

Literature as a looking glass

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Perhaps it is the aim of every storyteller to leave their reader a little changed after having read the tales they so carefully weave. But how many authors can actually achieve this? Leaving their audience with a story that broadens the mind, asks deep questions, and probes into the way we work is not easily done. The ability to move us from one plane to another is what distinguishes a really great writer from a storyteller. For many, Stephen King is such an author. Some may say even more so because of the use of his genre of the fantastical, the horrific and the gruesome. Exploring the darker parts of our psyches, and our everyday lives, he manages to lead us along the path to contemplate difficult social questions. Always leaving them open for us to determine the answers for ourselves.

In a comparison of his two works, *The Long Green Mile* and *Hearts of Atlantis*, we can explore his use of the fantastical as an opportunity to raise thought provoking social questions. Although both books, also interestingly both written as a series, are very different in nature, they share the common theme of finding the extraordinary in ordinary life. Each book finds the hero that seems to hide in everyday circumstances while at the same time forcing us to look at several of the factors that shape our lives, for the good or the bad. As mentioned by Jonathan Davis in his work, *Stephen King's America*, "While some of his stories focus more on one area than others, a close reading of his works will often show that King seldom fails to include a wide view of American society." (Davis)

The Long Green Mile is a prime example of King's use of storytelling as social commentary. In the book the main characters are themselves symbols of the society in which we live. John Coffey, an innocent man sent to death

row for a crime he didn't commit. Is it because he is simple, or because he is black? As Sharon Russell states in her critical review, *Revisiting Stephen King*, "While Coffey dominates the action, he remains an enigma, a symbol of a good beyond understanding." (Russell)

And his mysterious gift to heal is starkly contrasted with William Wharton's ability to destroy. Just as Coffey is the symbol for good, so is Wharton the symbol for evil.

Moreover, the underlying theme that resonates throughout the book is just that; the nature of good and evil. And Stephen King shows us how that battle rages in many arenas of our lives. One obvious question is that of racism. Was Coffey found guilty because he was black? Another character in the story, a white business man, was released from a murder he obviously committed. There was nothing to point to Coffey but the fact that he was found with the girls. Was racism a factor?

Also, the question of the death penalty raises its head several times. Delacroix, a horrible man, suffered death in the electric chair. However, the brine filled sponge that was supposed to make the electrocution quick and painless was omitted purposefully by one of the jailers. This resulted in a horrific and torturous death by Delacroix. Was his suffering justifiable?

Delving a little more deeply we probe the seemingly senseless death of Janice who had just escaped death by the miraculous hands of Coffey. After all the trouble and the wondrous miracle that saved her life, to die in a bus accident leaves lingering questions of human justice versus divine justice.

Similarly, in *Hearts of Atlantis* King dances the fine line between fantasy and reality, although in a different way. Although some of the characters are recurring, we are able to see them forming the opinions and beliefs that will be the basis of their actions in the future. Also, again King explores the realm and power of childhood. In *The Long Green Mile* Coffey is used and explored as childlike and also, interestingly, he is the one that has the mystical and unquestioned healing power. In *Hearts of Atlantis* we see the children as they are and watch their struggle with reality and fantasy defines them.

Those transitional moments are very apparent in the first story of Bobby and Carol. Bobby was an everyday hero, Stephen King style. The ordinary fabric of society, hiding hero's in every thread. However, King goes one step further by reintroducing the few key characters throughout a string of seemingly unrelated stories. By doing this he shows us the connectivity of individuals. How the actions we make today have huge impacts on others and shape their lives. Bobby's bravery inspired Carol's courage to stand up for what she believed later in life.

By looking closely at the lives of the characters we could see how the past could have drastic effects on the future. Although with the case of Carol it empowers her, it is not the same for everyone. This is illustrated in the story, "Blind Willie". Bill relives each day trying to resolve the regret for his past actions. We see the old baseball glove of Bobby's that Blind Willie uses to collect the money he earns as a broken Vietnam veteran while his wife and family believe him to be a successful business man busy at the office. Willie tries to find answers by living a double life.

Moreover, King uses the opportunity to stir up a social commentary on the effects the Vietnam War had on people specifically and then society as a whole. He uses the series of stories to look at different aspects of reaction. From the earliest stages, when war is just playing in the background, as in the case with Bobby in "Low Men in Yellow Coats" and then also with young adults drifting in and out of adulthood and drafting such as was portrayed in "Hearts in Atlantis".

Although it seems to be a simple peek into the issues that concern college aged kids trying to leap into adulthood, the story sells its moral in the end, as stated by Russell, "The story ends with an incident long after the main events—a reunion between Pete and one of his college friends. No matter what happened, they both agree that they tried during that period. They were not the big heroes, but they did something—just as Bobby saved Carol but failed with Ted. King suggests that any positive action is important even if it is not truly heroic." (Russell)

Davis, Johnathan. *Stephen King's America*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1994.

Russell, Sharon. *Revisiting Stephen King*. Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.

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In this way, everyone has the opportunity to be a type of hero, no matter how small the action, the effects can be long lasting.

While an extensive look at any author's works reveals a repeating and recurring theme or message that appears to be central in their writing, it is Stephen King's use of his particular genre that continually draws in his readers again and again. The parallel of the darker side of humanity with the fantastical opens windows to explore and question the reasons we think, act and believe as we do. Perhaps it is just that use of the darker and less explored side of humanity that holds such a fascination.

Russell comments, " The ongoing battle in King's fantastic universe to follow the beam and keep the world from falling apart is mirrored by later actions in the real world." So, in addition to his use of the genre to explore our social fabric, his consistent use of our interconnectedness and how the past affects the present are major recurring themes. By playing on our fears and opening up our minds to the impossible, we are able to look openly at issues that affect our lives without judgment, and perhaps emerge a better person.