Gerald's Game Short Guide

Gerald's Game by Stephen King

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Gerald's Game Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns....4

Techniques....5

Themes....6

Key Questions....7

Literary Precedents....8

Related Titles....9

Copyright Information....10

Characters

Gerald Burlingame, a corporate lawyer, makes only a brief appearance at the beginning of the novel. His "game" of bondage is the catalyst for Jessie's change from a passive, unfulfilled wife to traumatized victim and ultimately, a whole woman. While struggling with Gerald who has handcuffed Jessie to the bed, she accidentally kills him. Left handcuffed at their isolated summer cottage, she deals with increasingly painful memories of sexual abuse at age ten by her father. Her entrapment then forces her to come to terms with her own passivity, unfulfillment, and psychic wounds.

As Jessie struggles with her memories and her fear, voices in her head narrate her pragmatism, her terror, and her lost innocence. In time they become characterized as Ruth Neary, a cynical college friend that Jessie admires, who enacted the social and emotional freedom Jessie craves; as Goody Burlingame, that part of her that is the traditional good wife, submitting to her husband in all things; and as Punkin, the intelligent, hopeful child.

While this could be confused with multiple personality disorder, these voices are not dissociated selves. Rather, her memory and imagination intensify her coping strategy of talking to herself throughout the ordeal. She acknowledges most of these voices as herself, even the orthodox and prim Goody Burlingame. Thus she summons all her resources, ideas, opinions, and memories to repel her father's violation and Gerald's physical capture of her and to find a permanent way out of her grief.

Raymond Andrew Joubert is a persistent and terrifying visitor throughout this three-day ordeal. Though she initially does not believe that he is real, he motivates her to escape by any means possible. Later, she discovers that he is a necrophile, as real as any sexually-violent husband or incestuous father.

Social Concerns

Stephen King's novels have often been dismissed as mere works of fantasy.

Only his Bachman novels have been perceived as socially relevant because they do not rely on monsters or the supernatural for their depictions of evil. However, contemporary commentators assert that King has always been a storyteller who reveals contemporary social issues through a variety of genres. In Gerald's Game, King deliberately subordinates the story to a political/social agenda, and is even ostensibly didactic. But by his own admission, feminist social issues and strong women characters sometimes elude him.

In an interview with Eric Norden (Playboy 1983), King acknowledged that, in addition to his difficulty with describing sex scenes in his novels, he also has a problem with women. His women often are not carefully-crafted, multi-dimensional characters, but stereotypes who merely function as foils or accessories to his male protagonists. In contrast, Gerald's Game is dedicated "with love and admiration to six good women," his wife, her four sisters, and her mother. Through women personally familiar to him, King experiments with feminist social critique.

In the novel he confronts issues of child and spouse abuse, marital pathologies, and crushing social restrictions against women—all through the character of Jessie. He insists that abusive relationships develop when girls and women experience incest, marital rape and other forms of abuse against women, becoming pawns in men's games of domination and competition. In Jessie's life, her abusive childhood experience with her father has made her vulnerable to Gerald's sexual games, and to Joubert's predations. Jessie's task, then, is not only to slip out of the literal handcuffs which tie her to her marital bed, but also to recognize these predatory men, both past and present.

Techniques

This novel is excruciatingly tight in its focused claustrophobic effects. The narrative focuses on the predicament of a single individual, with telling details of her experience, from the wild hope inspired by a bottle of cream within reach, to the ecstasy of being able to get a drink of cold water—all without bringing her handcuffed hand to her mouth. Few novels, even those devoted to an interior monologue, get within the skin of a character as well as King's depiction of Jessie's captivity.

The only sense of movement or action, except for Jessie's escape, occurs as Jessie remembers the events of her life: childhood summers, college, marriage, an eclipse, and her molestation: a curiously static plot technique. But the weaving together of memory and circumstance, of action in the past and reaction in the present reinforce the full complexity of the text. King represents this textually wit long passages of italics to represent the many voices. The novel ends with long passages of san serif text as the freed Jessie writes a letter to the real Ruth, thanking her for her tough talk, both during their college days and, more recently, in her head.

King's sophisticated management of time in the novel is also noteworthy.

Captive Jessie is very aware of the passage of time. Yet this awareness is radically distorted as she suddenly falls asleep, or gets lost in her memories. This tense countdown unites the 40 small chapters that compose the novel and adds a sense of desperate motion to the text. This powerful technique both heightens the reader's anxiety and precipitates the climax of the novel when Jessie realizes she has little time to escape before Joubert returns at nightfall.

Themes

King's early novels stage the recurring theme of sacrificial children; that is, children whose lives or innocence are sacrificed to the evil ends and pathological needs of adults. Wrenching and premature rites of passage, precipitated by a life-threatening relationship between parents and children, occur frequently. In Jessie's case, her innocence and faith are violated by her beloved father's sexual abuse of her. Like King's other sacrificial children, Jessie has not escaped the consequences of this violation; she has only repressed the memory. Hence, her development as a woman is radically altered as the romantic musical refrain "Tammy's in love" shifts to the incipient sexual violence of "a woman likes it that way." She is emotionally traumatized as evidenced in her lack of desire for career, children or any other intimate, ongoing relationship.

Drawing from contemporary models of women's silencing and powerlessness, he uses a female monologue of steadilyrecovered memory. Through Ruth, Goody Burlingame, Punkin, and other unknown voices he highlights both the silencing and voicing of Jessie. These voices map her interior landscape, through images of dark woods, poisoned wells, and eclipses. These voices that tell Jessie of her double-voicedness, her fear of her unexplored shadow, and the "dark day" in which she has lived since the literal eclipse during which her father molested her are really guides to ultimate freedom.

King's greater reliance on the "monsters" within the dark places of the human soul, rather than the "monster" in the closet or under the bed distinguishes this novel from his others. While King's explanations of the demons within Jessie's father are sketchy, he is clear regarding Jessie's emotional coupling of Gerald, Joubert and her father. Joubert, the necrophile and grave desecrator, is a demon for whom all humans—male and female—are nothing but objects of pleasure and personal gain. His dehumanizing acts against the dead are similar to Gerald's "crimes" against Jessie; and her father's crime against her. Until Jessie makes the connection, she is paralyzed by fear and trapped. In King's psychological drama psychic horror and fear strip Jessie naked—metaphorically and literally, after which she is forced to confront and find herself, beyond civility, pretense, masks or forgetfulness.

Key Questions

King confessed that his characterization of women in his novels has been less than three-dimensional. However, Gerald's Game initiates a series of books about women, violence and survival, including Dolores Claiborne and Rose Madder. Critics have complained that this novel is too politically didactic, as Jessie's voices sound like radical (meaning bitchy) feminists. Yet few have pointed out the variety and scope of King's examination of the psychological, social and emotional interior landscape of women. Others dislike the details of Jessie's molestation by her father or King's explanation of Joubert's hideous history. Clearly, this uneven and complex novel provides many avenues for discussion.

1. What metaphors and principles of feminism does King explore and elaborate? How does this "date" the novel?

2. How do the characters of Joubert, Gerald and Tom Mahout represent the liabilities of traditional definitions of masculinity?

3. In this novel of entrapment on a bed, the main action lies within the body and mind of Jessie. What sensory and psychological details does King use to dramatize Jessie's plight?

4. King often uses the term "New Age." What does it seem to represent to him? How does this term date the novel?

Is it limiting or effective?

5. What, according to Jessica, is Gerald's game? What are its implication for husband/wife relationships?

Literary Precedents

Explicit antecedents of King's story of captivity, love, and madness are Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and poems.

Jessie remembers the narrator of "The Tell-tale Heart" (1843) commenting to his interviewers, that he is not mad, only nervousness. She also tries to persuade herself that she is also not mad, only nervous. However, like that famous unreliable narrator, she does not fully convince readers.

Jessie also often quotes Poe's "The Raven" (1845) to ironic effect, as she realizes that its romanticism of lost love does not fit her feelings for Gerald. Indeed, she realizes that her romanticism has protected and excused the behavior of the abusive men in her life. Yet the phrase "Only that and nothing more" rings true for her, as it memorializes a moment of infinite loss and change. Like the eclipse, Jessie's entrapment and subsequent realizations are a monumental event, altering all perception.

This story begins with a premise common to science fiction/fantasy anthologies or series such as The Twilight Zone or The Outer Limits. The main character, a contemporary of the audience, discovers that something has happened, something indefinable and unknown is coming, threatening disintegration. Thus, fantasy, horror or other speculative fiction begins with a reasonable, recognizable world— which has a new twist. Real ghouls like Jeffrey Dahmer, then, find their place in King's fiction.

This novel has been described as a variation on slasher fiction like Friday the 13th or Nightmare on Elm Street. However, King has decried these stories as exploitative; in slasher fiction "you don't come to see people get away; you come to see people die. And at that point, to me, you've crossed the line into immoral territory. I have always wanted my characters to be alive and I've always wanted my readers to like the characters and to find them good and hopeful . . . and to want them to live."

Related Titles

Of all of King's novels, this one is the most raw and experimental. It has been accused of being a weak novel, like Cujo, in that events seem to happen by fate or accident, rather than by some sense of direction or will, either malevolent or logical. Thus, the political and social message seems to drive the novel, rather than the character's action. As a minor character comments, he believes that Jessie was not guilty of the murder of Gerald because if she was smart enough to see a way to kill him, she was also smart enough to see that she would also be trapped in handcuffs. Yet readers know, ironically, that Jessie's own unexamined impulses for freedom left her trapped.

The motif of the sacrificial children extends through many of King's early novels. These children include Carrie White of Carrie (1974), Danny Torrence in The Shining (1977; see separate entry), Charlie McGee in Firestarter (1980), and culminate in the Loser's Club in It (1986).

Unlike most of these children, the members of the Loser's Club grow into adulthood having nearly forgotten the terrifying incidents in childhood. Ultimately, their sacrifice is validated by their future actions. Jessie is modelled on these characters though, at the beginning of the novel, she has not yet proven herself.

Despite its realistic rather than supernatural context and plot, Gerald's Game does have a supernatural connection to Dolores Claiborne (1993; see separate entry).

During the total solar eclipse that passed over Maine, on July 20, 1963, while Jessie Burlingame was being sexually molested by her father, Dolores was watching her husband die in a well. 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 Jessie and Dolores suggest that careful readers will not conclude with a simplistic comparison.

Gerald's Game is also much like Misery 1987; see separate entry) in that both are more rooted in social actuality than King's earlier novel. As Gerald's Game explores the development of female selfidentity in circumstances of sexual violence, Misery examines the disintegration of male self-identity in circumstances of physical violence. Paul Sheldon bolsters his will to survive by focusing himself on his composition of Misery's Return. Similarly, Jessie Burlingame exorcises her fear by confronting both Joubert in court and the implications of the whole episode by writing a letter to the real Ruth Neary.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994