

# The price of imagination in horses of the night



Margaret Laurence's story 'Horses of the Night' centers around the meeting and interaction between Vanessa -a girl looking back on her childhood- and Chris -her cousin who lived up north. Throughout the text the character Chris utilizes his imagination to fabricate false opportunities to overshadow his destiny. Chris becomes increasingly desperate as his opportunities to escape Shallow Creek dissipate, and because of this Chris consciously decides to take opportunities that won't lead anywhere, or ones that don't exist.

Through the character -Chris- Margaret Laurence develops the idea that a sensitive individual may utilize imagination to combat a hopeless reality.

Initially Chris utilizes his imagination to drive him forward to what he believes to be a better life. On the outside Chris leads the audience to believe that he is hopeful of the future as he strives to become a civil engineer, however, the audience soon comes to see the impossibility of such a task, and with the line "quite good isn't good enough" Chris's fate is seemingly sealed. Chris time and time again uses his imagination as a substitute for optimism and ignores anything that may suggest his failure; "When the bludgeoning words came, which was often, Chris never seemed, like myself, to be holding back with a terrible strained force [...] He would not argue or defend himself, but he did not apologize either". For example, when Chris finds out that he will be unable to attend university, instead of heading back home, he "cashed in his ticket, and thumbed a lift with a truck to Winnipeg" where he wrote to his mother but gave no address, hence, no way to find him. During Chris' time at the Alien Lake with Vanessa the audience sees the ways in which Chris is different from his family living in Shallow Creek, and that his motivations for desperately attempting to leave Shallow

Creek is because there is a lack of growth, of anything, Shallow Creek was only ever good for hay and Chris didn't want Shallow Creek's legacy of 'ordinary', 'average' or 'not good enough'. Chris was an existentialist and his biggest fear was to die without doing anything memorable. He speaks of the possibility of there being a God, and if there was, then what a cruel God it would be; " People usually say there must be a God, because otherwise how did the universe get her? But that's ridiculous. If the stars and planets go onto infinity, they could have existed forever, for no reason at all. [...] Look – what's the alternative? To believe in a God who is brutal. What else could he be? [...] It would be an insult to believe in a God like that". This is when the audience witnesses the overbearing nature of Chris' imagination, how it makes his mind run, and how he has no one around him to understand; " I used to talk with Ewen sometimes. He didn't see what I was driving at, mostly, but he'd always listen, you know? You don't find many guys like that". This becomes the point when the audience sees the burden of imagination, and the price of his imagination soon follows.

As the story progresses and Chris's opportunity of a higher education begin to fade away, he turns to other opportunities to prop open the door. He decides to become a traveling salesman in the hopes of saving enough money to eventually be able to go back to university; " But a guy could work at it for a year or so and save – right? Lots of guys work their way through university like that". Chris becomes hyperaware of the reality that the longer he's out of school, the harder it will be to go back. And so, the next two times Chris is seen he is selling magazines, then knitting machines.

However, amid the Great Depression not much can be saved, and Chris is

forced back to Shallow Creek. As Chris continues to struggle a desperate plea comes from him at the alien lake. There, Chris seems on the fence between two actions, his silent plea to Vanessa comes in the form of things she didn't have any awareness or knowledge of and Vanessa resented Chris for facing her with them. And his internal battle concerning the war. During Chris and Vanessa's conversation Chris mentions that "[he] can always think about things [himself]." Chris states that he doesn't "actually need anyone to talk to" and then he proceeds to talk about the story Ewen had told him about the war. In this moment Chris isn't talking to Vanessa, he had been aware enough to know how impossible it was for Vanessa to comprehend his problems at her young age with her lack of understanding. At this moment Chris is trying to convince himself of two things; the idea that war is similar to a road trip "It would be a job, and you'd get around to see places" and that war wasn't as bad as Ewen had made it out to be, "If there's a war, like it looks like there will be, would people claim that was planned? What kind of God would pull a trick like that? And yet, you know, plenty of guys would think it was a godsend, and who's to say they're wrong?" and in the end, Chris convinces himself that fighting in the war would be more digestible than staying at Shallow Creek.

Throughout the text Chris's imagination provides him hope and a sense of stability and control. However, when his optimism and imagination don't allow him to see a bigger picture, they are what lead to his downfall. Chris's motto of holding a goal in your mind until it becomes your reality is partly what leads to his desperation and eventual retreatment into his mind. At the beginning of the text the audience is introduced to Chris, a respector of

persons who disregards painful words and never talks back nor apologizes. Chris was a person who would make “fantastic objects” for the amusement of Vanessa and himself instead of doing homework and who imagined riding horses in criss-cross ranch. His imagination brought him a sense of joy and gave him a goal; “‘Where will you go?’ [...] ‘Winnipeg, to college’”, and offered him ways to leave Shallow Creek; “Well, we’ll have to see. After I get through high school, I won’t be at Shallow Creek much.” imagination was Chris’ catalyst, and it caused a reaction. Imagination allowed Chris to retreat, to keep on hoping and avoid the reality he was desperately running from. Imagination is both what saved him and destroyed him. Without his imagination, Chris would be simple, just like the monosyllable husbands, no substance, no need for something greater. Imagination allowed Chris to strive forward but all that was ahead was a great wall, and he hit it full force. At the end of the text the audience finds out Vanessa had received a letter from Chris, inside it said that “they could force his body to march and even to kill, but what they didn’t know was that he had fooled them. He didn’t live inside it anymore.” Vanessa had reflected, “thinking of all the schemes he’d had, the ones that couldn’t possibly have worked, the unreal solutions to which he’d clung because there were no others, the brave and useless strokes of fantasy against a depression that was both the world and his own”. Chris’s imagination had indeed made him brave, and foolish, and hopeful, and desperate, his imagination had brought upon a price he was not prepared to pay, and in the end, Chris retreated, retreated as far as he could and allowed his imagination to consume him. Chris had been pushed and pushed into a corner, the walls built from his imagination, and had -in a way- decided his fantasy was better than any reality.

Margaret Laurence utilizes Chris to tell the story of a boy with grandiose dreams and no opportunities. With a lack of opportunities and with no lack of imagination Chris improvises to hold onto his dreams in the hopes of one day escaping Shallow Creek. However, as the story progresses Chris slowly treads into the territory of self-aware delusions, his actions to escape increasingly becoming unreasonable, impossible, and dangerous. *Horses of the Night* stands as something like a cautionary tale, the idea that utilizing imagination as a primary way to cope with a dismal reality may result in the fabrication of false hopes and stave off acceptance and negate an ability to see the reality.