# Shane Short Guide

## Shane by George Stevens

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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". 

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". 

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# Overview

Shane's enduring and widespread popularity attests to the novel's compelling and exciting plot, which pits a greedy, land-hungry range baron against an embattled but valiant family of homesteaders in a fight for control of a Wyoming valley. When Shane, a mysterious gunfighter struggling to live down his violent past, joins forces with the Starrett family, the stage is set for an inevitable showdown between good and evil or, more accurately, between a new way of life and the established codes of the Old West.

Young readers easily identify with Bob Starrett, the story's narrator, who is an adolescent at the time of the action.

Young Bob is drawn both to Shane and to his own father, Joe, and he grows toward manhood by emulating these two father figures. Although Shane is a selfsufficient loner, while Joe is committed to the valley's community of farmers, both men share common qualities of fortitude, courage, and a determination to stand up for what is right. Early in the novel, for example, these two very different men labor together to wrestle a monstrous tree stump out of the ground.

Bob Starrett witnesses this epic struggle and begins to understand and take on the best aspects of both his "fathers."

Like Bob, young readers may find admirable role models in these hardy characters of the American West.

# About the Author

Jack Warner Schaefer was born on November 19, 1907, in Cleveland, Ohio, an unlikely birthplace for a writer primarily concerned with the history and characters of the American West.

He received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in 1929 and attended Columbia University in New York City before beginning a varied career as a United Press reporter, an educator in the Connecticut State Reformatory, an editor for a series of eastern newspapers, and finally an associate in a New Haven, Connecticut, advertising agency. Schaefer did not turn to free-lance writing until he was in his early forties, but he scored an immediate success with his first novel, Shane, most of which was written in Norfolk, Virginia.

That novel, perhaps the most famous and most celebrated of all westerns, had a difficult birth. Schaefer submitted an early version of the book to Argosy magazine, but he forgot to include return postage with his typescript, an oversight that could have resulted in the rejection of the work. Nonetheless, in 1946 Argosy published the tale under the title Rider from Nowhere as a three-part serial. Unfortunately, Schaefer's name was misspelled on the cover of the issue containing the first installment of his novel.

Subsequent years have been kinder to Shane. The publishing house Houghton Mifflin put out the revised novel in 1949, and it has enjoyed solid sales ever since.

By 1951 Shane was selling eight thousand hardbound copies a year; moreover, a Bantam paperback edition has averaged yearly sales of twelve thousand copies since 1950. The novel has been published in over seventy editions and has been translated into thirty languages. It was adapted into an excellent movie in 1953. The Western Writers of America honored Shane as the best western novel ever written. Schaefer himself was presented with a distinguished achievement award from the Western Literature Association in 1975.

He now lives on a ranch outside Santa Fe, New Mexico.

# Setting

The setting of Shane is of central importance to the novel's themes and characters. Like American writer Stephen Crane before him, Schaefer deals with a transitional period in American history, the twilight of the western frontier as it gave way to the more cultivated, domesticated, and settled ways of the industrialized East. The Starretts and the other farming families in the valley represent this new wave of domesticity and civilization that spread across the country in the late 1800s. On the other hand, the gunfighter Shane and the greedy cattleman Luke Fletcher exemplify the frontier way of life that is about to be displaced by the advent of the "New West." Ironically, both Shane, the hero of this novel, and Fletcher, his antagonist, have outlived the historical period in which they grew up and flourished. The West's future, Schaefer makes clear, belongs to people such as the Starretts who can adapt to their new and civilized world.

# Social Sensitivity

Shane, of course, culminates in an inexorable and violent showdown in which the gunfighter expertly dispatches Fletcher and Wilson; the novel's narrator, Bob Starrett, witnesses these killings. Nevertheless, the violent episodes in Shane are brief and never milked for sensationalism. Indeed, there is always a sense in Shane that such violence has been "earned" through Schaefer's manipulation of plot and character: the gunfire at the novel's end is far from gratuitous. Shane himself is perhaps the most reluctant gunfighter— and the most reluctantly violent man— to be found in any modern western. The profanity in the 1949 edition of Shane has been largely excised in every edition since 1954. Further, a special edition of the novel aimed specifically at juvenile audiences is available.

# Literary Qualities

The surface plot of Shane is rather typical of the western story: the conflict between cattleman and homesteader, leading inevitably to a fiery showdown, has become a kind of permanent American myth. But Shane upsets some expectations about this myth by altering its usual outline. In classical mythology, for example, the hero is called out of a static, settled environment at the beginning of the story and embarks on his great adventure. In Shane, though, the already heroic gunfighter continually tries to regain a settled existence by identifying with the Starretts; only at the end of the book does he find that he can never fit in with the farming life and that he must reassume his discarded role of gunman and deliverer.

Early reviewers sought to compare Schaefer's novel to the works of such western writers as Owen Wister (especially his The Virginian [1902]), Mary Hallock Foote, and Helen Hunt Jackson.

More recently, similarities have been seen between Schaefer's themes and those of Stephen Crane. In any event, critics have consistently admired Schaefer's prose style for its directness, conciseness, and clarity—qualities that probably reflect his years as a journalist.

Moreover, Schaefer demonstrates his mastery of many literary techniques— including symbolism, foreshadowing, and characterization—all of which make Shane an unusually rewarding reading experience several notches above the "blood and bullets" fare offered by the more typical western novel.

# Themes and Characters

Shane is filled with familiar character types that appear again and again in movies, television shows, and books about the West. Joe Starrett is a typically stalwart farmer, for example, while his wife Marian is a supportive and "houseproud" frontier woman, a type that the reader of western lore has encountered oh many occasions. Shane himself, dressed all in black and trailing behind him a mysterious past, is a similarly familiar character, as are Fletcher and the malevolent Wilson, the land baron's hired gun.

Schaefer sparks new interest in many of these stock characters, however, by evoking their humanity through their capacity for change, growth, and full emotional lives. For example, Shane continually struggles to cast off his violent past and assume the settled life of a farmer. Therefore, Fletcher's threat to the security of the Starretts and the other farming families sparks internal conflict for Shane: should he simply accept the outrages of Fletcher and carry on with his new life, or should he take up his ebony Colt .45 once again and confront the family's enemy? There is no easy answer to this dilemma, and it continues to pull at Shane throughout much of the novel.

Further, Shane's relationship to the Starretts is complex and often subtle.

He genuinely admires and even venerates Joe Starrett; indeed, it is Fletcher's threat to Joe's life that finally compels Shane to reassume his old heroic stature as a gunfighter. Shane is similarly drawn to young Bob, to fanning itself, and to the sense of belonging that he finds in his new life among the homesteaders. But when Shane agonizingly discovers that he is also falling in love with Marian, he realizes that he may ultimately destroy the very family that has adopted him. By exploring these competing aspects of the human heart, Schaefer. elevates his stock characters and rescues them from stale familiarity.

# Topics for Discussion

1. The tree stump, introduced in chapter 2, seems to symbolize many central concerns of the novel: nature's stubbornness, Shane's commitment to farming, even the land itself. What is important about Joe and Shane's struggle with the stump? What do.the two men—and Marian and Bob as well— gain from that struggle?

2. Most readers realize early on that Shane will eventually take up his gun again in defense of the Starretts. How does Schaefer nonetheless maintain an atmosphere of considerable suspense throughout the novel?

3. As the family returns from town in chapter 6, Bob Starrett observes that "the closer we came [to the farm], the more cheerful [Shane] was." What accounts for this feeling in Shane?

4. In chapter 8, Shane seems to lose his serenity in the face of the looming conflict with Fletcher. By chapter 14, however, Shane is again reconciled to "the simple solitude of his own invincible completeness." Trace Shane's movement toward this acceptance of who and what he is.

5. The events of chapter 15 take place after Shane has left the Starretts. What is the purpose of this short chapter?

What is the nature of Shane's enduring gift or legacy to the Starretts?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Stephen Crane's short story The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." Compare Crane's theme or central idea in that story to the theme of the declining West in Schaefer's Shane. Although on the surface they are very different, what similarities are shared by Shane and Crane's Scratchy Wilson? How are Joe Starrett and Marshal Potter alike?

Marian and the marshal's wife?

2. When Shane struggles with the tree stump or fights with Morgan, Fletcher, and Wilson, it is clear who his antagonist is. But what, precisely, are the terms of his inner conflict? That is, what competing needs and desires make their various claims on the gunfighter? How are Marian and Joe involved in some of these conflicts?

3. Western. novels, mystery stories, Gothic romances, and much of science fiction are often dismissed by critics as examples of "escapist" literature, unconcerned with the realities of everyday life. In this sense, is Shane "escapist," or do you find that the book does say things that are universally and permanently true about the human condition?

4. The enigmatic Shane is described at various times in the novel as "a man apart," "just different," and "fiddlefooted." What other heroes in American fiction are similarly alone, anxious to "move on," and cut off from a meaningful sense of community with more settled, domesticated folk? What do these heroes have to tell us about the ways Americans typically view their world?

5. In myth, the quest of the hero commonly results in benefits for the community that he serves. Discuss, in specific terms, the ways in which Shane's struggles assist both the Starretts and, more generally, the community of homesteaders in the valley.

6. In one sense, Shane is the story of Bob Starrett's initiation into adult values and insights. How do both Shane and Joe Starrett contribute to this initiation? What positive values does Bob learn from the gunslinger?

7. Shane is told from the point of view of a grown man, Bob Starrett, looking back on the events of one pivotal summer of his youth. How would the novel be different if narrated by Bob when he was still a child?

8. Given your reading of Shane, how does Schaefer feel about the decline and eventual fall of the Old West and its people? Does he view this fall as historically inevitable? Does he seem to regret the loss of the wide-open prairie and of men like Shane?

# For Further Reference

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Haslam, Gerald. Jack Schaefer. Western Writers Series, no. 20. Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1975. A brief, sympathetic discussion of Schaefer's works and themes.

Scott, Winfield Townley. Introduction to Collected Stories of Jack Schaefer. New York: Arbor House, 1966. A concise look at Schaefer, his debts to earlier writers, and his place in the literature of the American West.

# Related Titles/Adaptations

Schaefer has been a prolific writer of novels and stories, but his themes and characters remain fairly consistent throughout his works. In his short novel for young people, Old Ramon, the title character, an aging shepherd, shares Shane's Old West skills and his spirit of rugged individualism. In Monte Walsh (1963), Schaefer's most ambitious novel, the predominant theme once again is the gradual capitulation of the western wilderness to the forces of eastern civilization. In that novel, Monte is an expert cowboy, "a good man with a horse," who cannot adapt to the brave new world of the "autymobile" and the evolution of the cattle business into a corporate enterprise. Like Shane, Monte belongs to the "wild" West of his childhood; unlike Joe Starrett and his own friend Chet Rollins, Monte cannot find a meaningful place for himself within the confines of his new environment.

In 1953 Shane was made into an excellent and well-received film, starring Alan Ladd in the title role, Van Heflin as Joe, Jean Arthur as Marian, Brandon De Wilde as Bob (renamed "Joey" in the movie), and perhaps most memorably, Jack Palance as the evil Wilson. Lloyd Griggs's cinematography won an Academy Award. Released by Paramount Pictures and directed by George Stevens, with a screenplay by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., the film remains generally true to the plot of Schaefer's novel, and it does a good job of portraying Shane's futile quest to become part of the Starrett family. Inevitably, some of the complexity of the characters is lost in the screen adaptation, but the movie has become one of the most familiar and highly regarded of the countless westerns turned out over the years by Hollywood studios.

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