jake is Roland's Isaac, a beloved son who is sacrificed to a higher cause; Jake has no angel to intervene. Yet Jake knows that Roland would let him die, and he is not afraid: "There are worlds other than these," he tells Roland before he dies. Roland carries Jake's death on his conscience, along with the deaths of many other friends. Both Jake and the Man in Black serve as gateways for Roland's quest, preparing him to "draw the three."

The first of the three in *The Drawing of the Three* is Eddie Dean. Represented by the tarot card of the prisoner with the baboon on his back, he is addicted to heroin. Although Roland accuses him of a lack of honor, Eddie revives Roland's sense of humor and helps him realize that he needs to be connected to others. Compassion and loyalty are Eddie's strengths.

Eddie's compassion adds to the tension because the second of the three drawn into Roland's world is also compassionate, but at the same time very dangerous. Odetta Susannah Holmes is an activist in the civil rights movement, but fears that she lacks the courage to help make significant changes.

Odetta's alternate personality, Detta Susannah Walker, on the other hand, is serpentine, deceptive, and animalistic.



She also has the courage and toughness that Odetta lacks. Ultimately, she is a savior for both her companions.

The third of the "three" is interpreted in various ways: as Roland himself; as Susannah Dean, the third, integrated personality of Odetta and Detta; or as the serial killer, Jack Mort.

He killed Jake and injured Odetta twice. In some ways he is not much different from Roland in his quest for the tower: both want to introduce change into ordinary lives, altering the flow of their existence, and creating new destinies. Yet Mort seeks this power for his own personal and sexual pleasure. In the end Roland is no longer the lone hero; the apprentice gunslingers Susannah and Eddie have joined his journey to the Dark Tower.



## Social Concerns/Themes

A projected seven volumes, the Dark Tower series currently comprises *The Gunslinger* (1982, five short stories and a novel); *The Drawing of the Three* (1987, novel); *The Wastelands* (1991, novel); and *Wizard and Glass* (1997, novel). The series concerns a man's quest to find a mystical place known as the Dark Tower. These novels go beyond many quest novels in exploring the personality and conflicts of the quester — his motivations and the choices he is forced to make. These concerns inform the themes of *The Gunslinger* and *The Drawing of the Three*.

Roland's motivation hinges on his observation that the world has changed and "moved on." Civilization, as he knew it, has collapsed, and he seeks to discover the reasons. The Dark Tower is a nexus or center for all existence, time, and size, and Roland believes that he has to go there and perform an act of restoration or redemption. King develops the themes of change and entropy through the characters' lives and the environment. The sense of a paradoxical, tenuous existence is best symbolized by a minor character who builds playing-card towers in *Drawing of the Three*. The arbitrary collapses of these towers of cards illustrate the pain and unreasonableness of human life.

Yet, to others who see the actual tower, its endurance is an overt denial of incoherence of existence.

Roland must choose between his perceived duty to finish his quest and his moral responsibility to others. *The Gunslinger* describes Roland's past, in which he has sacrificed his friends and his morals to reach the Tower—and in which he acknowledges himself as damned. Yet he faces the apparent paradox that a damned, unconnected, and unloving man cannot redeem the world. The challenge that faces Roland is achieving his goal without sacrificing his friends' lives or his own soul.

Finally, Roland must accomplish his task with the aid of various disadvantaged characters drawn from the present. Jake, a young boy in *The Gunslinger*, has been emotionally neglected by his successful, urban parents. Eddie Dean, in *The Drawing of the Three*, is a heroin addict, who is smuggling cocaine to protect his brother. Odetta Holmes is a well-to-do, black woman who has lost both of her legs. In addition to this physical impairment, she has a psychological one. She has an other personality, Detta Walker, who is as malignant as Odetta is compassionate. King avoids making his characters into simple victims or heroes. After hearing their histories Roland (and the reader) sees their weaknesses and fears, as well as the steely strength that makes them potential gunslingers.

# Techniques

The plot development of *The Gunslinger* is unusual for Stephen King.

The novel began as five short stories published in *The Magazine for Fantasy and Science Fiction* from October 1978 to November 1981. All the stories are closely linked in time and place, but each chapter has its own development and climax. In contrast, *The Drawing of the Three* contains a longer, more unified buildup and a central climax at the end of the novel. The structure of the second work is foreshadowed in the first by Roland's encounter with a sexually hungry ghost-oracle, whose prophecy is repeated but left vague by the Man in Black's tarot card reading.

The three cards—The Prisoner, The Lady of Shadows, and Death—constitute the three major sections of the novel, interspersed with a "shuffling," which reestablishes order and prepares for the next "drawing."

The setting of the two works is the same; in fact, only seven hours—the time Roland sleeps—elapses between them. During the course of the story Roland crosses broad expanses of desert and high mountains, descends into a subway and walks along a beach. But to say that he is wandering across a segment of the United States would be to oversimplify. He also travels to different time periods in New York through a magic door, and the time is clearly in a future where the world has "moved on." Few machines work, electrical power has disappeared except in the most remote places, there are more demons, and the only cultural remnant of our time are children's rhymes, Bible verses, and Beatles songs.

King continues his free use of typographical devices to achieve certain perspectives. In both books italic type is typically used to represent Roland's thoughts—a particularly useful device when Roland enters into and carries on a silent discussion with other minds. In addition to his usual strategy of alluding to contemporary items, such as movies and Steadicam movie-making, King makes good use of dialect, capitalization, and exclamation points to depict Detta's familiarity with street jargon and her intense fury. In long stream-of-consciousness passages Detta "narrates" the events that brought her into being.

# Adaptations

New American Library offers audio tapes of both *The Gunslinger* and *The Drawing of the Three*. The combined eighteen hours of unabridged narration is read by Stephen King.



## Key Questions

The Dark Tower Series is King's most ambitious project, as Roland's epic travels reveal a world of equal breadth a variety. Roland's quest for the Dark Tower—the nexus of Roland's world and of our also—spills over into other non-fantasy novels, as King explores human interactions with luck, destiny, alternate times and dimensions, permanence and mutability. Yet King's metaphysics do not obscure his strengths as a storyteller. Despite his experiments he sticks to his strengths, with strong, complex characters and dynamic, compelling plots.

1. Roland often remarks that "the world has moved on." How is this sense of entropy illustrated in the novel? How does Roland view these changes?

2. In the series, King makes references to towers of cards, and to shuffling and drawing his companions.

What other elements of fate, chance and randomness does King play with?

3. The Dark Tower series has been characterized as breaking barriers between literary genres. What genres and conventions does King draw on?

How does he break the conventions to make fresh use of them?

4. Other characters in the novel have described Roland as a chivalric hero; others have called him a devil? Doubtless he is one of King's most complex characters. How would you describe Roland? How is he like or unlike Randall Flagg or the Man in Black?



## Literary Precedents

The Dark Tower series is a challenging blend of fantasy, science fiction, horror, myth, and realism. It owes its conception to Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855), which King read in a college literature class. He wanted to try to write a romantic novel that had the feel of Browning's poem. It took twelve years of intermittent labor to complete *The Gunslinger*. Allusions to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) establish the dark atmosphere and gothic flavor of the novels.

The setting and character of Roland owes much to the mythic hero, particularly as embodied in novels of the American West. While at the University of Maine, King wrote a short series ("Slade") for the campus newspaper, a typical western tale about a gunfighter that saves a woman's ranch from the clutches of a greedy land-grabber. Jack Slade's sense of moral integrity and his Colt .45s prefigure Roland.

Roland's past relationship with his parents —revealed in bits and pieces— owes much to Hamlet and the Oedipus tale. Roland's future, particularly his understanding that his universe is really a minute part of a larger universe, stems in some small way from Clifford D. Simak's *Ring Around the Sun*, the influence of which King has readily acknowledged.

## Related Titles

While the themes of questing and moral responsibility in The Dark Tower series are not unique to King's oeuvre, neither is the setting. The dark environment and fall from a more technological past are reminiscent of The Stand. King includes an aside that Roland once before encountered a demon named Flagg, the antagonist of The Stand and The Eyes of the Dragon. In fact, Roland's childhood may have been in a kingdom similar to Delain in The Eyes of the Dragon.

The Gunslinger, The Drawing of the Three and The Wastelands are part of a projected seven-book series. The next book, Wizard and Glass (1997), hints of a "seduction" and Roland's beginning of the quest. King notes that he has committed to finishing the series, as four-year gaps between books make fans restless. A section of The Wastelands, called "The Bear" was published in The Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994