Soldier Boy Short Guide

Soldier Boy by Michael Shaara

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Contents

Characters

Shaara says that he writes about damaged people. Most often, as in "Soldier Boy," "Grenville's Planet," and "Wainer," society has wounded his protagonists, striking at the innate differences which mark them as superior but misunderstood or even hated.

Their talents generally estrange Shaara's lonely ones from the rest of society, as with "Wainer," a man born — and despised — as man's first evolutionary step to the stars. Shaara says that "Wainer was hope," leading him to his novel The Herald (1981), where he develops a disturbing variation on the end-of-the-world theme, a device lethal to most of humanity which will spare those gifted individuals capable of a new beginning. Most of Shaara's protagonists share Wainer's alienation and his "herald's" Promethean dilemma: Can the new world be worth the destruction of the old and the price the individual who brings it about must pay? For Wainer, a composer rejected by his society, it was; he died in the happy knowledge that his physical abnormalities foreshadowed new men, able to live in alien atmospheres, just as Chamberlain in the carnage of Gettysburg rejoiced at what Lincoln would call "a new birth of freedom."

The five mainstream short stories Shaara included in Soldier Boy also deal with characters whom life has hurt into insight. "Come to My Party" was the first story Shaara based on an actual experience, in which he lost a professional bout "to a guy . . . who boxed, but couldn't hit" and won on rules that never would have applied in a real life brawl. Shaara's hero Morgan loses a similar fight, but he lives out the ending Shaara says the story ought to have had, a soul-satisfying obliteration of the opponent who had made a fool of him in front of the woman he loved.

Like all of Shaara's suffering heroes, Morgan pays his price willingly; badly beaten but victorious, he returns to her in a movingly inarticulate reconciliation. The unspeakable tenderness between them is one of the major motivations for Tom McClain, hero of Shaara's coming-of-age novel The Broken Place (1968), about a soldier-boxer who kills a man in the ring. In balancing McClain's love for Lisa against the violence of his nature, Shaara evokes all the love a man can have for a woman in one terse unforgettable image: "I was the meteor. She was the earth."

Like falling stars, Shaara's men consume themselves in one brief streak of glory; Shaara's women wait, sorrowing, inscrutable, silent. From Shaara's first story, "All the Way Back" to his latest, "Starface," the major preoccupation of his literary career is consistently the intricate human personality gifted with talents the world makes it pay for owning — because the world knows too well it cannot do without them.

Social Concerns/Themes

Soldier Boy contains some of Shaara's finest moments in fiction, and in his "Introduction" and his "Afterword" he hints at how they came out of his life and into his art. For Shaara, "writing has always meant . . . going for a while into another, real world," where flashes of insight are waiting, like Michelangelo's shapes, for the artist to set them free. Just as Chamberlain in The Killer Angels (1974) could not grasp the meaning of tragedy until he had lived it, at his best Shaara can make his reader share those times, a communication that he says has been, after his writing, "the best moment[s] in living as a writer: to know that somebody else has seen what you see, felt what you felt."

Ten of Soldier Boy's stories are science fiction, dating from the 1950s. The genre allowed Shaara to distance himself from what he calls "this incomprehensible mess" where most human beings live and to create hypothetical milieus to isolate and explore human griefs and growths. The title story dates from 1953, but it eerily forecasts the turbulent Vietnam era when some people had been taught "peace" so thoroughly that they despised the soldiers who had to maintain it; Shaara grimly observes that "no peace-loving nation in the history of the earth had ever kept itself strong." The same darkness that pervades many of Shaara's fictional universes prevailed in the Old Norse myth from which he drew the epigraph to "Soldier Boy" — the deadly certainty that evil will eventually vanquish good, and all that matters is the courage a man finds to meet his fate. The one saving grace in Shaara's valleys of the shadow is his sense of "a path going somewhere," just as the one common denominator of all his work is his belief that some human beings are able to choose it.

Techniques

Shaara's excellence in the short story form accounts not only for the success of the kaleidoscopic presentation of The Killer Angels but for some difficulty in the larger scope of the traditionally narrated novel. As reviewer John Pine has pointed out, The Broken Place attempted to cover too much — war, love, boxing, travel; and in The Herald, Shaara seemed unable to concentrate on a single point of view, a disturbing problem in a novel with a single unsettling message. In the burning focus of a short story, however, Shaara conveys the intensity of his vision supremely well, since the genre demands that he choose his words with artistic inevitability. His diction often resembles Beethoven's chord sequences: no other choice seems possible.

Literary Precedents

Although Hemingway's influence is also apparent in the short stories of Soldier Boy, especially in the compact ness of their dialogue, they also have a distinctly Nietzschean flavor — not the popularized and misread Nietzsche who claimed "God is dead," but the Nietzsche who celebrated the birth of tragedy in the equilibrium between man's rationality and his powerful emotional drives, and the Nietzsche who rejoiced in the belief that modern men could be "overcome," by abandoning pride and foolishness and stupidity and grow into greater beings, the sons of men to come. In The Broken Place, Shaara's autobiographical hero voiced his paradoxical view of the human condition today: "In all this world there are no signs and no miracles and nobody watching over and nobody caring. But I believe anyway."

Throughout his work, Shaara's stubborn, wounded heroes go on believing anyway, an affirmation of the humanity that is their hope. It is hard to see how any writer of contemporary fiction can say it better.

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