How the Dead Live Short Guide

How the Dead Live by Will Self

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Characters

As the novel's central character and main narrator, Lily Bloom dominates How the Dead Live. Lily's name connects her to Leopold Bloom, the hero of James Joyce's Ulysses, and readers of the classic high modernist novel will no doubt detect some similarities between the two Blooms (their fascination with bodies, their earthy pragmatism, and so on). Lily's relationships with the novel's other characters propel the narrative.

Lily's two daughters, Natasha and Charlotte, are set up as opposites from the very beginning. Natasha is tall and thin; she has striking black hair and perfect cheekbones.

Lily describes Charlotte, on the other hand, as "a big, blonde, lumpy thing, like me."

These physical oppositions are not merely superficial; they are clearly meant to signify deeper personality traits. Charlotte is stable, secure, and reliable, while Natasha is hysterical, unpredictable, and addicted to heroin. Such contrasts between sisters are common in literature—the blonde-brunette opposition was a staple of much Victorian fiction, for instance—and in this case the opposition is one of the key structures that propels the narrative.

Lily's ex-husbands, Dave Kaplan and David Yaws, are both located in the distant past. Kaplan is the more tragic figure, having had a nervous breakdown when Lily's first child dies. Incidently, this breakdown affords Self yet another opportunity to attack the medical system. Yaws, on the other hand, is appallingly dull. Self's characterization here is very skillful; he manages to portray everything readers need to know about Yaws in one damning passage: "Yaws was an ecclesiastical historian. He wrote his thesis on Trollope and the nineteenth-century clergy as depicted in his novels. I'm not saying it was a second-rate subject, but it was amazing how many second-rate minds were engaged by it."

Once dead, Lily encounters another, equally important set of characters. The two strangest characters—Lithy and Rude Boy—are, in fact, both Lily's children. As Phar Lap informs Lily when she reaches the world of the dead, stillbirths, miscarriages and abortions "snag round yer head some."

Rude Boy is the son hit by the car in 1957.

"Lithy" is a more confusing character. "A minuscule cadaver of a child," Lithy was conceived and died "mislodged in the folds of [Lily's] perineum." Lithy, short for "lithopedion," is Lily's "little dead fossil baby"—literally, her "stone-child." Rude Boy, Lithy and "the Fats" (the women comprised of Lily's lost weight) are all very enigmatic. Certainly they add to the sheer strangeness of Self's world of the dead, but, as Lily's second family, they also help to define Self's main character as well.

Finally, Phar Lap Dixon, Lily's spirit guide, seems to tie together a number of loose threads for the novel. First, he is the "sage" of the afterlife, providing Lily with all she

needs to know to "get off the goround." Second, as indicated above, he seems to help resolve the racial tensions of the novel—Lily's traumatic childhood wound is balanced by the authority invested in this Aboriginal Australian. Third, he is the only character who exists simultaneously in the world of the living (Natasha encounters him in Australia) and the world of the dead.

Social Concerns

It is difficult to speak of a few, specific social concerns in Self's How the Dead Live because the novel is full of social commentary. Large sections of the book are devoted to minute historical and political critique.

As Lily Bloom lays on her deathbed—and later as she sits and reflects after her death—she spends a great deal of time going over major political and cultural events of the last fifty years. Self criticizes the popularity of psychoanalysis in the fifties, nostalgically commemorates the political activism of the sixties, satirizes the weight-loss crazes of the seventies and eighties, and jokes about the political scandals of the nineties (i.e., the Clintons). And, through it all, he is, of course, quite merciless in his critiques of the middle class and its banal, homogenous desires. However, if readers were to attempt to articulate a handful of major issues that seem to organize the book's social commentary, they should consider the following four key issues: death's position in contemporary life, society's increasingly instrumental approach to human life, ethnic identity and racism, and drug addiction.

While the novel is certainly concerned with death's effects on the individual, it is just as interested in the ways death fits into social networks: the way doctors line up to make a profit of it, the way the best of friends and family do their best to pretend it is not there. When Lily is dying, she begins to understand that the entire medical system treats the human body in a rather instrumental way: I also liked the doctors' being at my beck and call—or so I thought. I realise now that all I ever represented to them was diseased throughput; another sick shell of a human requiring a missing component to be bolted on. Modern Times—no wonder these assembly-line workers find themselves unable to cease making diagnoses when their day's work is done.

The medical establishment begins to seem like a system that slowly feeds on death.

Self is implicitly criticizing the way that medicine operates as though the body were a mere object to be input and then output either dead or alive. Hospital food, for instance is as bland as possible, in Lily's words, put together "for the express purpose of sliding through us near-cadavers as fast as possible. . . . The other thing about this slick cuisine is, natch, that it doesn't repeat on you. Or rather, neither its odour nor its substance is likely to rise up in the faces of those poor overworked nurses."

When Lily's daughter Charlotte and her husband, Richard Elverse, go to the mag nificent Dr. Churchill in search of fertility solutions, this attitude of the human body as merely an instrument is taken to an extreme. Churchill admires Charlotte because she has "long since ceased to view her body as anything other than a vessel for procreation." When Richard visits Churchill himself, "the doctor [talks] to him, man to sperm." Indeed, when Charlotte and Richard finally get around to "having sex," Self suggests that "they were really having sex, owning sex the same way that the Elverses possessed two hundred Waste of Paper outlets, three homes," and so on.

Though not all of these scenarios precisely parallel one another, their common thread is an absence of regard for the aspects of the human being that the novel as a whole seems intent on valuing. Self seems wary of systems, markets, and bureaucracies that threaten human creativity. Ironically, when Lily actually dies, she ends up facing a "Deatheaucracy" almost as stifling as the networks of control that occupy the living.

One of the novel's other pervasive concerns surrounds ethnic identity and racism.

Lily Bloom and her first husband are both Jewish, but their relationships to their own identities are complex. Lily is constantly referring to both herself and her social circle (including, especially, her first husband, Kaplan) as Jewish anti-Semites. "I married Dave Kaplan, I understood later, because of his own—soon to be manifested—Jewish anti-Semitism. 'Y'know Kaplan isn't my real name,' he used to say to people, 'I changed it in order to appear Jewish—my real name's Carter.'"

Lily is highly self-conscious in her own "Jewish anti-Semitism." Her narrative voice is absolutely aware of itself when she sets herself in opposition to her sister Esther and her "UESNYJF" (Upper East Side New York Jewish Face). And Lily realizes the she is "unable to hide [her] racial self-disgust from [her] mongrel kids." However, while Lily does indeed make a point of distinguishing herself from her own roots, at certain moments she is keen to identify with them. This "positive" side of her ambivalence takes center stage when she distinguishes between American Jews, like herself, and English Jews: The indigenous Jews were too dull and conformist a group to crack real jokes.

They were the ones left behind in Liverpool while the rest of us headed on to the New World. As soon as they made some money they retreated, Rubens-like, to the 'burbs, to live out their days in colourless indifference. Jewish Anglicans. The English had to turn to American Jewry for entertainment, and so began the proper Jewing of London.

One recurrent trend in all of Lily's remarks on her Jewishness is her attempt to create an identity that makes her feel "different" or "special." At a certain point, she comes to believe that even Jewish antiSemitism is not as "special" as it used to be: "To be a Jew-hating Jew used to mean something, you could take pride in it; it put you up there with some of the finest minds of the last two centuries—but nowadays any little cut-about prick with an attitude can get away with it."

The entire issue of both Jewish identity and Jewish anti-Semitism actually has more to do with the "mystical" themes of the novel than one might think at first glance.

All of Self's nods to Eastern philosophy and religion—such as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the possibility of reincarnation, and the possibility of transcending the boundaries of the self to "get off the circle" of reincarnation—are actually participating in the same investigation into the concept of identity. Once dead, Lily learns: "our sense of self was nothing but mannerisms and negative emotions." Self borrows from Eastern mysticism to create a parallel for the paradox of Lily's ambivalent relationship to her own Jewishness. Identity is, in a sense, all one has, but one's relation to it can be entirely negative; indeed, one's own identity can seem "alien."

The obverse of her first husband's selfconscious Jewish anti-Semitism is her second husband, Yaws's "gentle" bigotry: "never hating anyone because they were black, or a Jew, or a woman, but simply disliking them for themselves alone—and incidentally their blackness, their Jewishness, their femaleness." The rather more conventional hatred of the other that readers find here is also prevalent in Self's novel.

This overt racism has actually left visibly traumatic wounds that haunt Lily until her death itself, and even beyond that. In a flashback to her childhood on Long Island, Lily remembers kissing and cuddling with her family's black maid, who "defined the world itself" for the young girl. But just as Lily is being absorbed in "Bettyness," her mother bursts in to yell at her, slapping Lily "the way British actors playing Gestapo officers were later to slap their interrogation victims." From this moment on, Lily cringes at the very idea of being touched by black hands: "we both knew we could never touch each other ever again; that for me black flesh was an anathema. An evil substance." Self suggests at points that even Lily's children may be filled with this "inherited racial prejudice."

Later, in 1957 to be exact, this scenario tragically repeats itself, as Lily admonishes her own son for covering himself in mud while playing with his friends and shouting that he's playing the "nigger game." Though Lily, unlike her mother, is attempting to act against racism, her response is eerily similar: "I grasp his blond hair, I smack his head once, twice, three times. The way British actors playing Gestapo officers smack their interrogation victims." Lily's son immediately runs away into the street and is struck by a car. David Kaplan is devastated by the loss, and he and Lily are soon divorced.

This traumatic event, coupled with Lily's own childhood experience, severely complicates her relations with the black people she encounters in the novel.

If the novel attempts to point towards a tenuous resolution to Lily's anxieties about race, this possibility is most evident after her death when she meets her "spirit guide," an Aboriginal Australian man named Phar Lap. As Lily comes to terms with the afterlife, Phar Lap attempts to guide her beyond many of her prejudices—racial and otherwise. At the same time, another possible resolution to the novel's racial problems seems to arrive when Lily's daughter Charlotte and her husband adopt an Afro-Caribbean child. This child itself ends up being oddly twinned with Lily herself when, in the novel's denouement, she is reborn as her younger daughter's baby.

Finally, when reading How the Dead Live, the issue of drug addiction difficult is to avoid. Throughout the novel, Lily's daughter Natasha struggles with heroin addiction. Of course, Self's own heroin use has garnered a great deal of notice in the press, and thus it is not a surprise to find that he addresses heroin dependency with a combination of sympathy and humor that avoids the sort of dehumanization one often finds in descriptions of "junkies." Some of Natasha's behavior is indeed rather scandalous: as Lily is about to get her diamorphine from the nurse, Natasha swoops "in its wake like a seagull. Jesus—how grotesque. You're dying and your junky daughter comes over to rip off your pain relief—'Natty!'" Yet one must note the humorous tone of such passages. Lily is always jokingly, if cynically, realistic about Natasha's addiction. When Natty is off

heroin she is a "nightmare"; when "she's on it she's a peach." Self is more interested in using addiction as a metaphor to approach broader thematic concerns than he is in demonizing drug addiction in the manner of the popular press.

Techniques

Self structures most of his works around a central conceit—in this case the possibility of a life after death that is contiguous with the world of the living. He has long been praised for his ability to write extended, complex works based on rather simple, if fantastic, scenarios (in Great Apes, for instance, monkeys control London). When reading How the Dead Live, one should note the ways in which these conceits allow Self to offer political, social, and psychological commentary from unusual perspectives.

Self's prose itself is very worthy of analysis. Like Joyce, Self makes use of puns and neologisms. When a pub explodes early on in the novel, items are cast everywhere in a chaotic mushroom cloud, including "the artworks formerly known as prints" (a nod to one of pop-icon Prince's various incarnations). However, Self is also capable—again, like Joyce—of seamlessly oscillating between such playful moments of hilarity and moments of high seriousness and pathos. Such an ability is absolutely crucial for an author working with the sort of satirical prose Self writes.

Self focalizes the entire narrative through Lily Bloom; as Phar Lap suggests, it is all in her head. Self thus makes extensive use of both Lily's stream-of-consciousness and her interior monologue. By repeating a number of passages from Lily's interior monologue word for word (i.e. the passage about the British actors playing Gestapo officers), Self is able to indicate the persistence of memory and trauma. As all of these techniques are standard devices in British modernism, one could argue that Self's prose owes much to both Joyce and Woolf.

Themes

The major thematic cruxes of How the Dead Live are the slippery life/death opposition, the body, and addiction.

Perhaps the most obvious of the novel's themes involves the life/death barrier and its permeability. This threshold is crossed a number of times in the hovel, sometimes realistically, sometimes fantastically. Over the course of the novel, Lily Bloom moves from life to death and back again, and in doing so she discovers that there was always already death in life and vice versa.

She comes to believe that "the boundaries between life and death [are] provisional, confused and indeterminate." For Lily, the living imagine themselves concerned with the present, with life, when, in reality, "Their minds are full of dead ideas, images and distorted facts. Their visual field is cluttered up with decaying buildings, rusting cars, potholed roads . . ."

As we have seen already, death's presence in life is very much a factor when Self is describing the medical system. But the novel's discussion of death and bodily decay extend beyond social critique (as it is conventionally defined, anyway) and move towards introspective interrogation of the body's status as the cause of both life and death. As Lily lies in bed, waiting to die, she becomes highly conscious of her own body, its weight, its decay, even its pleasures. At times, her body becomes terrifying and "other." When Lily becomes convinced that the cancer has taken over her liver, she speaks of this as a sort of revolution in metaphors taken from the exterior world: "like a filthy sponge, it oozes poisons. The body's oil refinery is itself polluted. The crazed enzymes have taken over the asylum." The key point here is that this is not "just" a metaphor. The vehicle (the refinery) does not dissolve into the tenor (the liver) the moment we decode the trope. The movement from liver to refinery is important because it signals a shift in the way Lily understands her own body. As she nears death, her body becomes a prison: "I've been buried alive in the flesh-eating box of my own body." Self describes her comatose state in stunning detail, revealing again the dominant theme of the body's strangeness.

Her body is made increasingly alien as it takes on the attributes of a "mere" animal.

She can no longer control the sounds her body makes, lamenting "I don't sound human. I sound like a[n] . . . animal. A gurgling cow. My brain's been vaccinated— with cancer." She begins to refer to this phase of her life as "the live burial, the uncoupling of mind from body."

Ironically, the fact that Lily Bloom leaves her earthly body behind halfway through the novel actually provides Self with more opportunities to articulate his main character's anxious relation to her body. A key example of this involves one of Self's more entertaining conceits about the afterlife: "the Fats." These three "disgustingly obese" dopplegangers follow Lily everywhere in the world of the dead; as it turns out, the

women are made from all the fat Lily has shed in dieting and gained back on eating binges over the years. Self's targets here are "those Weight Watchers meetings" in the seventies and eighties, but also, more generally, the systematic, ascetic approach to life these dieting fads involved.

As we saw in the last section, many of Self's moments of social commentary are devoted to critiquing medicine's instrumentalization and dehumanization of the human body, but readers cannot overlook the fact that other instrumental attitudes towards the human body are particularly troubling for women. In this novel, Lily's appetite for sex, for instance, is tempered by her knowledge that men are using her as a mere object. When Lily Bloom describes her affair with a younger man (she is in early middle age at the time of this affair) she says "Every time we did it I was amazed that he wasn't discommoded by my sour smells and puckering cellulite. But I guess there was plenty of vagina, heaps of bosom." Some readers may detect a typically misogynist representation of a middle aged woman attempting to hold on to her sexuality "for a little too long." Self is certainly open to criticism on this front, but readers should also point out that he is both attacking the instrumental use of women and providing another deft analysis of the general "otherness" of the human body as such.

The body's ability to betray its owner is, in a sense, also the basic idea behind addiction's thematic importance in this novel.

Indeed, the unmanageable desire that comes with an addiction is itself yet another instance of the body's otherness. Readers may have already noted the novel's interest in the issue of heroin addiction, but this narrower sense of addiction is certainly not Self's only concern. Lily Bloom is addicted to sex; the novel's middle class characters are addicted to commodities. The clearest instance of this sort of non-drug addiction is manifested in Charlotte and Richard's mad desire to procreate. Each night Richard has to "shoot up his wife with more human chorionic gonadotropin." Self makes the parallel completely clear when he writes that the Elverses (Charlotte and Richard) "parodied" Russ and Natty (the heroin addicts) "with their sniffing and shooting up drugs." Finally, Lily's inability to "transcend" the cycle of birth and death (in Phar Lap's words, "to get off the go-round") must itself, inevitably, be linked to the model of heroin dependency. It is a rather daring move on Self's part to connect the mystical/ religious idea that desire connects one to the world (the cycle of life and death) with addiction, but the move works very well.

Key Questions

How the Dead Live presents many problems for the reader. Lily Bloom's stream-ofconsciousness is often difficult to follow; indeed, Self purposefully confuses the reader at important moments. With this problem in mind, one cannot simply look past the confusing form of the novel to discuss the thematic elements immediately. The novel's formal features must be carefully examined if one is to gain an appreciation of the novel.

Once these initial barriers to understanding are broken down, one can then attempt to interpret and link the novel's various thematic concerns.

1. Why does Self choose to represent Lily's thoughts in a "stream-of-consciousness"? What is gained by this technique? Does it merely cause confusion or does it help the reader to a deeper understanding of Lily's character? Is it an effective way for Self to get his social commentary across?

2. Why does Self shift so often between the present and the past? How are these transitions marked? How are they meaningful? Can you notice any points where past and present seem to comment on one another?

3. One of Self's major concerns is undoubtedly the body: the dying body, the decaying body, the erotic body, the discarded body. What are Lily Bloom's attitudes towards her own body? towards the bodies of others? Is she comfortable with her body? Is the reader meant to be?

4. Why did Self, a young male writer, choose an elderly woman as the focal point of this novel? Self, like many modern novelists, is interested in observing and critiquing society. What does he gain by using Lily Bloom as the point-of-view for this sort of critique?

Are certain social problems more easily perceptible from a senior's perspective?

5. Self's own relation to drugs has been tabloid-fodder since his career began.

Is it possible to detect his sympathetic, knowledgeable understanding of drug addiction in this novel? How do drugs function in the novel? Is their inclusion merely arbitrary, or are they integrally related to the novel's dominant themes?

6. One of the novel's most stunning conceits is Phar Lap Dixon's restaurant, "Nowhere"—a perfect simulation of the Australian outback in the middle of London. When Natasha goes on her own "walkabout" in Australia, she not only encounters Phar Lap, but she also finds a "portal" of sorts in the middle of the Australian outback that leads back to "Nowhere." The mystical "purity" of the Aboriginal desert seems understandable, but why would this pristine site lead directly to its own simulation in the heart of London? Is Self suggesting that the desert is not as pure as it seems? Or is he suggesting that there is a sort of purity that resides even in the heart of the artificial?

7. At one point in the novel, Self satirizes the public's unending desire for Nike products: "It's struck me that I've been living with millions of worshippers of the wind goddess. Everywhere you look, NIKE is emblazoned on sweat pants and tops, jackets and hats, shoes and even socks. Often there's only the ubiquitous tick that's the shmutter vendor's logo." How does Self's conceit allow him to critique consumerism?

Does the world of the dead have a special perspective on commodification?

Literary Precedents

There are quite a number of relevant literary precedents for How the Dead Live; these literary precursors can be divided into two groups: the first group are various literary treatments of the afterlife or the voyage to the underworld, the second group are formal precursors, that is, novels with stylistic similarities but not necessarily thematic similarities.

The key texts grouped under the first heading are Homer's epic, the Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, Dante's Inferno, and The Tibetan Book of the Dead, the last of which Self actually quotes in his epigraph. Self is constantly referencing these "intertexts." Though he indeed echoes a number of these text's characters, his versions are most often playful parodies. Phar Lap Dixon plays the role of the underworld guide, but he is exactly the opposite of Virgil in Dante's Inferno.

Likewise, Self's parodic version of Charon— the ancient Greek's ferryman of the dead across the river Styx—isa London cab driver who gives Lily a lift to London's "Dead" suburb "Dulston."

As far as formal precursors go, many compare Self's work to that of Nabokov, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Ballard. Self himself sometimes compares his work, particularly its use of conceits, to that of Kafka. It seems safe to assert that Self is working in a postmodernist tradition that develops out of Joycean High Modernism. As mentioned above, Joyce's Ulysses is an extremely important precursor—not only does Lily Bloom recall Joyce's Leopold Bloom, but the styles of the two novels are also comparable. Self's similarity to Pynchon (often compared to Joyce himself) will probably strike the reader most at moments such as the lengthy digression about the invention of the ballpoint pen. This interest in the simple materials of everyday life, their origins in engineering, and their determining relation to larger social issues will seem familiar to readers of Pynchon's work, particularly Gravity's Rainbow, V, and The Crying of Lot 49.

A much earlier writer with whom Self shares a great deal is Jonathan Swift. Swift's Gulliver's Travels is also organized around a simple conceit: Gulliver travels to lands where he encounters beings radically different from himself in size or even in species. Swift's conceit, like Self's, offers him an opportunity to defamiliarize certain aspects of his world, allowing for devastating critiques of politics, society, and psychology that are astute, hilarious, and sometimes misanthropic.

Related Titles

Self has published collections of short stories (The Quantity Theory of Insanity [1991], Grey Area [1994], Junk Mail [1995], Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys [1998]), novellas (Cock and Bull [1992], The Sweet Smell of Psychosis [1996]), and novels (My Idea of Fun [1993], Great Apes [1997]). Those interested in How the Dead Live will find his short fiction interesting because it often serves as a testing ground for ideas and characters that show up in his novels. "Between the Conceits" (published in Grey Area) for instance, brings up the idea of the "eight people that matter," an idea that reappears in How the Dead Live when Lily discusses the "eight couples that mattered" during her first marriage.

Those interested in Self's other works would be well served by reading the novella Cock and Bull, which is probably as representative as any of Self's works. It is composed of two thematically related novellas that are queer modern versions of Kafka's Metamorphosis. In Cock, an abject housewife grows a penis, while in Bull a cabaret critic wakes up to discover a vagina in his leg.

Again, as with How the Dead Live, Self uses fantastic scenarios to create possibilities for cultural critique (in the case of Cock and Bull, inquiry into one's understanding of gender).

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