

"FALL FROM INNOCENCE: STEPHEN KING'S "THE BODY" BY KORINNA CSETÉNYI

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Pigeon-holed as the ultimate Master of Horror, Stephen King is a far more versatile writer than many of us think: his collection of four novellas, *Different Seasons*, published in 1982, attests to this fact. They are not typically King stories in the sense that they are not explicitly horror stories and they do not have recourse to the use of the supernatural, but they do contain elements of worldly horror.

The focus of my paper is "The Body;" it was also adapted to the silver screen and the resulting film, *Stand by Me* (1986), won sensational appreciation, both from fans and movie critics. King's name was downplayed, and it does not appear until the final credits roll. So most people walked away from the movie theatres without knowing this was a piece written by the [K]ing of horror. Yet this atypical story also reveals his strengths as a writer: the careful delineation of character, together with small idiosyncrasies and foibles, his ability to capture the dialogue of preteen boys, his depiction of the Maine landscape, his convincing recreation of childhood and, underlying all, his criticism of small town, rural America and the structure of the family, with its uncaring parents (Beahm 1998, 74). "The Body" is a bittersweet coming-of-age story, maybe the most autobiographical work ever published by King. Heavily influenced by incidents from his own childhood, it gives a real taste of what it was like to grow up in rural America during the 1960s. What sets this novella apart from other works, exploring this fuzzy territory wherein a boy enters manhood, is the central experience which initiates these youngsters into maturity: confrontation with death.

The four boy protagonists, all of them twelve years old, set out to find the corpse of another boy who had been hit by a train. More traditional coming-of-age stories usually emphasize the sexual aspect of the maturation process: the first kiss or seeing a naked girl for the first time, or plucking up enough courage to buy the first condom. The theme of love is not missing, however; it remains an equally powerful and sustaining force, even if it does not manifest itself in male-female relationships. Instead, we learn about the love that exists between friends, and that special bond which connects children of the same age and sex. King attributes a special

significance to this period in humans' lives and suggests that something is irrevocably lost when we cross the threshold to maturity: "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve" (King 337).

The subtitle of the novella is "Fall from Innocence," which has clear resonances with William Blake's poetry, and we immediately associate it with its counterpart: experience. The characters in the book experience something which will usher in their own maturity. It is not by chance that King chose late summer and early autumn as settings for his story: these are the times of ripening, maturation and harvest. The boys, in a similar fashion, will also reap their harvests, and what they gain during this expedition will change their lives. They are also about to start a new phase in their lives in the academic sense; junior high school is awaiting them and they will have to decide whether they are going to orient themselves for college prep courses or stick to the trade-oriented shop courses.

The four friends, who have a regular meeting-place in a treehouse, all have emotional scars. Gordon Lachance, the protagonist, comes from a more socially-elevated family than his friends, but this is still a far cry from being the 'ideal' personality. He had a brother, Dennis, 10 years his senior, a football hero, who was idolized by his parents. Gordie often felt neglected and ignored; his parents only seemed to care about Dennis. Gordie found a very apt metaphor for his condition when he chanced upon a book entitled *The Invisible Man*: he identified with the hero of that work. "Nobody ever notices him at all unless he fucks up. People look right through him. When he talks, nobody answers" (King 306). The boy often felt the same when, during dinner, his parents concentrated only on Dennis, overwhelming him with questions about his latest match, or the girl he was dating, but not giving any attention to Gordie. It is small wonder that he experienced a crisis of identity: do you really exist "if no one acknowledges your presence" (Biddle 1992, 85)?

A couple of months before the story begins, Dennis is killed in a jeep accident. His parents are devastated by the loss, and seem to forget about Gordie. They withdraw into themselves, are totally submerged in their grief, and Gordie becomes even more alienated from them. The poor boy does not even blame his mother for her behavior, since her "only kid was dead" (King 304). What is even more disturbing for Gordon's psyche is that he thinks that somehow he is responsible for the terrible grief visited upon his family. He is convinced it would have been

better for everyone if he had been the one to die, not Dennis. He has recurring nightmares, in which his brother reprimands him for staying alive: "*It should have been you, Gordon*" (309). For Gordie, the main lesson of the adventure is that death is often accidental, and happens for no apparent reason: "[s]ome people drown, that's all. It's not fair, but it happens" (429). He will eventually overcome his guilty feelings, escape from the shadow of the brother and have his sense of identity reinforced.

Chris Chambers, the rebel leader of the gang, comes from a no-account family. Everyone expects him to live up to the poor reputation, well-established by his delinquent brothers and his abusive, alcoholic father, who regularly beats him. He desperately tries to avoid being typecast, but the entire community seems to work against his desire. "Chris came from a bad family, all right, and everybody thought he would turn out bad ... including Chris" (303). When the milk-money disappeared from his class, everyone assumed he had stolen it. It is only during the trip with the other boys (aimed at finding the dead body) that Chris confides to Gordon that he really did steal the money; he later repented his deed, and took the money back to the teacher without having spent any of it. Yet the money never surfaced. Who would have believed him if he had told on the teacher, an impeccable figure of authority, who grabbed her chance and spent the money on herself? Gordie is flabbergasted when he hears the story, but he recalls the new skirt the teacher was wearing the week after the theft and this convinces him of Chris's veracity. Losing your illusions and being disappointed by persons you once respected (such as teachers or parents) come as a hard blow to a child's developing psyche, yet are an integral part of growing up.

Teddy Duchamp's father is confined to a mental asylum, but his condition was not detected early enough. When Teddy was 8 his father decided to teach him a lesson by holding the child's ears to the hot top of a stove. Teddy's disfigured ears and hearing impairment stand a constant reminder that sometimes the person entrusted with a child's well-being might also present the greatest threat to it. Teddy is not very bright, similar to the last boy in the group, Vern Tessio, who lives in constant fear of his elder brother. Vern is the one who overhears the conversation between his brother and a friend of his concerning the whereabouts of a dead body. The radio reports a missing boy from a nearby town, a boy called Ray Brower, aged 12, like the protagonists. Ray went to pick some blueberries and apparently lost his way in the woods. As it

later turns out, he was hit by a train and his body was found, only by chance, by Vern's brother. While the older boys hesitate about notifying the police, the young ones – once they learn about the location of the body – decide immediately to set out on this big adventure. Somehow, they all understand the significance of this enterprise, as they claim: "I feel like we *hafta* see him" (350); "this was a *big* thing" (398); "we *deserved* to see it" (391). The boys weave a carefully planned web of lies to escape the attention of their parents (which attention was never that intense in the first place), and tell them they are camping out in Vern's back field and set out on their journey of discovery. What they never consciously face is that they are going to meet death "face to face." A confrontation with mortality awaits them, all the more poignant for them because the victim is a child of their age.

King in this text presents a rather dark view of society, full of mean, hypocritical and weak adult figures. Since they do not provide the moral and emotional support which these youngsters need, it is necessary for them to establish non-familial bonds. In fact, their tree-house functions as a "necessary refuge from the irrationalities of Castle Rock parents" (Reino 1988, 131). This journey of discovery takes them away from their homes. For these boys, home is not the loving, nurturing place of the ideal childhood, but a place where drunken fathers and aggressive brothers threaten their daily existence. Home is also presented as a limitation: certain epithets are attached to them which they would like to shed. Teddy will always be considered "the son of a looney", Chris is "expected" to become a trouble-maker (Heldreth 1987, 65). Not all of them will be able to break out of these moulds, but this journey marks a watershed in their development.

Arthur W. Biddle sees the adventure of these boys as the quintessential example of the mythic journey in which the hero has to undergo different trials in order to return as a new man (84). The archetype of the journey underlies a series of tales and mythological stories, where the hero goes into the outside world, is put to the test, faces certain challenges and then comes back. King admitted that he was influenced by the book entitled *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell (Magistrale 1992, 3). According to Campbell, the underlying pattern of the mythic quest and the standard plot of the hero's adventure are exemplified by the processes of separation, initiation and return (Magistrale 1992, 30). The separation phase in King's text takes place when the four boys leave the security of home and treehouse and cross

the town limits to set out for uncharted territories. A dump that lies on the edge of the town marks the boundaries of their known world. This is the place where Gordie has to face his first test. Trespassing is prohibited, yet the boys enter to get water from the pump. Then Gordie leaves to buy some food. On his return, he decides to cross the dump again, to shorten the road. By the time he has walked half of the distance, he realizes that Milo, the dump-keeper, has arrived with his mythical dog, Chopper, who was "the most feared" (King 333) dog in Castle Rock with legends stating that his owner taught him to attack certain body parts. "Chopper! Sic! Balls!" (333) was the most dreaded command in the imagination of the boys. When Milo notices Gordie, he and Chopper start to chase him. Gordie's vivid imagination spurs him to run for dear life, and thus he manages to climb the fence before the dog could get him. When he looks back at his pursuer, he receives his "first lesson in the vast difference between myth and reality" (342): Chopper is only a common mongrel dog, not the "hellhound" (342) he was made out to be by the kids in town. Yet the dog and Milo, functioning as threshold-keepers and the guardians of borders, fulfilled their tasks in this mythic journey. They represented the first obstacle to the hero, who had to cope with the situation on his own. After the successful completion of this first task, the boys proceed further.

Next, they have to cross a narrow train-bridge, high above Castle River. Chris's question, "Any pussies here?" (353), sets the task in the context of bravery and daring, as if it were a test of masculinity. Halfway across the tracks, Gordie thinks, "[I]f I went back, I'd be a pussy for life" (354). They have almost reached the other side when he hears a train coming from behind. It is a bit like being pursued again, this time by a mechanical creature instead of a living one (Biddle 1992, 89). He has to run for dear life and he does not look back while being chased because he does not want to see this life-threatening entity. At the last minute they jump off the tracks, and this nearly fatal event has a strong impact on Gordie, who says that "I was alive and glad to be" (King 359). His will to live is strengthened and he is physically exhilarated by what he has just undergone. As Biddle points out, Gordie discovers here a new sense of wholeness, thanks to this trauma (89).

After a well-deserved rest, during which Gordie entertained his friends with one of his stories, they decide to camp for the night. The account, embedded in the main story, illustrates Gordie's role as a "community storyteller" (Badley 1996, 35). He performs on demand; his

friends ask him for a story, and he obliges. Characters often find their calling and “discover their identities as writers” (ibid.) through telling stories to friends. King places a lot of emphasis upon the oral nature of the situation. Gordie is interrupted by the other boys who pester him with silly questions and comment upon his narrative choices, telling him that his story sounds “pretty stupid” (King 362). This gives a real sense of community and audience participation; we are constantly reminded of the presence of the other boys, even though the principal narrator is Gordon.

The next episode, which helps him on the difficult road to maturity, he experiences alone, without his friends. After the night spent in the woods, Gordon is the first to waken up at dawn. He is sitting on the railroad tracks when a roe deer appears and starts to crop nearby. He is completely absorbed by the beauty of the moment. “I was frozen solid,” (389) Gordie utters. King’s description of Gordie’s feelings of awe, wonder and astonishment might be the most delicate passage of the entire book. “What I was seeing was some sort of gift, something given with a carelessness that was appalling,” (ibid.) he continues. He keeps this Edenic experience to himself, as if he were afraid his friends would ridicule the delicate, feminine feelings evoked in him. Later, he remarks that “for me it was the best part of that trip, the cleanest part” (390) and the sensations awakened in him were so strongly imprinted on his mind that later, in adult life, he often returns to this memory in times of trouble.

This encounter with the deer weighs more than the bravery and machismo involved in looking at the corpse (Reino 1988, 130), because it exerts an influence upon the soul of the boy, not upon his body. The spiritual dimension of the episode is further supported by the fact that the deer might be interpreted as an emblem of the soul, as it appears in the biblical Psalm 42: “As the deer pants for streams of water,/so my soul pants for you” (vv. 1-2). Gordie’s soul is awakened, and this condition is “essential for the tests that are yet to come” (Biddle 1992, 92). Later, the other boys wake up, and they continue their travel and come upon a pond. Surface appearances are deceptive; this is another lesson which they have to learn. Under the smooth, cool surface, the pond is full of bloodsuckers. When the boys get out of the water, they discover, to their horror, that they are covered by leeches. Screaming and jumping about, they get rid of the otherwise harmless creatures. When Gordie thinks he has cleared himself of them, he discovers “the granddaddy of them all clinging to my testicles, its body swelled to four

times its normal size" (King 393). Pleadingly, he turns for help to Chris, who only gapes in horror and then throws up, in a reaction of fear. Again, Gordie has to face the menace on his own: he pulls loose the swollen leech which bursts between his fingers with his "own blood" running across his palm "and inner wrist in a warm flood" (394). The deed has so strong overtones of self-castration (Heldreth 1987, 70) that it is more than an adolescent boy can bear; he faints and falls to the ground, as if dead.

According to Biddle, the hero must die in order to be reborn. Therefore, this supreme test, where Gordie's sexuality was threatened and where he had to shed sacrificial blood (93), was a necessary step in completing the process of his development. After the leech episode, readers witness the birth of a higher mode of personality (ibid.). All these tests may be seen as various rites of passage, which the hero needs to undergo in order to leave behind the previous stage of life, to achieve a new identity and become (more) mature. The fact that they are following train-tracks also reinforces the idea of development: "[t]here's a high ritual to all fundamental events, the rites of passage, the magic corridor where change happens. [...] the rite of passage is a magic corridor [...] Our corridor was those twin rails, and we walked between them" (King 399).

When they finally find the dead body, what they come face-to-face with is their own mortality, in a sense. Death is no longer an abstract term for them; and Ray's non-existent future life is summarized as a series of "can't, don't, won't, never, shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't" (405). Gordie needs to look him in the face to prove to himself that it was not he who died. Ray's body helps him digest the experience of death and dying, something he was unable to do when his brother died. His maturity is achieved through the confrontation with, and understanding of mortality (Evan 2005). At this point in the narrative, the older boys arrive, and a clash follows – over the 'ownership' of the dead body. After some verbal insults, the fight is decided by the firing of a pistol, which Chris had stolen from his father. With the help of this phallic gun, the young ones succeed in making the older boys retreat. Thus, they prove their masculinity. Though later they decide against carrying the body back with them, they clearly depart the scene as the victors. The hero's initiation phase is completed, and now he can return home. When they get back to town, Teddy and Vern separate from Gordie and Chris, foreshadowing the end of the four friend's union. A few months later, Gordie remarks that Vern and Teddy

“just drifted away” (King 428). It is implied that they will be true heirs to their parents and brothers. They do not have the moral strength to break away from the well-established codes and values of the Castle Rock society (Magistrale 1988, 93). So, the end of the summer puts an end to their friendship, not just to their innocence.

However, Chris and Gordie develop a “mutual support system” (Magistrale 1989, 85) and their friendship becomes stronger. Gordie makes Chris realize that he has “the potential to leave Castle Rock and escape the pattern of failure” (Magistrale 1989, 84). He starts to tutor Chris, who will eventually enroll at a university. This one-time loser finds enough strength of will to make his dream come true, and to break out of the confining limits of his home town. Chris, in turn, recognizes Gordie’s talent and urges him to write, something which proves to be a genuine mode of escape. The boys feel they no longer have anything to do with Castle Rock values, and their bond becomes “an alternative to the sterility of their families and the larger corruption of their community” (Magistrale 1988, 94). In a sense, they become each other’s parents. As Chris remarks to Gordie, “kids lose *everything* unless somebody looks out for them and if your folks are too fucked up to do it then maybe I ought to” (King 378).

Gordie has ambitions to become a writer and “The Body” is also about his development as a future author. He is also the narrator of the story, which frequently jumps forward and backward in time. In the manner of Charles Dickens’s character, Pip, there is the older, mature Gordon, recounting his singular summer adventure. The adult perspective occasionally intrudes into the narrative, as when he criticizes his juvenilia. The fact that the gang’s one-time storyteller ends up becoming a successful writer helps him deal with the strange experiences of his childhood. He feels that writing can offer some kind of control over life’s chaos; when the raw experiences of life are shaped by a writer, he creates order over the disorderly elements of life (Heldreth 1987, 72). King emphasizes this by Gordie’s feeling “a kind of dreadful exhilaration in seeing things that had troubled me for years come out in a new form, a form over which I had imposed control” (King 323).

A few years pass, and Gordie receives the news of the death of Chris, who is accidentally killed in a fight. He is so badly shaken by the news that he needs to relive that past summer. Up until then, Gordie had told no one about the happenings of that weekend, but now he needs to confront his childhood episode in order to become whole again. Sometimes, the fears of

childhood continue to haunt the adults, so he needs to go back and relive those experiences (Winter 1989, 127). Gordie realizes that “understanding the self requires understanding the past” (Heldreth 1987, 71). However, digging up treasured memories and sharing them are not easy tasks. He claims that

[t]he most important things are the hardest things to say. [...] words diminish them – words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they’re brought out. [...] And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you’ve said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. (King 289)

When he returns in memory to that summer of 1960, Gordie finds in himself and in his experiences, the stuff of storytelling. Through reliving the happenings of that weekend, he retrieves the past (Heldreth 1987, 73), looks in its mirror, and writes a story unlike previous ones, which reflect the suffering and guilt felt by his younger self. The final story, “The Body”, is his testament to “the power of honesty, courage, and love” (Biddle 1992, 96).

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