

From Renaissance to Dissolution: The Journeys of Disillusioned Heroes in Stephen King's Rat and Bag of Bones

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an analogical study of the journeys of the protagonists in Stephen King's novella *Rat* and the novel *Bag of Bones*. It is an attempt to identify the similarities and differences in the deliberation of the protagonists to create a long work of fiction that is brought to fruition only by the intervention of the supernatural. With room for minor variations, the narratives progress on a similar note that begins with the writers' struggle to write, followed by the change of scenery to precipitate manuscripts, the supernatural aid to dissolve the impediments, the dawn of disillusionment and the dissolution of the ambitions.

KEYWORDS

Writing, writer's block, selective perception, supernatural, renaissance, disillusionment, dissolution.

INTRODUCTION

"I knew nothing but shadows and I thought them to be real."- Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The "King of Horror" Stephen King's horror novella *Rat* from the collection *If It Bleeds* (2020) and the winner of the 1999 Bram Stoker, British Fantasy and Locus Awards, *Bag of Bones* (1998) feature protagonists who desire nothing but dexterity and luck to favour their fruitless attempts at writing a long work of fiction. Drew Larson in *If It Bleeds* is a professor at the University of Boston and a writer of short fiction who aims to write at least one novel as a challenge only to appease his ego. Though he is neither jaded by the demands of academia nor longs for a change in his career, he is restless because of his obsession with the idea of writing. In *Bag of Bones*, Mike Noonan is a well-established, widely recognised author of fiction who finds himself at wit's end because of his inability to write after the unexpected death of his supportive wife Johanna Noonan. He suffers a seemingly irreversible writer's block and persists steadfastly in the pursuit of the redemption of his writing.

The Catastrophe Called "Writing"

The word "catastrophe" is defined as "a sudden event that engenders trouble and destruction or a bad situation" ("Catastrophe."). The creative act of writing in both of King's works leads to unimaginable torments that wreak havoc on the lives of its writers. Writing, the renowned form of expression through words, metamorphosises from a wholesome, fulfilling, liberating process to one with the potential for destruction and ruin. Drew Larson, a tenured professor in *Rat* applies for a sabbatical for a final attempt at writing a longer form of fiction to get the closure he is desperate for after his previous attempt titled *The Village on the Hill* almost cost him his life, family and house. "He had burned the manuscript, and had come close to burning the house, as well." (King, "Rat" 297). Every time Drew, the visionary, gets inspired to write and begins typing it out, he suffers the erosion of selective perception. Instead of being able to work an extended period on focused narration, he gets lost in the choice of words. He finds himself completely overwhelmed and incapacitated by the decision-making required to winnow out the options and choose the correct word. Though the scene is clear in his mind, he panics and surrenders control when he tries to bring it out on paper. "Even the clearest part of what was in

your mind gets lost in translation” (King, “Rat” 314). Though he survives shorter works, the process of writing becomes hazardous when he starts working on longer fiction as the words and choices are endless. Though he is cognisant of his predicament, he dares himself to another when inspiration strikes him again.

The effect of writing, on Mike Noonan’s mental and physical well-being is worse than that on Drew Larson. Unlike Drew, Mike in *Bag of Bones* is a writer by profession and is compelled to get back to writing to maintain his position in the highly competitive publication industry, support his affluent lifestyle, save his reputation and sustain himself an audience. The sudden death of his wife Johanna derails him completely and it is a life-and-death struggle for him to try to get back on track. He is a one-book-a-year kind of an author and is expected to turn in his manuscript at the beginning of the year but his severe case of writer’s block clouds his life and almost chokes him to death.

My old pal Word Six...The pen-and-parchment logo came up... I suddenly couldn’t breathe...as if iron bands had been clamped around my chest. I pushed back from the desk, gagging...My head banged the floor and I saw a fountain of bright sparks go whizzing across my field of vision. If I was still looking at the logo – and at the hideous blank screen... I might have choked to death. (King, *Bag of Bones* 56)

Both Drew and Mike are found edging along sharp curves whenever they sit to write and endure near-fatal consequences. In her novel *Poisoned Prose*, the American writer Ellery Adams (2013) says, “Words have power, and all things of power are dangerous.” Words, here, become intoxicatingly alluring and impede the normal course of the lives of the protagonists. Sirens, the renowned symbols of temptation are the notorious bird-women nymphs in Greek mythology who try to lure away many maritime travellers like Odysseus and his comrades from their itinerary and lead them to their deaths. Odysseus ropes himself to the mast of the ship and seals the ears of his crew with wax to keep sailing past without trouble (“Siren.”). Drew and Mike do not secure themselves to reality like Odysseus and get carried away with imagined possibilities via writing no matter how debilitating it is to their health and welfare.

The Change of Scenery

The unincorporated TR-90 in Maine, USA, a fictitious town created by the author Stephen King becomes the writers’ retreat for Drew Larson and Mike Noonan to nurture their writing dreams. Unincorporated townships and ranges in the USA are unique settlements that are not officially recognised as municipalities by the state government and fall under the jurisdiction of the surrounding county or town instead of their own local government and have access to limited services, facilities and amenities (Team). While Drew goes there of his own volition, despite his wife Lucy’s opposition, Mike is mentally nudged by the paranormal entities to leave his residence at Derry for his lakeside log house called “Sarah Laughs” in the Western Maine woods in the TR-90. Drew receives a sudden afflatus for a Western novel while crossing the road and begins to see the plot unfold in his mind. He is resolute about going to his dead father’s cabin, away from his family, job and routine to direct his undivided attention on his novel *Bitter River*’s initial pages. “The first forty pages at the cabin, that’s all.” (King, “Rat” 299).

Mike Noonan’s nights get infested with nightmares of Sara Laughs and it does not take long for him to decode it as a persistent summon to the place. Maxim de Winter’s new wife is frequently taken to the Manderley estate in her dreams haunted by her husband’s drowned first wife Rebecca in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again” (Maurier 1). Likewise, the ghosts haunting his lakeside retreat plague his nights with repeated vivid walkthroughs with a striking similarity to the actual log house on the Dark Score Lake. On one such episode, he is taken to see an empty coffin of his wife at the end of the driveway and before he can run away, the door to Sara Laughs opens and a shrieking, faceless figure in white reaches out for him and terrifies him. He is relieved to wake up after the “nightmare powerful enough in its imagery to drive you insane.” (King, *Bag of Bones* 68). The nightmares cease only when Mike takes the initiative to move to Sara Laughs in July, hoping the change of place would reignite his writing before his publisher begins to bother him for a new novel and a renewed contract.

The desperate writers’ thirst for writing takes them far away from their quotidian patterns of existence, established routines, well-acquainted social circles, comforts and normalcy. They quickly respond to the overpowering urge to go far away from home to feel at home with writing and to stimulate the budding of the narratives. The change of scenery takes them closer to an exploration of the rawness of nature, the inexplicably paranormal elements and the previously masked recesses of their own psyches and it catalyses the precipitation

of the novels with the aid of the supernatural.

The Renaissance of Writing with the Aid of the Supernatural

“Well begun is half done.” Aristotelean wisdom emphasises the importance of beginning well to ensure the success of an undertaking. In both the works chosen for the study, the writers Drew and Mike frictionlessly transition from woebegone-wannabes to tale-tellers almost instantaneously and find the drafting of their novels possible with their physical and mental impediments gone. Having started on a positive note, they are determined to continue. But their writing is made possible only because of supernatural entities which serve as sails to their novels taking them smoothly through the turbulent waters. The role of their supernatural aiders can be compared to Remy the rat rising to the aid of Alfredo Linguini Gusteau to win a position as a chef at his late father Gusteau’s esteemed restaurant in the celebrated animated movie *Ratatouille* (2007) (“Ratatouille.”). Linguini becomes the marionette operated by Remy who uses his unusually heightened olfactory and gustatory senses to guide him to cook perfect meals, hiding within the pleats of Linguini’s toque blanche.

The “Remy” in Stephen King’s *Rat* is an unnamed rat who becomes Drew Larsen’s lifesaver after Drew’s kindness saves the frail rodent from a definite death on a stormy night at the cabin. Drew finds a weakened displaced rat on the brink of death and instead of killing him, he places him close to the fireplace to let him have one last chance at survival. The rat recuperates and offers an irresistible deal to Drew, who now has begun to spiral downwards, physically with flu and mentally with a repetition of the previous issue with selective perception. Stuck in the cabin because of the storm, Drew is unwilling to swallow his pride to accept defeat and get back home. So, he agrees to the “devil’s bargain” with the rat and holds on to the promise of finishing the novel at the cost of his friend and ex-colleague Al Stamper’s life. The deal with the rat yields the novel as promised and he finishes it with just under three hundred pages. “*I did it. Maybe it will be published and maybe it won’t, maybe I’ll do another and maybe I won’t, it doesn’t matter. I did it.*” (King, “Rat” 363). To his elation, the novel gets accepted for publication by Putnam and fetches him \$350,000 as an advance which could come in handy for his children’s college tuition fees. He also wins the trust and appreciation of his wife Lucy who had been highly sceptical of his writing process and it feels like his biggest victory.

In *Bag of Bones*, Mike Noonan’s renaissance of writing is revealed to be entirely of Johanna’s ghost’s doing. The writer uses his dead wife Johanna’s IBM Selectric typewriter to finish his writing at Sara Laughs. As he begins working on the first chapter of his novel, to his pleasant surprise he observes that all the symptoms he had experienced before whenever he sat to write no longer tormented him. He is glad to be cured of the writer’s block and grateful for the resuscitation of his career in writing. “Part of me still marvelled that I was sitting here at all, breathing easily, my heart beating steadily in my chest, and not even a glimmer of an anxiety attack...it had come out as naturally as a breath.” (King, *Bag of Bones* 293, 294, 296). But he is kept unaware of the fact that his debilitating writing block which seems to have magically vanished is only because of Johanna’s intervention. In order to help him locate the clues that lead him to decipher the reason for the haunting of Sara Laughs by the ghost of the dead blues singer Sara Tidwell and her son Kito, Johanna manipulates him into writing a manuscript for his new novel *My Childhood Friend*. The sentences of his manuscript containing a hundred and twenty pages begin with letters that can be decoded to the location of his clue to solve the mystery at Sarah Laughs “owls undEr studIO” (King, *Bag of Bones* 573).

The Disillusionment

“He is trying to recapture his innocence, yet all he succeeds in doing by writing is to inoculate the world with a virus of his disillusionment”, says Henry Miller (“Disillusionment quotes.”). After their fair share of struggles and triumphs in their pursuit of writing, Drew Larsen and Mike Noonan come to know that their career in writing has come to a dead end and that there is no hope for another resuscitation. They are fully aware that without the assistance of the supernatural, they would not be able to write another line and if they attempt to do so it would cost them their sanity and even their lives. They do not unfairly take full credit for their accomplishments under the influence of the supernatural. Drew in *Rat*, attributes his victory to the rat, “Really, when you thought about it, everything was all rat.” (King, “Rat” 373) Similarly, Mike accepts that it was Johanna’s ghost that had temporarily resolved his writer’s block to facilitate his discovery of the clues she had hidden at Sara Laughs. “*Jo had dissolved it. Jo had beaten it.*” (King, *Bag of Bones* 575) The dawn of disillusionment regarding their lack of ability to continue churning out fiction would help them shift their focus to viable goals that do not fool and imperil themselves and others.

The Dissolution

The writers openly proclaim the dissolution of their ambitions in writing after processing and coming to terms with their disillusionment. They develop an irreversible resistance to writing and are no longer tempted to try no matter how enticing the call to pen a novel is. Mike Noonan says, “The machine which ran so sweet for so long has stopped...I’ve put a tarp over it. (King, *Bag of Bones* 658) and he bids adieu to his career in writing. He chooses to retire with the profits from his previous publications and shift his focus to raising his daughter Kyra in peace. In *Rat*, Drew Larsen announces that in addition to quitting on writing, he also wishes to sell the cabin on the TR-90 to completely purge himself of his interaction with the supernatural rat there. He desires a fresh start with no traces of the endangering attempt at writing. Though the profits from the publication of his novel earn the support of his wife for writing, he now has a distaste for it. Bearing the guilt of the untimely deaths of Al Stamper and his wife Nadine is enough for him to unwaveringly say, “I was thinking we ought to sell the place, hon. I’m really going up there to say goodbye.” (King, “Rat” 368).

Conclusion

H.G. Wells in *Love and Mr. Lewisham* says, “There’s truths you have to grow into.” Truths, however bitter they are, must be bravely encountered, for, the longer the embracement of the lie the steeper the fall. The protagonists Drew Larsen and Mike Noonan deserve appreciation for their resilience in the unpleasant confrontation with truth and their proactive measures to protect the safety and peace of themselves and fellow beings by daring to extinguish their raging passion for writing. As the façade fades away, the fog clears and reveals new horizons for the writers.

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