

“I Did Them Things So You Wouldn’t Have To”: Secret Window and the Characters Who Won’t Stay Dead

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“You stole my story,” the man on the doorstep said. “You stole my story and something’s got to be done about it. Right is right and fair is fair and something has to be done” (253). The first paragraph of the novella “Secret Window, Secret Garden” is vintage Stephen King. Who could possibly stop reading without learning who stole the story? And what story? And who is the man on the doorstep? And if something has to be done, what is that something (and who will do it)?

“Secret Window, Secret Garden”—which became the 2004 film *Secret Window* starring Maria Bello, Johnny Depp, Timothy Hutton, and John Turturro—explores how authors may appropriate the ideas of others and how the characters they create may come alive, seeming at times to move and breathe on their own. With Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) as the most compelling example, fictional characters may become more real than we dreamed and may dominate our consciousness in ways we could not, quite literally, have imagined.

Whether or not we teach King’s work in American literature or popular culture classes, “Secret Window, Secret Garden” poses seductive questions about the production of narrative. In “A Note on ‘Secret Window, Secret Garden,’” King expresses his longtime interest in the impact of fiction, his desire to engage questions about plagiarism broadly defined, and his focus on why authors create particular characters. He writes:

A few years ago, I published a novel called *Misery* which tried, at least in part, to illustrate the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the reader. Last year I published *The Dark Half*, where I tried to explore the converse: the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the writer. While that book

was between drafts, I started to think that there might be a way to tell both stories at the same time by approaching some of the plot elements of *The Dark Half* from a totally different angle. Writing, it seems to me, is a secret act—as secret as dreaming—and that was one aspect of this strange and dangerous craft I had never thought about much. (250)

This study addresses the creative process by acknowledging the impossibility of articulating entirely new thoughts or producing wholly original texts. According to Ecclesiastes 1:9, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.” William Shakespeare makes the same argument in the first five lines of “Sonnet 59”: “If there be nothing new, but that which is/Hath been before, how are our brains beguil’d,/ Which laboring for invention bear amiss/ The second burthen of a former child!” A more recent example from popular culture is Led Zeppelin’s 1999 album “There Is Nothing New Under the Sun,” which was reissued in 2007 by Missouri band Coalesce, a group of musicians fully aware of the ironies in their project.

In addition, the study addresses comments by King and film director David Koepp about the role of the author. In the film, John Shooter (John Turturro) says to his own Victor Frankenstein, Morton Rainey (Johnny Depp): “I exist because you made me. Gave me my name. Told me everything you wanted me to do. I did them things so you wouldn’t have to.” But why do authors develop certain characters? Are those characters reflections of themselves? Do characters act out in ways the author fears to behave? Do some characters—such as Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* or Joe Christmas in *Light in August* or the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”—so dominate the narrative that they haunt both the authors who gave them their existence and the readers who encounter them?

Finally, “Secret Window, Secret Garden” is at home in the Gothic tradition of literature popular in Germany, Russia, the American South, and elsewhere. Although the doppelgänger is not exclusive to Gothic literature, authors as diverse as Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville, and Robert Louis Stevenson have created characters who do not exist fully without their double; in the case of the reclusive writer Morton Rainey and his violent visitor from Mississippi, however, Rainey is complicit in his own fate, having created the agent of his own demise. Stark differences exist in the adaptation of the novella into the film, and although the study stops short of detailed aesthetic analysis, some of David Koepp’s

decisions—especially with respect to the ending of the dark tale—are more artful, less manipulative, and significantly more realistic than Stephen King’s.

Plagiarism and Its Discontents

Six months after he discovers his wife Amy Rainey (Maria Bello) making love to another man, Mort Rainey sits alone and disoriented in his lakeside cabin. A stranger appears, introducing himself as “John Shooter” and accusing Rainey of having stolen his story. In the novella, Shooter tells Rainey that he wrote “Sowing Season,” which Rainey published as “Secret Window, Secret Garden,” seven years before and asks, “How in hell did a big money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shit-splat town in Mississippi and steal my goddam story?” In King’s fictional universe, plagiarism may be defined as the theft of another’s intellectual property or more broadly defined as participation in a free-flowing marketplace of ideas, a theme that lies at the heart of the novella “Secret Window, Secret Garden” and the film *Secret Window*.

Without making excuses for those who deliberately steal another person’s work and publish it as their own—as central character Mort Rainey most assuredly does—King and Koepp explore the ways in which the truths of human experience inevitably repeat in film, literature, music, television, and other creative projects. “When two writers show up at the same story, it’s all about who wrote the words first,” Mort Rainey tells his alter-ego, John Shooter, who comes from Mississippi to Tashmore Lake in upstate New York to reclaim his stolen story. The seriousness of the duel is obvious later in the film when Shooter tells Rainey that their war will not end “until one or the other of us is dead.” In an even more sinister statement, Shooter tells Rainey, “I will burn your life like a canefield in a high wind” (361).

In “Secret Window, Secret Garden,” Rainey is tortured by the memory of having stolen a short story by fellow student John Kintner in a creative writing class at Bates College. Confronting the dissolution of his marriage and his sudden inability to write, Rainey begins to question whether any of the work that followed his misappropriation of Kintner’s short story is authentically his own. King writes:

...Had he ever stolen someone else's work?

For the first time since Shooter had turned up on his porch with his sheaf of pages, Mort considered this question seriously. A good many reviews of his books had suggested that he was not really an original writer; that most of his books consisted of twice-told tales. He remembered Amy reading a review of *The Organ-Grinder's Boy* which had first acknowledged the book's pace and readability, and then suggested certain derivativeness in its plotting. She'd said, "So what? Don't these people know there are only about five really good stories, and writers just tell them over and over, with different characters?"

Mort himself believed there were at least six stories: success; failure; love and loss; revenge; mistaken identity; the search for a higher power, be it God or the devil. He had told the first four over and over, obsessively, and now that he thought of it, "Sowing Season" embodied at least three of those ideas. But was that plagiarism? If it was, every novelist at work in the world would be guilty of the crime.

Plagiarism, he decided, was outright theft. And he had never done it in his life. *Never.*" (335-36)

[P]redicament is an analogue for a certain philosophical exigency that drives Derrida to writing "sous rapture," which I translate as "under erasure." This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both the word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible)... In examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. (xiv)

Losing both his marriage and his sanity, Rainey eventually confronts the reality of his crime against the profession he reveres, on which he has based his identity, and from which he derives his self-esteem. In part to address his guilt, Rainey creates a dark figure who stalks him and carries out the crimes that ordinarily would make him recoil with horror.

Mort Rainey and John Shooter as Doppelgängers

“Secret Window, Secret Garden,” one of four narratives in Stephen King’s collection entitled *Four Past Midnight*, introduces the mysterious John Shooter, a dairy farmer with a Southern accent, a distinctly Gothic sensibility, and a stubborn claim that Mort Rainey has stolen his intellectual property. Suffice it to say that overt plagiarism rarely ends well, and Rainey begins a voyage into his past that will culminate in his own annihilation.

Murder and psychosis collide in a screenplay adapted by director and screenwriter David Koepp (*Jurassic Park*, *Mission: Impossible*, *Panic Room*, *War of the Worlds*, *Ghost Town*, *Jack Ryan*, and other films). Given the intricacies of the creative process that Stephen King and David Koepp seek to unravel, one wonders if they discussed the “plagiarism” involved in adapting King’s story into a screenplay and, ultimately, into a film; the final project results from—not only the desire of the original author, director, and scriptwriters—but also decisions made by actors such as Johnny Depp, known for his extemporization on the set, and by casting directors, marketing executives, and others committed to an artistic and commercial success.

Koepp is no stranger to nightmares, during which his characters are not certain whether they are awake or asleep as they seek to survive, among other things, alien attacks, a bizarre invasion of a four-story brownstone on the Upper West Side of New York City, and an amusement park filled with cloned dinosaurs. In the haunted universe of *Secret Window*, people and pets die and a betrayed husband goes quietly insane. Darkness, doppelgängers, horror, and romance identify the film as part of the Southern Gothic tradition and propel viewers into a world in which they must identify with a man who is either a victim or a monster—or both.

In “Gothic Fiction Tells Us the Truth About Our Divided Nature,” Alison Milbank argues that by the 19th Century, attention had shifted from concerns about the value of religious belief in Gothic fiction to “the horrors that lurk in our own psyche” (n.p.). Citing Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and quoting Sigmund Freud, Milbank writes:

Although the haunting by a second self may appear to confirm the existence of the supernatural, ever since Freud this apparition has been understood not as a true spiritual presence but as a figure of repression.

The eeriness of two selves where there should only be one is, Freud argued, an irruption of disquiet caused by our separation from our origin in our mother's womb. (n.p.)

The relationship between authors and their characters lies at the heart of the film *Secret Window*, as voices take over Mort Rainey's mind. One voice says, "There is no John Shooter. There never has been. You invented him." Rainey yells back: "Leave me alone!" The voice whispers, "You are alone." Wearing John Shooter's black 10-gallon hat, Rainey gazes at himself in the mirror and asks, "What is happening to me?" To save himself, Rainey tells Shooter, "You don't exist." Shooter assures Rainey that he most certainly does exist and, more importantly, that Rainey created him and keeps him alive.

The foray into what Koepp calls "dual identity" becomes far more than an exploration of an author's divided self. In the film, as Koepp states in "From Book to Film," there is a "dark awful part" of each person, and Mort Rainey imagines this part of himself as a "wholly separate person" with the ability to kill. Depp himself suggests that mirrors and windows in the film are portentous and deeply symbolic, providing glimpses into the multiple facets of our essential selves. Hutton alludes to the phrase "keep passing the open windows," which he interprets to mean that we should take seriously our choices. (Interestingly, Hutton incorrectly attributes the phrase to a novel by William Faulkner instead of the film *Hotel New Hampshire*, which is based on John Irving's novel by the same name. The band Queen, too, produced an album entitled "Keep Passing the Open Windows." Here again, it is appropriate to understand that artists borrow ideas, methods, and perspectives during the creative process, prohibiting general consensus about what constitutes an act of plagiarism.)

As Rainey loses his grasp on his marriage and his sanity, the home he created with his wife burns—the result of arson—and dire events become the rule of the day. In the novella, Bump, a friendly cat beloved by the couple, is killed, his neck broken before he is nailed to the roof of the garbage bin "with a screwdriver from Mort's own shed" (291). Rainey becomes less able to manage his rage, displacing it and becoming more and more agitated. For example, as the phone rings, Rainey gives a "screaky little cry" and falls backwards, "dropping the telephone handset on the floor" and almost tripping over "the goddam bench Amy had bought and put by the telephone table, the bench absolutely no one, including Amy herself, ever used" (294).

Clearly, it is his wife—not the bench—whom Rainey would like to hurt; her betrayal and the relentless pain that followed it precipitate Rainey’s mental collapse. Ironically, Rainey talks to himself about the way people try to shield themselves from loss:

Mort didn’t believe that people—even those who tried to be fairly honest with themselves—knew when some things were over. He believed they often went on believing, or trying to believe, even when the handwriting was not only on the wall but writ in letters large enough to read a hundred yards away without a spyglass. If it was something you really cared about and felt that you needed, it was easy to cheat, easy to confuse your life with TV and convince yourself that what felt so wrong would eventually come right...probably after the next commercial break. He supposed that, without its great capacity for self-deception, the human race would be even crazier than it already was.

But sometimes the truth crashed through, and if you had consciously tried to think or dream your way around that truth, the results could be devastating: it was like being there when a tidal wave roared not over but straight through a dike which had been set in its way, smashing it and you flat. (309-10)

Rainey’s loss of his wife and home prevents him from attaining self-awareness. There is no longer a window through which he can see himself clearly, as he grows increasingly disassociated from his essential nature. Intellectually, he understands; emotionally, he is distraught and immobilized. “It was over,” King writes. “Their lives together were history. Even the house where they had shared so many good times was nothing but evilly smouldering beams tumbled into the cellar-hole like the teeth of a giant” (310). As Rainey’s mind unravels, he remembers in particular his wife’s love for a room in the house, a room that becomes symbolic and the basis for the title of the film and novella:

The room was well away from the main house and she liked the quiet, she said. The quiet and the clear, sane morning light. She liked to look out the window every now and then, at her flowers growing in the deep corner formed by the house and the study ell. And he heard her saying, *It’s the*

best room in the house, at least for me, because hardly anybody ever goes there but me. It's got a secret window, and it looks down on a secret garden. (315-16)

Rainey's descent into madness becomes more and more obvious. Even when Amy Rainey is with him in the actual moment, he confuses "her real voice with her voice in his mind, which was the voice of memory. But was it a true memory or a false one?...Wasn't it at least possible that he was having a...well, a recollective hallucination? That he was trying to make his own past with Amy in some way conform to that goddam story where a man had gone crazy and killed his wife?" (316). Later, King describes Rainey as he pursues and confronts the hallucination he calls "John Shooter":

He turned the knob of the bathroom door and slammed in, bouncing the door off the wall hard enough to chop through the wallpaper and pop the door's lower hinge, and there he was, *there he was*, coming at him with a raised weapon, his teeth bared in a killer's grin, and his eyes were insane, utterly insane, and Mort brought the poker down in a whistling overhand blow and he had just time enough to realize that Shooter was also swinging a poker, and to realize that Shooter was not wearing his round-crowned black hat, and to realize it wasn't Shooter at all, to realize it was *him*, the madman was *him*, and the poker shattered the mirror over the washbasin and silver-backed glass sprayed every whichway, twinkling in the gloom, and the medicine cabinet fell into the sink. The bent door swung open like a gaping mouth, spilling bottles of cough syrup and iodine and Listerine. (328)

Madness does not protect Rainey entirely from the gradual realization that he is violent. By the end of the macabre tale, Rainey cannot avoid looking into a mirror and taking on the identity of his nemesis:

He stood in the front hallway, not sure what he wanted to do next....and suddenly, for no reason at all, he put the hat on his head. He shuddered when he did it, the way a man will sometimes shudder after swallowing a mouthful of raw liquor. But the shudder passed.

And the hat felt like quite a good fit, actually. (349)

As “dark horror stole over his brain” (382), Rainey rejects his role in the arson, in the killing of his pet, and in the murder of Tom Greenleaf, but his denial is short lived. King writes:

... Would you like to do something that does make sense? Call the police, then. That makes sense. Call the police and tell them to come down here and lock you up. Tell them to do it fast, before you can do any more damage. Tell them to do it before you kill anyone else.

Mort dropped the pages with a great wild cry and they seesawed lazily down around him as all of the truth rushed in on him at once like a jagged bolt of silver lightning. (380)

Eventually, even Rainey must confront his demon, the part of himself that can maim and kill and bury the bodies of his wife and her lover—and then calmly go to the market, chat with other customers, and complete a manuscript.

The Role of the Gothic in the Development of Character

Commonly accepted characteristics of the Gothic tradition, according to Robert Harris, include: 1) a mansion, or in the case of “Secret Window, Secret Garden” and *Secret Window*, an old cabin, in which shadows create a “sense of claustrophobia and entrapment”; 2) fear, mystery, and inexplicable events; 3) dreams and other portents; 4) highly dramatic occurrences; 5) “anger, sorrow, surprise, and especially, terror” (“Characters suffer from raw nerves and a feeling of impending doom,” Harris writes); 6) women in peril; 7) and a mood of “gloom and horror.” Like Edgar Allan Poe, whose Gothic characters often slip into madness (“The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Pit and the Pendulum,” for example), other authors introduce dark and mysterious settings and create characters in the throes of confusion and loss. Examples include the Brontë sisters (*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*), Charles Dickens (*Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and other novels), Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), Bram Stoker (*Dracula*), Daphne du Maurier (*Rebecca*), and novels

and short stories by William Faulkner, Harper Lee, and Flannery O'Connor that are too numerous to mention.

Similarly, in "Secret Window, Secret Garden" and *Secret Window*, we encounter yet another isolated figure struggling to deal with a fragmented identity in a dark and frightening universe. Mirrors in the cabin suggest the distortions between real life and fiction, between sanity and madness. In the film, townspeople tell Rainey, "I don't think you're really all that well" and "You really don't look well at all." But Rainey continues his dialogue with himself, even when Shooter tells him that if he himself is wrong about the author of his story, he'll turn himself over to authorities: "Then I'd turn myself in. But I'd take care of myself before a trial, Mr. Rainey, because if things turn out that way then I suppose I am crazy. And that kind of crazy man has no reason or excuse to live."

Mort Rainey's inability to separate dreams from reality becomes apparent in "Secret Window, Secret Garden" and underscores his connection to characters in stories by Dickens, Poe, and others. King describes a nightmare from which Rainey cannot escape:

He dreamed he was lost in a vast cornfield. He blundered from one row to the next, and the sun glinted off the watches he was wearing—half a dozen on each forearm, and each watch set to a different time.

Please help me! he cried. *Someone please help me! I'm lost and afraid!*

Ahead of him, the corn on both sides of the row shook and rustled. Amy stepped out from one side. John Shooter stepped out from the other. Both of them held knives.

I am confident I can take care of this business, Shooter said as they advanced on him with their knives raised. *I'm sure that, in time, your death will be a mystery even to us.*

Mort turned to run, but a hand—Amy's, he was sure—seized him by the belt and pulled him back. And then the knives, glittering in the hot sun of this huge secret garden— (268)

The Adaptation of “Secret Window, Secret Garden” into Film

The novella “Secret Window, Secret Garden” is different from the film *Secret Window* in significant ways, including the reader’s introduction to the story, John Shooter’s corporeal presence, and the fate of Amy Rainey and her lover Ted Milner (Timothy Hutton). Some of the changes make little difference at all. For example, in the novella, it is a cat named Bump who dies; in the film, a dog named Chico. In the novella, two townspeople, Tom Greenleaf and Greg Carstairs, die; in the film, Detective Ken Karsch (Charles S. Dutton) and Greenleaf (John Dunn-Hill) die.

Secret Window opens with a snowstorm, as Mort Rainey flees a motel in which his wife Amy Rainey and Ted Milner are making love. As the wipers thump across the windshield, Rainey sits behind the wheel of his Jeep and argues with himself: “Don’t go back. Do not go back there.” The cacophony of voices begins, but we do not yet understand their significance. Rainey ignores his own warning, takes a key from the front desk, enters the couple’s room, points a gun at them, screams, and leaves, his SUV careening away from the scene of his humiliation. But the debilitating pain that follows such a discovery has just begun. Only later do we learn that Rainey’s voices are evidence of separate identities that are beginning to manifest themselves as he goes slowly and privately insane. The snowstorm heightens the intensity of the scene, as wind and snow reflect Rainey’s own swirling emotions. The initial moment in “Secret Window, Secret Garden”—the instant when John Shooter appears at Mort Rainey’s front door—is equally powerful but less dramatic for a medium that relies upon visual impact.

From the moment in the film that Tom Greenleaf claims he sees Mort Rainey alone by the side of the road—not with Shooter, as Rainey claims—there are inklings that Rainey is losing his battle against his baser self: “I am *not* having a nervous breakdown,” he whispered to the little voice, but the little voice was having none of the argument. Mort thought that he might have frightened the little voice. He hoped so, because the little voice had certainly frightened *him*” (374-75). In the novella, however, Greenleaf looks in the rearview mirror and sees “another man with Mort, and an old station wagon, although neither the man nor the car had been there ten seconds before. The man was wearing a black hat, he said...*but you could see right through him, and the car too*” (398). Koeppe

deletes the ghostly presence of John Shooter, making the film more believable than the story (in Koepp's version, Shooter exists only in Rainey's mind).

In the film *Secret Window* and the novella "Secret Window, Secret Garden," Amy Rainey drives to Tashmore Lake to ask her husband to sign divorce papers. As she gets out of the car, King writes, "the hand pulled the shade in Mort's head all the way down and he was in darkness" (383). In both the film and the novella, the man in the black hat—who is and isn't her husband—tells her Mort Rainey is dead—that he died by his own hand—and then he comes after her with scissors, on which the sun "sent a starflash glitter along the blades as he snicked them open and then closed" (386). In both texts, when Amy Rainey visits the cabin, she discovers the word "Shooter" ("Shoot Her") etched into and painted onto walls. Perhaps her surprise and terror mirror her husband's on the night when he found her and Milner in a motel room.

The final scenes differ in each medium. In the novella, Amy Rainey understands the meaning of the word "Shooter," but she survives the attack. In the film, viewers learn the meaning of the word moments before Mort Rainey murders Amy Rainey and her lover. In neither text does Amy Rainey immediately believe that her husband will kill her, thinking that if he were capable of murder, it would have been at the motel when he found her with Milner. Even after the murder attempt that occurs in the novella, Amy Rainey attributes her husband's violence to the madman who seems to possess him. As Rainey comes after his wife, she realizes she is dealing with someone she no longer recognizes—"But this wasn't him" (386), she thinks. Suddenly, Fred Evans, an insurance investigator, appears at the cabin at the last moment and shoots and kills Mort Rainey. He and Amy Rainey explain her husband's behavior as a "schizophrenic episode":

"He *was* two men," Amy said. "He was himself...and he became a character he created. Ted believes that the last name, Shooter, was something Mort picked up and stored in his head when he found out that Ted came from a little town called Shooter's Knob, Tennessee. I'm sure he's right. Mort was always picking out character names just that way...like anagrams, almost." (395)

In King's version, Amy Rainey and Fred Evans deal for many years with the events at Tashmore Lake: "Both he and the woman who had been married to

Morton Rainey woke from dreams in which a man in a round-crowned black hat looked at them from sun-faded eyes caught in nets of wrinkles. He looked at them with no love...but, they both felt, with an odd kind of stern pity” (399). In a startling twist, Shooter leaves a conciliatory note for Amy Rainey, which she retrieves from inside the black hat he left behind.

Viewers who like Amy Rainey or who simply prefer a happier ending will appreciate King’s denouement more than Koepp’s. Those who understand that every destructive action prompts an even more devastating reaction are more likely to appreciate Koepp’s tidy (albeit horrific) finale. In both texts, of course, the function of the ending is to explain the doppelgänger and the hold that fiction can have over us. Both the novella and the film include references to Shooter’s demand that Rainey “fix “ his story. However, fixing the story does not mean resetting the clock to the moment before Rainey appropriates and publishes Shooter’s work. Instead, it means correcting the ending, tying up loose ends by meting out a punishment that (more than) fits the crime, and preserving the integrity of the events as Shooter understands them. To “fix” Shooter’s story, Amy Rainey and Ted Milner should die, although in the novella, Mort Rainey dies before he can kill them. Their deaths are the price for their thoughtless cruelty and their own particular duplicity. In the film, the two people who set disastrous events in motion die, and the end to Mort Rainey’s story—or is it John Shooter’s?—is a calm writer back at his computer, eating an ear of corn near an open window that looks out upon a secret garden. Beneath the garden, and feeding the cornstalks, are the still recognizable, decaying corpses of Amy Rainey and Ted Milner. We hear, “I know I can do it, [he] said, helping himself to another ear of corn from the steaming bowl,” reads the narrator at the end of the film. “I’m sure that in time her death will be a mystery, even to me.”

Conclusion

This study relies upon comments by William Faulkner—whose strongest connection with the wildly popular Stephen King may be his Gothic sensibility—and upon statements by King himself. In fact, King refers to Faulkner multiple times in his novella-turned-screenplay. For example, in “Secret Window, Secret Garden,” King describes the reaction Mort Rainey has to John Shooter: “*This man doesn’t look exactly real. He looks like a character out of a novel by William*

Faulkner" (254). Later, Rainey tells a detective that Shooter "didn't strike me as the house-burning type," and Rainey's estranged wife Amy Rainey surprises him with her literary acumen:

"You mean he wasn't a Snopes," Amy said suddenly.

Mort looked at her, startled—then smiled. "That's right," he said. "A Southerner, but not a Snopes."

"Meaning what?" [the detective] asked, a little warily.

"An old joke, Lieutenant," Amy said. "The Snopeses were characters in some novels by William Faulkner. They got their start in business burning barns."

"Oh," [the detective] said blankly. (313)

And still later in the novella, Rainey shares what he tells students in creative writing classes when he is asked to talk about his work, a responsibility he does not enjoy: "Get a job with the post office," he'd say. "It worked for Faulkner" (367).

But it is not the allusions to Faulkner or his characters that most interest King (or the readers of "Secret Window, Secret Garden"). While speaking to a class on American fiction at the University of Virginia in 1958, Faulkner told students that his work "begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does." During the same occasion, Faulkner advises the students to "get the character in your mind": "Once he is in your mind, and he is right, and he's true, then he does the work himself" (n.p.). The same year, this time at Washington and Lee University, Faulkner talks about his characters in a similar fashion: "Then they all stand up" and "begin to move," and "all you've got to do...is to trot along behind them and put down what they do and say" (n.p.).

Mort Rainey and John Shooter are larger than life, figures that draw from the Gothic tradition so familiar to Faulkner. As Rainey's creation, Shooter overtakes, usurps, and ultimately destroys his master. The characters reign over a universe

that is unmerciful and unyielding. In short, artistic production can be both a fascinating and terrifying process. Characters take over our imaginations, sometimes surprising even their creators. “I think there *was* a John Shooter,” Amy Rainey tells Evans at the end of the novella. “I think he was Mort’s greatest creation—a character so vivid that he actually *did* become real” (398-99). In fact, John Shooter was so real that he destroyed the author who made him possible.

The profession that obsessed and sustained Mort Rainey became his undoing. “In tough times—up until the divorce, anyway, which seemed to be an exception to the general rule—he had always found it easy to write. Necessary, even,” Rainey said. “It was good to have those make-believe worlds to fall back on when the real one had hurt you” (323). But clearly, as writers themselves, King and Koepp understand what occurs when the make-believe world, too, turns on us. “The writer’s job is to gaze through that window and report on what he sees,” King writes. “But sometimes windows break. I think that, more than anything else, is the concern of this story: what happens to the wide-eyed observer when the window between reality and unreality breaks and the glass begins to fly?” (251).

Other questions arise, as well: Is our intrusion into other people’s lives prompted by an interest in alternative ways of being, or something far more sinister? Like talk show audiences, do we feel better about ourselves if we see the conundrums and frailties of others? Do we need film, literature, and television to entertain us, or do we need to escape from our own empty spaces? If the answers to these questions—and others like them—are complex, would it be wise to account for the duality of our own nature? Just as Mort Rainey stares into a mirror and confronts a startling image of himself, are we prepared to face our secret selves? And where is the line between imagination and action? Of what are we capable?

Writers create characters who do “them things” so they don’t have to. They live vicariously through their creations and allow their readers to do so as well. However, where an author takes us may or may not be where we want to go. Like the unborn boy in the book *The Door in the Floor*, which became another 2004 film, do we really want to be born into a world in which there is a door in the floor? Do we really want literature to take us there?

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VOLUME 1

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CONTENTS

Editorial: What is Popular Culture? 1

Bob Batchelor

ARTICLES

Daniel Amos and Me: The Power of Pop Culture and Autoethnography 6

Andrew F. Herrmann

**When the Abyss Looks Back: Treatments of Human Trafficking in
Superhero Comic Books 18**

Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton

**Being-in-the-Technologically-Mediated-World: The Existential
Philosophy of Marshall McLuhan 36**

Marcelo Vieta and Laureano Ralon

**9/11 Did Not Take Place: Apocalypse and Amnesia in Film and
The Road 61**

Jesse Kavadlo

**“I Did Them Things So You Wouldn’t Have To”: *Secret Window*
and the Characters Who Won’t Stay Dead 84**

Jan Whitt

***Boardwalk Empire*: The Romantic Side of Crime and Capitalism 100**

Ashley M. Donnelly

**Why Engaging with Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick Matters: A
Review Essay 116**

Bob Batchelor

INTERVIEW

Figure/Ground Communication Presents: Arthur Asa Berger **126**
Interviewed by Laureano Ralon

BOOK REVIEWS

New Perspectives on Classics Texts **138**
Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870
Nathan Saunders

Reviews of New Books **142**
Gaga Feminism: Gender, Sexuality, and the End of Normal
Tammie Jenkins

Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation
Veronica Popp

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS **148**

<http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/volume-1/>