



Movie Club

Stand by Me (1986)

1. The film has been linked with archetypes from Greek mythology. “Both Odysseus and the four young men dealt with the issues of death, revenge, and what constitutes a hero in their own individual way.” (Ezovski, C., “Films and videotapes recommended for classroom study -- Stand By Me directed by Rob Reiner”, *English Journal*; Feb 1994; 83, 2; Research Library p.84). They embark on a quest and undergo many ordeals, like the junk-yard man and his “vicious” dog (perhaps reminiscent of the Cyclops), and the leeches in the river (like sirens luring unsuspecting victims), and are nearly run over by a train (much like Jason sailing through the Symplegades, the clashing rocks, on his journey to find the golden fleece). But perhaps what stands out the most are those of the boy’s transformations. Each undergoes a different change. A clear example is Chris. He is the outcast, but through the events of the film and later he overcomes this and one day becomes a well-respected judge. The other is Gordie, who deals with his hero worship of his deceased brother and the apathy of his parents and transforms from an unsure, shy, nervous child into a sure and confident man who goes on to scribe the story that unfolds. Does thinking of these archetypes add more to the story? How obvious are these references to classic mythology? How obvious should they be? Are they effective in their intent?
2. The film does not shy away from dwelling on trivial matters. This is most clearly demonstrated during the campfire scene, where the narrator, with much ironic self-awareness, asserts that they discussed very important matters. We see the boys engage in a highly detailed discussion as to what species Goofey is. They scoff at the concept of someone being well-versed in opera. And when posed with the question of last meal, Pez is offered as the unequivocal solution. Although highlighted in this scene, much of these “trivial” matters come forth in much of the film. This is in contrast to the very serious topics that make up the bulk of the film’s narrative, its look at loyalty, death, heroes, friendship and family. How do we reconcile these seemingly trivial matters given the weighty subjects that preoccupy the film? Are they simply to make the characters more relatable? Is it comic relief? Does it add to the notion of the loss of childhood innocence? Or is it simply revelling in the fact that life has both “serious” matters and “trivial” matters, and despite this we give equal meaning to both?
3. Although a film that has a largely realist quality, these boys do seem to lack some sense of reality. For example, in the discussion about who would win in a fight between Mighty Mouse and Superman, the deciding point is expressed rather unusually by Teddy: “Boy, you

don't know nothing! Mighty Mouse is a cartoon. Superman's a real guy. There's no way a cartoon could beat up a real guy." The mixing of real world logic with a make believe character strikes us as odd. Other incidents can be explained by an exaggeration of stories that circulate around the wider community. A clear example is with the "Chopper, sic balls!", where Chopper is told to be a ferocious killer yet is in fact extremely harmless. Both essentially act as local colour, details of small town America, where the local tale of a vicious guard dog is as much a part of life as dealing with bullies and admiring the incredible feats of Superman. Even their journey to find the dead body is driven by tales, by a youthful exuberance for adventure, rather than the very real fact that someone has died. How do we account for the mix of reality and make believe that occupies the boy's imaginations and discussions? Is it simply boys coming to grips with the world, a phase that will be grown out of once it is made clear that Superman too is make believe? Or is it indicative of a way of thinking, as with the trivial matters discussed earlier, that reality is a matter of perception? Think for example of the discussion between Chris and ... about the importance of writing. Does it impact anything else that we see in the film (i.e. should we give equal credence to what is being presented, given the tendency to stretch the confines of reality? Does this change by the end, when the boys are finally confronted by the striking reality of the dead body?).

4. *Stand by Me* has been considered "a love letter to childhood innocence" ("*Stand By Me: A Love Letter To Childhood Innocence*", *Weekend All Things Considered*, Washington, D.C.: NPR. August 6, 2011). What does this mean? We have the narrator longing to tell of his time with the boys, of the adventures, the silliness, and ends by saying that he "never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?" In fact the narrator starts by fondly saying "Everything was there and around us. We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going." Yet much of the film reveals the lack or battle with identity, the lack of clear direction in life, the lack of a sense of belonging to the wider world that only comes through the completion of their quest. Is the film "a love letter to childhood innocence" so much as a realization of its loss? The journey that is fondly remembered is not one of continued innocence, but one where it is lost, where fears, anxieties, and sorrows are overcome. Is it accurate, or for that matter even correct, to view childhood innocence with such nostalgia? Is it the case that becoming aware of your childhood innocence is a clear sign that you have lost it, leaving you only to be able to look back on it, either fondly or disparagingly?
5. Many of the characters have troubles with their families. Gordie lost a dearly beloved brother, a brother he believes was the more loved, the more important to his parents, with his parents emotionally abandoning him after his brother's death. Chris comes from a family that has a reputation in the town, and the town sees Chris simply as a continuation of that less than honourable tradition. Teddy's father, whom he asserts stormed the beaches at Normandy, has been institutionalised for, among other things, beating Teddy and his mother. Yet, despite the harm at his father's hand, Teddy still defends him whole-heartedly. Milo, the junkyard man, says he knows all of the kids, and feels entitled to torment each with their families' pasts, especially Teddy. What do you make of the paternal figures in the

film? Is there an element of exaggeration involved in how apathetic, cruel or disparaging they are?

6. The boys are forced to be heroes throughout the film. The whole reason for their journey is to become celebrated as heroes. And throughout their journey there are several immediate threats they must overcome. Some are quickly dispelled, as in the case of Chopper. But others, namely Ace and his gang, are very much real, and especially in the climax pose a definite threat. How realistic did you find this threat? Was there an element of unbelievability in how aggressive and cruel Ace and his gang were? Did the final confrontation, where Ace seems willing to kill or at least severely injure the boys, strike you as plausible? In the end, the boys decide not to take credit for finding the body. They make an anonymous call from to the police. The act they hoped would define them, that would make them heroes, was ultimately and consciously abandoned. But the act of finding the body was very much real. To what do you attribute this change in mentality? Was it due to an interaction with Ace and his gang, who likewise sought fame from the discovery, or was it the experience of the journey itself that meant that the fame no longer had its lustre, or indeed value? Think about other things, like Gordie's brother. He is known and admired around town, receiving adulation. This would have afforded the boys similar admiration. How has their perception of a hero changed? Is it that they no longer value heroes, or have they come to a different, perhaps more noble understanding of that concept? Is this linked with their coming of age, or specifically with the experience they have just endured?