Deadeye Dick Short Guide

Deadeye Dick by Kurt Vonnegut

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Characters

As often happens in Vonnegut's novels, there is really only one character (in this case, Rudy Waltz), a narrative voice who ranges back and forth over a given period (his life and those of his parents), describing the other characters, whom the reader rarely confronts directly. Rudy is a failure as a playwright, but he is a good cook, and he spices his narrative with recipes. Rudy settles down to a career as a pharmacist, but he is interrupted at his duties almost nightly by callers asking if he is Deadeye Dick, who accidentally shot a pregnant woman, so he is not allowed to forget his scapegoat fate. Rudy is living in Haiti when he begins to tell his story.

The rest of Rudy's family is as strange as Vonnegut's characters usually are. His father supported his friend Hitler before World War II and is condemned for this action once hostilities occur; his mother is done in by her own mantelpiece, and brother Felix eventually becomes head of the National Broadcasting Company but forsakes it all to return to Midland City.

Other characters include Fred T. Barry, owner of Barrytron, the largest employer in Midland City, but not a happy man, and Celia Hoover, whom Rudy loves but with whom he can never establish a relationship. She commits suicide by swallowing Drano.

Police Chief Francis X. Morissey is a person whose life may be compared to that of Rudy. When Rudy fires his fatal shot, Morissey at first wants to hush up the fact of the child's involvement, an odd reaction from a law enforcement officer. Later Vonnegut reveals why. The most famous unsolved murder in the area is that of August Gunther, whose headless body was found in a creek after he left his house to go hunting. Many years later Rudy finds out that Gunther was accidentally shot by Morissey, who never revealed his role in the affair. This episode underlines another of Vonnegut's ideas, the failure of easy moralistic answers. Honesty is not the best policy, and confession is not good for the soul: Rudy owns up to his accident and is pilloried for life, while Morissey keeps quiet about a similar incident and becomes a community leader.

Social Concerns

In Deadeye Dick, Kurt Vonnegut continues to voice his now familiar concern with modern technology gone out of control. For example, a mantelpiece which no one knows is radioactive, kills one of the characters, and, worse, a neutron bomb goes off over the center of the action, Midland City (another of Vonnegut's narrative substitutes for Indianapolis, his childhood home). Vonnegut also continues to investigate the role of the artist in society by making his main character a failed playwright who is more noted for accidentally shooting someone than for his literary efforts.

Techniques

The literary techniques of Deadeye Dick resemble those of most of Vonnegut's other novels. There is a sentimental, resigned, and eccentric first-person narrator who relates his tale with many chapters and many divisions within the chapters. There are also various "interrupters," that is, material that those who think that a novel should develop according to a definite pattern believe to be irrelevant.

In Deadeye Dick, Rudy's interpolated recipes break up the story. Sometimes he presents the story in the form of a play, because he wanted to be a playwright.

Vonnegut uses these techniques because he believes that the traditional novel is dead, so he sets out to write "antinoyels" in which conventional expectations about the novel are thwarted.

In Deadeye Dick, there is no real plot, but instead a collection of anecdotes; Vonnegut brings himself into the book by writing an introduction in which he explains its meaning and lists its symbols before the book has even begun. The purpose of these elements is not just to disarm and slyly poke fun at literary critics but to encourage his audience just to enjoy reading his writing rather than trying to puzzle out some hidden meaning. Vonnegut wants to put it all on the surface.

Themes

The role of accident in human life continues to fascinate Vonnegut. The society tells its young that if they behave in a certain manner, certain things will happen; therefore, one should behave in the socially approved way so that good things will happen to one. In nineteenthcentury America, the genteel tradition assumed that literature should show its readers proper ideals and values. In Europe, critics assumed that art was designed to instruct and improve; Thomas Hardy was condemned for allowing happenstance to rule at crucial points in his novels (such as in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, 1891, when Tess's letter of explanation slides under Angel Clare's door and also under his carpet rather than on top of it, so that he does not receive it; see separate entry). Hardy replied that accident is a determinant of human existence more often than we would like to think.

Vonnegut seems to believe that accident is the major determinant of human existence.

There is simply no way to know, according to Vonnegut, whether any action will have a good or bad outcome. The central event of Deadeye Dick occurs when Rudy Waltz, the main character, at the age of twelve, fires one of his father's guns at random and the stray bullet fatally wounds a pregnant housewife. Young Rudy thus becomes a double or "mass" murderer and acquires the taunting nickname "Deadeye Dick" which follows him throughout life, although he finally becomes immune to it. When Rudy's father, Otto, was studying art in Vienna, he befriended young Adolf Hitler, loaning Hitler his coat when Hitler had sold his own for food and buying one of his fellow artist's paintings so that Hitler would not starve. These kind and humane acts saved from death the greatest mass murderer of all time.

When Otto Waltz comes to the police station to rescue his son, the police savagely beat both of them. This action brings up another of Vonnegut's favorite themes, the brutality of institutional response to human misfortune. It is not just that the police enjoy violence and, because they are police, get to use it in an official fashion; institutions are set up according to logical patterns, and people who support those institutions must act as their logic tells them to act, even if that action is itself not reasonable. The logic of the law says that every unsocial act has a perpetrator who must be punished; reason easily shows that Rudy was not responsible for his act, but it is more frightening to accept that the event was an accident, because that admission would undercut the logical ground on which human institutions rest, so Rudy and Otto must be beaten.

Even more frightening than the idea that if accident were accepted as a primary cause, some who are innocent would no longer be punished is the corollary idea that guilt would also disappear.

Rudy became a mass murderer by accident and therefore should not be condemned, but Adolf Hitler became a mass murderer by the same process, and therefore, neither should he be condemned.

Vonnegut implies that emotion saves us from this moral nightmare. Since human life is too absurd for all of us, the alternative is to dismiss logic as a means of explaining life's events.

Key Questions

Deadeye Dick is a self-consciously literary work; its techniques and inventions are meant to call attention to themselves.

Vonnegut even goes so far as to point them out before the novel begins, probably in the hope that his audience will look for them in the narrative. A good discussion could begin by identifying the literary techniques that figure in the narrative—for example digressions and the absence of a plot. If the story is not the main aspect of the novel, then what is?

Are the characters the essential focus of the narrative? Is the narrative structure, or lack of it, the most important aspect of the novel? Are Vonnegut's inventions entertaining, enlightening, or annoying?

Another way to begin a discussion would be to look at the novel's ethos.

The universe in which the action takes place seems capricious; this may account for the many digressions—the narrative is imitating its environment, which is full of happenstance and loose ends. Is the world of Deadeye Dick without a moral center, and would that account for the confusion of characters who continually search for meaning when there is none?

Or do the peepholes symbolize a higher order of experience, one that may give meaning to the experiences of the characters?

1. Discuss Vonnegut's view of the role of accident or chance in human affairs. If he is right, does this mean that we should passively wait for events to happen?

2. Vonnegut is sometimes described as a "jazz writer." Investigate the connection between his work and that of the jazz soloist.

3. Critics have sometimes complained that Vonnegut's characters are all grotesques, unlike real people. Do you agree?

4. Consider the role of the "hidden disaster" (such as the radioactive mantelpiece) in Vonnegut's writing.

5. Examine other popular homilies such as "Honesty is the best policy" to see if they could survive Vonnegut's analysis.

6. Do you find Vonnegut's "antinovelistic" techniques disturbing or helpful?

7. If Vonnegut's bleak view of human society and behavior is correct, what are our alternatives?

8. Is Rudy Waltz too passive to be a main character? Is his passivity significant?

9. Vonnegut is sometimes called a "black humorist." What is "black humor," and how does it differ from conventional humor?

Literary Precedents

Vonnegut's most obvious literary precedents are his own works, but critics have compared his approach to writing to that of an improvising jazzman for whom plot and character are not as interesting as the sentence he is writing, just as the jazz musician cares about the song only as a means to the end of self-expression.

Vonnegut is often compared to Jack Kerouac, but the two free-form writers improvise in different ways. Another literary ancestor is Laurence Sterne, who in Tristram Shandy (1760-1767) wrote a novel that is more important for how it is written than what is said.

Related Titles

Most critics regard Vonnegut's early work, specifically Mother Night (1961), Cat's Cradle (1963; see separate entry), and Slaughterhouse-Five (1969; see separate entry) as his best, and subsequent works are always compared to those benchmark novels. As early as The Sirens of Titan (1959), Vonnegut established an antinovel form and antinovel techniques which he has used ever since: a main character or first person narrator who ranges back and forth in time, nightmarish and bloody events which overwhelm the characters, antinovelistic interrupters that break up the action and narration, and a whimsical or pseudoscientific view of the purpose of existence (in Deadeye Dick, when one is born a peephole opens; when one dies, it closes). How one responds to Vonnegut's later novels depends on whether one accepts and enjoys this form.

From the beginning of his career, Vonnegut has enjoyed plugging the same characters in and out of his books. Rabo Karabekian, who appears briefly in Deadeye Dick, will become the main character of the Vonnegut's next novel, Bluebeard (1987). The novelist himself speaks directly in Deadeye Dick, as he had done in Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions (1973; see separate entry).

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