

Stephen King's Greek Question

by b.b.brown

An ancient, fanged creature with deadly magical power isolates a coastal island during the 'storm of the century'. After terrifying the island folk with brutal murders, the creature explains its purpose. It is not immortal. If the townsfolk give up a child, for it to rear and love as it loves itself, the creature will leave them unharmed. If not, everyone on the island will disappear into the sea.

The island folk argue. Only the constable adamantly opposes the sacrifice of any child. But he is stunned when his wife sides with the ones who agree to a sacrifice. When he refuses to agree to let his child be part of the lottery, he is forcibly restrained. The mothers of the children take part in a lottery—seven white stones mixed with one black and red stone. The constable's wife picks the black and red stone, the one that resembles the creature's eyes. She screams. She pleads for her child. But the creature smiles and disappears with 'its' little boy.

Nine years later, the constable and his wife are divorced. She remarried and lives with the lie that her boy was lost in the sea during the storm of the century. He became a federal marshal in a city thousands of miles away. One day on the street there's a familiar figure. It's the creature. At its side is a teenage boy. The constable can see his face. Staring back at his father, the boy bares his fangs and hisses.

Summary, *Storm of the Century*, videotape, 248 min.

[START TAPE. CUE NARRATION:]

Stephen King's work has *extremely* interesting aspects. Unfortunately, his prose tends to the unexceptional and his characters are almost obsessively overwritten, but there *are* all those television and movie productions. The television adaptation of *The Shining*, fortunately lacking Stanley Kubrick's great 'vision' to misdirect it, opens up the isolation, fogginess, and strain of the alcoholic mind as well as the mixed terror and love of its victims. Amid the film's whalish bulk, *The Green Mile* glinted a solid idea—previously explored in Dostoevski's *The Idiot*, Williams' *Night of the Iguana*, and underlying most of Chaplin's films—that the 'perfect' human being, so sensitive as to be delicate, cannot survive in the 'real' world. *Christine* embodies vintage Pauline dogma when a bad object—that which is Caesar's—corrupts a good boy. And in *Needful Things*, Satan snatches souls in turn for worldly things that are anything but needful; however, though the assumption mirrors *Christine*, King here focuses on indirection (or mutuality) in a reversed form, from positive to negative. Borges did this before, and better. So did Martin Luther King, Jr., and more briefly—

'We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.'

The Dead Zone blends faith with practicality as a man finds, like Frodo on his unwanted path in *The Lord of the Rings*, the strength to turn the burden imposed by God into meaning. In *Salem's Lot*, evil attracts evil—vampirism in this case—after which the corruption *indirectly* spreads through friends and relatives. Evil flourishes amid the

townspeople's indifference in *It*, a principle used efficiently and infamously by the nazis, for King feels that those who do not stand against an evil are part of the evil. The heart of the prisoner in *The Shawshank Redemption* is permeated with beauty, as symbolized and embodied by Rita Hayworth, Raquel Welch, and Mozart's music, and that beauty gives life strength allowing the prisoner not merely to endure but to triumph. Like Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, although with a weaker script, *Thinner* condemns vengeance as delusory, pernicious, and self-destructive, doing so without the obscurity that often mars King's longer stories. And *The Night Flier*, though oppressive and bloody, sketches out the steps into corruption of two journalists as their over-valued competitiveness escalates to indifference toward human feeling. What is this 'thing' that makes King's best work so interesting? Typically, his prose is functional and no more. Perhaps, his stories and characters challenge the reader more deeply and take on larger dimensions than the simple personality conflicts so adored in many university courses. Moreover, other than snatching the personal adornments of money and egoism, isn't the literary and public goal of writers to enlarge our grasp of the world? 'Obsessed' with his characters as they act in, and react to, peculiar and unstable landscapes, King envisioned interesting, passionate, and even meaningful stories, thereby achieving what few writers do. His stories and his people *are* his themes.

[PAUSE NARRATION. AUTHOR'S ASIDE:]

In the printed form his 'novel for television', *Storm of the Century*, reveals a curious fact that should be obvious. Stephen King is a natural actor or, perhaps better, a storyteller. These strange creatures—these actors—will give you every absolute speck of personality, every quirky grain, every permutation of influence on their character's existence of parents, beer, pets, sex, bicycles, school, fishing poles, friends, cars, monster magazines, the backyard swing, the creepy guy next door, the neighbor who never drew her curtains, *ad infinitum*. What is more, if the character isn't important enough for the writer to give them a background, the actors are expected to create one. As Olivier said, there are no small parts, only small actors. Then, in the theater, they twist all the bits and pieces they've gathered into a personality—you are there, physically sitting there, and they are physically, three-dimensionally in front of you, breathing, sweating, crying, and thumping about the stage in their beautifully flawed creations. How they live for this immediacy, so desperately exciting, even addictive. On the other hand, unlike the actor whose medium is his body, the writer can't personally narrate his poetry of death, life, and meaning like the ancient, itinerate bards. The words themselves

must act. They must structure themselves *exactly right* (the right words in the right places—Swift) to embody the rhythm of a writer's passion and insight as they integrate into a single entity. No literal, physical three-dimensionality is allowed on paper. King, the archetypal actor-storyteller, writing for the ideal 'audience' that crowds his mind, scratches at his words to express *everything* he's envisioned and lived as a single thing. Unlike a 'literary' author such as R.L. Stevenson or Thomas Hardy, who trace their stories with balance, color, and mood for a composed audience that actively imagines the story, King writes like a robust actor who mesmerizes a passive yet excitable audience. Neither approach is wrong, they're different.

[END ASIDE. RESUME NARRATION:]

For King, the theme is the plot of *Storm of the Century*. He develops, or grows, the community of Little Tall Island into an independent entity with its own assumptions, laws, rewards, and punishments, and from the first the plot stirs within the structure of this unique whole. Within Little Tall's dynamics, the figure of the Constable embodies and symbolizes order, although he's horrified to see that the community's assumptions about good and bad closely reflect the Creature's. The people of Little Tall with their 'solidarity' and 'No secrets on the island', except what they hide from themselves, is the ground of conflict. And the children are the contested prize. Using the storm to isolate them, the Creature that is and symbolizes perversion ruthlessly slaughters a few island folk to trumpet its power and spawn fear in the community's heart. Then it waits. It waits because it knows the type of people who make up the Little Tall community: people squandering their lives in drifting. The citizens sit out bad times, sticking together, getting by, huddling for protection from the outside and the truth, just as they cherish a twisted sense of integrity in their deceit triumphant. But the Creature turns their world on its head, progressively stripping away their defenses and hiding places, forcing them to confront the sickly values squirming beneath their conventional façade. The community doesn't want to see—Why us? they whimper—but their hearts know that Little Tall Island is a house of lies and murder.

Evil must stir in secrecy before it emerges into the light, so the Creature chose this community because it can keep a secret. Values out of kilter, where fair is foul and foul is fair, it found this lake of perversity where it can happily swim by following the smell of their 'sin'. A force of negation, of selfishness, of cynicism, it enjoys the pain of others. It mocks his victims with 'Born in sin, come on in.' It chides the cynical Robbie with 'Hell is repetition,' implying that hell is an unimaginative, repetitive life

just like Robbie's. Like a satanic protection racket, it offers to do them a 'favor'. However, if they refuse, they'll die. Like the TV preacher pushing helplessness in the face of terrible forces, as well as the commercials exploiting those fears for profit, the Creature uses sin as unavoidable fate in order to manipulate and bamboozle the island folk into sacrificing a child. But the habit of force was its will, torment its food and pleasure. It can rain wealth as easily as death. Indifferent parents anywhere in the world would happily sell their children. The Creature was a bully, however, with no other purpose than continuation, a liar that fed on the torture of others and was always hungry. It didn't care which child it stole as long as the theft prompted the deepest pain. So, it chose the Constable's son, and then rigged the lottery, for where's the sweetest torment except in the good?

The Creature is familiar with the Constable's type, 'A good boy to the end, that's you', and even briefly debates the idea of goodness. Goodness is illusory, it scoffs, a delusion behind which cowards and clever people hide. The mass of people are vicious and the truly good a futile few. This is the Creature's biggest lie. Feeding children, protecting and educating them; the beauty of flowers and animals and people; scholars furthering mankind's understanding and craftspeople its grasp; the evolution of humanity's premier creation, civilization, with the incalculable totality of work that creates and recreates it, despite the selfishness of countless short-sighted, intransigent, covetous fools throughout history, all this merely hints at the vastness of the relational complex of the body of life—without which evil would starve—that nurtures both itself and the Good. The creativity of life reasserts itself incessantly because life *is* assertion. By definition, lacking positive relation to anything outside itself, when there is nothing to parasitize, evil withers at birth. It cannot grow—aggression and dominance alone increase its size and power, and that temporarily—so viciousness is the futile dead-end, not goodness. The tragedy, though, is that the island folk chose evil long before the creature appeared, seeing evil as a powerful fact, therefore as necessary and unchangeable. Not only do they accept corruption as part of their character, it is expected by those like Robbie, whose spoiled son mirrors his arrogant father. By force of habit, they drill these vicious, whimpering justifications into the children, and so they engrain the cruelty of selfishness into the each generation until it is practically impossible to eliminate from the community's personality, because it lies under conscious thought in the assumptions which compose their feelings. But there's another lie: the Creature lied by omission when it spoke of Roanoke Island, for why destroy them unless they were

defiant? They said no. Nothing infuriates selfish children and selfish monsters more than to be told no. Also, the Creature cannot manipulate good people, since it has no leverage over them. He eradicated them for denying his wants. However, goodness itself was untouched. And since the Creature couldn't shake the Constable's faith, it had to undercut his authority by spreading fear throughout Little Tall and fanning the worst of its 'character' into white heat.

[PAUSE NARRATION. AUTHOR'S ASIDE:]

The attempt to construct a formless 'reality' of details is a disease of the modern world. Adopting the scientist's inductive vacuuming of facts, artists have abandoned intuitively tracing out feelings to form. All details are supposed to have meaning, or no meaning, as you like, so whatever details the writer, filmmaker, painter, et al, vomit on their canvases are as significant as a Rorschach inkblot and their interpretations just as arbitrary. Mental states trivial or disturbed are vivisectioned, *ad nauseum*, like a patient who repetitiously babbles to a psychologist without point and continues therapy without hope of cure. King is not a prose stylist and suffers from overwriting, e.g., *Storm of the Century* is at least two hours too long and loses impact because of it. However, though ruthless pruning to the heart of a tale may be something he either never learned, or can't execute, he does avoid subtle writing that defines nothing while it dances about an empty barrel to the applause of fools. Despite the overwriting, King's work is not shapeless, for a habit of personality restricts his explorations. At bottom, he studies particular characters in unique situations. The limitations of a defined situation mark off its outline by 'detailing' where it is *not*, at the same time that positive references, i.e., the selective procedure of writing, fill in and assert *what* it is. The game of chess, for example, is unique because its rules limit what can and can't be done, while establishing both how the game is played and its outcome, either a win or a stalemate. Because of the shape its rules create, it is unique to anything of its type, and as long as those rules assert themselves consistently and persistently, it will remain so. King's integrity in following his own 'rules of order' through this two-fold dynamic creates the worlds about which he writes, and how people *act* in their world *defines* what they are. Each world defines the possibilities of personal action, but these very limitations assert themselves as the shape of possibility, such that the direction of the plot interweaves with the action of the characters to reach an inevitable end, like water poured through a funnel, all of which embodies the theme or idea of the work. If an anonymous man blinds himself, vagueness kills its memory; Oedipus blinds himself

into eternity.

[END ASIDE. RESUME NARRATION:]

Storm of the Century is the spirit of Greek myth. It is basic to the human endeavor. Like Greek drama, it sparkles with observations about the human situation and delves into fundamental questions about value. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, the title character is shamed and tormented into madness. The drama poses the question, what is sanity? Is it sane to live and die according to the unquestioned conventions of the status quo, or is there some better way? *Oedipus Rex* shows a young man blundering through life, who unknowingly kills his father, marries his mother, and begets two children who are his sisters. Discovering the truth, he blinds himself in temporary madness. Again, Sophocles asks, when does one stop drifting and challenge appearances? In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, like the child sacrificed in *Storm*, Agamemnon cuts his own daughter's throat to appease the gods and, as in *Macbeth*, wrecks the balance of the moral world, such that the gods must intercede to bring justice back into the world. Aristophanes, the satirist, wrote perhaps the bitterest of the Greek dramas. In *Lysistrata*, the women of the city go on strike for equal rights denying sex to the men until they agree. Instead, accustomed to continuous war and various other disastrous stupidities, the men just want to drift as they've always done. Eventually, driven by their own selfishness and not by any glimmer of justice, they succumb to the women's demands. In *The Clouds*, a merchant pays sophists to teach his lazy son how to cheat his father's creditors. Parents don't want their children taught anything they can't use to skin their neighbor. Unfortunately, the son learns his lessons so well that he throws his father over and leaves him moaning in the gutter. Euripides' most famous drama, *Medea*, deals with a witch and the very embodiment of ambition, Jason, who having taken all she can give him, throws Medea over for a sexy twit with a powerful father. Medea sacrificed everything for him: she has no home; she betrayed her father; her magic made Jason rich and powerful. And he steals her two sons while throwing her out. In revenge, she kills his bride and her two children. In killing her children, Medea did the only thing she could to save them from becoming copies of their perverted father, the corrupt Jason. No reasonable person could sanction the slaughter of the entire population of Little Tall to save one child. Few people could do as Medea. But one in our time who did was a prisoner with her two children at Auschwitz, where, to save them from horrible, inevitable deaths, she smothered them. But another concern perhaps is of greater weight than one child against a community, and that is the continuance of the Creature's cruel slaughters of humanity. The thing will

die. It wants the child to continue its 'work'. The question becomes, do we sacrifice our community in the hope that it cannot bend others to its wants and will die without an 'heir'? However one answers, sickened by a place out of joint and without value, the Constable dares say that, as practical as the community's actions seem *under the circumstances*, the sacrifice is wrong in principle and will be forever wrong, that it should never have been necessary to make such a choice.

[PAUSE NARRATION. AUTHOR'S ASIDE:]

The dramas of ancient Greece were a functional aspect of their society. Rooted in a religious tradition, the yearly ritual involved the comic and tragic aspects of life mixed with both vulgarity and the highest tenors of poetic feeling. The ritual embraced the entire spectrum of life. The best of the dramas tackled big issues to create a catharsis, an expulsion of daily life's trivial worries and relaxation of its petty obsessions, giving an enlarged and deepened perspective which allowed proper assessment of the problems faced by the whole community. All significant public ritual seeks to bind and to enhance, instilling the community with the needful courage to act by their ideals. And, in time, ritual and custom become law. Unfortunately, at all levels of social development, when people trust nothing but the personal and 'stand for' one another as a way to protect themselves, they become either timid herd animals running from everything, or predators feeding on the timid. Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, a bombastic, self-important real estate salesman much like Robbie, is in fact a timid sheep who lives in fear of losing his reputation. By contrast, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* kills herself rather than be blackmailed into becoming a mistress—a 'sheep'—to the predatory Judge Brack. *The Yellow Star*, a nonfiction compilation of the Holocaust, catches stark, familiar reality in a nazi official's report to Berlin on the 1943 'evacuation' of Dutch Jews for extermination.

'Eight Aryans laid themselves open to prosecution on account of *one* Jew, whom they had supported and hidden among themselves for weeks...'

Conditioned by the glorification of predation and self-interest, this incredulous fool was astonished that anyone would risk their lives for a fellow human being. From Western Europe's hundreds of millions, the nazis could not have identified those millions of people for extermination without significant numbers of authorities and citizens cooperating in the mass sacrifice of their neighbors—men, women, and children. In King's *Storm*, without the aid of the community of Little Tall, the perversion that called itself 'Linoge' could not triumph.

[CONTINUE NARRATION. EPILOG:]

Sacrifice forestalls the need to think or change: people prefer to let a problem fester until catastrophe hits, then dodge it at someone else's expense. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Hector's wife suffers the death of her husband in battle with dignity according to the rules of her time and class. But then, against custom, the victors execute her small son to prevent his return as an adult to revenge his father's death. She is stunned at the blasphemy, for they have smashed all the laws of man, class, and gods by which she lived. In the end, though, there is nothing she can do but grieve. The Constable's wife also lived by her petty society's rules, stated and implied, so it couldn't possibly be *her* child that would be taken—she had always had love on her terms. Like Beth in *Ordinary People*, who pretends to be strong but actually exists in a fragile, artificial world, she can't handle mess. She wants comfort and comfortable lies. And then her child is stolen. When her husband divorces her to escape the corruption that writhes beneath the facade of community, she marries his best friend and—because she can't handle mess—pretends that her child was lost in the sea. She had cooperated in her child's desolation, and all that's left for her is to grieve, and drift.

Most of King's works concern moral issues such as drifting, corruption, and hypocrisy, although his work typically explores and criticizes these problems from the standpoint of his theological convictions. *Storm of the Century*, his novel for television, is Stephen King's philosophic fable. It develops a new dimension by raising an ancient and relevant issue, one which the greek writers explored profoundly. What, asked Aristophanes, does society do with its children? Ignore them? Let them be exploited and demeaned at will? Or give them haphazard and contradictory training, so they continue the haphazard and contradictory paths taken by their parents and their parents' parents? Or is the community supposed to teach children to make decisions according to what is right, and then help them act according to those decisions, instead of sleazing along the easy, ultimately destructive path? These are greek questions because they were the first to address the problem of education systematically and in detail. Although formal education predated the greek civilization, mostly for the well-to-do and upper classes, they were the first to seriously examine the problems of how and what children should be taught, and their work laid the foundation for Western civilization that grew into *what is* Western education. What they established is that education is first and foremost a matter of growing living value, and that society must be organized

around the development of children. The best writer on education, or how society shapes people including its children, was Plato. He systematically extended his educative analysis from a religious base and intent that had been shaped and seasoned by vast learning, unsurpassed philosophic grasp, and artistic sensibility. His point of view was inherently one of seeing the whole. In essence, Plato suggests that, before the "real" world begins its influence, the young should be brought thoroughly into relation with the world of value until it grounds or reshapes their character, so that they may feel what is wrong and what is right, even if they can't articulate or defend it intellectually. This was not intended to create geniuses or great leaders; it was intended to create good people. In our day, working through his sensitivity to what is right, wrong, good for the growth of life, as well as bad for it, Stephen King has grasped that the larger world of value—that which enhances the growth and fruition of life—is an essential foundation for building a moral world. Throughout his work, he uses contradictions in characters and plot to forcefully imply the crucial importance of what can be called 'consistency with the Good'. With *Storm*, he joined the universal debate: whether society as a whole moves in the direction of plans and intelligent action; or wallows in the filth of indifference while things fall apart, then stupidly reacting in fear and blindness. Life and education and goodness are not abstractions. They lie at the active, physical base of civilization and its assumptions about what makes a human being, and what doesn't. That thing Stephen King imagined and called 'Linoge'—or was it Little Tall?—was not human, and neither is the child it rears.

[END NARRATION. STOP TAPE.]

© 2003 William B. Brown