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APPROACHING *Shane*

What I love most about teaching *Shane* is that it is almost infinitely adaptable: it can be taught from any number of angles, to almost any group from middle school through graduate school, briefly or at length, as an allegorical piece or a genre piece or a masterpiece of storytelling. What I love about *Shane* is that so many different people will agree, though their definitions of the phrase may differ, that it's "a really good book." It's also, of course, a classic. The parents of my students are likely to have read it for pleasure or studied it in school—and they, too, will remember it as *a good book*.

Shane is a good book, first of all because it is a good story told by a fine storyteller. The story itself is familiar, of course, as any watcher of late-night television movies can tell you, and connections between it and its predecessors will yield fascinating discussions, opportunities for higher-order thinking, and a natural avenue through which to teach the concept of genre.

The Western novel is as old in concept as the Civil War era. Pulp novels, so called because of their cheap wood-pulp paper, presented simplistic and repetitive plots, one-dimensional characters, melodramatic scenes of heroic derring-do (usually in service of a pristine heroine), and a philosophy as superficially satisfying as Mom and Apple Pie. Law and order always won out against the outlaw; the good guy always got the girl; and America was always lauded as a land where men are men, and right is decided by a showdown in front of the saloon.

And yet, *Shane* is clearly more than a reheated stew of stereotypes. This distinction is ripe territory for discussion. Once students are familiar with the stereotyped elements of the Western novel, they can begin to find the ways in which *Shane* rises above that designation. True, the world of *Shane* is a male-centered world, complete with wide open spaces, sixshooters, and cowboy hats, but Marian, the single female character, presents such strength and wisdom that her presence in this world provides a balance lacking in many otherwise similar Westerns. Moreover, the clash of good and evil, while portrayed clearly and dramatically, contains enough subtlety to allow more sophisticated students to read *Shane* without dismissing its message as shallow or "unrealistic." On the storytelling level, then, *Shane* combines a compelling plot, a nearly mythic Western setting, a cast of characters with complex human feelings and familiar human failings, and a narrator who knows how to transmit both mystery and message. What more could a reader ask?

In a slightly larger context, the American story in all its one-sided wonder is set forth in these pages. The wealthy cattleman, with his voracious desire for open range, his bullying wealth, and his hired gun, comes up against that seemingly endless army of American individualists, represented here by the homesteaders who want no more than a piece of land, a fair shake, and enough time to build a future. In these pages, Law and Order confronts the Lawless Frontier. These two ideas seem rooted in our soil, and in this Old West, it turns out, there's not room enough for both of them. And so the story of Fletcher and the Starretts becomes the story of two American dreams in conflict.

If the story is distilled to its mere outline, other lessons emerge. John Gardner claims that there are really only two stories in the world: a young man goes on a journey, and a stranger comes to town. As suggested by that statement, this two-story world is a male world in which the well-being of whole

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communities is dependent upon the good will and godlike abilities of a single man—the stranger. The plot line of *Shane* is classic: the stranger rides into town. The town recognizes on some preverbal level that with the stranger come blessings and bounty. Soon, however, a threat emerges almost as if it is the mirror image of the bounty the stranger has brought. The evil force becomes stronger and stronger until, in a climactic confrontation, the stranger defeats the evil, and the town/land/world is saved. But the stranger must now ride on, presumably to visit blessings upon another town/land/world. Henceforward, his name is legend to the people whose lives he has saved. This centuries-old plot is as old as Oedipus and as recent as Clint Eastwood's movie, "High Plains Drifter." It's a powerful story, and one worth examining in the specific example that is *Shane*.

Thematically, *Shane* is a story of a child finding and modeling himself upon a hero figure, of a family affirming what it means to put down roots, and of a man whose past is inescapable and whose future is an essential loneliness. Sacrifice and redemption, love and the denial of love, gentleness and courage—all are dealt with through the characters' confrontations with evil and with their own weaknesses.

For young readers, an additional advantage of *Shane* is the clarity of its craft. Stylistically, *Shane* introduces almost every technical device one might want to teach a beginning-high school group. It's a perfect book for teaching "how to read a book," because it is manageable in length, limited in plot complications, almost journalistic in style, and thematically rich.

Finally, for comparison purposes, an award-winning film is available. Because the movie version contains visual imagery and symbolism that is very different from that found in the novel, and because the characterization of the young boy is objective, not subjective, it will provide opportunities to discuss issues of translation from print to film.

BACKGROUND

Author

Jack Schaefer's background is a fascinating one that throws much light on the novel. First, and most surprising, he himself was not a Westerner. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1907 and attended Oberlin College, where he pursued interests in history, creative writing, and especially Greek and Roman literature. As a graduate student in English at Columbia University, he discovered the rebel in himself (he had the gall to consider writing his master's thesis on *film*), left school, and shortly began his career as an editorial writer—in Virginia. It was while working for the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* that Schaefer began to read extensively about the West. It is interesting that Schaefer claims that he read historical accounts only—none of the myriad “bad” Western novels; if this is true, it would seem that he practically “invented” the genre independently.

In 1946 Schaefer completed *Shane*, originally titled “Rider from Nowhere.” It was first printed in three installments in *Argosy* magazine. In 1953 the story was made into a popular movie. In 1954 *Shane* appeared in book form, receiving favorable reviews for a first novel. More novels about the West followed, but *Shane* is certainly the best known of Schaefer's works.

Narrative Point of View

The narrator in *Shane* is the adult Bob Starrett, who relates (in the first person) the events of one formative summer of his childhood, the summer the stranger came to town. Schaefer attempts, by use of childlike wonder and hero-worship, to capture both the mystery of the man Shane and the mystery the adult world presents to all children. Occasionally the narrator makes a statement to remind us of the distance he has traveled since that summer—“It was not until years later . . .” —or to remind us of the limitations of the child's experience—“I did not understand the glance that passed above me. . . .” The attempt to be true to the child's observations while suggesting the adult's interpretations is quite effectively accomplished. A measure of the success of the young narrative voice is the loss one feels upon viewing the movie and losing the interpretative point of view.

Setting

The several settings of *Shane* are important. As in most Westerns, the land is so powerful a presence as to become almost a character in the novel. Here we have wide open spaces dotted with homesteaders, a river with disputed water rights, range land that may or may not be fenced, a ragged town in the making, distant mountains, and striking sunsets. Nature offers everything necessary for a man determined to build a home for his family or for a man determined to make a fortune, in return demanding a stubborn faith and a ruthless fidelity.

The civilized settings are no less a mixed blessing. Among the buildings of the growing settlement are a schoolhouse and a general store; also present, though, is the saloon where a man's mettle is sure to be tested. The settings are stereotypical and often heavily symbolic. The “true men” in this novel work to push back a frontier that seems endlessly able to provide tests for both the wild-hearted, hot-headed gunmen of the West and the stubborn men who come to forge a civilization out of the wilderness.