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The Use of Suspense and Character Development in Stephen King's *The End of the Whole Mess*

King is, arguably, most commonly regarded in terms of his use of suspense in his writing. However, what is most prominent about the short story *The End of the Whole Mess* is King's message regarding the state of our planet. It tells the story of Bobby Forno from the perspective of his older brother, Howard. The world is on the brink of nuclear war, and Bobby believes he has found a chemical to reduce the aggressive tendencies of humans. They release it through a volcano set to explode, but later realize that the substance also causes symptoms resembling dementia and Alzheimer's disease before being fatal. He uses suspense nevertheless, along with both Bobby's and Howard's character development, and particular writing style to convey his message. King appears to be drawing upon similar ideas in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, instilling the fear of ambition and reminding the reader of human limitations; *Frankenstein* works as a warning to science overreaching itself, and while this is included, King also warns of the nature of war.

King opens the piece with this use of suspense and mystery to captivate his readers. The speaker, who we learn to be Howard Fornoy, states that he must write “as fast as (he)” can because he only “got somewhere between forty-five minutes and two hours, depending on (his) blood-type.” He intends to explain what happened and the situation he is now in through his story. So, beginning with this statement places the reader in a form of *media res*, as the catastrophe has already occurred, and we enter the story in the painful aftermath. King creates action through its consequences, and by not revealing everything from the start. Including brief hints like the mention of blood type invites the reader to begin questioning the circumstances and generate their own ideas of the plot. When he begins to go off topic, he stops himself with an outburst of “shit, I can’t afford these digressions.” These interjections portray a sense of urgency when he begins to panic about how little time he has left. It emphasizes the importance of the story he needs to tell, and the lack of his time left to live.

The way the speaker describes Bobby’s character initially is foreboding of his actions to come. He compares him to great names in history, such as “Leonardo da Vinci” and “Einstein,” and compares them to “huge compasses which swing aimlessly for a long time, searching for some true north and then homing on it with fearful force.” This simile is particularly effective, because it presents the idea of a pursuit of truth or meaning from Bobby’s perspective, implying that he does have good intentions, despite the consequences. The “fearful force” with which he pursues it however, suggests a form of obsession that becomes dangerous to himself and to others. Additionally, this image of Bobby as a sort of madman is also expressed through the story Howard tells about an incident that occurred when they were kids. Bobby had claimed to have

built an airplane, and asked his brother to help push him down the hill to make it work. He recalls how “his eyes were dancing with that crazed light (he) knew so well,” and “that was life with Bobby.” The use of the word “crazed” in this context is particularly interesting; on the one hand, it could be viewed in a positive way, highlighting a passion and childish excitement. On the other hand, it could imply a more manic, dangerous sort of passion. The caricature of a “mad scientist” comes to mind, and how the combination of obsession and ambition can have such detrimental effects not only on oneself, but also on everyone else.

Howard had warned him that he had got the “wings on backward,” but let him carry on anyway and “watched, wide-eyed and bullshit with fear and amazement.” Through this, the reader can see Howard’s admiration of his younger brother, and as protective as he is of him, he upholds the same desire to push his limits. This is emphasized through Howard explaining how he “couldn’t seem to stop grinning” when Bobby had a new idea. While Bobby expresses resentment for the way humans are behaving towards each other in this time, Howard remains blissfully ignorant for a time, as he blames “original sin,” and things are “going the way they always went.” He’s far more accepting of the state of humanity at this time, under the belief that nothing can be done. It’s evident, however, that Howard’s sense of excitement and desire to help his brother stems directly from that, as opposed to doing it for the sake of the greater good. The question of madness therefore, is whether it is Bobby himself or Howard that encourages him and whose desires lie in the thrill of the chase alone. From a non-scientific perspective, Howard wants to push the limits of humanity through his brother, hence allowing him to do everything he chooses.

Howard claims that he does not care about the consequences of their actions, because they “killed the plants, but at least (they) saved the greenhouse.” This metaphor is particularly telling of his view of the planet in regards to humanity. From one perspective, he is stating that despite killing off the human race, it was for the sake of saving the planet itself, so it is still able to sustain life even if it is not ours. On the other hand, describing the planet as a “greenhouse” arguably implies that he sees it as there for our use and its only purpose is to sustain life. King makes a point about the fragility of the planet and how we treat it, and the fact that if it ever ceases to stop being a planet capable of sustaining life, humanity will be the reason.

By the end of the story, Howard is struggling to remember things, spell, and string together sentences. His last words to Bobby are “Forgivyou” and “loveyou.” Through making Howard’s words and sentences make less and less sense, King is effectively making a connection between the character and the reader, as the reader witnesses his final moments on paper. Furthermore, it makes the drastic consequences of what they had done far more impacting. It is a useful device for creating ambiguity surrounding Bobby’s death and Howard’s honest attitude towards the situation. It is stated what he forgives Bobby for, but nevertheless emphasizes the fact that as his older brother, he still lets him get away with every mistake he makes. The only person who punishes him is himself, which is evident through wanting to die before the chemical kills him.

To conclude, I would argue that King effectively uses the theme of ambition to make a statement about humanity’s attitude towards our planet and our own limitations. The clear

description of Bobby's character, Howard's attitude, and admiration towards him, and the overall use of suspense within his writing style enforces his ideas. While he has good intentions, Bobby's plan backfires, because such a feat was beyond human ability and Howard encourages him for his own enjoyment. Ultimately, King suggests that ambition and obsession are vices in too large a quantity.