

# Ka is a Wheel: Time in Stephen King's "The Dark Tower"

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**KA IS A WHEEL: TIME IN STEPHEN KING'S "THE  
DARK TOWER"**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Philosophy at the University of Rijeka

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Abstract .....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. Background .....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	4
II. Temporal Paradoxes in King's The Dark Tower .....	7
2.1 The Way Station Problem .....	10
2.2 Death of Jake Chambers and the Grandfather Paradox .....	13
2.3 Mobius Band as a Possible Solution to the Way Station Problem .....	16
III. The Dark Tower and the "Groundhog Day" Loop .....	19
3.1 Ka is a Wheel - Concept of Circular Time.....	21
3.2 Roland Deschain and the Bootstrap Paradox .....	23
Conclusion .....	26
Works Consulted .....	27

## ABSTRACT

### "KA IS A WHEEL: TIME IN STEPHEN KING'S "THE DARK TOWER"

In his eight volume (and one novella) series *The Dark Tower* Stephen King presents a reader with an image of a world similar to our own, or it could even be argued, an alternate version of its very own future tainted by germ warfare and a nuclear catastrophe of disastrous global consequences. Throughout the series, King draws upon various elements commonly present in futuristic and post-apocalyptic sci-fi novels (even though *The Dark Tower* does not fall, in its own right, solely under that single genre) one of them also being the possibility of travelling through time and traversing freely the boundaries between parallel universes. In the first book of the series King acquaints the reader with the character of Roland Deschain, the last gunslinger on an epic quest to reach the now collapsing Dark Tower which is believed to be the nexus of all existence containing within itself all that is space and time. Throughout the entire duration of Roland's quest, the reader is confronted with many a philosophical issue stemming from the notion of the collapsing Tower causing time and space to change and distort. The grandfather paradox and the bootstrap paradox (both temporal paradoxes) are only two of many philosophical issues put forth by King in what can be considered his *magnum opus*. I will hereby try to accentuate the significance of time and various temporal paradoxes and demonstrate why the understanding of the aforementioned in the novels is crucial for successful and more comprehensible reading of the series.

## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND

The story that would, in a certain way, define Stephen King as a writer and would even grow to be considered one of the pivotal works of his entire career or would even eventually be declared his *magnum opus* can be said to have had its genesis around 10 years before the first story featuring the character of the last gunslinger has even been published. An interesting anecdote is associated with the birth of one of the best works Stephen King ever produced during his career as a novelist. According to the aforementioned anecdote, the idea to write the story of Roland Deschain came to King after him and his future wife Tabitha both received reams of brightly colored, green paper measuring 7" × 10" in size. Among other quite random pieces of text, that King decided to write on these extravagantly colored and rather large sheets of notebook paper he was gifted, was also his hand written transcript of a poem by a romantic poet Robert Browning – "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came". Soon, King became tempted by the possibility of "...trying a long romantic novel, embodying the feel, if not the exact sense of the Browning poem." (*Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*, afterword, 209). The full text of Browning's poem can be found and has been included in the appendix of the seventh novel of the series, *The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*. Not only was King's justifiably dubbed *magnum opus* greatly and visibly inspired by the romantic poetry of Robert Browning, but the author also drew inspiration from other writers and literary works such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy which provided the inspiration for High Speech, the language of the higher classes of *The Dark Tower's* protagonist's world. A significant portion of inspiration for the eight volume series King also seems to have drawn from various Arthurian legends as well as other Anglo-Saxon oral narrative tradition with the greatest emphasis on riddles.

On top of being written in the author's recognizable, horror-like style, inspired by romantic poetry, fantasy literature and Anglo-Saxon customs, the world of *The Dark Tower* is in some aspects also greatly reminiscent of the American frontier and spaghetti-western movies. Stephen King's love of spaghetti-western movies first becomes apparent in the physical description of the series protagonist, Roland Deschain. Imposing, tall, blue eyed, with two Colt .45 revolvers holstered at his hips and caped with a cowboy-like duster coat, Roland easily evokes the image of a young Clint Eastwood as the man with no name, Blondie, a mysterious wraith in a corrupt frontier mining town or any other character that fits the description of a cowboy-like, enigmatic loner whose actions are driven by an equally mysterious cause. However, the protagonist's appearance and his code of conduct is not the only aspect of the novel series majorly inspired by the American frontier. Many of the customs of Roland's place and time rely heavily on the ways of the Wild West as well. Even though the aforementioned is also apparent in the novels, it is the most visible in the comic book prequels to the original story. First published in 2007, adapted by Peter David and Robert Furth, and illustrated by Richard Isanove and Jae Lee, this series of comic books by Marvel Comics follows the adventures of a teenage Roland Deschain and his first *Ka-Tet* consisting of Cuthbert Allgood, Alain Jones, and his first and greatest love Susan Delgado (who is featured prominently as a part of Roland's flashback in *The Dark Tower IV: Wizard and Glass*). The first published comics indeed mostly deal with and more deeply explore the flashbacks present in the fourth novel and it is only the newer comics that incorporate an entirely new prequel story arc yet unmentioned in any of the novels of the eight volume series. The plot of the comic books follows the life path and the course of action of the young protagonist from his becoming a gunslinger through a chain of events which ultimately brought to where he is at the beginning of the book one – a hardened loner unsuspectingly trapped in an endless time loop and determined to find and enter the Dark Tower (in spite of

his not knowing almost anything about it; neither what it exactly is, nor how to access it) no matter what the cost may be. And so, the true journey begins.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

“The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.”

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*

The aforementioned is the very sentence with which, in 1982, King began the epic journey of the last living member of an order known as the gunslingers, Roland Deschain. When first encountered in *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*, Roland Deschain, or as he is also known – Roland of Gilead, is depicted following the elusive man in black (who, as one learns later in the series, is known by the name of Walter O’Dim) who seems to be ‘urging’ Roland to take only one of the many steps which the journey to reach his final destination, the Dark Tower, will include. As the first pages of the novel are turned and the plot starts unraveling before the reader, one is becoming slightly more familiarized with Roland’s world through which he chases the mysterious man in black. The gunslinger’s world seems at some moments completely different than our own, but, at a second glance, it becomes all too similar to it. Sounds of an old song that turns out to be Hey Jude by The Beatles, or the ruins of the ancient temple dedicated to a deity known as Amoco which are found to be nothing more than the remains of an Amoco gas station owned by the Standard Oil Company originating in Indiana, strike the reader with a grim sense of strange familiarity. It is this strange version of our own world struck by germ warfare and a nuclear apocalypse that is the very place where Roland will meet a boy from the 70s New York named Jake Chambers, who will prove to become one of the crucial characters in Roland’s quest to reach the Dark Tower, near the way station close to the ‘temple of Amoco’.



It seems as though Roland's world may not only bear striking resemblance to our own, but may, in fact, represent a post-apocalyptic version of our future in some alternate timeframe. This strange world creates an utterly peculiar setting for the reader. Some of the technological advances and social characteristics seem to have been inspired by the American Old West, while many other pieces of technology appear to be remnants of an extinct, technologically incredibly advanced civilization referred to, in Roland's time, as the Old Ones. The Old Ones are said to have built, or rather technologically reinforced, the Dark Tower (since it is said to always have existed as the physical manifestation of a being known as Gan) in the distant past, several centuries before the first novel in the series takes place. As a mean of preserving the Tower and all the different wheres and whens which it contains the Old Ones have engineered 12 guardian (cyborg-like) animals designed by the North Central Positronics (a tribute to the works of Isaac Asimov) to protect the beams. The novel series mostly deals with the events taking place along the bear-turtle beam (image 1.1).



1.1. The Dark Tower and its beams

The Dark Tower was eventually attacked by the Crimson King, the main antagonist of the story, in an attempt to bring about Discordia – a permanent state of chaos. With the assistance of the Breakers, subjects of the Crimson King determined to snap the beams

supporting the Tower, the beams of the Dark Tower finally start giving out thus causing the world to 'move on'. In other words, the breaking of the beams causes all the technology involved in the working of the Tower to fail ultimately causing time itself to move completely out of sync. Roland believes his destiny is to reach the Tower even though he does not know what awaits him when he finally does. He dedicates his entire existence to reaching the Tower and on the way to it encounters a number of characters including Jake Chambers, Eddie and Susannah Dean, and Oy the billybumbler (a raccoon like animal) who ultimately become members of his *Ka-Tet* (a group of people bound together by Ka) and follow him on his grand journey. When, after tackling many an obstacle on his quest, Roland finally does reach the Dark Tower, he realizes that, as he climbs the steps to the top of the Tower, the various signs and rooms he is seeing are all just different iterations of his own past existences within a time loop. He realizes that:

Because of changes in time - a softening of time which I know you all have felt - I've quested after the Dark Tower for over a thousand years, sometimes skipping over whole generations the way a sea-bird may cruise from one wave-top to the next, only wetting its feet in the foam. (King, 92)

Roland becomes aware of the fact that he has reached the Tower countless times before as he is once again forced through one of the doors within the Tower leading to the Mohaine desert, the 'trip' once again leaving him with no recollection of encountering the inside of the Dark Tower. The only difference is that, unlike in all the previous iterations of Roland's endless cycle of searching for the Tower, he has now acquired the Horn of Eld which he did not possess in any of his past 'laps' around the wheel of Ka. Once again "the man in black fled across the desert and the gunslinger followed". (King, 3)

## CHAPTER II

### TEMPORAL PARADOXES IN KING'S "THE DARK TOWER"

*"Right now the Seiko claimed it was sixty-two minutes past forty on a Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday in both December and March."*

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands*

Today, it is widely known and accepted among avid fans of science fiction movies and literature that irresponsible time travel would be very likely to cause all sorts of different changes in the fabric of time ultimately resulting in one of the many known and a little less known temporal paradoxes. Going back into the past, interacting with it and consequently changing it in a way that creates a seemingly impossible situation in the future has long been present within science fiction circles and has long secured its place as one of the most famous and interesting tropes within the genre.

The first account of a temporal paradox present in a science fiction novel can be traced back to 1891 when Thomas Antsey Guthrie wrote his *Tourmalin's Time Cheques* which follows the story of a man who is granted the ability to deposit and later withdraw certain amounts of time in a cheque-like manner. The problem arises when the time deposited does not occur in consecutive order, but is mixed up and the time arrow does no longer span linearly across the space-time continuum. Moreover, Michael Jameson's *Doubled and Redoubled* first published in 1941 can be said to represent the first account of a "Groundhog Day" type of situation in which the protagonist of this work of fiction is bound to repeat a single day over and over again, with the same situations occurring in each iteration of the

same cycle and always resulting in an identical outcome only to be repeated time and time again. Furthermore, Robert Heinlein's story *By His Bootstraps*, also first published in 1941, is one of the first works of fiction featuring a version of a bootstrap paradox. The general plot of the story involves a man who, upon meeting various future versions of himself ultimately finds out that it is his very meeting of his future versions that lead to their travelling back to the past only to meet him. Another famous temporal paradox is also encountered in Nathan Schachner's *Ancestral Voices* (1933), William Tenn's *The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway*, a science fiction novel published in 1955<sup>1</sup>, as well as in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Both of the novels feature different versions of the now well-known grandfather paradox. Whereas in the former the protagonist travels back in time to study the work of a famous artist only to discover that he has become the very artist he has been determined to study, in the latter, the protagonist is a woman who witnesses two different versions of a possible future and thus decides to prevent one of them in her own time. Considering she has prevented one of the potential future outcomes in the present, that future did not in any way occur, thus making it impossible for her to have ever witnessed it and also stopped it in her own time.

Upon presenting a brief overview of temporal paradoxes in science fiction literature, it becomes apparent that Stephen King himself does not shy away from drawing inspiration from already existing works belonging to the genre and incorporating their elements into his own work, sometimes even making direct references to other authors (such as is the case with North Central Positronics, which produces the same type of robots which are central to many Isaac Asimov's works). The most prevalent elements dealing with discrepancies in the arrow of time in King's eight volume *magnum opus* *The Dark Tower* are precisely temporal paradoxes. The most prominent paradoxes featured in the novel series are without doubt the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on temporal paradoxes in fiction see Anders and Jackson

one's also present in the earlier works of other authors listed above. Listed again for the sake of clarity, those temporal issues include:

- 1) The Grandfather Paradox – In its most basic form, this paradox presupposes ones travelling back in time in order to kill their own grandfather which causes a truancy of their own birth, thus making it impossible for them to have killed their grandfather in the first place.
- 2) The Bootstrap Paradox – This temporal paradox, often seen in the field of philosophy in diverse metaphysical discussions, could in its elementary form be described as a causal loop created by a later event becoming the cause of an earlier one often via some mode of time travel.

The first of the aforementioned paradoxes is featured in *The Dark Tower* only as a plot segment within the causal loop which spans across the entire scope of the series and helps in forming its entire essence. The Bootstrap Paradox influences the series as a whole and determines the very existence of its protagonist Roland Deschain, while the grandfather paradox, or rather its adaptation is only present as one of the causal loop's constituents and plays no role in the final changing and outcome of the past or future, but could be said to, in a certain way, ensure the continuation of the events caught in the causal loop. The grandfather paradox is evident in the character of an 11 years old and thus the youngest member of Roland's *Ka-Tet*, the very same Jake Chambers Roland first encountered at the way station near the Amoco temple/ruins of an ancient gas pump.

## 2.1 THE WAY STATION PROBLEM

*“While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket.”*

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*

“The Way Station” has first been published by Stephen King as a stand-alone novella in 1982 and featured the characters of Roland Deschain and Jake Chambers. The novella has, later on, been added to the Dark Tower books as a second chapter of the first novel – *The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger*. The novella/the first chapter of the first novel follows the events preceding the forming of Roland Deschain’s second *Ka-Tet* and presents the reader with the first ever encounter of the gunslinger and a young boy, Jake Chambers, at the way station located in the Mohaine desert (the place where Roland has both started and ended his never ending, circular quest to the Dark Tower).

After travelling across the desert for two weeks, Roland approaches the way station of the coach line where he spots a mysterious figure hiding in the shadows which he wrongly concludes is the same man in black from the very beginning of the novel. Upon further inspection, the gunslinger realizes that the seemingly eerie figure lurking in the darkness is, in fact, nothing more than a frightened, completely harmless young boy. Realization hits him as he dismisses any potential danger and only manages to reholster his revolver before succumbing to exhaustion and, severe dehydration induce, deep sleep. In the morning, Roland finds that the boy has brought him food and water and decides to further question him on the subject of his staying at the way station. The gunslinger discovers that the child’s name is Jake Chambers and that he comes from New York City, a city and time which will prove to play a pivotal role in Roland’s quest throughout the entire novel series. The boy seems to have

materialized in Roland's timeline by dying in New York in the year 1977 when he was hit by a car after being pushed in front of it by Jack Mort, one of alleged accomplices of Walter O'Dim - the elusive man in black, and ever since then his memory of his life prior to the way station started to fade and distort due to the nonlinear chaos that has become time. Roland recognizes much of his young self in this blonde, blue-eyed child and therefore decides to let him come along and accompany him on his travels. Before long, Roland starts thinking of the boy as "the sacrifice" thus from the very start revealing that Jake's future does not, for a still unknown reason, seem bright.<sup>2</sup> After arriving at the ruins of what thousands of years ago might have been a subway station, even Jake himself feels that his second end in nigh as the suspense of impending doom forces him to beg Roland to turn back and quit the pursuit for the man in black.

Even though he does seem to show a certain degree of affection for the boy (who he will in the end grow to love as his own true son), it seems as though Jake indeed is nothing more than a sacrifice Roland is willing to make to the man in black in the name of the Tower. Despite of his knowing of Roland's intentions regarding the sacrifice, Jake decides to follow after the gunslinger (since the events do seem to already have become 'predestined' by his *Ka*). Jake's dark forebodings appear to prove true when, on their way to the man in black, the duo attempts to cross a rather dilapidated bridge. The bridge fails, making Jake fall. As he clings to the bridge with nothing but his hand, the man in black appears making Roland choose between following him and saving the boy. Considering Jake has already died once in his time, he does not seem disturbed by the idea of dying again in Roland's since he appears to believe that he might once again simply wake up in another timeline, thus encouraging Roland to continue his quest, letting go of the bridge and falling into the chasm beneath. The gunslinger believes that, if he had not sacrificed Jake, he would have proven unworthy of his

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<sup>2</sup> See Bev Vincent, *The Road to The Dark Tower*, pg 35

destiny that is the Tower. However, it could even be argued that Roland's redemption (aka his exiting the eternal time loop which will be further explored in unit III. The Dark Tower and the "Groundhog Day" Loop) depends on his very ability to not sacrifice Jake in a future iteration of his quest, entrusting only *Ka* to guide him.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Bev Vincent, *The Road to The Dark Tower*, pg 38



## 2.2 DEATH OF JAKE CHAMBERS AND THE GRANDFATHER PARADOX

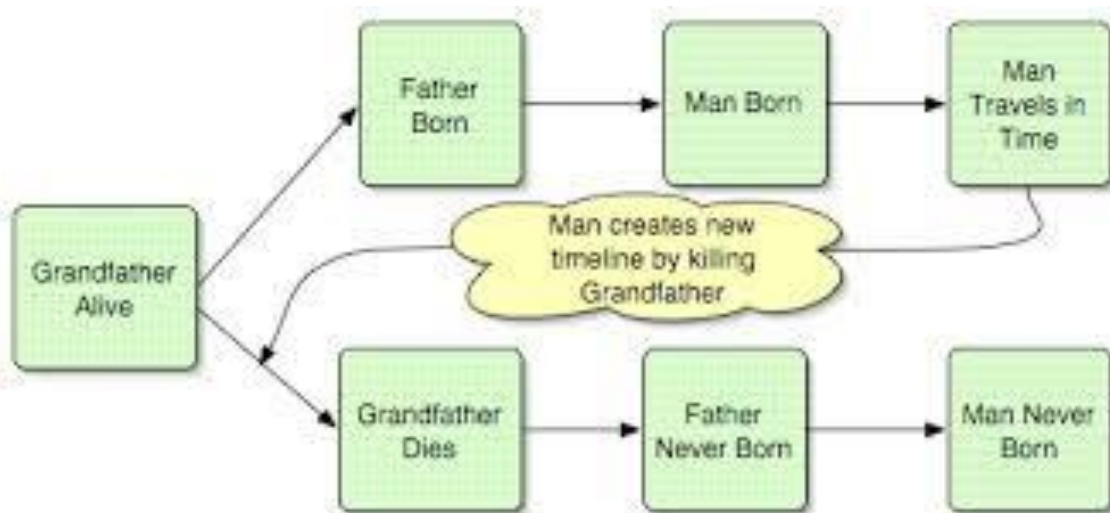
*“That was when it happened; that was when he split down the middle and became two boys.” Half of his mind screamed “alive” and the other, “dead.”*

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower III: The Wastelands*

In the second novel of the series, *The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three*, it becomes obvious that the gunslinger did, in fact, form an emotional bond with the boy who selflessly sacrificed himself in favor of Roland’s quest. Throughout the novel it becomes apparent that Roland does, in fact, miss Jake, and by the beginning of the third book, *The Dark Tower III: The Wastelands*, he makes it his objective to somehow reunite with the boy. Eventually, he is able to travel back to 1977 New York where he learns the identity of the man who had pushed Jake into a busy street and stops him from carrying out his intentions thus preventing Jake’s death from ever taking place. However, it becomes apparent that, as time passes, Roland’s mind seems to deteriorate more and more, losing touch with reality and, as it could be argued, almost splitting in two. One part of his mind appears to clearly and distinctly remember the events related to Jake Chambers, while the other is denying the gunslinger’s knowing of the boy and even rejecting the idea of Jake’s very existence. The same can be observed in Jake as well who is now, while still living in 1977, unable to tell apart between daydreaming and waking life rendering it impossible for him to determine with absolute certainty whether he has in reality ever even met a strange man named Roland Deschain.

The strange chain of events following Roland’s prevention of Jake’s death are due to nothing more than the gunslinger inadvertently creating a time paradox by travelling to the

past, changing it and subsequently altering the future solely by saving Jake’s life. What seems to have occurred corresponds closely to an already well known temporal paradox known as the grandfather paradox, or rather its altered version. The aforementioned paradox is an umbrella term for a myriad of examples typically used as an argument against time travel that aims to prove that traveling into the past is, and will always be, impossible. As mentioned in previous chapters, in its most simple version, the grandfather paradox presupposes one’s travelling into the past and unwittingly killing their own grandfather thus preventing themselves from ever being born in the first place (image 2.1).



2.1 a graphic representation of the basic grandfather paradox

In the novels (*The Dark Tower I: The Gunslinger – The Dark Tower III: The Wastelands*) Roland meets Jake only because his death in 1977 caused him to materialize into Roland’s timeline. If Jake never died, Roland could have never met him. Consequently, considering that he has never met the boy, he would have no reason to travel back in time to prevent his death since he would not even be aware of Jake’s existence. However, if he does not travel back in time and saves the boy’s life, Jake would have died uninterrupted. The death that occurred would cause him to meet the gunslinger thus resulting in Roland going back in time to prevent his death which would cause him never meeting Jake, which would

cause Jake's death to happen and so on. If one is to consider time travel into the past to be theoretically possible, there are two basic resolutions of the grandfather paradox they may consider:

1. The Novikov self-consistency principle: In this approach, the only timelines that can exist are those that are internally self-consistent. If you go back in time, then the events that happened have indeed already happened, and you cannot actually change anything.

2. Parallel Timelines: The other major means of resolving this is to invoke the idea of parallel universes, suggesting that when you go back in time you create a new divergent timeline where new events unfold. This resolution opens up a wealth of new philosophical questions, such as whether the old timeline "still exists" in out there in some way, whether the time traveler could ever possibly get back to the original timeline, and so on. (Zimmerman Jones)

However hopeless finding the solution to this temporal paradox may sound, there might be a means of presenting its resolution without having to accept that the past cannot be changed because reversing the arrow of time is impossible or that the only way of changing the past is by creating a parallel universe – the Mobius Band.

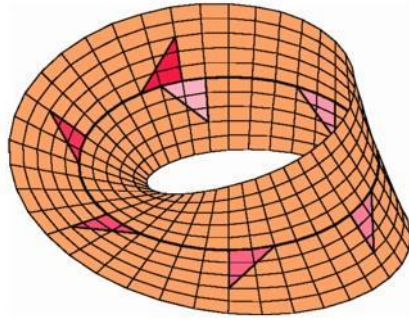
## 2.3 MOBIUS BAND AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO THE WAY STATION PROBLEM

**A young man named Möbius (quite clever),  
A circle of paper would sever.  
He'd then tie a knot  
As part of his plot  
To stay in Las Vegas forever.  
—Paul Cleverley**

*“There is a theory that the universe is forever folding back and over on itself like a cross between a Mobius curve and a wave. If we catch that wave, it will be quite a ride.”*

Gene Roddenberry's *Andromeda, Answers Given to Questions Never Asked*, Episode 401

The Mobius band, also known as the Mobius strip is a formation first proposed by German mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict Listing and represents a surface that is in itself one sided and contains only one edge. While most surfaces in Euclidian space are orientable (e.g. planes), meaning that one is always able to distinguish between the left or the right side with absolute certainty, the Mobius band falls under the category of non-orientable surfaces, together with the Klein bottle and real projective planes. Since it is a non-orientable surface, the notions of left and right, as well as the notions of clockwise and counter clockwise, become arbitrary when observing an object's traversing across the band and its paths seem to be reversing despite the Mobius band being a one sided surface. The Mobius band can best be explained by recreating the strip using a piece of paper. The paper strip is to be twisted and then joined at the ends so as to form a loop. However, the aforementioned is not by far the only variety of the Mobius band, but is purely one that is, unlike other more complex variants, most easily recreated in Euclidian space.



2.2 a simple version of a Möbius band with an object traversing across it

It can be observed from the provided illustration that if an object were to be sent around the Möbius band it would return to the exact same point from which it started. What would be different, however, is that that very same object would now be inverted horizontally. Additionally, if one were to use a paper model of the Möbius belt, they would be able to notice that the object is now not only inverted horizontally, but is also on the other side of the paper strip. Even though the object would technically be on the other side, for the object itself it would seem as though it has remained on the same side since it did not at any given moment during its trip around the band need to cross the edge of the paper to get to its current location (hence calling the Möbius band a one sided surface). If one were to assume that time consisted of the same properties as the Möbius band, it would be made possible to avoid some of the temporal paradoxes present in conventional time travel theories.

For example, the grandfather paradox is one of the temporal paradoxes that could, under the assumption that time takes the form of a Möbius band, be easily avoided. In the case of Jake Chambers and the Way station problem, the solution to the grandfather paradox via the assumption of the Möbius band would assume the following structure: Jake Chambers and Roland Deschain are nothing but objects traversing across the folded strip of paper that is time. At one point Jake is alive in the 70s New York. Moving forward through time he comes to a point at which he is pushed in front of a car and killed (which transports him into Roland's time). Upon meeting the boy Roland travels to the 70s New York in order to prevent

his death and succeeds. If one continues forward along the Mobius band, they would again reach the point in Roland's time in which he decided to travel back to the 70s New York in order to save Jake, but this time there would be no time travel since the death of the boy never occurred. Since the time travel did not occur, the prevention of the boy's death could not have occurred either which means Jake did, in fact, die and further along the strip he is again found in Roland's time.

Even though the Mobius band may prove to be quite a confusing solution to the grandfather paradox, it does in a way solve it by assuming that events contained within the Mobius Time Loop (which could, in the case of *The Dark Tower*, be considered a loop within an even greater loop) are taking place on both 'sides' of the strip and can even be observed separately as two parallel universes splitting at the time travel trip, both containing one of the two different possibilities (e.g. one is a universe in which Jake is dead in his own time and the time travel never needed to occur and the other is a universe in which Jake is alive in Roland's time)

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<sup>4</sup> See Anthony Edwards, *Time Travel: The Mobius Time Loop*

## CHAPTER III

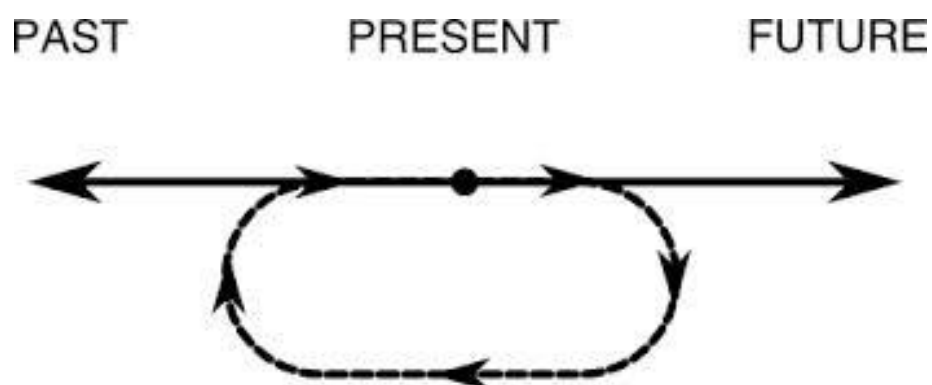
### THE DARK TOWER AND THE “GROUNDHOG DAY” LOOP

*“What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?”*

Phil Connors, *The Groundhog Day*

Often times, science fiction films and literature seem to utilize the idea of a time loop as a plot device. The standard plot of science fiction works involving time loops most commonly used in such works usually follows the experiences of character who find themselves somehow ‘stuck’ in time and is forced to re-experience the same chain of events ad infinitum. The character may or may not be aware of their being stuck in a time loop, but whichever the case might be, their main goal almost always is to find a way to leave the time loop and return to their original linear timeline. Even though the concept of time loops has been present in science fiction since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been most popularized by the 1993 film “The Groundhog Day” the plot of which follows a recurrent day in the life of Phil Connors, a TV meteorologist who finds himself re-experiencing a holiday known as Groundhog day every new morning. Eventually he manages to break the loop by changing his course of action and ‘setting things right’ which ultimately allows him to continue with his everyday life. The Groundhog Day has since become somewhat of a pop-culture epitome of temporal recurrences and it has become acceptable to refer to any kind of similar situation as another Groundhog Day type occurrence. However, a Groundhog Day like time loop does not necessarily need to consist of just one recurring day, but can, in fact, be occurring on a much larger scale and be comprised of recurrent years, centuries and even millenniums.

In *The Dark Tower* novel series, Roland Deschain's quest bears striking resemblance to the aforementioned movie. However, unlike *The Groundhog Day*'s Phil Connors, Roland Deschain is not at all aware of his being in a time loop for the entire duration of the recurrent events. He only comes to the realization of his being 'stuck' in time for one brief moment at the end of the novel series when he reaches the starting/ending point of his journey through the circle of time. It becomes apparent that the loop is comprised of events in between the gunslinger's following the elusive man in black and finally reaching the much desired Tower (in fact, the entirety of the eight novel series represents nothing more but yet another version of the same, long present, temporal loop with its beginning and ending with the same exact sentence), which all prove to be influenced by Roland's previous iterations within the very same time loop. It is neither clear how long exactly has the gunslinger been stuck in a time loop, nor is it stated why exactly the loop occurred. Nevertheless, the situation the protagonist of *The Dark Tower* novels has found himself in raises a series of interesting questions regarding the nature of time and the issues that may result from an event creating a series of other events resulting in yet another event that ultimately proves to be the cause of the initial one (also known as the bootstrap paradox).



3.0 a graphic representation of a time loop with the dot representing Roland Deschain at the beginning/end of his journey in the Mohaine desert



### 3.1. KA IS A WHEEL – CONCEPT OF CIRCULAR TIME

*“Ka is a wheel; its one purpose is to turn. The spin of ka always brings us back to the same place, to face and reface our mistakes and defeats until we can learn from them. When we learn from the past, the wheel continues to move forward, towards growth and evolution. When we don’t, the wheel spins backward, and we are given another chance. If once more we squander the opportunity, the wheel continues its rotation towards devolution, or destruction.”*

Robin Furth, *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: The Complete Concordance*

Even though time is most commonly understood and represented as linear in the western society, many of the world’s cultures understand the nature of time quite differently and tend to interpret it as a never ending cycle of events without a clearly defined beginning or end. More precisely, it is not only the case that the beginning and the end are less easily distinguished (as it would be the case if time happened to be a straight line), but the perception of such concepts changes to such extent that the distinction between the two becomes completely obsolete. As it is at times understood in Judaism, the concept of circular time treats the beginnings and the endings as one and the same, with no past, present or future. Instead, time is composed of a chain of events influenced by one another and bound to repeat infinitely thus forming an infinite chain of occurrences moving in a circular motion. Such view of time can even be seen in the first lines of a Yiddish song based on a poem of Yitskhok Yoyel Linetski: “All the world is a little wheel, / And time is rolled. / Fortune and misfortune, honor and wealth / Just roll alongside. / One person lives out his world in such poverty, / The other lives in such plenty. / In the blink of an eye, things are reversed: / The

little wheel has turned.”<sup>5</sup> However, the aforementioned song lyrics speak not only of the circular nature of time, but also of changing the outcome of an event that occurred during one full ‘turn of the time wheel’ during the next.

Similar is seen in King’s concept of Ka. In the world of Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower* series Ka proves to be one of the most important plot devices throughout the entire series and is seen as a sort of a life force that drives all living things through space and time. The word itself can even be translated as something similar to ‘destination’. In the world of Roland Deschain it is widely believed that all an individual does is determined by Ka, as well as are all the events set into motion following their actions. Even the nature of time itself seems to be due to the wheel like nature of Ka’s influence. Roland’s entire quest to reach the Tower has been determined by nothing other than Ka itself. As it can be seen from the beginning of the first novel and the last sentence of the seventh, Ka is, much like the Jewish conception of cyclical time, a wheel that turns endlessly. Under the influence of Ka, time moves perpetually between the beginning and the end which are both contained within the same event thus forming a loop in which the gunslinger is caught.

With each new turn of the wheel, he is given a chance to change the events of the previous turn (except for the final outcome) which may ultimately cause him to break out of the temporal loop (here, King is possibly drawing upon the idea of the Indian Samsara). However, the cyclical nature of time associated with Roland’s quest to the Tower not only causes him to re-experience the same events over and over again (sometimes with different outcomes, sometimes not), but it also leaves him prone to inadvertently causing a causal loop also known as the bootstrap paradox.

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<sup>5</sup> For more see Josh Waletzky, *Is Time Circular or Linear? A Jewish look at before and after...and before.*

### 3.2 ROLAND DESCHAIN AND THE BOOTSTRAP PARADOX

*"We spread the time as we can, but in the end the world takes it all back."*

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower VI: Song of Susannah*

The bootstrap paradox is a type of a temporal paradox which includes a chain of events such that A causes B, B causes C, and C causes A<sup>6</sup>. The aforementioned occurrence (a hypothetical situation in which event C would lead to A) is also known under the name of backwards causation. Causation usually tends to be a forward moving process, with the cause always necessarily preceding the effect. The laws of nature are such that they only allow for causation to be directed towards the future, therefore excluding any possibility of 'changing directions' and allowing for a future event to cause one that has already occurred in the past. A deviation from this pattern (a cause leading to the effect), although physically impossible, is all but inconceivable.<sup>7</sup>

Under the assumption of time travel, backwards causation becomes completely possible, entirely imaginable and, it might even be argued, quite difficult to avoid. By travelling back to the past one might inadvertently set into motion a chain of events which would ultimately cause the event that would cause them to travel back into the past and inadvertently set into motion the very same chain of events that would ultimately cause them to travel back in time and so on and so forth. As it can be noted from the aforementioned, such manner of causation would undoubtedly leave one trapped in an infinite loop in which the above mentioned event A has no clear origin whatsoever.

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<sup>6</sup>See Faye, Jan, "Backward Causation", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<sup>7</sup> For more on causation see Horowich

Considering that the very foundations of Roland Deschain's epic journey to the Dark Tower seem to lie in the infinitely ongoing time travel to the past in order to only re-start his quest time and time again, it is only logical to assume that there is a risk of the bootstrap paradox occurring. And occurred it has. Under the assumption that King's world of *The Dark Tower* consists of only one and not many parallel universes it is clear that the gunslinger did, in fact, become caught in a paradoxical loop. In the second novel of the series *The Dark Tower II: Drawing of the Three* the reader is first introduced to two more characters that eventually become members of Roland's Ka-Tet together with Jake Chambers – Eddie and Susannah Dean. Before they became husband and wife, the two not only lived in different parts of New York, but lived during completely different times. While (before being brought into Roland's when) Susannah led the life of a well standing yet oppressed woman of color in the 1960s, Eddie struggled with heroin addiction in the 1980s Brooklyn. Their lives came together when they both got transported into the gunslinger's timeline and therefore into the future (of course, under the assumption that Roland's world indeed is a future, post-apocalyptic version of our own).

However, Susannah's and Eddie's arrival to the future is very likely to have had serious consequences regarding the nature of causation. It is possible to argue that it is even possible for it to have caused a bootstrap paradox. Since, upon meeting Roland, their presence in their own times ceased to exist, it is all but impossible to argue that it is those very events (their ceasing to exist in their own times) that triggered an avalanche of interconnected events that lead to the world becoming exactly what it is in Roland's time and, consequentially, to Roland embarking on a quest during which he transports Eddie and Susannah to the post-apocalyptic future, thus causing a situation similar to that in which A causes B, B causes C, C causes D and D again causes A. If this is the case, the very existence of the three characters mentioned

above is put into question since A (Eddie, Roland and Susannah) now seem to lose their points of origin.

Again, much like is the case with Jake Chambers and the Mobius band which may be interpreted as two parallel universes, the only mean of resolving the paradox appears to be to observe Roland's, Eddie's and Susannah's different whens also as different wheres. Under the assumption that their worlds are just three out of an infinite number of parallel universes containing all the fathomable outcomes it is possible to argue that by time travelling they have also been transferred to a different universe while continuing to exist without ever time travelling in another. Even though there is no sufficient enough solution to the paradox, the idea of multiple parallel universes does at least seem to offer a satisfactory solution to the bootstrap paradox present in the novel series.

## CONCLUSION

*“The story of their fellowship ends here, on this make-believe street and beneath this artificial sun...”*

Stephen King, *The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower*

Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series can, indeed, for a reason be considered the authors *magnum opus*. The series spans over the whopping 4250 pages filled with detailed descriptions of the journey to the Tower and all the characters involved in it. For this very reason, it is difficult, not to say almost impossible, to do these eight King's books the justice they truly deserve. Since it does seem quite unrealistic to try and tackle and analyze each and every important aspect of the gunslinger's quest in such a little amount of words, it appears as though one is almost forced to focus solely on a single aspect of this epic journey. I have, therefore decided to focus only on temporality as depicted in the novels with a special focus on the temporal paradoxes caused by ill-advised time travel. I sincerely hope that I have managed to shed some light on the issue and introduce the readers of my work to two of the paradoxes most prominently featured throughout the entire novel series and also provide a satisfying suggestions of the possible solutions to the aforementioned problems. *The Dark Tower* is most definitely an extensive read and, most importantly, is and will always be open to different interpretations.

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