

Character Development in Jack Schaefer's *Shane*

Kishan Stanley  
ENC 1102  
Dr. Ellingham  
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## Outline

**THESIS** : With his usual descriptive style of writing, Schaefer skillfully develops riveting characters and an intricate plot in his novel, *Shane*.

### **Introductory Paragraph:**

- 1) Introduce Jack Schaefer and *Shane*
- 2) State my Thesis

### **Second Paragraph**

- 1) Give a brief biography of Schaefer

### **Paragraphs three to five**

- 1) Give synopsis of *Shane*
- 2) Overview analysis of some of the characters in *Shane*
- 3) Analyze Shane
- 4) Analyze Joe Starrett
- 5) Analyze Marian Starrett

### **Sixth Paragraph**

- 1) Analyze other characters of Schaefer's

### **Final Paragraph**

- 1) Conclude research paper

Kishan Stanley  
ENC1102  
Dr. Ellingham  
Research Paper

“A consummate craftsman, he wrote moving tales about characters of fierce individualism and courage”(Torres 1). This and numerous other similar criticisms are frequently attributed to the prolific twentieth century fiction writer, Jack Schaefer. For years he has mesmerized his readers with his exceptional, classic stories riddled with complex, yet well-defined characters and relationships. Though the author of many classics, it is said by some critics Schaefer didn’t get the attention he deserved as an American western writer, which is clearly unjust when considering the impact he had on western literature with his novels. One of his first and most famous novels is the classic western *Shane*; though a relatively short novel, “Shane accurately reflects Schaefer’s concern for both the romance and the reality of the West. It is, in fact, a remarkable blend of these elements” (Haslam 253). With his usual descriptive style of writing, Schaefer skillfully develops riveting characters and an intricate plot to deliver his novel *Shane*.

Jack Schaefer was born in Cleveland on November 19, 1907. His parents were Carl Schaefer, an attorney, and Minnie Schaefer. He received his AB in English in 1929 at Oberlin College Ohio; he later attended Columbia University where he never graduated. Schaefer later got a job in the reporting field at the United Press in Connecticut; he later got jobs in the journalistic field for twenty years until about 1949. It was after this period of being a journalist that he began to publish his novels, most of which were westerns. One of his first books he wrote was probably the most memorable one, *Shane*, which was published in 1949; other memorable works of Schaefer include *The Big Range* (1953), *The Canyon* (1953), *First Blood*, (1953), *Company of Cowards* (1957), and *Monte Walsh* (1963). All these novels each contain one element for which Schaefer is famous: strong, deep characters. Jack Schaefer died of congestive heart

failure on January 24, 1991, forty-two years after *Shane* was first published. Though not a relatively popular writer he is considered by some to have defined the genre, and there are quite a number of critics who look at books like *Shane* and “Marvel at how well it’s written” (Susan Brockmann 1).

The novel *Shane* was the first one to be published by Jack Schaefer, Houghton Mifflin released it in 1949 and it immediately became an instant success, skyrocketing the book and Schaefer to extraordinary popularity. The novel deals with a strong mysterious protagonist named Shane, and his impact on the lives of a family of squatters called the Starretts, namely Joe Starrett, an ambitious and understanding man, Marian Starrett, the wife of Joe, and Bob Starrett, the ten year old son of Joe and Marian, also the narrator of the story.

The basic synopsis of the story is that the major antagonist Fletcher wants to use brute force to threaten and remove the homesteaders, a group of which is the Starretts. Shane comes along and befriends the Starretts and within a short period of time has two major confrontations with Fletcher’s hired thugs, both of which he won. There is then one final showdown between him and Stark Wilson (Fletcher’s hired gunslinger); he ends up facing Wilson because he forcibly took the place of Joe Starrett. Shane wins the gunfight by killing both Fletcher and Stark Wilson. Due to the deaths of Fletcher and Stark Wilson, the homesteaders are free to live on their land without harassment from anyone. After the gunfight Shane immediately leaves the valley and never returns, dwelling only in the hearts and memories of the Starrets and the people of the valley.

The entire story is told as seen through the eyes of ten-year-old Bob Starrett, thus, as one critic put it, “there’s an entire layer of the story that he overhears and sees yet doesn’t understand, and in his innocence he merely reports the words said, reports the emotions in the room, yet he doesn’t label or judge or condemn” (Brockmann 1). This style of writing is extremely convenient and effective considering certain events and

relationships that take place. One of these relationships includes the one between Shane and Marian, clearly the two share unapparent, but present, feelings for each other that are never acted upon. As this relationship is seen through the eyes of the innocent Bob, the reader doesn't condemn them for their feelings for each other, yet there is a sense of honorable display in both characters, which again shows Schaefer's skillful implementation of layered characters. Suzanne Brockmann once again states, "I find myself intrigued by the multitude of layers Jack Schaefer has woven into this fast-paced, exquisitely written story"(1).

The relationship between Shane and Marian is intriguing in itself, but even more intriguing, is the characters of various individuals in the story, one of the most complex being Shane himself. When he is first introduced he is seen as an alert, sharp, well dressed individual yet with a sort of underlying roughness to him, he had a "Dark appearance and lean, hard look" (Schaefer 9), yet "The tiny wrinkles around his eyes were what with him would be a smile"( 7). This portrayed image at first seems complex, but it actually helps the reader understand that there are two sides to this man, and throughout the story he expresses both sides. This portrayal also gives the reader an impression that there is some sort of mystery surrounding the true identity of Shane. Shane was once defined by a critic as "a multifaceted, complicated man, filled with countless contradictions. Each time I read the book, I am struck by how effortlessly Schaefer has created such a hero without ever writing from Shane's point of view" (Brockmann 1). This is helpful for Schaefer, because he never really tells the past of Shane or anything about his life prior to meeting the Starretts, so it is left up to the reader to figure out Shane's past with the subtle personality traits Schaefer attributes to Shane.

These subtle clues include Shane's ever-alert behavior; in some cases Schaefer is always seen "sitting with his back towards the wall facing the doorway" (Schaefer 62) and constantly looking down the road when on the porch. This behavior gives some

clue to Shane's past; it is interpreted that Shane is afraid his past might catch up with him or that he is simply trying to escape it. On the topic of observations made by other characters in the story, there are quite a few key statements made by the other characters in the book that give even more clues to Shane's apparent dark past. One instance was when a greedy salesman criticized him about his appearance; one look into the dark, angry, and alert eyes of Shane abruptly ended this criticism. Shane's surprising response was to remove an annoying tree stump that Joe always wanted to get rid of. The scene went as follows.

Father halted, legs wide, hands on hips. "Now lookahere," he began, "there's no call for you," Shane broke his rhythm just long enough to level a straight look at us. "A man has to pay his debts," he said. (31)

Bob's response to this was "you don't owe us anything" (Schaefer 31), Joe responded to Bob by saying "No, Bob. He doesn't mean meals" (Schaefer 31). This statement shows Shane as trying to make up for his past but unwillingly accepting it, and it is at this point that Shane's past is first presented to the reader as being inescapable.

This style of character development was typical of Schaefer in his novels; he once said the essential purpose of all his fiction was "to establish a distinct and individual major character and pit him against a specific human problem and show how he rose to meet it"(Torres 1). This is one of the main reasons that makes the character Schaefer writes so intense; in Shane's case the problems were both inner and outer conflicts, both of which he conquered. Another interesting character is Joe Starrett; he befriends Shane, and they end up working with each other, during which they share many experiences together. One notable characteristic of Joe Starrett is his honor and pride. Joe is depicted by Schaefer as a strong, tough man and yet sensitive and caring in some instances. One distinct exhibition of his honorable character was the subtle but present "love triangle" (Brockmann 1) between Joe, Shane and Joe's wife Marian. Joe knows that there is something present between Shane and Marian, yet he never seems

to confront them or speak out; it is as if he even understands, the relationship is, as Suzanne Brockmann describes it, “an odd love triangle, and one to be admired because all three characters are so thoroughly honorable”(1). Another example of this man’s exceptionally layered character is when he was willing to give his life for his family and everything that he had worked hard for and believed in; this heart felt show of emotion went as follows:

“I can’t see the full finish. But I can see this. Wilson down and there’ll be an end to it. Fletcher’ll be done. The town will see to that. I can’t beat Wilson on the draw. But there’s strength in this clumsy body of mine to keep me on my feet till I get to him, too.” Mother stirred and was still, and his voice went on. “Things could be worse. It helps a man to know that if anything happens to him his family will be in better hands than his own.”(178)

Luckily, Shane knocks out Joe and it is Shane who voluntarily fights Stark Wilson and, as stated before, defeats him. Shane voluntarily takes this risk due to the layered relationship he has with Joe and the characteristics that Joe displayed throughout the novel that makes Shane feel it is worth the risk.

Another notable character is Marian Starrett; in contrast to the women of the time, she is quite independent and is as strong a character as her husband Joe Starrett. Marian is presented to the reader as having an equal role as her husband Joe and her character is just as, or even more complex than his. When analyzing Marian Starrett as a character, one has to acknowledge the honor and inner strength that Schaefer implemented in her. Although Marian had feelings for Shane, she clearly exhibited her loyalty and strength when she chose not to act upon them, which is why the relationship is rarely spoken of in the whole novel. One of the main scenes, where their relationship was exhibited, shows her displaying her strength over her emotions by asking Shane to stay and help Joe to deal with Fletcher; it went as follows:

“I know. And I know that you’re the man to stand up to it. In some ways it would be easier for me, too, if you rode out of this valley and never came back. But we can’t let Joe down. I’m counting on you not to ever make me do that. Because you’ve got to stay, Shane, no matter how hard it is for us. Joe can’t keep this place without you.”(117)

There is also one scene in the book where Schaefer chose to emphasize her “stubborn strength and spirit,” as critic Susan Brockmann put it; this pivotal scene was when she refused help from Joe to remake an apple pie she promised them earlier. This blatant refusal of help, which also emphasizes her perseverance, helps the reader to truly understand the determined part of her complex character.

*Shane* isn’t the only novel in which Schaefer portrays complex and riveting characters; this show of literary dexterity is consistent throughout most of his novels. These extraordinary characters appear in books like *Monte Walsh* and *The Canyon*, each of the novel’s protagonists “ sooner or later, confront himself for what he is”(Errisman 3), and Schaefer tries extremely hard to bring a sense of reality to each of the characters no matter how minuscule by focusing on each on every one of them. He gives each character definitive layers in which they develop; this character depth makes the fictitious novels he writes very compelling and realistic. In *Monte Walsh*, quite a few of his characters are extremely layered, for example, a saloon girl and prostitute named Hattie, who “Initiates Monte into manhood”(Errisman 9), but she later teaches him the true meaning of what it is to be a good friend. There are also quite a few characters that come of age in his novels; in *Monte Walsh*, Dobe Chavez, a Mexican outlaw, begins a career in livestock after he begins to tire of being an outlaw; he then discovers another side to life and, eventually, he becomes a lawman. This type of character depth is what makes Schaefer’s novels so interesting: almost every character, rather than just the protagonist, goes through a definitive experience. In *The Canyon*, one can see Schaefer’s skill as a writer by the characters that are implemented in the

novel; the most interesting character is not even human, but is a badger who teaches an Indian tribesman, Little Bear, how the world really operates. When reading *The Canyon*, one cannot help but marvel at Schaefer's implementation of such ironic and metaphoric characters in the novel.

The characters Schaefer uses and the way he goes about creating them is remarkable; "The simplest of the themes that Schaefer utilizes is that of straight forward individualism, he is, as author, concerned with the solitary individual, the person moving in lonely, independent fashion"(Errisman 2). Fred Errisman could not have summed up Jack Schaefer and his characters any better in that last quote, he "established himself as an author capable of elevating the tired themes of the Western to new levels, of projecting their wider significance, and of broadening the range of characters and situations"(Haslam 251). When compared to other western writers Schaefer stands as "one of the most versatile and highly regarded" (Errisman 1) and he is said by some to have influenced western literature in more ways than he is credited for. Although the majority of his work isn't relatively popular, the ones that are have established themselves as literary classics; both *Shane* and *Monte Walsh* are praised by critics and have been made into academy award winning films. Though it has been eleven years since his death, his popularity as a talented author still begins to rise and, with novels like *Shane*, which is printed in numerous languages, his in-depth, intricate characters will be remembered for years to come.

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