The Dead Father Short Guide

The Dead Father by Donald Barthelme

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Dead Father Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns/Themes....4

Techniques/Literary Precedents....5

Related Titles....6

Copyright Information....7

Characters

The characters in The Dead Father are neither differently nor more completely developed than their counterparts in Snow White (1967). This includes the Dead Father himself who, at 3200 cubits long, is imposing and ridiculous. The subject of sagas, the Dead Father is given to throwing temper tantrums when not allowed to have his way (particularly in sexual matters).

His mechanical left leg is the self-conscious symbol of his cartoon emasculation. The nineteen men who pull the Dead Father are both disgruntled and uncertain about their difficult task: to what "end" and "purpose" they want to know. The Dead Father mistakenly believes that the journey will end with his revivification.

Thomas, his self-doubting thirtynine year-old son, who will turn forty before the novel's end, finds in the journey the fulfillment of "the dream of the stutterer," the "murderinging" of the father. Thomas takes from him his belt buckle, sword, passport, and finally, life (all, of course, in comical, grotesquely exaggerated fashion).

Emma and Julie, 26, are the sexual, yet maternal, objects of his and the Dead Father's attentions. Edward, the beneficiary of the will the father only reluctantly makes, seems a much "paler" version of Gloucester's illegitimate son in Shakespeare's King Lear (c.16051606). The Wends, tautologically defined as "what is ahead," escape Thomas's and the Dead Father's dilemma because they father themselves, a feat which Thomas cannot understand but which the Wends assure him is no more difficult than Christianity.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Dead Father fully supports Barthelme's claim that in the contemporary age, physicist Werner Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle is our song of songs." Although his treatment of the necessity of living in a permanent state of uncertainty is comic, Barthelme's undermining of all forms of authority and authoritative discourse is just as serious as it is playful. His novel grotesquely exaggerates the father's size only to better emphasize his ridiculousness as a caricature of Freudian Oedipal conflict. The Dead Father everywhere implies what one passage in the inserted "A Manual for Sons" makes explicit: Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done, thus moving towards a golden age of decency, quiet, and calmed fevers .

. . Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least 'turned down' in this generation — by the combined efforts of all of us together.

The novel undermines not only the authority of the symbolic father (Freudian, Christian, social, and political) but of males in general, of the author (who diffuses his presence and thus defuses his power to control the narrative and the reader's understanding of it), of meaning (the entire novel trembles on the edge not of significance, which it anticipates and thus short-circuits, but of silliness) and, as in Snow White's questionnaire, of the authority of the reader who carries his or her own dead father in the form of antiquated modes of reading and understanding. What the novel ultimately offers in the place of all it debunks is not the golden age promised in "A Manual for Sons" but a clearer perception of the factitiousness of all framing devices. Momentary delights to be found, or rather made, within the acceptance of limitations include limited redemption and reinvigoration, achieved by means of "the sweet sensuality of language."

Techniques/Literary Precedents

A work devoted to undermining authority in all its forms, particularly that of the past, will necessarily take the form of a parody. The Dead Father is a carnivalesque parodying, not of any single authority but of a host of writers, texts, and beliefs as vast as the symbolic father himself. Freud may be the most recognizable target, but he is certainly not the only one. The selfevident journey motif parodies the mythic substructure of high modernist works such as T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922), James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), and Ezra Pound's Cantos (19251948). Freely conflating myths, Barthelme makes the object of the journey/ quest a life-giving golden fleece, which turns out to be Julie's pubic hair. The Dead Father/Fisher King is allowed to see but not touch it (an echo of the Biblical story of Moses and the Promised Land). Other passages are still more pointed: chapter 22 parodies Joyce's Finnegans Wake (1939), the death of the Dead Father is a take-off on the Grandmother's death in Edward Albee's grimly funny existential parable, The Sandbox (1959), and the Dead Father's long speech (the one he says "means" that he has made a speech), echoes Lucky's speech in Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1952). His tale of how he fathered the Pool Table of Ballambangjang recalls Richard Harding Davis's romantic yarns of the 1890s, and the descriptions of setting at the beginning of many chapters strongly suggests a novel imitating a motion picture script.

Drawings are inserted, lists absurdly extended, languages improbably combined, words literalized ("the Land Rover rovered out"), and cliches animated (Julie making conversation an actual rather than a metaphorical ape) as Barthelme goes about his exhaustive demystification, turning what Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence" on its head. Barthelme takes as his subject the making of meaning, and the making of an art that has more to do with what the speech act theorists call the performative, than the constative (communicative) function of language.

Related Titles

"Views of My Father Weeping" (1969) is a variation on the same mockOedipal theme, and "The Glass Mountain" (1970) similarly parodies the quest motif. Barthelme's exploration of the dialogue form is continued in Great Days (1979), in several of the stories in Overnight to Many Distant Cities (1982), and in Paradise (1986).

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994