How to Read and Why Study Guide

How to Read and Why by Harold Bloom

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Contents

How to Read and Why Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Preface and Prologue....5

Introduction and chapter 1....7

Chapter 2....13

Chapter 3....18

Chapter 4....23

Chapter 5 and Epilogue....26

Characters....30

Objects/Places....33

Themes....35

Style....37

Quotes....38

Topics for Discussion....40

Plot Summary

In "How to Read and Why", Harold Bloom describes a brief theory of the value of literature, and then discusses a number of books, poems and plays that provide some of the most exquisite pleasures reading can offer. Bloom's theory about the value of reading is rooted in the principle that the individual has many facets, and that literature introduces a reader to him or herself in uncanny ways. The benefit of reading, according to Bloom, is to gain the ability to find pleasure in more and more difficult thoughts and feelings, up to the point where one must acknowledge death, fate and the limitation of individuality.

Bloom starts his discussion with short stories. In Turgenev and Chekhov, he admires the ability to render realistic lives in all their enigmatic detail, but without moral judgment. This admiration then swings out to Maupassant, who permitted his characters some redemptive imaginative life beyond realism and death, and in Hemingway's stories, Bloom finds something like Shakespearean nihilism, and an artistic redemption in Harry's moment of death. Flannery O'Connor takes Bloom closer to darkness, but with such irony that the stories become outrageous and entertaining as well as warnings against our own damnation. Nabokov introduces an element of aestheticism in which Nabokov himself redeems the characters against their shallow ideas about death with an acrostic that explains to the readers what it is that haunts the shallow character. In Jorge Luis Borges, Bloom says that a cultural change took place, and that literature became more purely imaginative, so that writers after Borges are either Chekhovian or Borgesian: they either take reality seriously, or create worlds that are imaginative and playful with the idea of reality. They are still accountable to the same psychology as the reality-based writers, but their work concedes more to death.

Turning to poetry in the second chapter, Bloom starts with pure lyrics, which are small and self-contained, and then he expands his view to Tennyson's "Ulysses", which he says admits the reality of imaginative failure, but displays a noble persistence toward a complete knowledge that will never be won. Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" takes this theme further into a despair-filled landscape, but the enigmatic nature of the confrontation at the Dark Tower leaves the possibility for imaginative life. Walt Whitman, Bloom says, found the threat of death or limitation within himself, and set the figure of himself as one of the roughs against the figure of the genuine Myself, which was absolute and unknowable. In his discussion of Emily Dickinson, Bloom says that Dickinson's talent is uncategorizable, for the strength of her self-assertion against the reality of death and loss. In his discussion of Milton's Satan, Bloom describes the negative self-assertion as heroic as well, and even though it is doomed to failure, he admires the haunting wistfulness of Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", in which the knight-errant is all but destroyed by his fascination with his lover.

Bloom turns to novels, starting with "Don Quixote", which he says is the first and best among novels, on account of the friendship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Stendhal he finds similarly playful, in "The Charterhouse of Parma", where "all is irony" (p. 152). Irony is the chief pleasure of Jane Austen's "Emma" as well, for Bloom, for

Emma herself integrates wit and will with her imagination, to entertaining effect when she is trapped by her own machinations. In Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" and Henry James's "The Portrait of a Lady", Bloom describes the motiveless crime, and the satisfaction of Raskolnikov and Isabel Archer's attempts to preserve their freedom throughout their brushes with guilt and bad decisions. We are tested in these characters, Bloom says, and also in Proust's "In Search of Lost Time", which turns literature into a mirror of sexual jealousy, as the author fights against the loss of time and experience to return to the moment of his betrayal.

When Bloom looks at drama, he starts with "Hamlet", which is the ultimate work, in his opinion. The character Hamlet is ironic and detached and yet vital, interested only in playing with language and the characters around him, although at the end he is concerned about his good name, and Bloom finds Hamlet's detachment more instructive than most religious texts for introducing the self to itself in its uncanny otherness. After Hamlet, Bloom discusses both "Hedda Gabler" and "The Importance of Being Earnest" as fantastic rebellions against reality, although with tragic and tragicomic results, respectively.

In modern novels, Bloom effectively returns to many of the themes he has laid out, especially the rebellion against death in sublimity and in heroic and tragic action. In "Moby Dick" and "As I Lay Dying", he describes the protagonists' attempts to create the world for themselves, and in "Miss Lonelyhearts" and "The Crying of Lot 49", he describes the failure and frustration of that project. Bloom's view of modern culture is apocalyptic, and tends toward collapse, not just of reading but of civilization itself, but he says that there is still always the work of encountering the self in literature, and if one can never finish that work, one can never stop doing it either.

Preface and Prologue

Preface and Prologue Summary and Analysis

Preface: Bloom says that reading is the most healing of pleasures, because it returns you to otherness. He says that "Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness." (p. 19). Bloom says that while literature is an "imperfect discipline" and "there is no method but yourself" (p. 19), he will talk about works that are experiential and pragmatic. He says that his masters—his critical predecessors, Dr. Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt—sought to make explicit what was implicit in books, and he resolves not to separate the how and the why of his title. He says that Virginia Woolf famously said that "the only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice." (p. 20). Nevertheless, Bloom offers us his thoughts, with the pledge that there will be no polemics, and he will only listen to the spirit that says 'I love' when he talks about writing.

Prologue: Bloom starts the prologue by asking "Why Read?" He says that it is important for people to read if they want to retain the independence of their opinions. If you read for your own interest, Bloom says, you prepare yourself for change, and also for the final change, which is death. In turning to the practical technique of reading, Bloom describes Dr. Samuel Johnson's concern, which is with "what comes nearest to ourself, what we can put to use" and Sir Francis Bacon's advice: "Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider." (p. 21). To these two ideas, Bloom adds Emerson's statement that "the best books 'impress us with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads." (22). Combining these three statements into advice for reading, Bloom says that the purpose of reading is to find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time's tyranny." (p. 22).

Bloom says that we read "in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests." (p. 22). We read for ourselves, not for others, Bloom says, and he expresses wariness of any endeavor that merges individual reading and social benefits. Bloom blames the university system for turning reading into a social process, and reiterates his opinion that the real reading is going on outside the university system. Criticism, he says, should address itself to the individual, not the mass. Bloom lays out some principles of reading. First is Dr. Johnson's saying: "Clear your mind of cant" which Bloom amends to clear your mind of academic cant. Bloom's second principle is "Do not attempt to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood by what and how you read." (p. 24).

Third is "A scholar is a candle which the love and desire of all men will light." Fourth, from Emerson: "One must be an inventor to read well." (p. 25). "Recovering the ironic" is the fifth principle, by which Bloom means that there is a richness in the ability to hear things beyond what a person is saying, and to say things beyond the literal meaning of what you say. Bloom says that irony is essential for understanding literary metaphor. "Irony demands...the ability to sustain antithetical ideas, even when they collide with one another." (p. 27).

Concluding his prologue, Bloom says that "to read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you." (p. 28). He credits the reading of Shakespeare with the exorcism of phantoms. Bloom closes by listing the reasons we read: to know people, to acquire knowledge, and more than anything, "to search for difficult pleasure." (p. 29).

Introduction and chapter 1

Introduction and chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Introduction: Bloom says that short stories can have a powerful effect in spite of their brevity. He says that we ask short stories for closure in a way that is different from novels or parables. Bloom says that Edgar Allan Poe recommends reading a short story in one sitting, and Bloom lists the authors whose works he will discuss.

Ivan Turgenev: In Ivan Turgenev's "Bezhin Lea", Turgenev himself is out hunting when he runs into peasants who believe in goblins. One youth, Pavlusha, is courageous and brazen in how he stares at Turgenev, and Turgenev says that Pavlusha died years later in a fall from a horse. Bloom says that we read "Bezhin Lea" in order "to know better our own reality, our vulnerability to fate." (p. 33). He says that Turgenev refrains from moral judgments, and does not give the reader a single interpretive point to conclude, just the bravery of the youth, and then his death. In this, Bloom says that Turgenev "rediscovers the human" (p. 34). In "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands", Bloom introduces us to Kasyan, the dwarf who is uncanny and unexpected and paradoxical. In this enigmatic story, Bloom says that Turgenev leaves us with unanswered questions, but he says that this is consistent with the unknowable nature of life and human beings.

Anton Chekhov: Bloom says that Chekhov's detachment "turns out to be something else" (p. 36)—Bloom says that Chekhov told his stories in such a way that no explanation was required from the author. According to Bloom, Chekhov is the "indispensable artist of the unlived life" (p. 37). In the story "The Kiss", Chekhov describes a soldier who is kissed unexpectedly by a woman who mistakes him for someone else—then later in the story touches a cold wet sheet hanging from a line to dry—an anti-kiss, Bloom says. He concludes that Chekhov remains cheerful in spite of his stories living by the dictum, 'you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you despair.' (p. 38). Bloom says that Chekhov teaches him that literature is a form of the good, and he says that Chekhov is one of the kindest of writers whose inner lives we know anything about. In another story: "The Student", a student tells a widowed mother and her daughter the story of The Apostle Peter denying Jesus three times. When the mother cries, the student feels a connection between her tears and Jesus', and goes away feeling a rhapsodic joy about the continuity of life. The narrator, however, notes that the boy was only 22, as if to say 'what could he know'. In "The Lady with the Dog", which is regarded as one of Chekhov's finest stories, the unhappily-married Anna Sergeyevena is seduced by Gurov, a womanizer, who turns out to have fallen in love with her. He comes to see her in her home town, and she promises to rendezvous with him in Moscow secretly. Bloom says that this story is quite an ordinary tale except that Chekhov's artistry leaves her sadness enigmatic and meaningful instead of reducing her to a 'weeping woman'. The conflict between Anna Sergeyevena's sadness and Gurov's contentment with the "dark secret love" is an irresolvable tension in the human character, according to Bloom: "We cannot cast off their story because it is our story,"

(p. 41). Bloom quotes Gorky as saying that Chekhov "was able to reveal in the dim sea of banality its tragic humor." (p. 41).

Guy de Maupassant: Bloom quotes Russian critic Lev Shestov as saying that Maupassant often had to strain every effort to overcome his victim [character]. The victim often escaped from Maupassant, though crushed and broken, yet with his life. In Chekhov's hands, nothing escaped death." (p. 42). In the story "Madame Tellier's Establishment" Maupassant portrays a madam and her prostitutes return to the evening's work after a First Communion ceremony. Bloom says that "the story is bawdy, not prurient, in its Shakespearean spirit; it enlarges life, and diminishes no one." (p. 44). In "The Horla", Bloom says that Maupassant described the state of madness in a first-person narrator who is possessed by the Horla, a demonic spirit, and sets fire to his house to rid himself of the spirit, although he kills his servants in doing so. The narrator says that the Horla's arrival marks the end of the age of man, and Bloom says that we should read Maupassant "because he will hold you as few others do." (p. 46).

Ernest Hemingway: Bloom says that in Ernest Hemingway's stories "consciousness takes the place of imagination" (p. 46) although he quotes critic Frank O'Connor as saying that Hemingway's "stories illustrate a technique in search of a subject." (p. 46). Bloom examines the story "Hills Like White Elephants" where the woman has imagination, but not the man, and the end of the relationship resonates as the difference between vital sensibility on the woman's part and the numb insensitivity of the man. In "Snows of Kilimanjaro", Harry's impending death seems to invoke a "Shakespearean nihilism" according to Bloom. (p. 49). There is an irony in the story, for Harry is a failed Hemingway, but Hemingway, by being able to compose the story, "is precisely not a failure." (p. 49). Bloom says that Harry's dying vision, of the rescue plane carrying him high over the mountain, is pathetic more than triumphant, but evocative and dignified nonetheless. In "Sea Change" Hemingway describes a man who experienced a 'sea change' when his woman conducted a lesbian relationship, then returned to him. Bloom says that he has become the writer who will write "the rich and strange" novel "The Garden of Eden" (p. 50).

Flannery O'Connor: Bloom says that this section by quoting D. H. Lawrence: "Trust the tale, not the teller." (p. 51). In terms of Flannery O'Connor, Bloom means that "As teller, O'Connor was very shrewd, yet I think her best tales are far shrewder, and enforce no moral except an awakened imagination." (p. 51). Bloom says that Flannery O'Connor assumes that her readers are among the damned. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the grandmother becomes a good and caring person in the face of death, and the Misfit tells his comrade that "she would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." (p. 52). According to Bloom, this is outrageous because "being damned, *we* are outraged by it." (p. 52). In "Good Country People" this same sentiment does not apply when a salesman swindles Hulga out of her wooden leg. Bloom next discusses, "A View of the Woods" in which a grandfather kills his granddaughter and then dies himself. Bloom says that O'Connor herself was not clear about the tale when she said that the granddaughter was saved, but he appreciates her skepticism even about her own characters' viciousness. Bloom says that O'Connor's "skepticism outraged her and inspired her art." (p. 53). Bloom says that he is "exhilarated to the brink of fear" by O'Connor's stories and by her novel, "The Violent Bear it Away."

Vladimir Nabokov: Bloom says that Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters" bears resemblance to Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray". The unnamed narrator of this story is a French Professor, but his writing is playful, as he is haunted by the two sisters who have died, one by heart attack, one by suicide. Whereas O'Connor found spirituality in violence, Bloom says, Nabokov finds spirituality in aestheticism, and his priggish narrator seems to be unmoved by the deaths of the Vane sisters. An acrostic from the end of the story, though, reveals the author's presence as the ghostly presence of the sisters—the first letters of the words in the final paragraph spell out "Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me, Sibyl." Bloom says that he is delighted with this aesthetic solution—turning the sisters into ghosts who play with the narrative—to the pragmatic problem of responding to loss, and death.

Jorge Luis Borges: According to Bloom, Borges replaced Chekhov as the primary influence on the authors who followed him. Bloom says that like Kafka, Borges gave up the impressionistic line of literature that was centered on perception and sensation, and followed instead the line of literature founded in phantasmagoria. Bloom says that Borges is aware that his stories are artifices—they do not pretend to be realistic glimpses of our condition. "One is not going to hear the lonely voice of a submerged element in the population, but rather a voice haunted by a plethora of literary voices, forerunners." (p. 57). For Borges, Bloom says, "the world is a speculative illusion, or a labyrinth, or a mirror reflecting other mirrors." (p. 57). "Tlön, Ugbar, Orbis Tertius" is a place Borges' narrator discovers in an encyclopedia seen in a mirror—Bloom says that this is Borges' most outrageous fiction. Framing the story as an account of this purely fictitious country, Borges throws the whole nature of reality into question, replacing the real world with the imagination. "Nothing could be like an idea except another idea, is the primordial law of existence on Tlön." (p. 59). Bloom says that Borges, "a skeptical visionary" (p. 60) exemplifies why we read: to see the real world replaced by the things we want to see.

Tommaso Landolfi: According to Bloom, Landolfi's story "Gogol's Wife" is the apotheosis of the spirit of Gogol. In Landolfi's story, Gogol's wife is a rubber balloon named Caracas. Bloom says that Landolfi could not have written the same story for Maupassant's wife, or Turgenev's wife, but because of the somewhat violent absurdity of Gogol's work, the story is perfectly suited to the biographical Gogol, and the fantastic wife is an invention that strangely manifests something Bloom says that was inherent in Gogol's writing.

Italo Calvino: In Bloom's account, Calvino's "Invisible Cities" consists of eleven groupings of cities, which are described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan. The underlying principle of the cities and stories is that "falsehood is never in words, it is in the things." (p. 63). Kublai Khan objects, and wants to send Marco Polo out to discover the cities, but Marco Polo demurs, and Bloom says that the true story is the tension between the visionary storyteller and the skeptical audience. Kublai Khan keeps urging Marco Polo on to the fantastic lands, promised lands, but Marco Polo says that we are already in "the inferno of the living" (p. 64). Marco Polo then expresses what Bloom says is the wisdom of Calvino: that the reader should "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space." (p. 64).

Summary observations: Having started with the distinction between Chekhovian and Borgesian stories, Bloom considers the implications for imagination and pragmatism, in each mode, but his conclusion is expansive and inclusive: we read in both styles for different needs, one to experience reality, the other to explore the desire for things beyond reality. This inclusive spirit makes Bloom's criticism a merely useful, essentially affectionate form of writing, whose purpose is simply to bring out the character of each thing as it is to itself. The expectation being that the reader will find that each book corresponds to something inside him- or herself.

Analysis

Introduction: Bloom's opening comments in the first chapter are glancing, temporary, provisional. He is easing into his subject, and delighting in the process of quoting lines from Kafka and invoking Poe. He is obviously happy to be talking about literature, and lists a long list of authors whose works he will not include, but whose names should be mentioned nonetheless. This indicates that work of reading is eternal, and the list of prominent authors is long, but the pleasures are at some point idiosyncratic, and limited by the space of the book itself.

Ivan Turgenev: The pleasure Bloom finds in Turgenev's stories is exemplified in two stories: "Bezhin Lea" and "Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands". What Bloom likes about these stories is Turgenev's neutral tone, his affection for the human beings whose lives Turgenev encounters in the stories. Bloom likes the vitality of the boy Pavlusha and the strangeness of the dwarf Kasyan, and he appreciated Turgenev's ability to bring us close to these lives without turning them into symbols.

Anton Chekhov: The pleasure Bloom finds in Chekhov is similar to the pleasure he takes in Turgenev: he appreciates the author's ability to leave the enigmatic parts of people alone, and let the enigma remain intact, and unresolved. In all three stories, Bloom finds that Chekhov has loved people to the point of rendering them as if they were people who had inner lives of their own—even though he himself could not see them, and only hints at them, before ultimately leaving them contradictory.

Guy de Maupassant: Bloom says that Maupassant is important because his stories are compelling and lively, and they draw the reader into the lives of the people who expand the reader's mind. Whether it is the prostitutes who go to mass for First Communion before their evening's work, or the man persecuted by his madness, these gripping stories bring out the strangeness and the pathos of being human, and so fulfill Bloom's principles of reading—to find oneself and to love the people.

Ernest Hemingway: Bloom's section on Hemingway is marked by Bloom's affection for the suggestive imaginative life that shines through Hemingway's realism and consciousness. For Bloom, Hemingway is the author of reality, and Bloom is struck by how poignant the realities are, especially where Hemingway's crisp style is concerned with knotty problems in human relationships, or with the impending death in "Snows of Kilimanjaro". These human questions and experiences take on a unique power in Hemingway's hands, for the sparse language takes the reader into the situation, whether it is a conversation or a dying man's reverie.

Flannery O'Connor: Bloom is drawn to the outrageousness of Flannery O'Connor's stories, for their insistence on the characters' and the readers' being among the damned. He is moved by the darkness of her vision, which he attributes to Roman Catholicism, and while he is outraged by her outrageousness, he is entertained and compelled by the acerbic tone and the quality of self-flagellation in O'Connor's stories.

Vladimir Nabokov: Bloom delights again in Nabokov, whose aestheticism is haunted by the deaths of two sisters. There is reality in their deaths, but the narrator of "The Vane Sisters" is too priggish to understand its importance. The author, though, knows, and keeps the dead sisters in the story, mocking at his narrator's viewpoint. Bloom says that he likes that Nabokov is "not interested in pathos, [and] prefers them as whimsical ghosts." (p. 56).

Jorge Luis Borges: The trajectory over the course of Bloom's description of the short story started in death and realism and moved toward imagination and whim, and with Borges, it has been perfected in the fantasies of countries that are discovered in encyclopedias seen through mirrors. This desire to do away with reality—this playful attempt to test out other realities—becomes for Bloom the dominant note for the second half of the 20th century.

Tommaso Landolfi: Reality and fantasy merge, for Bloom, in Landolfi's story "Gogol's Wife" as the phantasmagoria in Gogol's writing is manifested as an absurd but uncannily prescient rubber balloon wife. Bloom says that he is delighted by this story, which he says might be the funniest and most unnerving he has ever read.

Italo Calvino: In Calvino, the tendency toward imagination seems to have led full-circle back to reality, not the external reality of death and the physical world, but at least the physical reality of the reader, the living individual who puts things together to make sense of them, who tells stories in order to organize the world.

Summary observations: Starting with the distinction between Chekhovian and Borgesian stories, Bloom sorts writers into the two different camps. "Chekhov expects you to believe in his realism, his faithfulness to our ordinary existence. Kafka, and Borges after him, invest themselves in phantasmagoria." (p. 65). Kafka and Borges create from a void, Bloom says, while Chekhov starts with reality. Bloom says that the "most skilled short story writers are as elliptical in regard to moral judgments as they are in regard to continuities of action or the details of a character's past life." (p. 66). In conclusion, Bloom says that there is no need to choose between the Chekhovian and the Borgesian modes—"we want them for different needs: if the first gratifies our hunger for reality, the second teaches us how ravenous we still are for what is beyond supposed reality." (p. 67).

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Introduction: Bloom says that poetry is "freer from history than prose fiction or drama", but he says that he will avoid a discussion of poetic form, sticking simply with the content itself.

Housmann, Blake, Landor and Tennyson: Housman's lyric "Into my heart an air that kills," Bloom says, is a poem he used to chant to himself, and Bloom advocates the advantages of memorizing poems as a way of possessing them. In Bloom's account, the poem paints a convincing picture of the world of inspiration beyond the present moment reality, but the picture is marked with sadness for having arrived later in history than other writers. "The true criterion for any good poem is that it will sustain a very close reading indeed." (p. 71).

Turning to Blake's "Sick Rose", Bloom says that the poem's ironies are cruel: "it is a kind of spell, a prophetic outcry against nature and against human nature." (p. 72). The dark visionary burden of the poem—the knowledge that death exists—makes the things in reality glow, in Bloom's account. In Landor's "On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday", Bloom sees a savage irony in Landor's complacent preparation for death, and he urges the reader, again, to memorize poetry.

In Tennyson's "The Eagle", Bloom says that he sees a proud longing which is a universal feeling, and in Tennyson's "Ulysses", Bloom says that "something in many readers is tempted to make an identification with the equivocal hero" (p. 74). Ulysses' profound ambivalence—and his determination to continue to be profoundly ambivalent about his quest, even to the last limits prophesied by Tiresias, that Ulysses would continue to wander. He endeavors to do something of note—or at least try whether something of note can be done, and he resolves, heroically, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Bloom sees this last line as resembling Milton's Satan, for its relentlessness, although it plays against the abiding and tempering humanism of the previous lines. In conclusion, Bloom says that we should read "Ulysses" because it helps us commune with ourselves: "We speak to an otherness in ourselves, or to what may be best and oldest in ourselves. We read to find ourselves, more fully and more strange than otherwise we could hope to find." (p. 79).

Robert Browning: In "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" Browning describes a bleak landscape that may well be one with Roland's psyche, corresponding, as it does, to no actual landscape. When Child Roland arrives at the Dark Tower, her fails at the task that awaits him there, and blows upon the horn to announce his failure. Bloom says that the poem is enigmatic, but the darkness adds a negative heroics to Roland's quest. The joy of such a poem is in its negativity, which is counterbalanced with the joy of the poetics, and the ongoing nature of the quest, which must be fulfilled regardless of its bleak qualities.

Walt Whitman: Bloom says that Walt Whitman had an equivocal relationship with British literature, and attends closer to himself than to the tradition: "The shock of overhearing yourself is that you apprehend an unexpected otherness." (p. 89). Bloom says that there are three 'selves' in the "Song of Myself: Myself, The Real Me, or Me Myself, and My Soul". This tripartite division does not, Bloom says, correspond to the Freudian division. Whitman is simultaneously 'one of the roughs', and the me myself who is at peace, and "wary of intrusion" (p. 90).. his Outermost, spiritual self is an enigma to him, but he attends to it. "'The Other I am' is the 'Me myself'" (p. 91). While these outer selves might oppose each other, Bloom says, the persona of the self who is one of the 'roughs' mediates and prevents mutual destruction. In the "We" of the American masses, Bloom says Walt Whitman "transcends the limitation of finding his own soul unknowable." (p. 92). "A patient, deep reading of Song of Myself," Bloom says, helps us to the truth that 'the what is unknowable.'" (p. 92).

Dickinson, Brontë, Popular Ballads, and "Tom O'Bedlam": Like Walt Whitman, Bloom says that Dickinson is highly original, breaking with much of the western tradition. Bloom says that Dickinson is impossible to categorize, because her consciousness was so mobile: her irony and symbolism is deep and contrarian and ultimately enigmatic, as she approaches the mysteries of life and death, action and consequence. Bloom says that Dickinson's poetry is a poetry of "erotic loss", so that poetry comes to replace the beloved, or the sensation of love itself. Dickinson conceives of the power to replace or annihilate God himself, refusing to be consoled for the loss of love, which is ultimately the loss of many things beside love. Bloom makes Dickinson's loss clear by discussing Emily Brontë, who sees the human heart as "centering both the worlds of Heaven and Hell." (p. 98). "Brontë's stanzas suggest an even lonelier freedom than Emily Dickinson's, since Dickinson commemorates erotic loss while Brontë's romance is altogether visionary." (p. 98). Bloom says that his favorite of the Popular Ballads, "Sir Patrick Spence", commemorates a heroic and doomed expedition. Patrick Spence's heroism is "necessarily self-destructive" in Bloom's opinion, (p. 101). In "The Unquiet Grave," a ghost warns the grieving lover to return to life, which is short, while death is eternal, always ready to accept the living. "Tom O'Bedlam" is one of Bloom's favorite poems outside of Shakespeare. Bloom quotes the entire poem, with discussion in which he says that the poem "is the most powerful expression in the language of being condemned for erotic activity." (p. 112). Tom implies that "one might as well be debased in one's behavior, because even if one is actually virtuous, others will see it differently." (p. 112).

William Shakespeare: Bloom says that lust itself is the hero-villain of Shakespeare's sonnet 129, in which "a litany for desire prophesies only further desire." (p. 114). In sonnet 144, Shakespeare laments the state of desire as opposed to his better angel, which may or may not have been corrupted with syphilis.

John Milton: Following Shakespeare, Milton "identifies energy with spirit; Satan abounds in both" (p. 116) and Bloom describes Milton's pride and individuality, in making himself a Protestant 'sect of one.' Bloom relishes Satan's crisis in recognizing his ruined beauty, after having been the most beautiful of angels, and waking to see himself as hell. Even here, Bloom sees Satan's courage as fundamentally human, for persisting in spite of his failure and his outrage over his "injured merit." (p. 120).

William Wordsworth: Turning away from Satan's grandiloquence to Wordsworth, Bloom remains focused on the individual as the site of all experience. This was Wordsworth's genius—to distrust the "bodily eye" as opposed to "the power of imagination" and "emotional accuracy" (p. 121). For Wordsworth, nature is "a spirit that beckons us to sublime intimations." (p. 121). The sublime is a form of pleasure in difficulty or suffering or discomfort—the delight with finding oneself still alive in the presence of something that might have obliterated you. Wordsworth's poetic persona is despairing and desperate for faith, but Bloom says that he finds redemption in the rainbow—and in the moment of childlike wonder, where the man becomes both the child again and the creator who has established a covenant with the world.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Bloom says that that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is the centerpiece of the literature of the motiveless crime, and he says that while others have attributed the crime to the mariner himself, Bloom sees him as passive before even his own action, so that the crime of killing the albatross belongs to his environment, not to him personally. His one act, of blessing the water snakes, attains expiation for him, and liberation. Bloom says that "the sympathetic reader will emerge from this dark voyage with an enhanced sense of freedom, another reason why we should read." (p. 129).

Shelley and Keats: Bloom says that that Shelley's unfinished "The Triumph of Life" would be depressing and confusing if it were not for the poem's "augmented poetic power." (p. 130). The ability of the poet to raise his state of consciousness is a compensation for the depressing facts of death and limitation. In Shelley's visionary poem, the difficult pleasure comes from the concealed eloquence, bitter though it may be, that comes from his appreciation of the human condition. In his discussion of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Bloom says that Keats attains a "haunting wistfulness" (p. 134) out of the knight-errant's relationship with the faery woman. Bloom says that there is a stirring pathos in the miscommunication between the knight and the woman, for his fascination destroys him, but it is not clear that this is what she wants. In the end, Bloom says that we read "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" "for its marvelous expression of the universal longing for romance, and its deep awareness that all romance, literary and human, depends upon incomplete and uncertain knowledge." (p. 137).

Summary observations: In conclusion, Bloom says that D. H. Lawrence is "a culmination of the visionary despair that seems to me central to the greatest poetry of the English language." (p. 138). This visionary despair bears witness to the bleak facts of life, and the horrors of industrial culture—without surrendering the human dignity of beautiful works and the vital expression of life, in poetry. "Poetry, as I urge the reader to see it, can be a mode of transcendence, secular or spiritual, depending on how you receive it." (p. 138). In Yeats, Bloom finds a "stoic, agnostic courage" (p. 139); in Lawrence, he finds "good oblivion" (p. 139); in Stevens' "Of Mere Being" he finds an exuberant statement of consciousness, and in Hart Crane's "The Broken Tower" he sees hopelessness but persistent pursuit of poetic voice. In each case, these poems helped the poets live their lives. Bloom foreshadows his discussion of Hamlet, where the poems he has discussed reach their apotheosis, for the allusivity and the irony of Hamlet's language force the reader to orient themselves to the world on Hamlet's terms. Like Hamlet, poets, and poetry in general, provides what Bloom calls a kind of violence, which wakes the reader up from "sleep-of-death into a more capacious sense of life." (p. 142).

Analysis

Housmann, Blake, Landor and Tennyson: In these first four poets, Bloom identifies the pure lyric, which is contained in itself, and limited to one sentiment. The sentiment at the heart of the poems he describes is the desire for some other life beyond reality, and the desire for the self to survive the death that is imminent in the reality of human life. Bloom's hero is Tennyson's "Ulysses" whose ambivalence opens him to the widest experiences, and keeps him open to new aspects of himself, and he admits his limitations even as he fuels his ambition to have every experience he can.

Robert Browning: Bloom describes "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" as a negative quest, the opposite of Ulysses' ambivalence. Here everything is negative, but instead of despair—which is externalized into the landscape itself, the poetic character is proudly defeated by his failure to overcome the test he finds in the Dark Tower. There is a dignity in this double defeat, by death and by the failure of imagination—but the dignity resides in the poetry that asserts itself nonetheless.

Walt Whitman: In the tripartite division of self into human persona, genuine self and universal self, Bloom says that Walt Whitman sets up a potentially destructive war between selves, but that the persona of "Walt Whitman, one of the roughs" allows the tensions to turn graceful and human, containing the known and unknowable selves in a self that can be shared by others. This dynamic self, Bloom says, is essentially American.

Dickinson, Brontë, Popular Ballads, and "Tom O'Bedlam": Following Walt Whitman, Bloom looks at Emily Dickinson, whose poems are strong and uncategorizable, bending Christian doctrine to establish her own poetics of erotic loss. In losing her love, she draws herself near to the mysteries of life and death, and finds that poetry itself is not exactly a substitute for loss, but it is a power that rivals divine creativity. This leads Bloom to a discussion of Emily Brontë's Stanzas, which are also fiercely solitary, but in a visionary, not erotic sense. The popular ballads, like Ulysses, celebrate the heroic quest, even in its noble failure, and "Tom O'Bedlam" sings against the madness of desire and unattainable love. This section traces the poetic attempt to contact the

William Shakespeare: The discussion of "Tom O'Bedlam" turns into a discussion of the erotic in Shakespeare, and Bloom says that while Shakespeare himself may be unknowable, his poems treat lustx as a hell, which introduces the poet to the horrors of sexual experience—with the threat of venereal disease.

John Milton: Continuing on the dark side, Bloom discusses Milton's "Paradise Lost", where Satan is a darkly heroic general, taking down all mankind rather than one opposing general—i.e. God. Bloom admires Milton's individualistic self-assertion in Satan, whom he says is the "apotheosis of the Protestant spirit." (p. 120).

William Wordsworth: Following Milton's Satan, who sought heroically—and tragically—to replace the world with himself, Wordsworth's lyrics replace the world itself with the poet's experience of the world, and also of the world's promise of experience. This brings the vast war Satan waged back to earth and the individual poetic self, whose war is always with his own preconceptions, a war that is fought to liberate and fulfill inspiration.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Delving further into the visionary world in which the self creates the world—and the self—through experience and imagination, Bloom describes Coleridge's mariner as an essentially passive man whose act, of killing the albatross, was preordained, but whose redemption comes from blessing the water snakes—finding it in himself to make a blessing. This poem is a map, according to Bloom, for finding redemption from nature and history.

Shelley and Keats: According to Bloom, Shelley's "The Triumph of Life" recognized the dark facts of death and limitation, but its elevated tone redeems these bleak facts through the sheer sensation of poetic flight. Keats, as well, turns death and drunkenness and desire—all limiting, destructive facts, in their way—into enigmatic knowledge that exceeds reality, and gives life a certain bittersweetness.

Summary observations: In Bloom's account, there is no ultimate answer to the final question, of death and reality, which cannot be evaded. However, the elevation of sensibility into prophetic or visionary or imaginative states makes that impossible fact beautiful instead of depressing, and even in the poets whose poems express despair, the poetic voice finds cause for courage and persistence, even if it is only in poetry itself. This sense of life—as something that can be redeemed from despair, if the reader communes with the larger self present in poetry—gives Bloom hope against the cruelty of passing time and looming death.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Introduction: Bloom says that novels are different from short stories and poems, because the novel seems to portray a recognizable social reality that depends on each individual reader's perspective. "There will still remain the pleasure of repetition [rereading], and of keeping civilization alive." (p. 143). Bloom says that the novel might have a darker future than the lyric poem, which will always survive, since "novels require more readers than poems do." (p. 144).

Miguel de Cervantes: According to Bloom, "Don Quixote" is "the first and best of all novels." (p. 145). Shakespeare, Bloom says, had read "Don Quixote", but Cervantes had probably not read Shakespeare. Confining himself to the central relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Bloom says that nothing like this intimacy exists in literature. The ongoing conversations between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are mutually illuminative, as the two friends come to resemble each other, and adopt each other's opinions. By way of contrast, Bloom says that Hamlet and Horatio only grow and develop as characters by overhearing themselves speaking. While Don Quixote says that he wants to go mad for no reason at all, Bloom says that Sancho Panza provides the novel's gaiety, and that Panza is a "great instance of the undying in us." (p. 148). Bloom says that the reader comes to acquire Don Quixote and Sancho Panza's knowledge by following their exploits. Bloom says that Cervantes bewilders the reader, and also makes himself necessary as the author who might be able to unravel the bewildering story.

Stendhal: According to Bloom, Richard Howard calls Stendhal "the anti-Flaubert" (p. 151) who goes from surprise to surprise, so that Bloom says that his books require rereading. This tragic novel is centered on the love relationships of Fabrice, who loves Clelia and is loved by Gina, and Mosca, who loves Gina. As Bloom puts it, Stendhal has learned from Shakespeare the arbitrariness of all grand passions, and from Cervantes, he has learned that passion, even when it kills, is a mode of play. All is irony." (p. 152). "The sadly noble survivor is Mosca, who ends up rich but deprived of his Gina, who has lost her Fabrice, who is divested of his Clelia." (p. 153).

Jane Austen: Bloom says that Jane Austen is "a profound ironist" (p. 156) and that her works are quite indifferent to the social concerns of economic class of modes of production or distribution. Her writing does not improve reality at all, but it does enliven it. Jane Austen describes Emma as an 'imaginist' "a consciousness not fully aware of the reality of other selves" (p. 160) whose art (matchmaking) parodies Austen's own creativity. There is an irony in the fact that the author and reader both witness Emma's sufferings with humor, not sufferings of their own, because Emma is a comic figure, though sympathetic. In conclusion, Bloom says that "Austen's superb heroines...integrate wit and will, and they triumph in that integration." (p. 162).

Charles Dickens: According to Bloom, Dickens does not invite the reader to identify with the "caricatures and grotesques" (p. 163) in his novels, although he describes Pip as a "complexly inward figure" whose "sense of pathos is unending" (p. 163). Dickens does not describe characters who change and grow; Bloom describes Pip as a play on Hamlet, although he says that it is never clear what Pip is guilty about, whereas Hamlet's guilt is metaphysical and understandable. Bloom says that Dickens invites the reader to read like a child again, and to follow Pip in his longing for a return to origins.

Fyodor Dostoevsky: Following his discussion of Pip's groundless guilt in Great Expectations, Bloom turns to Crime and Punishment, where Raskolnikov has committed a motiveless crime, almost in order to punish himself. According to Bloom, Dostoevsky "believed in a Christianity that is yet to come: when all of us would love selflessly, and so sacrifice ourselves to others." (p. 167). Bloom makes the distinction that Dostoevsky was "essentially a tragedian, not an epic moralist" like Tolstoy. (p. 167). Bloom says that he thinks Raskolnikov's repentance runs against Dostoevsky's grain, as if he is hesitant to allow his character to be redeemed. According to Bloom, the nihilist Svidrigailov is the more convincing character. Svidrigailov outdoes Raskolnikov's crimes, but Raskolnikov's crimes nonetheless implicate the reader through the reader's pathos. "We begin to feel that in Raskolnikov's Petersburg, we too might commit murders." (p. 169). Bloom says that Dostoevsky's purpose is to "raise us from our own nihilism" and this makes his book tendentious "as though it were a Macbeth composed by Macbeth himself." (p. 170).

Henry James: Bloom says that Henry James was 37 when he wrote "The Portrait of a Lady", and 65 when he revised it, the later version, Bloom says, being preferable. Isabel Archer, "a heroine of consciousness" (p. 173) who "sees...at the apparent cost of much of her freedom" (p. 174). Isabel Archer's ability to see—even to see the consequence of her own tragic marriage with Gilbert Osmond—redeems her every suffering. Bloom compares Isabel Archer to Hester Prynne, who does not flee passion, and is thus a more Emersonian heroine. Isabel Archer, Bloom says, wants "inward freedom at almost any cost" so her tragic marriage fulfills Nietzsche's saying that "error about life is necessary for life." (p. 177).

Marcel Proust: "'How to read a novel,' Bloom says, "now means how to read Proust." (p. 181), "specifically," he adds, "how to read and appreciate literary character." (p. 182). Marcel Proust's erotic obsession with Albertine is one of three love stories in the novel. Bloom says that Proust's obsession with Albertine is more than ironic, insofar as it suggests more resonance than one surface meaning, or even a ironic, double meaning. Bloom says that the novel "cures the narrator, and the reader, of what the ancient Hindu work warns against as 'dark inertia'...the sickness-unto-death" that comes from despair, unfulfilled longing, and disengagement. (p. 183). Looking for a lost time in his jealousy—the time when he might have enjoyed Albertine, or known about her betrayals—Proust describes jealousy as an optical error, a looking in the wrong place, or in the wrong way.

Thomas Mann: According to Bloom, "The Magic Mountain" marks one of the heights of western culture, insofar as the novel requires education and reflection. Castorp is an ideal student, who learns and continues to learn, taking in every viewpoint from liberal humanism to radical politics and calls for violence and terror. Castorp is not a Faustian figure questing after knowledge to misuse it, he is an idealized student who continuously quests after wisdom. While dogmatic thinkers duel over their ideas, Castorp remains apart, never staking ground he might have to defend. Bloom recognizes a certain demonic quality in his character, sine he "really does not require the endless cultural instruction he receives." (p. 193).

Summary observations: Bloom wonders about the future of the novel, in a time when readership is not renewing itself. He asks how characters change, and sees value in the developments the great authors put their character—and themselves—through. He says that "only deep, constant reading fully establishes and augments an autonomous self. Until you become yourself, what benefit can you be to others?" (p. 195). Bloom says that a good biography of an author can be an immense help to reading, as it will tell the reader where a work came from in the life of its creator. Most importantly, the works reveal or dwell upon enigmas that are valuable to behold. Instead of plot, some novels are meant to be read for the character development that takes place through the story, and to be in the characters' presence as they change. Bloom says that rereading a book gives an elevated sense of pleasure and satisfaction—and wisdom—as the reader can measure him or herself against the previous reading, and also watch the character fulfill what is now, on the second reading, a known destiny. In the end, Bloom advocates "wise passivity" as the proper stance for the reader to take, with regard to great literature. (p. 196).

Analysis

Introduction: Bloom tries to define the difference between the novel and the short story and the poem, and finds that the novel depends upon the fact that multitudes of readers are also reading the same book. He worries about the future of the novel in an age of new media.

Miguel de Cervantes: In Bloom's account, "Don Quixote" sets the standard for literary friendship, in that Don Quixote and Sancho Panza deepen each other's consciousnesses. What Bloom calls the Cervantine personality is a mix of these two friends, visionary and practical.

Stendhal: Bloom says that Stendhal does not write to impassion the reader, but to get the reader to see "passion as vanity raised to madness" (p. 154). He is delighted by the convoluted logic of Stendhal's "The Charterhouse of Parma", which subsumes the characters themselves to passion itself, which works its way with them. Bloom says that the reader acquires a certain self clarification by being tested against these characters and the passions that ultimately consume them. Stendhal, Bloom says, enlarges the reader's reality "without any yielding to fantasy." (p. 156).

Jane Austen: Bloom says that Jane Austen is a superb ironist, and that women are often perceived as more imaginative than men. He finds Emma a brilliant imaginist, who succeeds in her matchmaking, but is caught in a trap of her own imaginings, with the result of creating comedy for the reader. The fusion of imagination and will leads Emma into trouble, and her story tests the reader who would try to enact their own imaginings in the lives of others.

Charles Dickens: "Great Expectations" is one of the exceptional works that does not fit into one of Bloom's categories. Bloom says that the book does not invite identification with the characters, but presents a complex of desires that attempt to take the reader back to origins in childhood. He says that we read Great Expectations "to go home again, to heal our pain" (p. 165).

Fyodor Dostoevsky: In Bloom's account, "Crime and Punishment" takes the reader into the mind of the guilty murderer, and Raskolnikov's guilt—which precedes his crime—becomes so sympathetic that the reader is drawn into the crime, and feels a longing for the redemption Raskolnikov himself undergoes. The novel clearly intends to elevate the reader, but this is a different undertaking, in fiction, than it is in poetry, where the feeling is more contained than it is when a whole cast of characters share and disperse those feelings, as in "Crime and Punishment".

Henry James: Bloom describes Isabel Archer as one fulfillment of Emerson's ideas about self-reliance: she wants freedom at all costs, but suffers a marriage to the poser Gilbert Osmond, who wants to treat her not as a companion consciousness but as a statue, a possession. Bloom asks why James would have inflicted this disaster on his heroine—who is also a portrait of himself as a female—and he proposes that Isabel Archer represses sexual passion because she wants to be loved, but not to be the object of sexual passion, for fear that it might prove overwhelming.

Marcel Proust: The discussion of Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" adds a Nietzschean sense of self-creation through literature to Bloom's discussion of literature. For Proust, Albertine was both a woman and a cipher, a symbol and a lost experience. Her presence in Proust's life makes Proust attentive to himself and to her, and his jealousy over her lesbian betrayal spurs him to detailed and creative acts of remembering akin to self-creation.

Thomas Mann: Hans Castorp is a unique character insofar as his primary drive is for self-cultivation, but he never expresses a personal desire that would lead to sexual knowledge of jealousy—he simply breathes in all the wisdom his teachers can offer. Castorp stands as an ideal for Bloom, of the endlessly self-cultivating student, and if Mann has turned Castorp slightly demonic in his refusal to mature past a certain point, he has also given us a highly literate example of how to read, and the benefits of continuous deep reading—both in Castorp's education, and in the novel, "The Magic Mountain" itself.

Summary observations: Bloom's meditation on how to read novels concludes that the reader ought to be wisely passive. This passivity and receptivity allows characters and authors to penetrate the reader, and to resonate with the reader in ways, Bloom suggests, that the reader will not have anticipated, so that reading becomes a surprising act of continual self-discovery. Bloom advocates the value of rereading as well, on the grounds that motivations and causations in novels are puzzles as in life, and revisiting certain stories involves returning to certain living questions to meditate on their meaning and value.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Hamlet: The discussion of "Hamlet" is the longest by far in the book, for "Hamlet" is the centerpiece in Bloom's experience of reading, and the central text of Western art and culture: "Hamlet's consciousness, and his language for extending his that consciousness, is wider and more agile than divinity has manifested yet." (p. 201). Bloom says that there are two Hamlets in the play, as the Hamlet of Acts 1-4 is a young man, but the Hamlet of Hamlet of Act 5 is about ten years older and wiser. Bloom says that Hamlet's "natural mode is an extreme ambivalence" (p. 202) and that he invites the audience to share his skepticism. According to Bloom, this is entertaining and also exasperating for the audience, because he models and also hides, in a way, the freedom he quests after in what Bloom calls his 'wild detachment.' "You overhear Hamlet," Bloom says, "by becoming Hamlet." (p. 204). Bloom also notes that "Hamlet shows us that poetry has no social function whatsoever, beyond entertainment. But it has a crucial function for the self: "Hamlet very nearly heals himself, but then touches a limit beyond which even the most intelligent of literary characters cannot progress." (p. 205). According to Bloom, this limit is reached between acts 4 and 5, when Hamlet is at sea, and comes to be rather indifferent about questions of life and death. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off to their deaths, and seems not to care for anyone's life, even his own. Bloom notes that "we are not Hamlet, nor were meant to be." (p. 209) but Hamlet nonetheless constitutes an experience for any reader, who has to measure their own stories against Hamlet's reckless ironies and self-awareness. Hamlet is worried that his name has been wounded, but he himself has been reckless with his life, so that his loss of everything, and his death in the end, constitute a puzzle that seems true and still puzzling, discomfiting the reader (or audience). Bloom says that the play "Hamlet" is also a spectacle that the characters in the play are aware of being part of. In this sense, Bloom says, the play is more like a ritual that the audience enters into and returns to, than a text whose meanings could ever be settled and known. Bloom continues his discussion by saying that Hamlet has no peers in the play—none of the other characters are suitable foils for him, so that Hamlet stands for the solitary reader, for consciousness itself, and Hamlet's ironies keep us as detached from him as he is from himself, and whatever his true meanings might be. Bloom says that Hamlet's intellect is "profoundly skeptical of action" (p. 216) as anyone who enjoys the pleasure of knowing and seeing and playing with words must be afraid of the consequences of any act which might change the known world (or fail to change it) or limit or quantify the speaker's ability to speak and be inventive in speaking and conceiving new thoughts. The only thing Bloom says Hamlet cares for is his good name, and he wants to be remembered for his thoughts, even if his acts have caused deaths from Polonius to Gertrude to Laertes to Ophelia and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Having overheard Hamlet's thoughts, and identified with them, the audience is disposed to forgive him and value his name in spite of all that.

Hedda Gabler: In Bloom's account, "Hedda Gabler" is a "marvelous blend of Iago and Shakespeare's Cleopatra, at once a genius revising the lives of others and a heroically failed woman." (p. 219). Bloom describes the character Hedda Gabler as partly a troll, or 'huldre,' a daughter of Lilith in Norse myth. "Trolls incarnate fiercer versions of our erotic and also our destructive drives," Bloom explains. (p. 219). Hedda is afraid of losing her social position and being exposed as a huldre. Bloom says that she wants "a huldre's revenge on human reality." (p. 221). She burns Thea's 'child' by Loevborg (i.e. his manuscript) while she herself is pregnant with a child she does not want. Forced into an arrangement with Judge Tesman, Hedda kills herself beautifully, winning her apotheosis in suicide.

"The Importance of Being Earnest": according to Bloom, is most closely tied to Lewis Carroll and Gilbert and Sullivan as being nonsense literature, which "free us of ordinary sense." (p. 225). In Wilde's world, to tell the truth is to be disbelieved, whereas to tell a lie is to be "corroborated on every side," but Bloom says that "to originate or to set in motion is to lie" for Wilde (p. 225). Lady Bracknell is the delightful central figure of "The Importance of Being Earnest", and she is not attached to reality, but like Sancho Panza from Don Quixote, she plays with everything she encounters, and hollows out all real terms with insouciant sayings like "Everything matters in art except the subject." (p. 229). Bloom says that 'earnest' means original in Wilde's language, so the reader should encounter "The Importance of Being Earnest" as nonsense, as a farce, and as a morality play, all at the same time. Wilde's characters are not human beings at all, but "paradoxes-at-play" in Wilde's refutation of society, which is also his insistence on treating the world as his audience and simultaneously his minder. (p. 231).

Summary observations: Bloom says that Shakespeare is a master of leaving things out, and that this quality is valuable for a writer, most of all for a playwright, since the monologue does not always reveal him, and "the informing voice of the novelist himself is substituted for by theatricality itself." (p. 232.)

Analysis

"Hamlet": Harold Bloom is obviously enchanted with Shakespeare's "Hamlet". He has written about Shakespeare extensively, notably in "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human". Bloom's discussion of "Hamlet" is centered on the play's irreducibility. Hamlet the character is too various and too vital, too playful and detached for identification. In this sense, the play "Hamlet" is the ultimate literary work, for it describes an inventiveness that forms the foundation for modern consciousness and individuality. To be a self-aware person is to participate in Hamlet's struggles with language and the opinions of others, not to mention the situation he finds himself in, of being unprepared for the drama thrust upon him, and distrustful of the action by which he might reconcile that situation. Once a person has started down the road of self-knowledge, they will necessarily resonate with Hamlet's fear of the consequences of his acts. Reading Hamlet shows a reader the danger of those consequences, and the necessary detachment that keeps a self alive against all the actions that could commit and limit consciousness.

"Hedda Gabler": Bloom's discussion of Hedda Gabler hinges on the revenge against reality, with Hedda herself destroying the lives around her for failing to live up to her ideas about how beautiful things could be. This is a theme the reader has seen before, but its return here raises the act of rebelling against reality into a tragicomic art. Bloom appreciates the fierce nature of Ibsen's drama, and the vitality of its heroine-villain.

"The Importance of Being Earnest": "The Importance of Being Earnest" is another case of denying reality in favor of imagination and even more, of will and solipsism. In Wilde's play, characters insist on their own perspective to the point of negating reality, and turning everything into solipsism, but this delightful stance refracts society's light into amusing nonsense which produces a strange alternate-artistic morality play. Bloom appreciates Wilde's zany Lady Bracknell for her solipsism and her absurdities, which turn society on its head.

Summary observations: Bloom concludes this section by pointing out that drama is often the art of leaving things out, and Shakespeare was a master of this, never showing the audience Antony and Cleopatra alone together, for instance, and omitting the transformation that takes place in "Hamlet" when he is at sea. He delights in drama, though, and reiterates the power of "Hamlet", that has its effect on a good number of the novels that followed it.

Chapter 5 and Epilogue

Chapter 5 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

"Moby Dick": Bloom says that he insists on seeing Ahab as the negative hero of "Moby Dick", whose power and determination are doomed but deeply human and quixotic but also uniquely American. According to Bloom, "Moby Dick" "is the fictional paradigm for American sublimity." (p. 236). In Bloom's account, Ahab's God was not the Christian God but an early, bungling god, opposed by the true God, who remains hidden. Bloom says that "you rightly worship fire, according to Ahab, by asserting your own sacred selfhood against it." (p. 238).

"As I Lay Dying": "As I Lay Dying" invokes Agamemnon's bitter speech about Clytemnestra in the "Odyssey": "As I lay dying, the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyes for me as I descended into Hades" (p. 240). Abby Bundren has died, and "As I Lay Dying" is told from the perspective of her children, who carry her body back to its intended burying place in Mississippi. Darl is the protagonist, and is assigned the greatest number of the 59 monologues, but he verges on schizophrenia, and ends the novel being taken to an asylum. According to Bloom, though, Darl's insanity is uncanniness and visionary power, which does not quite resolve to madness: it troubles the reader for its ability to see the self from outside the self, and he intimates that "the human predicament is a kind of aboriginal disaster." (p. 244). Bloom takes pleasure in watching the Bundren family emerge from an abyss and descend into an abyss again, acting out the catastrophe of the human condition.

"Miss Lonelyhearts": Bloom says that Miss Lonelyhearts "is so sublime in its negativity, so perfect in its farcical despair, that one would not wish it different or better." (p. 245). There are two protagonists, Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike, his editor. The character Miss Lonelyhearts is "a would-be Walt Whitman, proclaiming universal love but cold to the core." (p. 246). Refusing any consolation—and refusing at the same time the splendidly negative quest of someone like Ahab or Satan, Miss Lonelyhearts can only avail himself of the violence of literary parody, short of violence itself. Bloom says that we should read "Miss Lonelyhearts" in order "to understand better our obsession with guns and violence, our fanatic need to be loved by God, our Gnostic roots that teach us redemption through sin." (p. 249).

"The Crying of Lot 49": Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49", follows in the line of Hans Castorp of Mann's "Magic Mountain": she wants to unravel the mysteries that surround her. In Pynchon's self-reflexive novel, Bloom says that her job is "to discover how and why to read the story in which she finds herself." (p. 250). Instead of helping his protagonist, Pynchon, mirroring modern times, provides both Oedipa and the reader with a surfeit of information, much of which is confusing or misleading. The conclusion—in which the story is cut off just as the climactic auction is about to get underway—is less an ending than an arbitrary termination of an ongoing process: it does not matter to Oedipa—and will not matter to the reader—what the outcome of the auction is, it will just leave the protagonist, reader and author, alike, in the position of trying to make sense of the limbo where she finds herself. As Bloom says, "there are worse places to be." (p. 254).

"Blood Meridian": Bloom says that the first time he tried to read "Blood Meridian", he was but off by the violence, but by the third attempt, he read straight through and recognized the seven-foot-tall Judge as another Ahab, or Satan, a figure of violence incarnate, whose alter-ego, the Kid, changes from a naïve figure of mindless violence himself, to the Judge's opponent. The Kid's opposition is not successful, but that does not stop him from growing and trying to find some way to mitigate or overcome the death principle the Judge stands for. Resistance to the power of the Judge and death and chaos is ultimately no more successful in "Blood Meridian" than anywhere else, but the Kid's gutsy insistence to the Judge, "You aint nothin" (p. 262) marks a high point for courage and determination. In the enigmatic epilogue to "Blood Meridian", Bloom says that the figure striking fire out of the rock might be the "new Prometheus" who can finally go up against the Judge. (p. 263).

"Invisible Man": Bloom says that Invisible Man is based on Jazz, the uniquely American art form of shifting rhythms and improvisation. This aligns the novel both with the developmental model of self-cultivation seen in certain characters and poets so far, and also with the chaos and destructive energy that have threatened the poetic self-fulfilling characters. This quality of "negative sublimity"—i.e. approaching the forces of chaos and unraveling, as opposed to the forces or symbols of order and beauty and light—is a testament to the survival instinct. (p. 265). This instinct is emphasized by the book's Jonah theme: "blackness puts you in the whale's belly, and blackness alone is insufficient to resurrect you." (p. 266). Even if it is not enough for resurrection, self-reliance is nonetheless necessary to orient the self, even if orientation and sanity come at the expense of foreseeing the destruction of American by race tensions. Like Svidrigailov and Ahab and the Judge, "Invisible Man's" character Rinehart is well adjusted to violence and chaos, but the more human protagonist is intent on salvaging something like his own humanity—he does not want to simply prosper, if it means losing the ability to reflect with satisfaction on his own role in things.

"Song of Solomon": Bloom says that Morrison's skill makes The Song of Solomon a book in which the reader "never quite knows where reality and fantasy come into conflict." (p. 270). This ability to give the reader a world that is larger than the literal world—and yet remains a convincing world nonetheless—places Milkman Dead's quest for his history squarely in line with the books that have come before in "How to Read and Why". Unlike many characters, Milkman Dead does have a redemptive experience, and recovers the name and the history he was searching for, and the book then makes the reader wonder how much is mythology and how much is experience.

Summary observations: Bloom looks for a method of redemption that does not carry the danger of nihilism, as negativity does. He rehearses his analyses, and finds that apocalypse is the tenor of our times, and that Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian is absolute in its relevance to our times. There are survivors in other novels, but if the tendency Bloom describes is toward annihilation, the voices of the survivors will speak to the reader and give him or her a map for their own survival.

Epilogue: Reverting to "The Sayings of the Fathers", a book he read as a boy, Bloom quotes Rabbi Tarphon's admonition to attend to the work of self-pursuit and knowledge of the world. Bloom says that the "genealogy of normative tradition" (p. 279)—i.e. the notion that Judaism has been handed down intact from its conception, from father to son—is itself a dubious narrative. In contrast to Akiba, another rabbi, Bloom says that Rabbi Tarphon emphasized hard work and close attention to the texts and to the world, but he also advocated a pragmatic approach that allowed the self a good deal of interpretive leeway. In conclusion, Bloom leaves us with this advice: "Bear yourself with equanimity, for you will go out from here to live a life in which you will constantly find yourself keeping appointments that you never made." (p. 281).

Analysis

"Moby Dick": Bloom delights in Ahab's preternatural God, and his intention to rebel against the false God the White Whale seems to symbolize. The true God, the fire itself, seems to be the living heat of Ahab's rebellion itself, his life asserting itself, and while this has something in common with Milton's Satan, it asserts the sublimity of the American situation, and defines the tragic quest that results from American freedom.

"As I lay Dying": There is a bitterness in Faulkner's account of Abby Bundren's death and her family's reaction. Darl in particular is a riveting character, but his schizophrenia does not overcome the catastrophe of the family dynamic—he merely makes it tragic and inevitable in the reader's eyes. The inclusion of "As I Lay Dying" in Bloom's discussion adds a note of urgency and fierce competition to a book about the problem of identifying with books and characters. This competitive relationship between family members is a prototype for the competition between authors.

"Miss Lonelyheart"s: Bloom's account of "Miss Lonelyhearts" is full of appreciation of the verve of West's parody of America's negative culture of self-help and false answers to genuine weariness and despair. He advocates reading Miss Lonelyhearts for the "unsettling laughter he will bring you, as you too approach the abyss prepared for the American soul by the American religion." (p. 249).

"The Crying of Lot 49": Pynchon's novel adds a degree of playfulness to "How to Read and Why", for Pynchon's protagonist's quest, like Hans Castorp's quest for self-fulfillment, is never going to be fulfilled, it is a process. In a measure of how much modern times have changed the act of reading, the character in this novel is now going through the same reading and analyzing process the reader himself is going through, so the plot mirrors the work of making sense of the novel itself, and the world. There is a delight in being confounded by facts, and this is what Bloom leaves us with his in discussion of "The Crying of Lot 49".

"Blood Meridian": "Blood Meridian" is a stirring combination of allegory and history novel, and the Judge's violence is well-grounded in historical fact of the Texas/Mexico border in 1849-1850. While Bloom says that it is not clear whether the Judge is an allegorical figure or a real man, the chaos and murder and death that he stands for is real enough, and pervasive in that landscape. This makes the Kid's opposition to the Judge a heroic—and ultimately tragic—battle, but the Kid grows from it, and if he dies, his rebellion against the Judge reiterates the doomed triumphs that have concluded so many earlier works.

"Invisible Man": "Invisible Man" is another story of conscience opposed by energy and chaos, and the protagonist proposes to speak for the reader, but the reader's identification is up for grabs, considering Rinehart, the appealing figure of chaos and power. Bloom's attraction to this novel has been well foretold in the tensions between chaos and self-pursuing order, but the addition of jazz and race makes this a welcome addition to the book.

"Song of Solomon": The line between mythology and experience is a promising boundary, where people feel that they can experience the fulfillments life seems to promise. In other books, this line has been a heavy, dangerous, violent or chaotic experience—but in "The Song of Solomon", Milkman Dead experiences a fulfillment that renews the promise that imagination and self-pursuit might in fact be capable of leading a person back to their sources. This is a promising, imaginative note to end the book with.

Summary observations: Bloom's analysis of more recent literature has led him to the rather bleak conclusion that apocalypse is the order of the day—but he cannot accept the 'cleansing' nature of violence without asserting the literary value of survivors' tales like Oedipa Maas' and Ishmael's and the Kid's and the Invisible Man's. The world might be going toward conflagration, but literature, Bloom says, will keep the self and its complex alternate selves alive.

Epilogue: In concluding his work, Bloom positions his work amidst the differing opinions of Jewish rabbis who proposed a history of continuity, on one hand, and a history of more individualistic self-pursuit on the other. Following the latter school, and Rabbi Tarphon, Bloom provides his last advice: carry yourself with equanimity as you read, and as you figure out whose work you are performing in your life and in your reading.

Characters

Harold Bloom

Harold Bloom is a professor of literature at Yale University, and an esteemed literary critic. He began his career with "The Anxiety of Influence" in 1972, and his books have explicated the experience of creativity and the relationship between artists throughout western history. Bloom has entered into the controversy about the value of literature and the political uses of imaginative work, but in "How to Read and Why", he leaves politics aside, and celebrates the pleasures and difficult pleasures of reading.

William Shakespeare

Bloom considers William Shakespeare the ultimate writer. Little is known about the author himself, but the works—from the sonnets through the history plays and tragedies, reveal an enormously playful sensibility that is marked by a deep affection for human individual and the possibility of change and growth. According to Bloom, the ability to develop as a person was effectively invented by Shakespeare, and each of Shakespeare's characters has, to Bloom's mind, a unique personality.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson lived and wrote in the 1800s in Concord, Massachusetts, and his writings about self-reliance are echoed in much of Bloom's writing about the self and its responsibilities in terms of self knowledge. In "How to Read and Why", Bloom quotes Emerson's saying that one seeks in literature the sense that one nature wrote and the same nature reads, and this makes Emerson central to Bloom's idea that the reader finds him or herself in every literary work.

Dr. Samuel Johnson

Dr. Samuel Johnson is an 18th-century English author and literary critic. Johnson is one of Bloom's literary heroes, for his adroit criticism and explication of Shakespeare among many others, and his advice for readers, which is to make explicit the implicit structure and beauty of a book.

Anton Chekhov

Anton Chekhov is a Russian author who was born in 1860 and died in 1904. He is, in Bloom's opinion, the founder of a line of realistic literature in which characters are presented as enigmatic human beings who are always laboring under the destructive presence of death.

Jorge Luis Borges

Borges was an Argentinean writer who was born in 1899 and died in 1986. His stories are whimsical in treating imaginary facts as realities, and Bloom sets Borgesian literature against Chekhovian literature as representing the two primary strains of literature in the 20th century.

John Keats

John Keats is an English poet who lived from 1795 to 1821. He is the author of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," in which a knight-errant is fascinated destructively with a faery woman who threatens to destroy him. Bloom describes Keats' poem as one of the negative triumphs of literature, insofar as its use of language is so haunting and beautiful that the eventual death of the knight is redeemed my the beauty of his poem.

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson is an American poet who lived from 1835 to 1886 in Amherst, Massachusetts. She was famously reclusive, but her poems are commanding in their assertion of a self that can create its own compensations for what it has lost. Bloom finds Dickinson uncategorizable, one of the few authors whose work is so strong and original that it cannot be said to be derived from anyone else's.

Miguel de Cervantes

Miguel de Cervantes is a Spanish writer who lived from 1547 to 1616. He is the author of "Don Quixote", which Bloom considers the first and best of novels. Bloom says that Cervantes had probably not read Shakespeare, who was his contemporary, although Shakespeare had almost certainly read "Don Quixote".

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman is an American poet, who lived from 1819 to 1892. He is credited with articulating the American voice, and he was honest about having been strongly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose theories Whitman effectively fulfilled, in his own way. According to Bloom, Walt Whitman's self is divided into three parts, the 'rough', the Me Myself and My Soul. According to Bloom, the persona of the rough prevents a war between the absolute Soul and the willful Me Myself.

Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy is an American author, born in 1933, who wrote Blood Meridian. Bloom considers this work one of the strongest and most apocalyptic books written in modern times, and he admires these character of the Judge for his vitality and negative sublimity, similar to Ahab's in "Moby Dick". According to Bloom, the Kid's rebellion against the Judge is the foundation for a self that might one day survive the apocalypse the Judge represents.

Objects/Places

Sketches from a Hunter's Album by Ivan Turgenev

This is a collection of linked short stories by Ivan Turgenev, in which Turgenev describes his encounters with people in his travels and hunting expeditions. Bloom credits Turgenev with representing the people he finds with affection and also with respect for their individuality.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare

This is the play that Bloom says is the summit of literary achievement. Written in 1609, the play is an Oedipal tale in which Hamlet never really does act to repair the usurpation of his father's throne. Waiting to be goaded into action, he forces events to be thrust upon him, taking no responsibility for the people who die as a result of his attempts to keep from acting.

The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon

"The Crying of Lot 49" is a novel in which Oedipa Mass is drawn into a fascinating puzzle based on the possibility that a rival postal system has been running in secret. She sees signs of this rival system, but can never know for certain whether it exists, and when the book ends abruptly as an auction begins that might give her some sense one way or another, Bloom says that the Oedipa would not likely have found anything definitive either way, and that she will go on living in limbo as before.

Ulysses by Alfred Lord Tennyson

"Ulysses" is a long dramatic monologue in which the character Ulysses reflects on his life and travels, and resigns to continue traveling—striving, seeking, finding and not yielding—till the end of his days. According to Bloom, the poem presents both a rebellious view (of a self that wants eternal knowledge) and a tragic view (of a self that can only be resigned to limitation and death).

Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen

"Hedda Gabler" was published in 1890. It is a play in which Hedda Gabler herself is a disappointed woman who conspires in the destruction of people around her. According to Bloom, Hedda is a 'huldre' or troll, and her nature is destructive because reality cannot measure up to the intuitions she has as an earth spirit.

The Magic Mountain by Thomas Mann

In "The Magic Mountain", published in 1924, Hans Castorp is a student who goes to the Magic Mountain to learn and to fulfill himself. According to Bloom, his quest for knowledge leaves him curiously uncommitted, as he witnesses rival theories and remains aloof. His character is limited in his knowledge sexually, as he remains aloof from women as well, but Bloom sees Castorp as the ideal student, eternally devoted to self-knowledge.

In Search of Lost Time by Marcel Proust

Reflecting on his beloved's lesbian betrayal six years ago, Marcel Proust has created a novel in which the loss of time and the search for it becomes the vehicle for self-knowledge. Bloom says that the experience of sexual jealousy is perhaps the most useful experience in literary training, for the attempt to redeem a lost time, and to recreate a previous experience is the basis for reading and writing literature, for writing is essentially, in Bloom's opinion, an attempt to regain something lost, even if the loss is an imagined world.

Paradise Lost by John Milton

According to Bloom, "Paradise Lost", published by Milton in 1667, is one of the most influential poems in the English language. Of all the characters, Bloom says that he admires Satan most, for he is full of vitality, and his agony over having lost his heavenly position—and his pride at refusing to serve—is a fitting mirror for the human condition.

As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner

"As I Lay Dying" by William Faulkner was published in 1930. In it, three brothers and a sister take their mother's body back to Mississippi for burial. The character Bloom admires most in this novel is Darl, who ends up in an asylum, but his schizophrenia is more than madness, it is an attempt to see the self from beyond the self, and to describe the self as a stranger. Bloom says that there is a nihilism in Darl's monologues, but the nihilism asserts an energy and a desire to live that is still beautiful even in tragedy.

Themes

Reality

Reality is a significant character in Harold Bloom's "How to Read and Why". Principally, reality means death and limitation. The inevitable process of dying—and of losing love, losing oneself and one's lovers—spurs the creativity of all of the writers Bloom talks about. They each feel the desire to give reality its due and at the same time to find a transcendent solution to the panic it raises in them. Consciousness being incompatible with death, it is impossible to know death first-hand, only to prepare for it, approximate it, or know it symbolically, and the writers whose works Bloom describes all give death a presence if not a voice in their works, and then counterbalance that voice, or character, with other voices or characters who create value and dignity, even if they do not, themselves survive dying.

One of the other forms of reality is chaos, which has its counterpart in the nihilism or anarchism of characters like Svidrigailov in Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment". Svidrigailov's rapacious desire defines the basement to which Raskolnikov's moral guilt never descends, but Raskolnikov measures his ethical life against Svidrigailov's depravity. Chaos or randomness is also evident in some of the enigmatic figures in poetry, such as the ancient mariner, or "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", who threaten to dissolve the order other characters have fought to achieve.

Sexual jealousy

Bloom says "I sometimes feel that the best literary training my students can obtain is only an enhancement of their pragmatic training by sexual jealousy, the most aesthetic of psychic maladies, as Iago knew." (p. 184). The education Marcel Proust gets, from his long jealousy of Albertine, awakens him to the inner landscape of his soul, and also gets him to pay attention, like a detective, to the real world in which Albertine's betrayals took place.

Sexual jealousy makes other appearances in "How to Read and Why": Henry James, for instance, writes Isabel Archer as someone who represses sexual experience in order to protect herself against it, thus proving jealous of sex, and protective of consciousness. Emily Dickinson sought to replace sexual loss and even sexual experience with poetry and the power that swept into her when she was writing, and defining her own relationship with the God who had created everything. The scene in which a reader is replaced by another lover is similar to the scene in which the author or the reader accepts that the literary work is a replacement for the experiences that cannot be had any more, or the people who have been lost, or who died.

Imagination

Imagination has its own powerful effects on poets and on novelists and their characters. Imagination is the tool with which unreal things become real—not only things outside of the self—like spirits and experiences—but things inside the self as well, as the creator can create things that do not already exist in nature. The ability of the mind to supplement and even to alter reality is a power at the heart of reading and writing, and the ability to take others' creations seriously is one of the faculties Bloom recommends readers to cultivate. If the reader can take others' visions seriously, he or she finds that they are capable of those same visions, and so are introduced to themselves in the mirror of the work. Imagination is principally evident in poetry, which is a prophetic, even visionary art form, which relies on the poet's conceits, and the images that are created and set against other images. The ability, for instance, to bless the sea snakes, in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", gives the Ancient Mariner the relief he needed; the ability to describe the mind as wider than the sky, in Dickinson; the ability to believe in a life that goes on beyond death—these capabilities keep the soul alive, and sane, in spite of the death that will ultimately be demanded of it.

The power of language and rhetoric

One of the ways in which writers overcome the looming presence of death, or even the overwhelming presence of the writers who have come before—is by the beauty and vitality of language itself. In poetry more than in any other written form, the ability to be speaking, and to have one's words repeated and resonating in the hearts and vocal cords of others, keeps the poetic self alive in spite of everything that is lost. The best examples of this may be Nabokov's story, "The Vane Sisters", in which the storytelling itself compensates for the narrowness of the narrator, or Milton's "Paradise Lost", where Satan's ability to imagine his freedom and power is alluring, even if it ultimately needs to be contained.

Style

Perspective

Bloom's point of view is a scholarly humanism that treats literature as 'equipment for living' to use Kenneth Burke's phrase. He is concerned about the future of reading in an age of speed, connection and overwhelming amounts of data, and he makes a case for the value of each genre of literature, from poetry and short stories to plays and novels. His concern is strictly with imaginative literature, and in his discussion of the value of particular works in each genre, he is chiefly interested in the different psychological stances authors take, in their characters or in their words themselves. Harold Bloom started his career by studying the anxiety writers feel about having come after other great writers, and in this book, he holds up the exemplary works that stand out among their predecessors, works that made their impact felt in later works.

Tone

Bloom's language is elevated to the most intellectual heights, and his vocabulary is sophisticated and erudite. His discussion is permeated with language from Wen philosophy and religion, from Judaism and Kabbala to Gnosticism and Messianic Christianity. Bloom also reverts to his own vocabulary about belatedness, or the fear that a writer has arrived on the scene too late to have anything to say. More than anything, Bloom uses the language of appreciation and celebration, as his descriptions of each work seek out the remarkable thing that sets the work apart and makes it beautiful and valuable. His language is not often personal, though: he typically locates a work's value in its ability to conjure a certain feeling in the reader, or in its ability to introduce the reader to parts of him or herself that might not be familiar or accessible. In this sense, the writing is prophetic, since Bloom is trying to predict the selves a reader has yet to meet, or discover in him or herself.

Structure

After the preface and prologue, the book is broken up into five sections, starting with a section on short stories, then poetry, then novels, plays and then a last section on modern novels. Within each section, Bloom devotes two to four pages to each work or author or poem, and he concludes each section with summary observations.

Quotes

"Let me fuse Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson into a formula for reading: find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time's tyranny." (p. 22).

"The people, not the college, is the writer's home." (p. 24).

"It sounds naïve, and yet Cookie's greatest power is to give us the impression, as we read, that here at last is the truth about human existence's constant blend of banal misery and tragic joy." (p. 41).

"Flannery O'Connor had the penetrating insight that religion for her countrymen and women was not the opiate, but rather the poetry of the people." (p. 54).

"Something very different [than the literature of perception and sensation] came into modern storytelling with the phantasmagoria of Franz Kafka, a prime precursor of Jorge Luis Borges, who can be said to have replaced Chekhov as the major influence upon the short stories of the second half of our century. Stories now tend to be either Chekhovian or Borgesian; only rarely are they both." (p. 56).

"We read Chekhov and Borges for different needs: if the first gratifies our hunger for reality, the second teaches us how ravenous we still are for what is beyond supposed reality." (p. 67).

"Poetry is the crown of imaginative literature, in my judgment, because it is a prophetic mode." (p. 69).

Poetry, so frequently visionary, tries to domesticate the reader in a world where what she gazes upon has a transcendent aura." (p. 72).

"The American soul does not feel free unless it is alone." (p. 91).

"A world that becomes more American also needs to read Walt Whitman, not only to understand America, but to apprehend better exactly what it is in the process of becoming." (p. 94).

"The poet Shelley...once described the poetic Sublime as an experience that persuaded readers to give up easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures." (p. 122).

"We should read "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" for its marvelous expression of the universal longing for romance, and its deep awareness that all romance, literary and human, depends upon incomplete and uncertain knowledge." (p. 137)

"You cannot evade bringing yourself to the act of reading." (p. 143).

"My idea is to become a lunatic for no reason at all." (p. 147).

"There are parts of yourself you will not know fully until you know, as well as you can, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza." (p. 150).

"To understand Pip in all his shadings is to have read "Great Expectations" well, and is a good start on how to read a novel." (p. 163).

"Reading old books is the highest form of literary pleasure, and instructs you in what is deepest in your own yearnings." (p. 162).

"Cultivation of an individual consciousness is certainly a prime purpose, and a major benefit, of deep reading." (p. 173).

"If you are an intense enough reader when you are still very young, your first love is likelier to be fictive than actual." (p. 175).

"I sometimes feel that the best literary training my students can obtain is only an enhancement of their pragmatic training by sexual jealousy, the most aesthetic of psychic maladies, as Iago knew." (p. 184).

Topics for Discussion

Are there places where Bloom seems to be inconsistent with his own philosophy. If so, how does he account for or justify the inconsistency? If not, what are the limitations of Bloom's consistency? What does he give up in order to remain self-consistent?

What does Bloom mean when he says that poetry can be a move of transcendence (p. 138)? What experiences does poetry transcend? Where does a person 'go' when they have made a poetic transcendence? Give examples from the text.

In his introduction to the chapter on novels, Bloom asks "how do you read a novel differently if you suspect you are one of a dwindling elite rather than the representative of a great multitude?" How does this book answer this question, or suggest possible answers to this question?

Do you think that the novel will survive in future ages. Using Bloom's arguments and evidence, assess the proposition that it will endure forever—that it will have to changing entirely if it is going to survive—or that it will die out.

Who is Bloom's ideal reader? What qualities would that person have? What uses would they put literature to? Using examples from the text, describe the ideal reader, in Bloom's opinion.

In what way is this book specifically American? How does Bloom lay out the terms to define America, and where does How to Read and Why fit in his definition of what it means to be American? Define terms and use examples from the text.

What is the role of women in Bloom's "How to Read and Why"? What differences are there between men and women as readers? As authors? How does Bloom characterize the difference? Use examples from the text.

Which works are you most curious to read, after having read Bloom's account of Western literature? What was it about Bloom's description that made you want to read each of these works? What do you find personally intriguing or promising about these works in particular, and why are certain other works less appealing?

Where is the moment where Bloom is most himself in "How to Read and Why"? What makes him more himself in that moment than elsewhere? What are the other moments where he might be most himself, and why is the moment you chose the best?

What is missing from "How to Read and Why"? What books or poems or plays would you add to Bloom's account? What do you think Bloom would say about the books you propose to include? Why do you think that the work you propose was excluded?