

2001: A Space Odyssey Short Guide

2001: A Space Odyssey by Stanley Kubrick

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Characters

Four characters of 2001 have one great need, to achieve a memory.

Moon-Watcher, the man-ape of the first chapters, cannot remember his father.

He lives only in the present, from which he is redeemed by the monolith's teaching him the future he might have. Contemporary humanity, which Dr. Floyd represents, has a broader time-sense, but must be shocked out of those limits by the discovery of the monolith three-million years old. And Bowman goes to Saturn to join a race now considerably older than that.

Dr. Floyd, however, recognizes only his own limit. Moon-Watcher and Bowman not only confront their limit but are forced to return to school as little children in order to overcome it.

The most interesting character struggling with memory is the computer, Hal. He actively suffers, concealing from the crew what has been discovered in the past and what shall happen in the future. Bowman's disconnecting him retrieves his past; he recapitulates his birth as an innocent computer in the laboratory on Earth. His rebirth, in fact, may be the formal reason why 2001 had to be written, to allow him the question what he would do next; his transformation is as important as Moon-Watcher's and Bowman's.

Social Concerns

One reason for the success of Stanley Kubrick's film and Arthur Clarke's novel was their timing, which coincided with the achievement of Apollo 11. Both film and novel offer a tour of human origins in Africa, of settlements in space stations and on the Moon, and of a sizable part of the solar system; unhampered by the limits of special effects, Clarke extends the tour from Jupiter to Saturn. Since contemporary science fiction seldom allows itself to be so openly didactic, the novel enjoyed its chance to show where the Apollo program might lead. Clarke and Kubrick's private title for their first outlines was appropriate; "How the Solar System Was Won." In its first year of publication over a million copies of the paperback were in print.

The novel is also oddly flattering in its view of the territorial imperative.

Against the background of debates in paleontology, the novel endorses human aggression as necessary to the evolution of the race, yet denies that aggression is innate; the man-ape has to be trained by the alien monolith to throw stones at targets, and he eats flesh with a fleeting nausea. Humanity is red in tooth and claw, but guiltless.

A major theme is the human anxiety of being supplanted by a machine.

Clarke, however, mutes this anxiety by making the contemporary demands of national security responsible for the murderous neurosis of the computer Hal. The novel argues for a free exchange of information among the scientists of Earth, whose divisions, nearly invisible from the edge of the solar system, seem parochial.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The debates of Dr. Louis Leakey, Desmond Morris, and Robert Ardrey influence not only the first section but the broad themes of the novel. The use Clarke and Kubrick made of the Odyssey in structuring the screenplay and novel is clear, and the Divine Comedy plays a part in the afterlife pilgrimage of Bowman; and Stapledon, in *Last and First Men*, remains important. But the major background to the novel is Clarke's own work; as several commentators have noted, narrative motifs have been woven into it from "The Sentinel," "Transcience," "Encounter at Dawn," "Out of the Sun," "The Possessed," and his moon novels.

Themes

Early in its making, Clarke had said, "If this film can be completely understood, then we have failed," and his third law of science fiction states, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Yet the novel explains a good deal of the climactic transformation. The transcendence of the novel, much more than that of the film or of *Childhood's End* (1953), remains within an explicable science.

The themes of the novel share this ambivalence. Like the film the novel concerns aggression, but *Moon-Watcher* does not learn target practice, only to kill. Several times sighting involves either a telescope or a radio antenna; the monolith on the Moon is centered, both in Tycho and in its magnetic field.

Thus the novel suggests that aggression and communication function together, each incomplete without the other. Society arises from their fusion.

A major theme, therefore, as in *Childhood's End* and *The City and the Stars* (1956), is the transcendence of the material world. The mind aspires to a condition of inorganic crystal, like the aliens who have passed through a machine existence "to preserve their thoughts for eternity in frozen lattices of light." Crystalline imagery is pervasive, in the monoliths, in the hibernacula, in the music of Bach that Bowman listens to after his companions have died, and in the Eye of Japetus into which he is drawn to be changed. Although the novel argues for teamwork, the characters experience an isolation from which they can escape only into a frozen group-mind.

A pervasive theme related to these of explaining the inexplicable and of evading the link between aggression and communication is the treatment of guilt. When talking to Hal after its murder of Poole, Bowman feels as though he were being cross-examined "for a crime of which he was unaware." This guilt is surely his human responsibility for the secrecy which led to the murderous schizophrenia of Hal.

Clarke's well-meaning humanity is caught in a dilemma: Communication is linked to aggression and so to guilt, but secrecy leads to alienation and defensive outbursts. The necessity of living in the real world entails panic and guilt.

Adaptations

When Clarke first visited Kubrick in 1964 to work on a science fiction film, the director believed that they should together write a novel upon which it would be based; they would be forced to detail the background of the world that would be filmed. Both processes, novel-writing and filmmaking, occurred in tandem, so that the relation between novel and film is intricate.

Some differences flowed from the nature of the media; since Kubrick's special-effects could not depict satisfactory Rings of Saturn, the film had to end its odyssey at Jupiter.

Other dissimilarities highlight the different thematic concerns of novelist and director. There is little in Clarke of Kubrick's brilliant treatment of the mechanization of human relations; Clarke gives Floyd and Bowman interior lives. Nor is Hal, in Clarke, the Frankenstein's monster of countless films; much more resembling Mary Shelley's original creature, Hal is a victim of the divided intentions of its makers.

Although some critics found the film empty or too long, albeit visually stunning, most have come to regard it as the most important science fiction film since *Things to Come*. Within its genre, the novel is not the ground breaker the film has proven to be.

The film made from 2010: *Odyssey Two* was a workmanlike and entertaining effort, which handled the charm of the novel competently. But neither the novel nor the film meant to deal with the religious and evolutionary reverberations of the works they followed and suffer by comparison.

Key Questions

Modern Western thought includes several perspectives on the origins of the universe and of life. Religious literalism may hold with a Six Day Creation occurring about 6000 BC, with each twenty-four hour day's developments being a new product of God's spoken word. Theistic evolutionism blends acceptance of scientific evidence of long-term developments in plant and animal species over spans of millions of years with acceptance of a Creator God who triggered and guided the development of the universe and the life it contains.

Agnostic and atheistic evolutionary views accept scientific evidence of long-term developments in the genera and species of prehistoric and presentday life, differing on the issue of whether the existence or nonexistence of God is unknowable, or that God simply does not exist.

Within the varieties of evolutionary thought, still another issue lurks: that of gradualism versus cataclysm in evolution. Gradualist thought holds that the adaptation of a species to its environment operates very slowly over spans of millions of years. Cataclysmic thought holds that relatively sudden changes in climate, in the orientation and rotation of the earth, rapid advance or retreat of glaciers, rapid flooding or desertification of a land mass punctuate critical stages of the evolutionary record.

The novel *2002: A Space Odyssey* opens with prehuman primates dimly struggling to survive in an arid African environment, then leaps to events in the twenty-first century. It poses mysterious monoliths as crucial to human evolution, mixing both rational and mystical opportunities for interpreting the existence and position of humanity in the universe.

1. What conditions does Clarke posit for human society on Earth in the twenty-first century? How do current social, economic, political and ecological conditions in the world at present compare with Clarke's projections?
2. How many monoliths are used in the story? Where and when are they found? How do they compare in size, location and apparent functions?
3. What do David Bowman and Frank Poole first understand the mission of *Discovery* to be? What have the three astronauts in hibernation been trained for, and why were they put aboard in an inactive status?
4. How nearly human is the HAL 9000 in its thought processes? In what ways is it more capable than a human?

How realistic is it to expect that humans can design and program computers to function in ways entirely superior to both human rational and human intuitive processes?



5. What is the cause of Frank Poole's death? Why is David Bowman not eliminated after Poole is lost?

6. How is Bowman able to regain control of Discovery after Poole's loss?

How is he able to manage the ship alone with HAL's higher cognitive functions disabled?

7. How many moons does Saturn have? What are their names? How much scientific survey of the moons does Bowman accomplish? Can any of the moons support life as humans know it?

8. In *Childhood's End*, the human race is forbidden to venture into space. The Overlords keep peace on earth, in effect incubating human kind until an entire cohort of youth begins transition from material to nonmaterial existence.

In 2001, humanity is allowed to explore the solar system, and the transition from material existence to transcendent higher consciousness is given, finally, to one person, David Bowman. Why should Clarke revisit the theme of transcendence in 2001 with only one man drawn into the change? Why should the rest of humanity be left no clue that the change has occurred?

9. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick worked together on the screenplay of 2001.

Kubrick kept primary control of the film version, while Clarke kept primary control of the novel. In what ways does the film/video version of 2001 differ from the book? How important are the differences? If a person sees the film/video version first, then reads the novel, will the "meaning" of the film/video version be different from the "meaning" of the book version?

10. Bowman, in the final chapter of the novel 2001, is termed "master of the world." In what ways is Bowman superior to other humans? Does Clarke develop the proof of Bowman's "mastery"? Why or why not?



Related Titles

The sequels to 2001: A Space Odyssey are 2010: Odyssey Two, (1982) and 2061:

Odyssey Three (1987). However, several critics consider *The City and the Stars* (1956), Clarke's masterpiece. It compares two Utopias, the urban Diaspar and the pastoral Lys, and finds each an incomplete response to the challenge the universe presents. The people of the closed Diaspar are immortal, recreated by passing through the crystalline memory of the Central Computer, life after life; with no navels, they are abstracted from the cycles of nature.

The people of Lys die, having achieved telepathic communication in their woodlands; but they have renounced analytic reason. The quest of the protagonist Alvin opens up both communities to the galaxy, to discover humanity's ancient failures and triumphs, to accept such risks again, and to remain open despite the clear premonition that humanity will not be present at the end of the universe, except in its artificial descendants.

Rendezvous with Rama (1973) is Clarke's version of an old science fiction plot, the probe of an alien artifact, in this case a cylindrical spaceship fifty kilometers long and twenty kilometers in diameter, as it falls through the solar system toward the sun. Meticulous in its physical details, the novel allows the object to dwarf the characters; for a crucial theme is the insufficiency of any viewpoint to exhaust reality. Yet the characters are admirable in their concerted efforts to encompass this mechanical landscape. When the spaceship leaves with very little known of the intelligences that made it, the humans, for all their limitations, seem larger.

Imperial Earth (1975) is a disarming novel about the visit of Duncan Makenzie, the heir of Titan, to Earth to celebrate the Quincentennial of the United States and to have himself cloned to present a future heir to the Makenzie line (he is himself a clone). But for all its air of tourism and improvisation, it is a complex study of identity, social stasis, isolation, bisexuality, the reconciliation of intuition and reason, and the possibility of alien contact. It seems a more explicit development of problems basic to Clarke's original labors on *Against the Fall of Night* (1953) and tells his most moving love story.

2010: Odyssey Two (1982), a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, was eagerly awaited, but seems matter-of-fact in comparison with its predecessor. Dr.

Floyd, forced to resign from administrative isolation, commits himself to the team effort of the Leonov crew; and Bowman re-incorporates sufficiently to warn the ship and Earth of the aliens' new creation. The real interest of the novel lies in the resurrection of Hal and its response to its maker, Dr.

Chandra. This episode is another example that Clarke's writing often works best in the final encounters between father and son. *2061: Odyssey Three* continues the thread of alien operations to guide human and other life.

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