

# Death in Rites of Passage films

Hannah Billingham examines the of death in Rites of Passage films.

Rites of Passage films traditionally focus on adolescent characters on the brink of maturity and their transition to adulthood. The films feature such themes as first love, sexual awakening or death of a loved one and it is through confrontation with these issues and the internal conflicts surrounding these issues, that characters grow or 'come of age'.

Robert McKee describes the genre as the 'maturation plot' (*Story*, Methuen, 1998) and, arguably, older characters - not just adolescents - can face new rites of passage that allow them to mature or grow. Death is perhaps the most obvious issue to be explored using older characters: death of a partner or a child or facing one's own mortality. These themes feature in two of the films to be examined here: *In America* (Jim Sheridan, 2002) and *About Schmidt* (Alexander Payne, 2002).

Death within Rites of Passage films often proves to be a catalyst or inciting incident for a character to make the transition to a new phase of life. An archetypal film within the genre, *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986) portrays the metaphorical journey of the protagonist, twelve-year-old Gordie, which allows him to accept his older brother Denny's death. It is, however, his physical journey - with his friends along the train tracks to find the dead body of Ray Brower, a boy their own age - which enables his metaphorical voyage of self-



Sight of passage.

Stand By Me: Columbia TriStar

discovery and eventually allows him to release his repressed grief.

Initially embarking on the journey in the hope of achieving fame in their home-town of Castle Rock, by the time Gordie and his friends are finally face-to-face with the body, we have witnessed the emotional

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development of the characters (primarily of Gordie and Chris): their coming of age. They no longer see glory in their find. They have a new understanding and respect and they have matured. Faced with this dead body, Gordie properly acknowledges his brother's death - and faces up to his own grief. The cathartic release of this emotion appears to

permit a change in Gordie who, earlier intimidated by bully Ace Merrill, is now able to stand his ground and shows no fear. He has come of age.

In an original draft of Jim Sheridan's semi-autobiographical *In America*, the protagonist's daughter, Christy, states, 'This is a coming-of-age story; unfortunately for me it's my parents who are coming of age.' (Jim Sheridan, Kirsten Sheridan, Naomi Sheridan *In America: A Portrait of the Film*, Newmarket Press, 2003.) Although Christy, in fact, also comes of age, the story focuses much of its attention on her father Johnny (this will be explored later).

In *About Schmidt*, the protagonist is sixty-six years old, yet he still has a huge personal journey to make. Amy Heckerling, writer and director of teen coming-of-age movies, addresses the concept of adult rites of passage thus: 'I think you ... hopefully keep coming of age. It would be sad if somebody figured it out at seventeen and then just glided through the rest of their life.' (Serena Donadoni, 2000)

The notion that life does not just provide us with 'one life-altering epiphany' (*ibid*) is key to understanding the role of death in Rites of Passage films: death marks the end and beginning of various chapters of our lives until our own ultimate end.

*In America* portrays an Irish family who emigrate to New York haunted by the death of toddler, Frankie, and the inability of

Johnny, the patriarch of the family, to accept his son's death. He, like Gordie in *Stand By Me*, is unable to externalise his grief. Following his journey to make a new life with his family in America, it is the death of Mateo - an artist living in their building whom they had befriended - which enables Johnny finally to reach his inner emotions.

*In America* has a dual protagonist in the form of Johnny's elder daughter, Christy, who narrates the film through voice-over. Although it is structurally more Johnny's story - it is his need to move to New York and his lack of emotion that prevents him from finding acting work - the dual perspective works. This is perhaps because both characters represent Jim Sheridan himself: the son who lost a brother and the father who moved his family to New York. Commissioning drafts of a screenplay from his two daughters about their memories of America, Sheridan has successfully worked the authentic perspectives into the final film.

Christy's coming of age occurs, alongside her father's, at the end of the film. Wise beyond her years but clinging to the past, she has been praying to her brother and carries his image around on her camcorder. In the emotional climax of the film when she confronts her father with the need to say goodbye to his son - after the death of Mateo and the near death of her mother (Johnny's wife) Sarah - she releases her own emotional burden. When she confronts her father with his inability to grieve, he dismisses her and she retorts: "Don't 'little girl' me! I've been carrying this family on my back for over a year. He was my brother too." As she and her father say goodbye to Frankie, they gain understanding and maturity. It is a cathartic moment for them both and for the audience.

Warren R Schmidt, the downbeat protagonist of Payne's satire on American life, faces a whole new set of rites of passage: retirement, the impending marriage of his only child, Jeannie and, most importantly, the sudden death of Helen, his wife of 42 years. Early on in the film when he finds his wife dead, he is faced



About Schmidt: Entertainment

**Jump mundane**

with his own mortality. The death is the main catalyst for his journey across Middle America to visit Jeannie and, playing a large factor in his decision to go, is the metaphorical death of his sense of status and achievement in life.

A former actuary in the insurance game, he estimates that he has nine years left to live and is forced to question the meaning of his existence. His former employers have replaced him with a young hotshot and, having discovered that his wife and best

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friend had an affair early on in their marriage, Jeannie, his pride and joy, provides the only hope for him. His journey to visit her also provides him with an emotional journey but there is less hope for Schmidt than for the aforementioned films' protagonists because he realises that she resents him and no longer needs him.

The 'death' of their relationship as he has known it, marks the start of his new journey. Once home he must face his 'new beginning' alone. However, he has now accepted that life is futile and the film ends abruptly with him breaking down. This structure - the lack of resolution of Schmidt's inner conflict and his need for meaning in his life - allows the audience to

question his place in society. *About Schmidt* offers a bleaker, more ambiguous ending. His grief is not only for his dead wife and the 'loss' of his daughter emotionally (and through marriage to "that nincompoop" Randle), but for himself, for a life apparently wasted. The film arguably ends on a note of hope with the innocent painting sent to him by Ndugu, the Tanzanian boy he sponsors. However, given the sense of futility that Schmidt has conveyed to Ndugu through his final letter, the painting serves to remind us that Schmidt has nothing. All hope has gone. Order is not restored.

In his chapter on Rebirth, Christopher Booker states that in comedy, the hero '... must be brought to recognition of things hidden before he can achieve the happy ending' (*The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Continuum, 2004). In this respect, perhaps there is hope for Schmidt after all: his emotional breakdown and recognition of self serves as a moment of catharsis, as is the case in *In America* and in *Stand By Me*.

Rites of Passage films examine universal milestones and fears and so enable audience identification. The playing out of fears, including the death of a loved one, allows us, if sufficient emotional resonance has been established, to engage. Emotional connection with the story is strengthened by recognition of the story elements including setting, the dynamics at work within the characters' relationships, and theme.

Phil Parker suggests that themes are '... the emotional basis on which an audience is



In America: 20th Century Fox

### Happy clappers

unconsciously involved in a film because the film addresses a major emotional need within the individual lives of the audience' (*Personal Drama - the Genre of Success*, *ScriptWriter Magazine*, issue 9). The audience will therefore experience the character's epiphany or moment of catharsis with them. In engaging through empathy, we put ourselves into the character's position and through them play out our responses to the scenarios explored. This is how Rites of Passage films are seen to 'play' with our emotions.

*Stand by Me* is dark and reflective and also nostalgic, inviting the audience to reflect on their own childhood friendships. It portrays the end of summer, the death of the time when 'friendships are as close as when you are twelve'. Structurally, it is framed by a present-day narrator, 'The Writer': a grown up Gordie Lachance who is inspired to reflect on his childhood friendships and his first experience of death when he reads of his best friend Chris' murder. Both characters, it transpires, had achieved their childhood goals in life: Gordie has overcome his father's disapproval and constant comparison with his sporty brother and made a life for himself telling stories. Chris had overcome his bad reputation and worked hard to become a lawyer. So Chris' death marks another rite of passage for Gordie, made all the more poignant by the fact that he now has his own children.

Early on in all these films, a physical journey is undertaken following a death.

While the lengths of the journeys vary within the films, they all allow space for emotional examination. The 'dead of night' is a key theme in all of these emotional journeys. It is where the characters confront what they lack. Schmidt, in a scene that appears to be a parody of *King Lear*, not only because of the theme of 'lost' daughters, spends a night 'in the wilderness' (sleeping under the stars on the roof of his Winnebago). It is where he forgives his dead wife and the moment seems to take on a religious significance for him.

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Similarly, it is while camping out in *Stand By Me* that Gordie and Chris face up to their own emotional issues. It is a key moment in the film: from then on the tone darkens with the realisation that they are about to see the dead body. This, in turn, enables Gordie to see the situation clearly: that the purpose of their journey for fame is childish.

Johnny's moment of catharsis in *In America* occurs when he, in helping his youngest daughter Ariel to accept the death of Mateo (who had promised her he would say goodbye) convinces her to wave goodbye to him by pretending that he is riding a bike - ET style - across the night sky. The metaphorical 'dead of night' appears to

enable the characters to begin to face up to their grief.

It is clear from these three films that the protagonist's experience of a second loss or death enables them to externalise repressed emotion regarding their initial loss. In the case of *In America*, it is not only Mateo's death that allows this, but the near death of Sarah and the new baby. In *Stand by Me*, the story is organised so that the death, years later, of Gordie's childhood best friend, enables him to face up to the death of his brother and the death of his childhood through remembering the encounter with the dead body of the boy in Castle Rock, a situation which allowed him, at the time, to mourn his brother.

In *About Schmidt*, the second loss is metaphorical. Schmidt loses his daughter to another man. Having retired, he has also lost his status. Alone and grieving for all this - and for his late wife - he must now face up to his own mortality. The relatively abrupt ending of the film, as Schmidt breaks down, does not give the audience any easy answers or closure. The film ends as Schmidt's new chapter in life begins but, unlike the other films, there is little sense of hope for his new life.

From an audience's perspective, death in Rites of Passage films enables us to reflect on our own experiences and resolve our fears. Robert McKee defines this as 'aesthetic emotion' and suggests that 'Life on its own, without art to shape it, leaves you in confusion and chaos, but aesthetic emotion harmonises what you know with what you feel to give you a heightened awareness and a sureness of your place in reality.' (*Story*)

Within these Rites of Passage films we are able to travel with the protagonists on their journeys and experience the moment of catharsis with the characters. Instead of themes of death and grief being abstract, we experience the emotions directly but with the safety net that the lives represented on screen are not our own.

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