Dolores Claiborne Short Guide

Dolores Claiborne by Stephen King

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

King's greatest strength as a writer has always been deft characterization.

In a novel that is staged through the monologue narration of one character, King has an undeviating sense of Dolores's inner character. As she tells her life — at her own pace, despite the impatience of the police — readers are invited into the increasing richness and complexity of her courage. She steadily narrates to us her life, loves, omissions, sins, and motivations. Cantankerous, scatological, profane, and fiercely maternal, she is also earthy, vivid, goodhearted, believable and compelling.

Through her authentic voice — unvarnished, uncultured, agonized and unforgettable — Dolores Claiborne emerges as almost heroic.

By comparison, Joe St. George, her husband, is cardboard cutout of a loutish, insensitive drunkard. He is physically abusive, voyeuristically interested in his compassionate daughter, and emotionally destructive of Dolores and Selena's mother/daughter relationship.

The only positive images of Joe which Dolores remembers for us were very early memories of their courtship and early marriage, memories which, in retrospect, become ironic.

Vera Donovan, in comparison to Dolores, is a soured and tragic figure.

Like Dolores, she realizes that "men have accidents all the time." She is also an independent woman who has made a painful decision to murder her husband and spends the rest of her surviving or finally not surviving her own actions. Her husband's infidelity is an unspoken secret in their marriage, but his death in an auto accident is a great relief to her. However, her son and daughter blame her for the infidelity and the accident. A year later, her children die in another auto accident.

Vera spends the rest of her life creating stories about her children as if they were alive, yet estranged from her. As Dolores explains, Vera is a bitch because she is obsessive, exacting, and pathologically angry. She is also sly, vicious and punishing. But ultimately, she is a pitiful, disintegrating, lonely woman, who is losing her mind and is afraid to live or die. Despite Vera's increasingly mad behavior, Dolores admits she still has some affection for Vera: "I felt something for that bitch besides wanting to throttle her. After knowing her over forty years, it'd be goddam strange if I didn't." And Vera has reciprocated Dolores's loyalty with restrained affection, by reading between the lines of Dolores's domestic nightmare and helping with her family problems as much as her sense of propriety would allow.

Social Concerns

While in Dolores Claiborne King does not dabble in direct social criticism and mainstream attacks on male power in society, he nevertheless deals succinctly with issues of feminism, child and spouse abuse, marital relations, and the crushing social restrictions of women in the early part of the century. His approach in this novel is as a storyteller who reveals his social agenda incidentally. Though not as explicit as in Gerald's Game, in its implicit social criticism, Dolores Claiborne has been compared to the Bachman books, in which the horrors depicted in them are psychosocial horrors rather than supernatural ones. Dolores's life, while having taken an ironic turn, has all the gothic fascination of a neighbor's family crises.

Dolores, a strong woman and a survivor of an abusive, alcoholic marriage, is found by the postman at the bottom of the stairs leaning over Vera Donovan's dying body with a rolling pin in her hand. From this moment on, this sixty-five-year old woman stands accused of killing her employer and lifelong friend. But no one can help her with her ensuing legal and personal complications; no romantic companion will ride to her rescue. Constant harassment by anonymous townspeople finally force Dolores into the local precinct for intensive questioning.

However, while clearing herself in the matter of Vera's death, she confesses to killing her husband, presumed drowned in a drunken stupor, some thirty years earlier.

Through Dolores's alone, King narrates the tale of her life and circumstances, in which the issues of child and spouse abuse are raised in a pointedly political fashion. This novel, spanning the 1930s to the 1990s, reflects King's clear historical vision. There is no denial of Dolores's brutal experiences with marital rape, physical abuse and child molestation of her own daughter by a conniving, manipulative father. No white-washing assertion that, "in those days," such things didn't happen to women and girls appears, nor does King soften the description of Dolores's anxiety about her daughter, Selena, her depression, nor her final confession to her mother about her father's sexual predations.

Dolores is unswerving in asking Selena the details of her father's abuse, and it is Dolores who details Joe's violent rage when she told him how she'd gotten back the money he'd stolen out of the kid's college funds.

Dolores's story also reveals the often violent bleakness in the marriages of working class women. As Dolores tries to remember why she loved and married Joe, all she can remember is her high-school daydreams of Joe's forehead: its smooth whiteness against his dark hair, its clear skin. She also recalls that she married Joe because she was pregnant. But the love has disappeared long ago. Dolores also recalls that her father administered "home correction;" in fact, she tends to excuse men generally, on the grounds that it's their job to police and control their wife and children. While her upbringing allows her to believe that while there may be some minimal justification for a husband beating his wife, there is no justification for a man sexually preying on his own

daughter. Therefore, to illustrate the profound impact Dolores's loss of love, King creates a unique image—a contemptuous, staring eye in her forehead—representing her unwavering clarity of vision in her later years and the cold rage she manifests whenever she looks at Joe. Given Joe's treatment of Selena and of Dolores, his murder appears to be justifiable homicide or self-defense. Clearly the police believed her to be innocent, as they do not prosecute Dolores for either death.

Finally, King illustrates the crushing economic restrictions of the time for both working-class and well-heeled bourgeois women. Dolores describes her excruciatingly long hours at low wages for Vera Donovan, her raw, abiding pain while hanging wet sheets to dry in cold winter winds. She expressed fears that Selena's lifelong employment will be as a housekeeper at a hotel. The bitterest pill in Dolores's life is that, while Joe has contributed little to the children's college funds (what do his kids need with college?), his revenge against Dolores is to withdraw their savings without her knowledge and, with the aid of sexist bank policies of the 1960s, to close the children's accounts without the passbook. As Dolores points out, if she had tried to do that, the bank would have called Joe to verify the transaction. Adding insult to injury, the loss of the money into an inaccessible bank account financially traps her on Little Tall Island, ironically precipitating Joe's death.

Techniques

The narrative technique of Dolores Claiborne is very postmodern. The entire novel is an unbroken monologue in Dolores's voice as if it were transcribed from an audio tape that recorded only her. There are no switches into thirdperson, no chapter divisions, and no dialogue in the text or other characters, except as she talks of them. While the police presumably ask questions and request clarification, King's readers must reconstruct them solely from Dolores's unbroken talking. Unlike the stream-of-consciousness novel or interior monologue, this is an exterior monologue through which the character literally speaks herself into being, albeit on a printed page. It is this entirely remarkable voice that creates the historical causes and effects, her dilemmas, actions and suffering. It is her voice which stages the presence of others and through which King indirectly accomplishes his social critique.

The narrative logic of this double tale is that to avoid being tried for Vera's death, Dolores confesses to her husband's death. While this seems illogical at first glance, these tightlywoven events are two parts of one whole story. Dolores summarizes at Vera's passing that her narrative is about "how sometimes bad men have accidents [both Joe and Michael Donovan] and good women turn into bitches [both Dolores and Vera]." These two stories are parallel and intertwined. By confessing to Joe's murder and illuminating Vera's suffering, Dolores hopes to avert the ravages to her sanity from living a double life — a duplicity that destroyed Vera.

Dolores structures her story by starting in the middle, reminiscing, and then climaxing the narrative by describing the deaths of Joe, then Vera.

While the description of Vera's death details the facts as and her emotional responses to Vera's last trick on her, the death of Joe is described in grand style, with horrific details and frightening flashbacks.

This novel is the shortest, least supernatural, and one of King's best works. The story is intelligently and originally plotted; the style reflects a colloquial Maine speech, with sudden bursts of passion contrasted with understatement and the unsaid, consistent with the inflections of a relatively provincial yet astute human voice.

Dolores's honest recollection of the past mixed with self-revelation rings with pain, tranquility and resolution.

The novel confirms that perhaps a male writer can compassionately stage a female psyche and her very own female voice.

Themes

Dolores Claiborne is a telling choice for the name of his heroine. Dolores comes from the Latin "dolor" or "to suffer." Claiborne, her maiden name which she reassumes after Joe's death, is derived from Old English, meaning "born of clay." Both reflect her humble beginnings. This is a narrative of suffering and of weakness or, referring to a dominant metaphor in the novel, of eclipsed lives. Both Dolores and Vera are women who make painful decisions, act on them, and live with the consequences.

Dolores is unimpeded by circumstances in her love for her children.

Typically, King's characters rarely experience parental love, since their parents are usually absent or selfishly preoccupied. Others experience madness and violence from their parents, who in various ways sacrifice their children to their unfathomable and insatiable needs. Dolores also rises above circumstances in her practical, enduring friendship with Vera Donovan. Their first common ground is that they are both vigilant mothers with destructive husbands. After Dolores breaks down and cries about Joe's molestation of Selena, Vera allows Dolores to call her by her first name, and comments tellingly that tragic accidents can be a woman's best friend.

Though they are not particularly warm or confiding, they trust each other enough to consider murder together and confess to each other their deepest fears.

Adaptations

In 1995, Taylor Hackford directed a cinematic Dolores Claiborne, which was adapted from the novel by Tony Gilroy. While the movie has been compared to a gaslight melodrama of the nineteenth century, with a sneering police officer, played by Christopher Plummer, and a wicked villain of a husband, played by David Stathairn, and a troubled daughter, played by Jennifer Jason Leigh. However, Kathy Bates's Dolores is no fainting/wailing victim tied to the railroad tracks. Her performance has been described in this movie as "sweet and fierce, hesitant and determined . . . brushing aside the calculations of the story with the sheer force of her humanity."

Key Questions

The novel has two great strengths that make it accessible to a variety of topics and discussion groups. First is its trenchant examination of various social issues; the second is its focus on the singular character of Dolores Claiborne and the unique narrative style that brings her into being.

1. Vera Donovan terrified Dolores with her hallucinations of haunting dust bunnies and live, creeping wires.

What does Dolores think these images mean to Vera?

2. Examine a passage of Dolores's narrative. What is King's narrative style: how does Dolores express her emotions, her reflections, attitude, or the facts regarding Vera or Joe's deaths? What qualities represented in the passage make Dolores feel real?

3. Examine the newspaper articles at the end of the novel. How do they close the action and conclude the novel? What do you have to infer or add to the articles to make meaning of them?

4. King creates a double narrative of Joe's murder and Vera's death. How are Dolores's and Vera's circumstances and emotional responses similar? Different? Connected? If you consider Dolores Claiborne and Gerald's Game another doubling of a larger narrative regarding women in American culture, compare and contrast Dolores's and Jessie's life. Or Selena's and Jessie's experiences and reactions.

5. Most people are not comfortable with describing themselves. Yet King creates a character that describes herself, her family, her home, community, and employer. How does Dolores create the characters and settings without sounding like a catalogue?

6. Explore the characteristics of oral narratives, folklore and performance.

How does King integrate these qualities into his novel?

Literary Precedents

The plot of Dolores Claiborne itself is rather ordinary; Joe's murder is typical of mainstream fiction regarding marital violence, murder and justifiable homicide. And Vera's death by tumbling down the stairs is not uncommon. But the additional plot element of having the maid agree to finish her off with a rolling pin — and getting caught before she can do — is unusual. However, intertwining domestic violence, a household accident and attempted euthanasia is certainly unique.

King's narrative technique eliminates the "Dear Reader" authorial voice or an omniscient third-person narrator: the voice of the storyteller is primary — it is the story. Critic Roland Barthes describes "speakerly texts" and "writerly texts;" speakerly texts, like oral narratives, are based on the voice and persona of the story-teller. Speakerly texts also have an unusual relationship to the audience, in that the reader must complete the text by filling in the blanks; hence, they become a coauthor or active participant in shaping the meaning of the tale. Readers have to construct context from her words, filling in the sheriff's questions, creating other characters from Dolores's descriptions, and completing the action of the narrative implied in the closing newspaper articles.

Oral tale-telling is an ancient narrative form. Much contemporary postmodern fiction seeks to hide its writerliness, its print medium, by creating the illusion of a voice emanating from a barely-lit and barely-furnished stage — a situation in which there is nothing else but the utterly compelling and realistic sound of a human voice, the origin of all story. Yet Dolores Claiborne is also comparable to genres and writers that experiment with other narrative modes.

By comparison, many novels and short stories have significant passages of monologue or a series of monologists, including the short stories of Grace Paley's and Saul Bellow's and William Faulkner's novels. Whether the monologist is fictional or actual is not an issue with the approach to the text.

This novel could also be compared to genres with a distinctive voice and a specific rhetorical purpose by the author, such as personal narrative, confessional literature, autobiography, slave narratives, holocaust survivor literature, or women's journals and letters. For example, in Elizabeth Dewberry Vaughn's Many Things Have Happened Since He Died, a woman tells her autobiography (not unlike Dolores's) on tape recorder, in the same mode of a confession or legal statement. This literary device also emphasizes the voiced quality of the novel.

Related Titles

Despite its realistic rather than supernatural context and plot, Dolores Claiborne does have a supernatural connection to Gerald's Game. During the total solar eclipse that passed over Maine, on July 20, 1963, while Dolores was watching Joe die in the well, Jessie Burlingame, age ten, was being sexually molested by her father. They both saw each other and knew they saw each other, though they were 165 miles apart. While some critics are disappointed with this "forced" paranormal connection between these two texts, King clearly designed them to be "bookend" novels, with related themes and social issues in women's lives.

Both women lives were eclipsed, overshadowed by horrific acts. When their stories are told 30 years later, they are still coping with these events. The differences in events, circumstances, and age between Dolores and Jessie suggest that careful readers will not conclude with a simplistic comparison.

Another strong woman is Stella Flanders in "The Reach," from Skeleton Crew. While she gives birth alone as the world is overrun with zombies, King makes similar use with the landscape of an island: in this respect the tone, texture, and feeling of these stories is similar. The landscape in both novels functions on literal and symbolic levels. The mainland and island represent self and possibilities, life and death, experience and innocence, the physical and the spiritual, ordinary and extraordinary.

In The Green Mile series, King creates another narrative voice telling his autobiography. Paul Edgecombe also has a clear narrative voice. King describes his perception of Paul: "There were lots of things I liked about it [prison stories], but nothing more than the narrator's essentially decent voice; low-key, honest, perhaps a little wideeyed, he is a Stephen King narrator if ever there was one."

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