

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



Central Department of English
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal

URL: www.cdetu.edu.np

Research Article/ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v6i2.68744>

The Interplay of Fantasy and Physics in King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*: A Physicist's Perspective

Amrit Prasad Joshi , Kamal Sharma, PhD 

Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxim Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal

Article History: Submitted 05 May 2024; Reviewed 08 Jul. 2024; Revised 12 Jul. 2024

Corresponding Author: Kamal Sharma, Email: kamalsharmabaglung@gmail.com

Copyright 2024 © The Author(s). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s). The work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). www.cdetu.edu.np



Abstract

The paper aims to explore the existence of many worlds and their interconnections in Stephen King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*. It draws on theoretical physicist Brian Greene's concept of parallel universes. It also draws on the theoretical concept of Albert Einstein and Nathan Rosen as they have discussed in 'Einstein-Rosen Bridge Theory'. This theory is commonly known as wormholes that connect different regions of space-time, enabling the journey from one world to another and back. Greene's theoretical underpinnings, proposing a vast ensemble of universes with distinct properties, find expressions in the narrative. King's narrative, exemplified by, among others, Jake's revival in Mid-World after a presumed death in a New York car accident, explicitly embraces the idea of parallel universes, each with unique physical laws that influence the concepts such as life and death. The narrative unfolds across disparate worlds, echoing Greene's theoretical mapping of parallel universes, each governed by its unique set of physical laws and realities. In the narrative, the exploration of multiverse concepts employs fiction's imaginative license to investigate interconnected universes and the potential for transcendent journeys through the cosmic fabric. The theoretical backdrop finds resonance in the novel where characters navigate within the four-dimensional continuum, mirroring the speculative nature of multiverse theories. By intertwining the world of fantasy with the hypotheses of physics, the paper discusses the connections between seemingly disparate realms. This perspective bridges literature and theoretical physics, offering a compelling exploration of the speculative landscapes of parallel universes.

Keywords: Fictional realm, gunslinger, multiverse theory, parallel universes

Introduction

The myths and truths of fantasy and physics have long captivated the human mind, resulting in the rise of narratives that fantastically traverse the borders of the

known and unknown worlds. The examination of the crossovers of the magical laws of fantasy and the dynamics of astrophysics in Stephen King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* (2003) stands as a beacon in the realm of soft science fiction. The incidental and accidental happenings in the lives of characters that come across the gunslinger open up the avenue in fictional realm to expose and explore the parallel universes. This paper explores the interplay between fantasy and physics in the novel, with especial attention to the hypothetical notion of parallel universes and their interconnections. Drawing inspiration from the general idea of both celestial dynamics and multiverse theory, the authors have drawn upon the hypothesis outlined in Brian Greene's *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* for the scrutiny of the existence of parallel universes, which are out of the visible range of one another. The inestimable distance between the universes has reserved our knowledge within our own universe making the journey from one to another impossible till now. Albert Einstein and Nathan Rosen proposed the existence of bridges through space-time in the hypothesis forwarded by them. The hypothesis "Einstein Rosen Bridges," or commonly known as 'wormholes' links two different points in space-time by creating a shortcut between them. Einstein's theory of general relativity mathematically claims the existence of such wormholes that reduce the distance between two points in space-time. The route created by such wormholes is considerably short for the journey from one universe to another. This paper delves into the journey of the characters from one world to another along the miraculously constructed route in *The Dark Tower*. The instances of mysterious travel include Nort's journey to the land of death before being resurrected by the man in black, and Jake's journey to Mid-World following his death in New York. While applying the laws of physics to corroborate fantasy events may seem illogical and absurd, this paper aims to spark the discussions in both seemingly disparate realms of science and literature. Thus, this is an endeavour to propose a unique perspective that miraculously yokes the world of fantasy with the hypothesis of physics.

Literature Review

King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*, initially published in 1982 and later revised in 2003, has elicited diverse critical perspectives. Richard Fuller, in his review of the book in *New York Times*, offers an insightful examination, portraying the narrative as centered on a gunslinger "who wears two guns as he pursues the man in black" seeking revelations about the elusive Dark Tower. Fuller depicts the gunslinger as a man who "earned those guns in combat, armed only with a hawk, with his larger, older, presumably stronger teacher; that his land is called New Canaan, and that his name is Roland." Highlighting the novel's genre-blending nature, he notes the fusion of "the western" and "the science fiction." Fuller's 1989 assessment of the original edition is critical, describing it as "undergraduate-style goulash" and "merely sophomoric," as he had no idea of its later revision into a more mature literary work. Michael Agger, in his review, delves into the genesis of the novel, citing King's inspiration from the 1966 film "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." Agger mentions King's attempt to imitate Tolkien as he notes the step "to combine a western with a fantasy like J.R.R. Tolkien's." We agree with Agger's sentiment that "with a little more preparation" the novel "might have turned out better," especially, in the treatment of fantasy and multiverse. "Tolkien created a beautifully constructed interlocking world," whereas, according to Agger, "The world of 'Dark Tower' is insane and lawless." The essence of this paper is in the exploration of parallel universes, reflecting on King's narrative.

Viewing the novel as a fortune telling story, Emily E. Auger writes, "Fictional cartomancy scenes tend to emphasize the trumps, and the Dark Tower series is no

exception. . ." (186). The novel consists of cartomancy indicating the viability of multiple worlds. Auger further mentions that the novel is a trajectory of distant worlds with fantasy, horror, and other genres. He sees the move from ". . . a semi-feudal post-Arthurian-roundtable world to increasingly distant hinterlands, filled with images and events suggestive of fantasy, horror, occult, tech-noir, western, and other genres" (195). Auger clarifies that King's protagonist Roland Deschain travels across the worlds. His reminiscences of previous lives indicate a possibility of multiple verses.

Roland's journey through multiple worlds, traversing realms such as In-world, Mid-World and End-World, shapes an astonishing adventure. As noted by Abigail L. Montgomery, "Roland completes this physical and mental journey, opens the door of the final room, and finds himself cast back to the desert where readers meet him at the beginning of *The Dark Tower* — the story's final, shocking revelation is that the quest is cyclical . . ." (109). Roland's odyssey across the multiple worlds finally takes him to find himself back in the desert, indicating the cyclical nature of the quest. Similarly, Leonard G. Heldreth's emphasis is on Jake's revival in Mid-World following his presumed death in New York. As noted by Heldreth, Jake "remembers the death that brought him to the gunslinger's world and anticipates his death in that world" (6). The less intelligible account of Jake's multiple deaths prompts Heldreth to raise intriguing questions about the nature of mortality and the plausibility of parallel universes. At the same time, *The Dark Tower* has contributed to promoting King's reputation as 'The King of Horror,' and a large number of readers, critics and scholars have stressed the elements of science fiction, fantasy, and even gothic writing.

Though science and literature seem to deal with disparate realms, both offer unique perspectives on human condition. Science takes the empirical route while literature explores the complexities of human experience and emotion. Charles Percy Snow was a scientist by training and a writer by vocation. Reflecting on his experiences straddling both worlds, he remarks, "I have spent the working hours with scientists and then gone off at night with literary colleagues. . . . I christened to myself as two cultures" (2). Snow, in 1959, had a worry that "the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups" (3). The contemporary voices like the theoretical physicist Brian Greene seem to address Snow's concern. In *The Hidden Reality*, Greene hints at a possible fusion of scientific theory and literary imagination making passing references to the works like *The Wizard of Oz* (ch. 1) to support the idea of multiple worlds - yet to be verified empirically. Likewise, King's *The Dark Tower* offers a fertile ground for exploring the connections between these two realms. In addition, this paper endeavours to uncover the subtle undercurrents of physics woven into the fantasy narrative, creating room for interdisciplinary reading and understanding.

This study explores how the principles of physics, specifically those of parallel universes and wormholes, can be employed within the narrative framework to evoke the possibility of alternate realities commonly depicted in the fantasy genre. By examining the viability of scientific hypotheses in fantasy literature, particularly through an analysis of *The Dark Tower*, this research adopts a multidisciplinary approach. Based on the incorporation of scientific hypotheses into fictional narratives, this paper addresses the following research question: How does Stephen King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* employ the hypotheses of physics, such as parallel universes and wormholes, to construct a narrative that leads to the possibility of alternate reality often mentioned in fantasy?

Multiverse Theory: A Theoretical Perspective

Literature has long borrowed, accepted, and cemented the idea of the existence of another world. Hell and heaven are the worlds or the universes known to the readers

irrespective of their religious adherence. Hell and heaven have so far not been declared as a constituent of our universe that started with the Big Bang. Sometimes, the authors of fantasy and science fiction create a world, which is not the world where they dwell. But, the physicists have long worked to hypothesise the possibility of another world where they or the species like them can dwell. The theoretical physicist Brian Greene explores hidden dimensions and their implications for knowing the underlying fabric of cosmos. He stresses the viability of parallel universes which have remained unimaginably distant from one another. Michio Kaku and Max Tegmark have delved into the idea of parallel universes and their relationship to the universe known to them. Albert Einstein and Nathan Rosen see the possibility of the (potential) existence of wormholes that connect two immeasurably distant universes in the so far known cosmic fabric. These wormholes construct a shortcut route making the journey from one to another possible. In the light of and with reference to these ideas of physics, this paper examines the possibility of the existence of many worlds or universes in Stephen King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*, and the journey from one to another. One clearly observable instance is the death of Jake in New York and his revival in another universe mentioned as Mid-World. This paper sees the route from New York to Mid-World from the perspective of the possibility of wormholes. Thus, this paper offers a game changing perspective in reading a work of literature by bridging the realms of literature and theoretical physics.

King's *The Gunslinger*: Critical Analysis

King's *The Dark Tower*, at different intervals of time, explicitly mentions the existence of "In-World," (10) "Mid-World," (13) and "End-World" (54) when the protagonist the gunslinger, also known as Roland Deschain, is on his pursuit of the man in black. The novel begins with the iconic line, "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed" (3). The gunslinger's interactions with various people on his way to the Dark Tower hint at the existence of parallel universes. Notably, Jake revives in Mid-World following his presumed death in New York, suggesting a crossing between worlds. Likewise, Nort, resurrected by the man in black, has knowledge of his destination upon his death, referring to a connection between different realities. Similarly, the gunslinger experiences the auditory hallucinations of Allie, a girl he had shot dead in a town of Tull, indicating the survival of a dead person who may not physically be visible to others. Likewise, the gunslinger's odyssey from Gilead of In-World to and across the Mid-World, in search of an encounter with the man in black, whom he believes has the knowledge of the Dark Tower, suggests the possible communications across the universes. These four instances in the novel underscore the complexity of multiple worlds or parallel universes and the enigmatic nature of the journey between them. Together, they provide the compelling evidence of the viability of parallel universes. The issue of the parallel universes in the novel is discussed at length following a brief review of the issue in the realm of science.

Reality designates the state of things as they actually are. When viewed traditionally, the universe or the world (in the context of this paper) means all existing matters and space: with nothing outside it. And reality is usually understood as what is found in the universe. But, in his groundbreaking book *The Hidden Reality*, Brian Greene claims, "the common experience is deceptive," (Preface) for the people living in the age of quantum mechanics, especially, at "revealing the true nature of reality" (v) because of the possibility "that our universe is not the only universe" (ix). Further, reflecting on the meaning or nature of reality, Greene, in his book *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, writes, "physicists such as myself are acutely aware that the reality we observe . . . may have little to do with reality, if any, that's out there" (ix). The people have long

trusted and accepted the reality because “observations are all we have” (ix). Mentioning a claim made in the past regarding the idea of more than one universe, Greene states that it would be “a contradiction in terms” (*The Hidden Reality*, ch. 1). He claims with certainty that “the major developments in fundamental theoretical physics – relativistic physics, quantum physics, cosmological physics, unified physics, computational physics – have led us to consider one or another variety of parallel universe” (Greene ch. 1). For further simplification of the meaning of universe, he opines, “*parallel worlds or parallel universes or multiple universes or alternate universes or the metaverse, megaverse or multiverse* [italic original]” (Greene ch. 1) can be used synonymously. “...quantum mechanics is only one of the numerous ways,” writes Greene, “that a conception of parallel universes emerges from modern physics” (ch. 1). But he admits that “the subject of parallel universes is highly speculative” (ch. 1). Though the notion of parallel universes is considerably speculative in science, it has a foundation that is likely to be cemented.

Another prominent contemporary voice in multiverse theory is Max Tegmark, a Swedish-born American physicist. In his book *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality*, he opines that different mathematical structures could correspond to different universes within a larger multiverse framework. “Eternal inflation predicts that our Universe,” writes Tegmark, “is just one of infinitely many universes in a Level I multiverse where everything that can happen does happen somewhere” (153). Tegmark suggests that our universe is one of the possibilities of what we call the universe. Similarly, Michio Kaku, a popular American physicist among readers, listeners, and viewers, draws upon Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg’s analogy involving radio waves to clarify the hypothesis of multiple universes. Though there are “hundreds of different radio waves being broadcast from distant stations” (170), one can “listen to only one frequency at a time” (170). He writes, “. . . in our universe we are ‘tuned’ into the frequency that corresponds to physical reality. But there are an infinite number of parallel realities coexisting with us in the same room, although we cannot ‘tune into’ them” (170). Just as a radio tunes into one frequency at a time, we can acknowledge one universe at one point in space-time continuum. In line with the earlier quoted physicists, Alex Vilenkin states that there are many universes, each with its own distinct physical laws. Comparing the universe with an inflating balloon linked to the exterior by a contracted ‘wormhole’, he says that the observers in the inflating bubble universe “will never find out that their universe has a boundary and that there is another big universe beyond it” (68). As an inestimable distance separates these universes, the journey from one to another has not been possible. Albert Einstein and Nathan Rosen, in 1935, tried to address the exclusion of singularities from the field theory. While considering the great distance between these universes, akin to sheets of paper for illustrative purpose, they had a hypothetical “bridge” (73) connecting these universes. This connecting bridge is commonly known as wormholes that significantly reduce the distance between the realms that remain beyond the visible range, creating a potential path for traversal.

With the glimpses of the parallel universes hypothesized in the realm of sciences, the paper shifts to King’s *The Dark Tower*, which presents the parallel universes through the concepts of the “In-World” (10), “Mid-World” (13), and “End-World” (54). Though not distinct, these worlds exist alongside one another, each with its unique traits. The gunslinger, currently in pursuit of the man in black in Mid-World, reveals that he hails from In-World, as he mentions, “Long Ago” (10). However, he seems to evade the discussion about the place as King writes, “his face suggested this was a topic better not pursued” (11). Though unintelligible at first, the narrative hints at

the gunslinger's successful journey from In-World to Mid-World when he says, "*I am in the West, Cuthbert, he thought wonderingly. If this is not Mid-World, it's close by*" (209). Mid-World is a vast and desolate landscape, where deadly and unbelievable things happen. End-World is a nightmarish realm that the man in black does not "wish to know" (226). He adds, "To speak of the things in End-World is to speak of the ruination of one's own soul" (226). These worlds exist alongside where the characters' traverse from one to another has been shown. Akin to Greene's idea that "an observer at the center of any patch [called the observer's cosmic horizon] can have interacted with only things lying in that same patch" (Greene ch. 2) due to the "speed of light" (Greene ch. 2), the worlds in *The Dark Tower* seem to have evolved and existed independent of one another. Nort's Knowledge of the world where he had been following his death in the town of Tull underscores the notion of the viability of multiple worlds existing simultaneously.

Jake's journey to Mid-World from New York is a vivid exploration of parallel universes in *The Dark Tower*. Delving into Jake's memory to unravel his past, King writes, "Jake ... going downstairs with his bookbag ... he is on the street ... a big blue 1976 Cadillac ... breaks Jake's back ... Jake dies" (86-88). Jake is now alive somewhere in Mid-World. This journey transcends mere physical distance, delving into the aspects of metaphysical realms. Echoing the idea of the journey through the 'wormholes,' Jake's journey becomes a metaphor for the interconnectedness of the parallel universes. When the gunslinger questions the boy about his identity, the latter replies: "My name is John Chambers. You can call me Jake" (78). The readers have a natural sense of surprise and shock when Jake (or a certain version of Jake) expresses his concern to the gunslinger in a thoughtful mood by saying, "I thought you were going to shoot me" (78). Jake dies in New York to revive in Mid-World and again fears death. Jake in the novel says, "He killed me the first time and you're going to kill me this time" (150). The multiple deaths question the idea of life and death further deepening the mystery of one universe or more.

Roland Deschain, known as the gunslinger, in the novel, seems to have travelled to Mid-World from Gilead of In-World. When a man named Brown interrogates the gunslinger about his place of origin, the latter reveals that he came to Mid-World from In-World "Long ago" (10). The gunslinger hails from the once the glorious city of Gilead in In-World. Born in the family of the noble gunslingers of the line Eld (158), Roland, to attend to the job of protecting the realm and upholding the values of his order, has journeyed from Gilead to Mid-World. The gunslinger is after a man in black who, he thinks, can provide him with the information about the Dark Tower. To bring the changes that occur in the two worlds to attention, King writes, "the gunslinger had lost most of his time sense" (162). Driven by a desire to arrive at the Dark tower, the gunslinger embarks on a perilous journey across the desolate landscapes and treacherous terrain. Thus, King suggests the possible communications across the universes that exist parallel. However, the gunslinger's odyssey to Mid-World is not merely a physical trek; it is also the spiritual journey representing an exploration of human spirit and the eternal truths for enlightenment. Through the quest of the Dark Tower, King suggests the possibility of communications across the parallel universes, intertwining the physical and metaphysical dimensions of the gunslinger's journey.

In the town of Tull, the gunslinger encounters a young woman named Allie (alternative name, Alice), who reveals the details of the man in black's visit and Nort's resurrection. She tells him that Nort has the knowledge of the land of the dead that he visited before the man in black resurrected him. Further, Nort is ready and anxious to tell her things of the world if she says "Nineteen" to him. Her craziness, following the

utterance of the word, makes her ask the gunslinger to kill her to take the weight of guilt and remorse from her, assuming the end of hers. But, later, when he is inside a hut that looked like the stable, he has auditory hallucinations: he hears a voice that is like that “of Alice, the woman he had stayed with in the town of Tull” (95). The voice makes a cautionary remark to the gunslinger, “While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket” (95). In spite of Allie’s death, her presence continues to haunt or help the gunslinger. Distinction cannot be made with ease whether the gunslinger has travelled to the land of the dead to hear her voice or she has come to his land. Her company to the gunslinger serves to underscore the blurred boundaries between life and death suggesting the overlapping realities. It manifests the idea that the actions taken in one universe can reverberate across the others.

Nort, a mysterious man in the town of Tull, is described by Allie as a man who has lived there as far as she can “remember” and who does not “steal” (27). When Nort dies, it is reported by Allie, “He died in his own vomit with that grin on his face” (28), and remains so until the man in black intervenes. The man in black, in an attempt of resurrecting him, begins “to spit into Nort’s face” (34). The man in black performed uncanny actions on Nort’s body until he “drew a deep, dry breath” (35), and later “there came a moment when his eyes opened” (35). She hears the sound that “Nort had made when he came back to life” (35). Nort is believed to have died, only to be inexplicably resurrected by the man in black. She wonders about his thoughts in his “reanimated brain” (35). She speculates where he had been while dead, and if he brings any memories from that experience to his current world. Nort’s journey to the land of the dead and back blurs the line between life and death, suggesting the parallel realms. His resurrection serves as a compelling perspective on the possibility of multiple realities.

Conclusion

The analysis of King’s *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* has revealed a fascinating integration of physics within the framework of fantasy literature. The application of the hypothesis of parallel universes in the novel leads to the exploration of intricately woven elements of fantasy and science. The reflection on the multiverse theories and their associations with the novel direct the readers’ attention to a unique perspective that prompts deeper contemplation. Drawing from various scientific theories on parallel universes and wormholes, this study has demonstrated how the novel portrays the interconnected universes and the potential for traversal between them. It showcases how a fictional narrative can embrace the scientific concepts to bridge seemingly disparate realms of knowledge. Within the novel’s coexisting realities, ‘In-World,’ ‘Mid-World,’ and ‘End-World,’ the characters navigate worlds governed by the physical laws of science and the magical laws of fantasy. The explorations of the gunslinger’s journey to Mid-World from In-World, Nort’s passage to the land of the dead and back, Jake’s revival in Mid-World following his presumed death in New York, and Allie’s posthumous warning to the gunslinger contribute significantly to the novel’s exploration of the ideas of parallel universes and wormholes. Through this analysis, this paper has opened doors to new realm of thoughts and inquiry, inspiring further examination of the dynamic interplay between literature and theoretical physics.

Works Cited

Agger, Michael. “The Dark Tower: Pulp Metafiction.” *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/books/review/the-dark-tower-pulp-metafiction.html>

- Auger, Emily E. "Tarot and T.S. Eliot in Stephen King's Dark Tower Novels." *Mythlore*, vol. 36, no. 2 (132), 2018, pp. 185–214. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26809311>.
- Einstein, Albert and Nathan Rosen. "The Particle Problem in the General Theory of Relativity." *Physical Review*, vol. 48, 1935, pp. 73-77. [//journals.aps.org/pr/pdf/10.1103/PhysRev.48.73](https://journals.aps.org/pr/pdf/10.1103/PhysRev.48.73)
- Greene, Brian. *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality*. Knopf, 2004.
- Greene, Brian. *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*. Knopf, 2011.
- Fuller, Richard. "In Short, Fiction." *The New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1989, section 7, page 22. <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/08/books/in-short-fiction.html>
- Heldreth, Leonard G. "Rising Like Old Corpses: Stephen King and the Horrors of Time-Past." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 2, no. 1 (5), 1989, pp. 5–13. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43310204>.
- Kaku, Michio. *Parallel Worlds: A Journey through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos*. Doubleday, 2004.
- King, Stephen. *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*. Penguin, 2003.
- Montgomery, Abigail L. "Gunslinger Roland from Yeat's Towers Came(?): A Little-Studied Influence on Stephen King's Dark Tower Series." *Mythlore*, vol. 37, no. 2(134), 2019, pp. 103–16. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26809357>.
- Snow, Charles Percy. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Tegmark, Max. *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality*. Knopf, 2014.
- Vilenkin, Alex. *Many Worlds in One: The Search for Other Universes*. Hill and Wang, 2006.