Intoxicated by My Illness and Other Writings on Life and Death Study Guide

Intoxicated by My Illness and Other Writings on Life and Death by Anatole Broyard

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Broyard, Anatole. Intoxicated By My Illness and Other Writings ON Life and Death. Ballantine Books, 1992. Kindle.

Intoxicated by My Illness is a collection of writings by American literary critic and former editor of The New York Times Book Review, Anatole Broyard.

In 1989, Broyard was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer, passing away in 1990. Before his death he wrote multiple essays on illness and dying, three of which make up Parts One through Three of Intoxicated by My Illness. The rest of the works included break from this format, and are comprised of journal entries in Part Four, a literary review of death written in the early 1980s, and finally, a short story published in 1954.

“Part One: Intoxicated by My Illness” is a brief essay chronicling the early days of Broyard’s illness. Here, the author explains how illness, for a writer, is an intoxicating experience because it is truly tragic. Writers, like himself, seek out tragedy for inspiration and therefore relish complex, negative experiences. Broyard also details how illness alienates one from friends and family.

In “Part Two: Towards a Literature of Illness,” Broyard assumes his role as a literary critic, creating a veritable bibliography of illness literature. He opens the section referencing Shirley Hazzard's novel The Transit of Venus and how it allowed him to transcend his circumstances while he was in the hospital. Hazzard's work made Broyard realize that literature could truly help terminal patients and call for the creation of a genre of illness literature. He states that he has not come across a single nonfiction book that does serious illness justice. He praises fiction novels like Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain and Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano for fearlessly tackling the topic and avoiding the comfort of clichés. Broyard takes issue with most nonfiction books about illness because in their attempt to inspire, they become disingenuous. However, in the nonfiction category, Oliver Sacks is Broyard’s favorite author though Susan Sontag, Norman Cousins, and and Bernie Siegel also receive honorable mentions.

“Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor” is Broyard’s indictment of modern doctor-patient relations. In this essay, the author argues that doctors should reveal more of themselves to their patients, creating a more personable and healing relationship. To argue this point, Broyard details his own experiences with his various doctors. These men were all described as interacting with patients with the same detachment of a mechanic fixing a car. Ideally, Broyard’s doctor would enter into a complex relationship with his patients, treating them as human beings rather than broken machine parts. The most striking of these descriptions is of his first urologist, who was a nondescript looking man who hardly spoke to Broyard. To compensate for the disappointment he felt towards these doctors, the author recounts spending time dreaming up his ideal physician. Broyard believes that, though it would make the doctor more vulnerable, his vision of a more personable doctor-patient relationship would be mutually beneficial.

“Part Four: JOURNAL NOTES May-September, 1990” breaks from the formula of the first three parts in that it is a compilation of random journal notes. Here, the reader is offered insight into Broyard’s creative process and private fears. Within these fragments are the beginnings of Broyad’s main thesis points including the necessity of developing one’s own style for illness and the necessity of a personal relationship with one’s doctor. The journal notes also reveal a more vulnerable side of the author, detailing his personal fears and regrets.

“Part Five: The Literature of Death 1981-1982” was written before Anatole Broyard fell sick with cancer. Broken up into five small parts, it explores an emerging pattern of death literature that Broyard saw coming out of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These books, unlike the self-help movements of the 1960s, essentially taught one how to face death and how to die. Broyard believes that people have forgotten how to deal with death and dying because the once communal process became a solitary in the eighteenth century. He suggests that the rash of literature that had emerged as he wrote could lead to a true understanding and acceptance of death in the twentieth century. To illustrate this point, Broyard names several books that he finds particularly significant, namely, Lisl Goodman’s Death and the Creative Life and Ernest Becker’s The Denial of Death. Finally, Broyard recounts the story of his writer friend Paul Breslow who died of cancer. Breslow spent his final days writing a novel that was never completed. His unflinching desire to finish his final work even in the face of immense pain, proves to Broyard that having one’s own style of illness, be it through the creation of art or other means, is an essential aspect of the dying process.

“Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said” is a short story written by Broyard in 1954. It is an only slightly fictionalized account of his father’s death by cancer and his subsequent entry into manhood. The story chronicles Broyard’s father’s degeneration from a strong man to an infantile shell of his former self at the hands of cancer. Broyard recounts that as his father deteriorated, he rapidly took on the role of the patriarch. The story is filled with symbolism and references to this process which can be compared to a benevolent vampirism as the strength of the father is passed on to the son. In the hospital Broyard struggled with the inhuman way in which the dying were treated and found it all to be overwhelmingly grotesque. His father, and indeed all of the terminally ill patients, were placed in a large room and treated as nuisances rather than suffering human beings. His father’s attending nurse, Miss Shannon, became emblematic of this and Broyard decided that he had to possess her sexually in order to avenge all of the dying men that she treated. Just after his tryst with the nurse, Broyard’s father died, expelling his last breath into his son’s mouth and therefore finally passing on the role of the patriarch.

Part One: Intoxicated By My Illness

Summary

In the opening lines of “Part One: Intoxicated By My Illness,” Anatole Broyard reminisces on the moment his doctor told him that he had prostate cancer. As a writer he felt relief in the sense of crisis, real crisis, that this announcement brought on as so much of his profession involves assumed suffering. He realized in this moment that his life, like the book he was in the process of writing, had a deadline, a finite and definite ending. Time became a precious resource, and he felt a sudden sense of shame at the prospect of leaving the book he had promised the world unfinished.

Broyard's friends find him surprisingly cheerful for a man with cancer, but, he explains, he is not cheerful but rather, full of a desire to live and create. He remembers a time in the 1950s when he tried to convince his friend, Jules, not to commit suicide. Essentially, Broyard remembers attempting to sell Jules on life: the streets full of people, the women, vacations, books, art, and music. He thinks that perhaps what he said to Jules must have been a lie because just a few weeks later, the young man stuck his head into an oven.

Broyard is touched by how his friends have rallied around him and is reminded of “a flock of birds rising from a body of water into the sunset” (5). It amuses him that this group of witty, intellectual men are suddenly spouting inspiration phrases. Unlike him, they are not intoxicated by his illness, and have taken the responsibility of seriousness as he himself refuses to. Though he is touched by his friends' attention and care, Broyard still feels a sense of alienation because he now knows the truth of existence and they do not. He, unlike the healthy people around him, understands the “conditional nature of the human condition” (5).

In the first stage of his illness, Broyard could not sleep, urinate, or defecate. When he changed doctors however, all of these functions came back and he felt an overwhelming sense of pleasure at their return. He realized why the Romantics liked illness so much - it made life poetically meaningful.

Analysis

Part One of Intoxicated By My Illness sets the tone for Anatole Broyard’s humorous and inquisitive exploration of death and dying. Throughout this part, Broyard establishes himself as, above all else, a writer whose analytical eye relishes in the profundity of grave illness. Indeed, his illness acts as a lens through which he may better see the world and the reality of existence. As he explains:

“A dangerous illness fills you with adrenaline and makes you feel very smart. I can afford now, I said to myself, to draw conclusions. All those grand generalizations toward which I have been building for all those years are finally taking shape” (5).

Broyard's new perspective is a divisive force between him and his friends. He feels as though his illness has cured him of the uncertainties and falsities that still plague his colleagues. In his words, he remains "outside of their solicitude, their love and best wishes. I'm isolated by the grandiose conviction that I am the healthy person and they are the sick ones. Like an existential hero, I have been cured by the truth while they still suffer the nausea of the uninitiated" (5). Here, Broyard highlights the essential difference between writers and non-writers, a theme that continues throughout the work. Rather than sinking into despair, he likens the enlightenment he suddenly feels to the inspiring forces behind works of tragic poetry stating "I see now why the Romantics were so fond of illness - the sick man sees everything as a metaphor" (6). Indeed, it seems that Broyard believes that illness and proximity to death heals the writer of the practical day-to-day perspective. The world becomes, as in childhood, frightening, enchanting, and full of inspiration.

Though he is, in his words, "intoxicated" by his illness, Broyard does not exhibit a longing for death. On the contrary, his increased proximity to death has heightened his lust for life. In a moving passage, the author depicts himself as a defendant in a court case in which cancer is his conviction. He explains that "the eloquence of being alive, the fervor of the survivor, is my best defense" (4).

In essence, Part One acts as a sort of disclaimer for the reader. It is very brief, and seems to establish the foreign perspective of both the writer and the invalid for those who are unfamiliar. It also describes the unique feelings associated with the very early stages of illness that Broyard accepts will fade as his condition worsens. He describes being filled with a "desire" that overcomes his fear of death and inspires his creative drive. This brevity of this "hot flash of ontological alertness" (8) is mirrored in the length of Intoxicated By My Illnesses's first part: beautiful and short-lived.

Discussion Question 1

How does Anatole Broyard establish the unique perspective of a gravely ill person throughout Part One? How does his being a writer change this perspective?

Discussion Question 2

Throughout Part One, how does Broyard liken his illness to artistic inspiration and creation?

Discussion Question 3

What reasons does Broyard give for the feeling of excitement that came with his diagnosis?

Vocabulary

innocuous, tacit, trite, sheepish, eloquence, homelier, pious, elation, infatuation

Part Two: Toward a Literature of Illness

Summary

In Brigham Hospital in Brookline, Massachusetts, Anatole Broyard was reading The Transit of Venus by Shirley Hazzard. His roommate, a thug-type with a broken jaw and a drug habit had the television set and radio on at the same time and kept spraying sickening deodorizer. Broyard's diagnosis was ambiguous with his oncologist guessing that he had a few years left to live. At this news the author burrowed deeper into Hazzards's novel, relishing it's beauty: to him, The Transit of Venus provided a cure that his doctors could not.

When he got out of the hospital his first instinct was to write a book about critical illness because he could find no nonfiction book that depicted it accurately. Indeed, he explains, very few works of great fiction do it justice naming The Death of Ivan Ilyich by Tolstoy, The Magic Mountain by Thomas Mann, most of Kafka, and Under the Volcano by Malcolm Lowry. He compares these magistral works' approach to illness and decay concluding that Mann and Lowry's depictions were his favorites.

Turning to nonfiction, Broyard points out the shortcomings of the few passable works on illness and dying. His criticisms range from too detached and analytical as in Hanging in There by Natalie Spingarm to overly-motivational exemplified by Norman Cousins' Head First: The Biology of Hope. Broyard explains that the problem with inspirational books is that they're "more 'inspiring' than believable" (17). Broyard is also critical of Susan Sontag's indictment of metaphoric thinking when approaching illness however, stating that "only metaphor can express the bafflement, the panic combined with beatitude, of the threatened person" (18). In Broyard's opinion perhaps the best works of nonfiction on illness are those of neurologist Oliver Sacks which, in the author's words, "find[] more means of healing than are dreamed of in our philosophies" (18).

Broyard explains that the news of his illness came in a series of "disconnected shocks" that he tried to make sense of by narrativizing them (19). He found this to be the case with his friends and family as well, who upon learning of his cancer inundated him with stories of their own illnesses. "Storytelling" he elaborates "seems to be a natural reaction to illness. People bleed stories, and I've become a blood bank of them" (19). In Boyard's view illness should not be treated as a disaster, but rather, as a story in order to humanize the situation. Like anyone who has lived through a unique experience, he wanted to describe it, to share his new perspective with the world.

Years earlier Boyard had tried to write a book about the death of his father but found his tone was too polite, too pious. He feels that now people are treating him in much the same way he had treated his dying father: with wariness and deference. Broyard wants his writing on illness to be impudent and witty because he views wit as a healing force. He stresses that illness writing, ought to have a literary critic, like himself, to tell the world the importance of developing a "style" for one's illness in much the same way a

writer develops a style because “only by insisting on your style can you keep from falling out of love with yourself as the illness attempts to diminish or disfigure you” (24). Indeed, attempts had already been made to disfigure Boyard with his urologist suggesting that they remove his testicles to stop the cancer. The author rejected this solution opting instead for hormonal manipulation treatment, which would stop the growth of the cancer in his prostate but also kill his libido. However, Boyard asserts that his libido is not located solely in his prostate but also in his memory and imagination. He wonders if when his body inevitably begins to fail him he might develop a new form of purely mental sexuality questioning if “the imagination can have an orgasm” (26).

Broyard states that there is too much talk of anger in illness writing: after all, he is 69 years old and it is the first time he has ever been seriously ill in his whole life, he has nothing to complain about. It is not so much anger that a clinically ill person feels but, rather, a mixture of frustration and confusion, therefore, Broyard commits to keeping his final wishes simple: he prays only to be alive when he dies.

Analysis

“Part Two: Toward Literature of Illness” is essentially a bibliography of books that focus on serious illness, death, and dying. Here, Anatole Boyard assumes his role as one of the greatest literary critics of the twentieth century, offering pointed and poetic analyses of the works within the illness canon.

Broyard opens the chapter with a book that, though not explicitly about illness, he used as an artistic refuge during the early stages of his treatment. The Transit of Venus by Shirley Hazzard is used in these opening paragraphs to demonstrate the necessity of art and storytelling in the healing process.Essentially, this novel offers Broyard insight into the sublime or the height of human existence. Broyard believes that the transcendent beauty present in Hazzard’s work is markedly absent from literature about illness. Moving forward, Part Two aims to establish what Literature of Illness should be and how Broyard’s writings on his own illness will differ from the works that came before it. He explains:, “When I got out of the hospital my first impulse was to write about my illness. While sick people need books like The Transit of Venus to remind them of life beyond their illness they also need a literature of their own” (12).

After briefly speaking about beautiful works of nonfiction dealing with illness (he names works by Kafka, Malcolm Lowry, and Thomas Mann), Broyard turns to his preferred style: nonfiction. He wishes to place his illness literature somewhere in between overly intellectual and analytically detached memoirs such as Max Lerner’s Wrestling with an Angel: A Memoir of Triumph over Illness, and the self-help inspirational style of Norman Cousins’ Head First: The Biology of Hope. Both of these approaches seem somehow unnatural to Broyard because they do not fully confront grave illness: the former detaches itself from it by assuming the unbiased eye of the reporter while the latter glazes over it with inspiration. In the author’s view, literature, storytelling, and illness fit together naturally. He details:

“The patient has to start by treating his illness not as a disaster, an occasion for depression or panic, but as a narrative, a story. Stories are antibodies against illness and pain. When various doctors shoved scopes up my urethral canal, I found that it helped a lot when they gave me a narrative of what they were doing. Their talking translated or humanized the procedure. It prepared, strengthened, and somehow consoled me. Anything is better than an awful silent suffering” (18-19).

To avoid the destructive force of silence, Boyard encourages the sufferer to write their own story, thus becoming an active agent in the face of the illness that seeks to dehumanize them. In Broyard’s words “[t]o die is to no longer be human, to be dehumanized-and I think that language, speech, stories, or narratives are the most effective ways to keep our humanity alive” (20). Broyard's chosen tool for combatting silence, literature, is intriguing in that it is an essentially silent art form: the words he writes are read silently in the mind's of the audience.

Indeed, Broyard takes control of his illness and its treatment through his art form, often describing the more grotesque and humiliating medical procedures in poetic terms. He describes having a fluid sample taken from his intestines as “a needle that seems to be writing on your entrails, scratching some message you can’t make out” (21). Here, we see a vision of two warring forces: his illness attempts to write him as he attempts to write his illness. Ultimately, his cancer will win. Descriptions such as these are reminiscent of Kaka's treatment of illness in stories like The Metamorphosis and A Hunger Artist.

Boyard allots the outbursts of poetry born of his diagnosis to the fact that the “space between life and death is the parade ground of Romanticism” (22). That is to say that illness gives one permission to set free one’s hysteric romanticism and live out the rest of their shortened days in “garish colors” (23). While the well person must maintain a level head to manage the demands of daily life, the sick person is free to pursue passionate endeavors with intensity. Essentially, proximity to death forces one to fully assume their “style” (25). Broyard explains that: “Sometimes your vanity is the only thing that’s keeping you alive, and your style is the instrument of your vanity. It may not be dying we fear so much, but the diminished self” (25).

Central to the final passages of Part Two, is Broyard’s struggle with the prospect of impotence. Prostate cancer affects the genitals and thus one’s sexuality: it threatens literally to diminish his person with his urologist urging him to have his testicles removed. However, Broyard uses his talent as a writer to redefine and adjust his sexuality in relation to his illness. He asserts that should his sexual organs fail him, he will relocate his erogenous zone to his imagination stating that “after a brush with death, I feel that just to be alive is a permanent orgasm” (27). The power of the imagination and therefore, literature is fully demonstrated here. Broyard gives primacy of the mind over the body throughout this chapter, insinuating that thought the body decays and is disfigured through illness the mind remains a brilliant gateway to the sublime. This view echoes Cartesian Dualism and the Enlightenment primacy of the mind over the body.

Discussion Question 1

How do the books that Anatole Broyard names throughout Part Two compare to his own approach to illness and dying?

Discussion Question 2

Why is storytelling so important to enduring and surviving illness in Broyard's view? How does Part Two enact Broyard's claims on storytelling as a healing force?

Discussion Question 3

How does Broyard say that he is going to reconfigure his sexuality should his body fail him? How does his primacy of the imagination over the body fit into his argument for the importance of writing and illness?

Vocabulary

quiddity, agape, caveats, inundated, circumspection, cloying

Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor

Summary

At the beginning of “Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor” Anatole Broyard admits that he is not an expert on illness because he has only been sick once in his life. He warns the reader that he knows very little about doctor-patient relationships and therefore risks romanticizing or idealizing his experience.

In the summer of 1989, after a move from Connecticut to Cambridge, Massachusetts, Broyard found that he could not urinate. Worried, he asked his friends, an academic couple whose scrutiny he trusted, for a doctor recommendation. They referred him to a doctor, who, in turn, referred him to a urologist. Waiting in the doctor’s office, Broyard took in the decor admiring the well-made shelves full of books, the tasteful oriental rug, and the panoramic view of Boston. Pictures of children hung on the wall signaling to Broyard that this man was capable of looking after the lives of others. Soon, the doctor came in and told him to come with him to his office: Broyard had been examining another doctor’s office the whole time and now felt tricked. The urologist's office was, in fact, modern and innocuous. The doctor himself was equally non-descript and Broyard immediately had a negative feeling about him. Broyard knew that he was being unfair but explains that being ill makes you a little crazy and he simply could not warm up to him. In the examining room the urologist awkwardly felt his prostate, stating that there were hard lumps in it suggesting tumors. The realization that he was ill, truly ill, hit Broyard like an electric shock and he felt like a new person.

A few days later, the doctor performed a cystoscopy on Broyard. Broyard turned further against his urologist when he noticed how awkward the urologist looked in his surgical cap: his round face under the tight hat made him look confused and uncertain. Broyard specifies that he by no means means to question the doctor’s medical capabilities, but for him the man lacked the style and magic needed to conquer illness.

Now that he knows that he has cancer in his prostate, lymph nodes, and part of his skeleton, Broyard has decided that he wants a doctor who is a metaphysical man to keep him company. In short, he wants a man who is both a writer and a doctor, capable of organizing the diagnoses given to him by technicians into a healing poem or narrative. He would like his doctor to understand the artistic dread he feels in the face of death and that beneath his facade of courage lies a nuanced fear.

Furthermore, Broyard wants a doctor who can understand that though his illness may seem routine to the seasoned medical professional, it is the crisis of his life. He does not want love from his doctor but profound empathy. Broyard also wants a doctor who enjoys him and hopes that the two can share each other’s art forms: Broyard his writing and the doctor his medicine. Finally, Broyard would prefer a witty doctor who

understands the irony and dark humor of his situation. Since Broyard believes that technology has robbed him of any intimacy with his illness, he hopes he can find a doctor that can re-personalize it for him. Broyard muses on the different ways that doctors avoid personal connection noting that most of the doctors he encounters use various methods of avoiding eye contact with their patients.

Broyard asserts that hospitals are full of wonderful and terrible stories and that if he were a doctor he would read them like one reads good fiction. He recalls when his friend, another writer, was in the hospital dying of lung cancer. His friend asked Broyard to call a rabbi to the hospital to perform a marriage between he and his long-time roommate so that he might leave her his rent-controlled apartment. Soon after the rabbi began chanting a young doctor burst into the room, leaned over Broyard's friend, and asked him whether he loved the woman he was about to marry: had the doctor known his patient better this intrusion would not have taken place. Broyard concludes that perhaps there is a dearth of illness literature because "doctors discourage our stories" (51).

Broyard started seeing one of the best urologists in the country, the premiere specialist on the prostate in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Broyard's response to him was so positive that his cancer went almost immediately into remission. In spite of this, Broyard regrets the fact that the urologist is not very talkative and they two cannot have a conversation. After all, doctors, whether they know it or not, are storytellers and therefore must learn the eloquence and subtleties of a writer. Broyard decides that all doctors should be accompanied "a combination, soothsayer, clown, and poet - to help answer the patient's questions" (54).

Broyard found that the emergency room was the only place in the hospital where the traditional distance between the doctor and patient did not exist. Here, the nurses and doctors talked to him, sympathized with him, and related to him. He believes that this exception is due to the fact that they would only meet each other once.

At the close of Part Three, Broyard implores doctors to learn how to talk with their patients. He argues that silence and neutrality are unnatural and that the doctor has "everything to gain by letting the sick man into his heart" (56). He concludes by claiming that in "learning to talk to his patients, the doctor may talk himself back into loving his work" (57).

Analysis

Part Three of "Intoxicated by my Illness" is primarily a dissection of the doctor-patient relationship and an indictment of the impersonal treatment that the ill receive. The doctors that Anatole Broyard describes throughout this part, though they are efficient and highly skilled, are (save for the emergency room doctor) distant and cold. Referencing the healing power of literature and the magic of storytelling, the author makes the case for a multi-disciplinary approach to medicine.

The analyses Broyard gives of his various doctors are those of a keen-eyed literary critic: he focuses on details, rather than pure information like degrees, prestige etc… As he sat in the first doctor's office, he paid little attention to the myriad of diplomas that hung on the wall focusing instead on: "The fact that the room was furnished with taste. There were well-made, well-filled bookcases, an antique desk and chairs, a reasonable Oriental rug on the floor. A window opened one entire wall of the office to the panorama of Boston, and this suggested status, an earned respect" (35).

With these furnishings and the photos that hang on the walls, Broyard constructs a vision of a heroic, artistic, and caring man. This doctor, allows the patient to see into his life and personality, a trait that is markedly absent in all of Broyard's subsequent interactions with doctors. Within this office, the author constructs the ghostly figure of his ideal caretaker and the subsequent doctors he meets cannot compete with this initial dream. Indeed, the central problem that he identifies with his two urologists is that they do not share enough of themselves. The first doctor's office is as impersonal and nondescript as the man himself: modern, well lit, with no art or literature, it seems to hide nothing and everything. In order to understand the urologist's enigmatic blandness, Broyard the wordsmith turns to his manner of speech. He recounts:

"He proposed to do a cystoscopy on me. He said he wanted to examine the architecture of my bladder. I pondered the word 'architecture.' Was it justified, or was he being pretentious? Was he trying to accommodate himself to my vocabulary by talking about the architecture of the bladder as though it had a vault like a cathedral, a timbered vault, a fan vault? I thought, I can't die with this man. He wouldn't understand what I was saying. I'm going to say something brilliant when I die" (38).

Broyard has similar complaints about the second urologist he sees. Though this man, a "brilliant, famous, [...] star", almost immediately sends his cancer into remission, Broyard is dismayed at the fact that he "doesn't talk very much" and that "[h]is brilliance has no voice" (51-52). Here, the author offers his services to doctors explaining:

"Whether he wants to be or not, the doctor is a storyteller, and he can turn our lives into good or bad stories, regardless of the diagnosis. If my doctor would allow me, I would be glad to help him here, to take him on as my patient" (52).

Medicine, to the layman is an enigmatic force, a dizzyingly intricate network of knowledge that the doctor simplifies with a facade of neutrality. Broyard is vocally against this tactic, calling for a return to metaphor, storytelling, and, centrally, magic. He asserts that "[t]he doctor can use his science as a kind of vocabulary instead of using it as a piece of machinery, so that his jargon can become the jargon of a kind of poetry" (44). As an artist and writer Broyard prefers to see his doctor as a figure of romantic heroism rather than an efficient part of a healing machine. The problem with doctors behaving merely as medical instruments for Broyard is the fact that this approach is deeply impersonal. Both parties are dehumanized in this system, the patient becomes like a broken machine part and the doctor a mere mechanical tool. He elaborates:

“I see no reason or need for my doctor to love me—nor would I expect him to suffer with me. I wouldn’t demand a lot of my doctor’s time: I just wish he would brood on my situation for perhaps five minutes, that he would give me his whole mind just once, be bonded with me for a brief space, survey my soul as well as my flesh, to get at my illness, for each man is ill in his own way” (43).

This is the critical distinction between the oncologist or the urologist and the emergency room doctor. When Broyard had to go to the emergency room to get his catheter cleaned and replaced, the nurses listened compassionately to his problems and the supervising physician, recognizing the author’s name from the paper, came in to tell him how happy he was to meet him. Broyard realized that this discrepancy was due to the fact that these “doctors and nurses still saw illness as an emergency, an emotional crisis” (56). The difference Broyard sees between his habitual doctors and the emergency room attendants is another manifestation of his interest in the mind/body dialectic. Broyard, it is important to remember, sees himself primarily as a brain while his doctors view him merely as a decaying body.

Though Broyard understands that the distance doctors establish between their patients is done so with the patient’s best interest at heart, he argues that neutrality ends up hurting the critically ill more than it helps. In the final lines of Part Three Broyard pleas with the medical community to change their approach to doctor-patient relations expounding that:

“Not every patient can be saved, but his illness may be eased by the way the doctor responds to him—and in responding to him the doctor may save himself. But first he must become a student again; he has to dissect the cadaver of his professional persona; he must see that his silence and neutrality are unnatural It may be necessary to give up some of his authority in exchange for his humanity, but as the old family doctors knew, this is not a bad bargain” (56-57).

Part Three thus moves from Broyard’s enigmatic ghostly vision of an ideal to doctor to a concrete thesis on patient care. This movement also exhibits the power of the mind, with Broyard manifesting as if through magic his ideal doctor. He believes that the doctor and patient, rather than interacting merely as embodied beings, could potentially meet in the space that makes them essentially human: the mind.

Discussion Question 1

What is Broyard's central complaint about doctor-patient relations? What solutions does he give to these perceived problems?

Discussion Question 2

Throughout Part Three, Broyard mentions magic multiple times. What is the significance of these references and how do they factor into his thesis?

Discussion Question 3

How does Broyard's desire to talk with his urologist factor into his ideas on illness and storytelling?

Vocabulary

internist, austerity, semiotic, scrutiny, mandated, metaphysical, rumination, fibrillating, dithyrambic

Part Four: JOURNAL NOTES May-September, 1990

Summary

Part Four, a collection of Anatole Broyard's journal notes, opens with the assertion that being ill and dying is "largely, to a degree, a matter of style" (60). Broyard wants to show people that one does not merely have to be brave or stoical in the face of death but can turn their situation into an art, even a career. He asserts that the ill can decide whether their experience will be positive or negative and encourages them, above all, to find their own voice.

Broyard believes that one of the most damaging things a patient can do is present a false self to their doctor; though it may be tempting to assume a nice and accommodating persona, it will ultimately be damaging to the relationship. The main thing that the ill fear is not dying but the diminishment of the self; becoming a monster of sorts. Broyard states that developing a style is central to staying in love with yourself, joking that it would be a good idea for every cancer patient to buy a new elegant wardrobe. The author is in the process of finishing his life, and it is his right, and the right of all the dying, to do so in his own style. Broyard personally would like to die at a party like Socrates.

There comes a point where it is obvious that the critically ill person is going to die, and Broyard believes that it is obscene to keep said person alive using machinery. He affirms that it is the right of every chronically ill person to decide when and how they die. Broyard himself, would like to die "an untamed, beautiful death" (64).

Broyard describes his insomnia and the fact that late at night, between midnight and dawn, he despairs thinking of all the things he would like to do. His friends, a group of witty men, no longer come and make jokes but look at him "with a kind of lovingness in their faces" (67). What the dying person needs above all, Broyard asserts, is to be understood, and the overly-gentle, timid way that his friends and family now approach him is not understanding. His friends now find him more interesting than before; he has "become a ghost who is at the same time more real than they are" (67).

"Why did all this wisdom and beauty have to come so late?" Broyard wonders (67).

Finally, the author concludes that it is the patient, not the treatment that matters in the dying process.

Analysis

As a collection of disjointed entries from Anatole Broyard's personal journal, Part Four acts as a window into the author's creative process and his true feelings about illness

and dying. Here, a different narrative voice, that is less self-assured, eloquent, and pointed than the one the reader has become accustomed to, manifests itself.

In the first three Parts of Intoxicated by my Illness, Broyard presents an idealized self, one that is calm and witty in the face of death. This is not an exercise in vanity, but rather, as he repeatedly states throughout Part Four, an effort to create his own “style” in illness (60). Much of the ideas in these journal notes are seen in the first three treatises. For example, he stresses that it is important not to fall “out of love with yourself” as your body deteriorates (61), a point that is reiterated almost verbatim in Part Two. He also writes about the transformation of his friends from wits to stoic caregivers stating:

“All my friends are wits, but now that I’m sick I’m treated to the spectacle of watching them wear different faces. They come to see me and instead of being ironical and making jokes, they’re terribly serious. They look at me with a kind of grotesque lovingness in their faces. They touch me. They feel my pulse almost. They’re trying to give me their strength, and I’m trying to shove it off” (67).

This idea is reproduced almost exactly in Part One when he says: “I can’t help thinking there’s something comical about my friends’ behavior - all these witty men suddenly saying pious, inspirational things” (4-5).

Fragments such as these are included in Part Four to illustrate the author’s creative process, and to demonstrate the sincerity of his claims. Though Broyard is a master of the English language, his words are not mere turns of phrase and come from a place of profound candor. However, as is the case with his feelings towards his friends, they often show the author’s anger at his situation. Broyard wishes his style of illness to be witty, ironic, and irreverent however, within the journal fragments that make up Part Four are moments of fear and desperation. This anger is markedly absent from the previous three parts, perhaps because it demonstrates a kind of weakness. Broyard's thesis about illness literature and doctor-patient care is based largely on the strength and agency of the chronically ill person. These moments burst through the cracks in his illness persona and in their brevity stand as some of the most powerful phrases in the novel. Various excerpts exhibit a deep-seeded regret. For example:

“There has been insomnia: as if I couldn’t turn off my sense of time, couldn’t stop thinking of all that I wanted to do. Perhaps, like the child’s prayer, I thought that I would die before I woke. My life has become a vigil” (65).

And

“Why did all this beauty and wisdom have to come so late?” (68).

Part Four, though it is very short, is important moving into the next two parts of Intoxicated by my Illness which were both written before Broyard was diagnosed with cancer. In the following sections, death is a foreign yet fascinating concept to the younger and stronger Broyard. Part Four, represents Broyard's final confrontation with the void and offers the reader insight into the difficult reality of the dying process.

Furthermore, these fragments help to better define his illness style because they are not written exclusively in it.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative voice in the journal notes that make up Part Four differ from the rest of the Parts? Why is this significant?

Discussion Question 2

What is it important, in Broyard's opinion, for the patient to remain true to themselves during treatment?

Discussion Question 3

What does Anatole Broyard mean when he says that the chronically ill should develop their own style of illness?

Vocabulary

stoical, palatable, legacy, eke, grotesque

Part Five: The Literature of Death 1981-1982

Summary

Part Five of the novel is divided up into four small sections.

THE LITERATURE OF DEATH -

Broyard writes that whereas in the 1960s books told people how to rescue oneself from an identity crisis, in the seventies and eighties there has been a wave of books telling you how to die. Death has been so suppressed throughout the twentieth century that in these late decades it has become fetishsized or in Geoffrey Gorer's words, "Pornography" (70). Up until the seventeenth century, dying was part of "the flow of life," but after that people began protesting it as though it were unnatural (71). Phillippe Ariés argues in The Hour of Death that when people started turning away from communal dying, the drama of dying in isolation led to its romanticization in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, according to Ariés, death became invisible, dirty, and obscene. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, on the opposite end of the spectrum, campaigned for death positivity and acceptance in her Living with Death and Dying, claiming that people should be more involved with the dying process of loved ones. Similarly, David Hendin maintains in Death as a Face of Life that "a good death is an indispensable end to a good life" (73).

Indeed, while books have always tried to show us ways to live they now teach us how to die. In an increasingly atheistic world, it seems that we try now to soften the blow of the nothingness beyond death by developing a literature around it. In Between Life and Death, author Robert Kastenbaum claimed that people who had been through near death experiences either saw heaven, a religious figure of relative, demonic visions, or a void. Broyard concludes that all of these experiences confirm one thing: we die in clichés. In The Human Encounter with Death, Brof and Joan Halifax detailed their experiences using LSD as a therapeutic tool for terminal patients. Though some patients had bad trips, most felt an emotional unblocking in which they spoke freely and joyously with friends and relatives. While some might see this as an ideal way to die, others might view it as tampering with the solemnity of the moment. As Tolstoy lay dying he said "I don't know what I'm supposed to do" (75). This literature tries to answer that question.

DOMESTICATING DEATH

Understanding and coming to terms with death may be the crowning achievement of the twentieth century. There has been a rash of literature on death in the 70s, and Lisl Goodman's Death and Creative Life is like the concluding chapter of the movement. This work offers a method of living comfortably and intimately with death. Goodman

concludes after 22 interviews with artists and scientists that it is not death that people are afraid of but the incompleteness of their life. She found that subjects with a lower sense of fulfillment had a more negative relationship with death. Furthermore, as Broyard recounts, “[o]ne of her boldest suggestions is that we reckon our age by counting not from birth forward, but from death backward, based on how much life we realistically estimate we have left in us” (79). She concludes that we are never so much alive as we are in the face of death.

LIFE BEFORE DEATH

Good books should always be read more than once as the pleasure of reading a great work changes and grows richer the second time. Broyard recently reread The Denial of Death by Ernest Becker concluding that though it won the Pulitzer Prize for literature and was well-received, it never really got the attention it deserved. Here Mr. Becker rejects Freud’s claims we are driven by desires to sleep with our mother and fathers but to be our fathers and project a familial immortality into the future. Indeed, it is by becoming so insistently and inimitably ourselves, or by producing something so indelibly our own, that we may be said, as a poet put it, to have added forever to the sum of reality” (82). One of our greatest difficulties in achieving this is that we feel too small for heroism. That is to say that heroic people allow themselves to be burned alive by their passion, while the rest of us “subdue our sense of ecstasy or grandeur” living a life of timie “sanity” (83). Mr. Becker’s concluding statement calls for a modest form of heroism: “The most that any of us can seem to do is fashion something - an object, or ourselves - and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force” (83). Broyard assures the reader that this is entirely possible and advises them to go buy a paperback copy of The Denial of Death and find themselves some glory.

A STYLE FOR DEATH

Broyard states that he sometimes wonder what the act of writing means to a novelist and how it connects him to life. He recalls an author friend, Paul Breslow, who felt that unless he completed the novel he was working on before he died of cancer, his life would be a failure. Broyard saw it as a project that would keep his friend’s mind off of the pain and dread that accompanies a fatal illness and encouraged him. His friend was so determined to finish the book that, even though he was racked with excruciating pain and could not move from his hospital bed, took Ritalin tablets to stay awake and focused. Suspended above his bed, was a contraption that allowed him to type lying down. Though Broyard expected Breslow to foreshorten the novel, he expanded it “adding further dimensions to what was already an intricate structure” (86). The dying man seemed to think that only a work of fiction could tell the world who he really was. Breslow composed a style for his death and he produced only beautiful sentences until the day he died. When he told Broyard that he worried about inconveniencing him with all the hospital visits the author responded that “it was far more inconvenient for me to lose one of the rare persons I loved” (88).

Paul Breslow turned his death into a kind of literature making it easier for him to bear. He never finished the novel but, in Broyard's words, he "was anything but a failure, though, because the style is the man and literature isn't everything" (89).

Analysis

Part Five of Intoxicated by my Illness is divided up into four brief critical essays. The works form a tableau depicting the evolution of thinking towards death in the twentieth century. Broyard sees a movement away from the self-help books in the sixties towards, towards what he sees as the death-help books of the seventies and eighties. He explains:

"While books have always tried to show us how to live, they are trying now to teach us how to die. The fascination with nothingness that we find in contemporary philosophy, fiction, and painting seems to have been extended to the nothingness beyond death, and we have developed a literature that tries to soften the impact of that impending nothingness" (73).

The first essay, "The Literature of Death," commences the collection by contrasting approaches to death in literature and the public conscious throughout history. Broyard argues that death was considered an essentially natural occurrence, and not something that was fretted over up until the seventeenth century. After this point death became something unnatural, a mistake of nature that human beings must fight against. This thinking manifested itself in society through extreme suppression: talking about death became bad manners. It moved from being a communal experience, where families took care of the ill and dying, to something that was done in private. Essentially, people were expected to die alone. This led to a romanticization of what had become the tragedy of death in the nineteenth century. By the time Broyard was writing the essays, in the late twentieth century, death had been so suppressed that it became a fetish that bore a rash of literature. Broyard's citation of Gorer's relation of "[p]ornography" (70) to the twentieth century approach to death, is an instance of the author's nuanced approach to death. Throughout the work we have seen Broyard use oppositional terms like "galvanized" when speaking about illness and death (37). Here, Broyard links sex (through pornographic imagery), a life giving act, to death thus reincorporating it into the pre-modern vision as part of the "flow of life" (73).

This exercise continues into the second short essay titled "Domesticating Death." Here, Broyard affirms that: "Understanding death and coming to terms with it may turn out to be one of our major achievements in the twentieth century" (76). Though this did not turn out to be the case, Broyard himself certainly came to terms and understood death before the century's close. This essay is essentially an exegesis of Lisl Goodman's book Death and the Creative Life. Here, Goodman, through a series of interviews with scientists and artists, tackles the modern aversion towards death. Essentially Goodman found that it is not dying that people are afraid of but feeling as though they have not achieved all of their goals. This approach obviously resonated very deeply with Broyard as it is reflected throughout the book. He does not talk about regret or inadequacy but

rather, focuses on the luck he has enjoyed. Goodman's book seems truly to have changed Broyard's vision of life, evidenced in his glowing reviews of her work. For example:

"Miss Goodman, who has an adventurous mind, distinguishes between an internal and an external expectation of death. Quoting Georg Simmel, who observed that in Shakespeare, subordinate characters succumb to external forces while tragic heroes 'are allowed to die from within,' she urges us to take death in, even to learn to love it as the final reward for all our striving toward completeness" (79).

Broyard, as Goodman suggested, learned to love his death by taking it in and transforming it into a tool of creation.

The following short essay "Life Before Death," details how one might feel this sense of completion through a review of Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize winning work The Denial of Death. Here, Becker compels the reader to fearlessly follow their innate "movement toward glory" (82). He argues that people reject heroism because it requires a certain madness and willingness to let oneself be consumed by passion. As Broyard summarizes:

"Human heroics are 'a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming of glory as uncritical and reflexive as the howling of a dog.' Embarrassed by this natural exhibitionism, most of us tend to subdue our sense of ecstasy or grandeur, to inhibit our private madness and call it sanity, to live out our lives incognito, concealing our true selves even from ourselves" (83).

Broyard, having pursued the life of an artist, allowed himself to be burned up by his passion, living it to the extent that he turned his death into a work of art. This exercise is mirrored in Part Five's final essay "A Style for Death." Here, Broyard recounts his friend, author Paul Breslow's, attempt to finish a novel before dying of cancer. As the cancer ate away at his body, Breslow's creative drive consumed him, giving him a will to live. Again, here we see Broyard's primacy of the mind over the body. Breslow felt that if he did not finish the novel before his death, his entire life would be failure. Though he did not finish in time, Broyard seems to argue that by allowing his passion to burn so brightly in his final days, Breslow achieved something resembling heroism. Broyard's description of Breslow's dedication to his art demonstrates this:

"Imagine a man in a hospital bed, regularly racked by spasms, unable to sit up or move, looking death in the face at the age of forty-seven—imagine such a man trying to write a witty, metaphysical novel. Though the anesthetic he was given suppressed only a small part of the pain—just enough to keep him from screaming—it made him drowsy, and he fought the drowsiness by taking several Ritalin tablets a day. His heart had never been strong, and so much Ritalin was dangerous for him, but as he said to me, with a smile that comprehended everything, 'I don't think this is a time for caution'" (85).

This image is deeply moving for Breslow's commitment to his art and for the way it mirrors Broyard's own experience with death. He, like Breslow wrote up until his last

moments and was dedicated to leaving behind something that was essentially and indelibly his own. However, Broyard attempted not only to make something that was unique to him but that would essentially help usher in a new paradigm of the human approach to death and caring for the ill.

Discussion Question 1

How does Broyad's discussion of literature and death differ in Parts Two and Five? Why is this significant?

Discussion Question 2

How does it seem that the books discussed in Part Five informed Broyard's own writings on illness and death?

Discussion Question 3

How does Broyard's friend, Paul Breslow's, experiences with writing and death mirror his own?

Vocabulary

exhibitionism, erudition, thanatology, wrest, chafed

Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said

Summary

“What the Cystoscope Said” is a short story published in 1954 by Anatole Broyard. It is a fictionalized recounting of his father’s death.

When Anatole Broyard first saw the horse collar, or neck brace, around his father’s neck he knew that it was the beginning of the end. Though he, his mother, and his father alike all attributed the patriarch’s stiff neck to a strain or a cold they all silently knew it was something more.

Although he was a superintendent, Broyard's father always insisted on carrying a box of his own tools everywhere he went. Worried about his tools, he insisted on stopping by the job site to get the box. Broyard, for the first time held the toolbox for his dad and realized how incredibly heavy it was; he almost collapsed trying to carry it home.

His doctor, Dr. Windelband, told Broyard's father that he needed a cystoscopy and warned him that it would be rather unpleasant. The procedure made his father so ill that Broyard did not recognize him; suddenly, he turned into a nondescript withered old man. A few days later, Dr. Windelband told Broyard that the cancer had reached his father’s bones and estimated that he had about six months left to live. When Broyard asked if the hospital would take him, the doctor responded that they did not keep incurable cases.

Broyard realized that he had to be the one to tell his mother that his father was dying. He could not bring himself to say the words, but she understood and broke down in tears. Though Dr. Windelband suggested a nursing home for his father, the family doctor said they would not be able to provide enough care and regretfully told him that his father would have to go to Kings County Hospital. Though not a chamber of horrors, Kings County was overpopulated and understaffed. Broyard’s father was put in a large room with a dozen other people. As Broyard waited for his father to die, everything in the hospital came into sharp focus and it was in one of these occasions that he noticed the nurse, Miss Shannon. She looked so fresh, like a model in a beer commercial or a beauty pageant contestant. Broyard decided he hated her and wanted to ravage her right there and then.

As time went on Broyard's father worsened until finally one day Broyard arrived at the hospital to find his father frozen in pain. Broyard called for Miss Shannon who violently pulled down his father’s arm and injected him with an anesthetic. She smiled, her “infernal smile” the whole time (109). His father grew immune to anesthesia and pain killers over time. As his father’s strength dwindled, Broyard’s grew.

One day Miss Shannon laughed at Broyard for being at the hospital all the time and he decided that he absolutely needed to dominate her through sex. He wooed her by being

poetic, and convinced her to have a drink with him. That same day, a doctor at the Kings County told him that his father had about two days left to live. That night after, after a double bourbon in a quiet bar, Broyard took Miss Shannon home and made angry love to her.

After that night Broyard's father finally broke down and was truly at the brink of death. He begged Broyard not to leave him alone and Broyard promised that he would not. The next day Broyard's father fell into a coma in which he could hear what Broyard said but could not respond. Broyard remembered when he was sent off to war for the second time and how his father restrained himself from becoming too emotional when he dropped him off at the train station. Broyard told his father that he had been a good father, that he loved him, and thanked him for making him a good man. Suddenly his father's eyes lit up with understanding and he expelled a great amount of air which filled Broyard's lungs. He was dead.

Broyard decided on the least expensive funeral. His mother could not get out of bed to come and he did not invite anyone else. Again, he was alone with his father only this time his father was dead. He did not like how the morticians had made up his father and decided to have the body burned. They delivered the ashes in a box and left them on his doorstep. Broyard realized with absolute clarity that it was "[his] job to sift those ashes, and sift them [he] would, until he rose from them like a phoenix" (132).

Analysis

"What the Cystoscope Said," a short story written by Broyard in 1954, is anachronistic in its placement as the final part of Intoxicated by my Illness. It's appearance in the book is poignant because the story recounts a fictionalized version of Broyard's father's death and the fear and sadness that surrounded it. It is clear that, even before he was diagnosed with cancer, Broyard thought deeply about illness and dying, making the prospect of his own death all the more profound.

Central to "What the Cystoscope Said" is the transfer of strength and vitality from father to son; Broyard takes part in a benevolent vampirism, growing stronger as his father grows weaker. This first evidence of this takes place around the image of his father's toolbox. The toolbox is a complex symbol in the story's opening pages and Broyard describes it as almost as a sacred object expounding:

"The box was about two and a half feet long, eighteen inches high, and six inches thick. It was made of plywood, stained mahogany, with metal-reinforced corners, and it held a surprising number of tools, because they were all ingeniously fitted into special slots. Although, as I said, I'd seen the box all my life, I'd never picked it up. I would no more have picked it up than I would have picked up my mother, as my father sometimes playfully did" (93).

Broyard describes lifting the toolbox for the first time and being shocked at its immense weight. This symbolizes the difficulties of manhood, a weight that Broyard could bear

only as his father weakened. Indeed, as the story progress, the author seems to take the place of his father, notably in his relationship with his mother. The fictionalized Broyard's moments with his grieving mother contain sexual and romantic language. For example, when he went to tell her that her husband was dying she:

"She looked at me as a girl looks at her first lover the first time, her eyes shiny with fear and regret and suppressed excitement, her soul splayed open to indistinguishable joy or pain, her whole being a question that strained, strained, toward an answer..." (99).

This interaction alludes to Broyard's assertion on the first page that "The relation between a son and father ought to be barbaric" (91). Barbarism here evokes images of the animal kingdom and sexual competition in which the young male kills the old one to acquire its females. This imagery is enhanced in Broyard's interactions with Miss Shannon. One of the first time he sees her he has the distinct impulse to seize her and ravage her there in an act of domination. Later, he describes making love to her in terms of stating: "I would have to do it while she was shoving the needles in my arm, so that we could, like two scorpions, sting each other to death" (114). In both of these examples, sex and death intermingle in a way that returns the human subject to nature and re-naturalizes death. His linking of scorpion's poison with the sex act furthers this theme. Death resumes it's integral place within the circle of life in these passages, asserting it's place within a death-denying setting. Indeed, the hospital, filled to the brim with death, is depicted as a societal hiding place for illness and dying. Kings County, therefore, represents a closet filled with skeletons.

Echoes of Broyard's critique of the medical system can also be found in this early work. The Kings County Hospital, where Broyard's father died, is described as "a huge factory for repairing human organisms, a factory whose commitments always exceed its capacity, a sort of sweatshop" (102). The factory's workers, or doctors and nurses, are impersonal to the point of cruelty. For example, Dr. Windelband, after explaining to Broyard that his father had six months to live, coldly told him that his hospital did not "keep incurable cases" leaving the dying man to his own devices (98). The nursing home that Boyard called asked if his father was "disfigured" to which he shouted "No! He's handsome![...] He's beautiful!" (100).

Finally, the story details masculine humiliation in the face of chronic illness. His father, a man who at first refused to wear the neck brace that the doctor gave him, rapidly deteriorates into something infantile and subhuman. For example:

"After a week or so, he couldn't use his legs anymore, and they told me that every day he got up and fell on his face. When they gave him a wheelchair, he exhausted himself spinning through the wards and the corridors, afraid of becoming rooted to a spot. They threatened to take the chair away from him, and this so offended him—he had expected them to admire his gumption—that he only used it when absolutely necessary after that" (99).

Here, Broyard's once strong and independent father was scolded like a child. This imagery is extended when, just before he died, Broyard describes his father's eyes as

“[...] twin drains in a sink down which blackish waters swiftly disappeared, suddenly widening as the tides ran out. They nursed, like infant mouths, on me. I tried to find some formula to feed them, but I felt shamefully inorganic” (121).

These passages are particularly striking for the way they depict the circle of life; the old man returns to an infantile state. These depictions of decay and the ultimate act of submission that is death, become even more striking when considering that Broyard went through the exact same process at a similar age to his father. Overall, the story makes sense of Parts One, Two, and Three in that the experience of his father’s death seemed to caution him against dying passively. Though it is by no means a critique of his father’s style of illness, the experience seems nonetheless to have inspired Broyard to fight against the factory of medicine and forge his own path towards death.

Discussion Question 1

How does Broyard's fictionalized account of death and dying differ from his nonfiction works on the subject? How are they similar?

Discussion Question 2

As his father dies the old man seems to give his life force to Broyard. How does Broyard seem to pass his life force to his readers?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Broyard's relationship with Miss Shannon? What does she represent?

Vocabulary

pathos, yoke, auscultation, illicitly, speculatively, sentries, aphorism, antechamber, irrefutability, undulate, centrifugally, coda, tableau, semaphoring, consonant

Characters

Anatole Broyard

Anatole Broyard is the author of all the works included in Intoxicated By My Illness. He was a New York Times literary critic and author that died of terminal prostate cancer in 1990.

The essays, journal entries, reviews, and stories included in the work give the reader insight into different facets of the man, forming a complex three-dimensional portrayal of his character. The first three Parts of Intoxicated By My Illness were written and published while Broyard was suffering from a fatal case of prostate cancer. These three works portray the author in what he refers to throughout the book as his chosen "style" of illness (38). That is to say that he used his power as a writer to create a self that remained beautiful in the face of the deterioration brought on by cancer. Therefore, these essays portray him as witty, pensive, and artistic, attributes that Broyard valued above all else. This exercise was meant to keep Broyard from "falling out of love" with himself, or what he saw as the worst side effect of terminal illness (62).

The journal entries that comprise Part Four, while they affirm the verity of Broyard's wit, kindness, and intelligence, reveal the author's more vulnerable side. Here, the reader sees a man with impressive courage that, nonetheless, feels fear and regret in the face of death.

The final section of the book, "Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said" differs from the rest of the portrayals of Broyard in that it is a fictionalized version of himself. This piece, published in 1954, tells the story of the death of Broyard's father and his subsequent entrance into manhood. Here, the author is depicted at the peak of his virulence and health, an image that grows stronger when contrasted with the withering figure of his dying father. This final character description is important for it's anachronism, depicting Broyard before his illness.

Jules

Jules was a suicidal young man who Broyard was friends with in the 1950s. In "Part One: Intoxicated by my Illness," Broyard describes how, after Jules told him that he wanted to die, Broyard attempted to "sell life to him" (4). After weeks of Broyard reminding him of the wonderful vacations he would take, the women he would meet, and art he would enjoy, Jules killed himself by sticking his head into an over.

Anatole Broyard's first urologist

In "Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor," Broyard meets and is treated by two unnamed urologists. The first, was a nondescript man with a bland, modern office that

the author felt an immediate antipathy towards. He is described as having a "round," "confused," and "uncertain" face (39).

Anatole Broyard's second urologist

Broyard's second urologist was, in his words, "brilliant, famous, a star" and the premiere expert on the prostate in Cambridge, Massachusetts (52). Though this doctor was so effective that Broyard's cancer almost immediately went into remission, Broyard wished that he had talked to him more. As he explains: "He knows everything about the prostate, but I cannot sit down and have a talk with him about it, which I find a very great deprivation"(52).

Anonymous friend with lung cancer

Broyard talks about a friend with lung cancer who lost his ability to speak in multiple sections. Though he is never named it is clear that this man and his death had a profound effect on the author. Broyard's description of his death is one of the most striking in the collection:

"For a month he lay in his hospital bed trying to talk to me and his other friends with his eyes. He was too depressed or too traumatized to write on a pad. He died not of cancer exactly, but of pneumonia, as if his lungs had filled with trapped speech and he had drowned in it" (20).

Paul Breslow

Paul Breslow was a writer friend of Anatole Broyard's. He, like Broyard, was diagnosed with terminal cancer and wrote up until his death. Broyard described him in the following passage:

"Imagine a man in a hospital bed, regularly racked by spasms, unable to sit up or move, looking death in the face at the age of forty-seven—imagine such a man trying to write a witty, metaphysical novel. Though the anesthetic he was given suppressed only a small part of the pain—just enough to keep him from screaming—it made him drowsy, and he fought the drowsiness by taking several Ritalin tablets a day. His heart had never been strong, and so much Ritalin was dangerous for him, but as he said to me, with a smile that comprehended everything, 'I don’t think this is a time for caution'" (85).

Anatole Broyard's father

Anatole Broyard's father is described in detail in the only slightly fictionalized account of his death "What the Cystoscope Said." Before he got cancer, Broyard describes his father as strong and macho, playing into societal expectations of a patriarch. After his

father's diagnosis however, his character rapidly deteriorated into an almost subhuman, infantile shell of what he once was.

Anatole Broyard's mother

In "Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said," Anatole Broyard's mother is depicted as kind but passive and deeply dependent on his father. As his father's conditioned worsened Broyard took the place of his father in her eyes.

Dr. Windelband

Dr. Windelband was the doctor in "What the Cystoscope Said" that suggests Anatole Broyard's father get a cystoscope. He also was the one to tell Broyard that his father had only six months to live. Broyard describes him as looking "so much like Saint Peter that he was almost comically suited for his job. Very tall, he had iron-gray hair, bushy eyebrows, and a great decisive rudder of a nose" (96).

Miss Shannon

Miss Shannon was Anatole Broyard's father's attending nurse at Kings County Hospital. Broyard felt a deep sexual aggression towards her and on the eve of his father's death made hateful love to her. He described her in the following passage, in which he noted

"her astonishing freshness. She might have been one of those white-uniformed demonstrators at a department store cosmetics counter, except that she had no trace of hardness. She was the type you also see in Rheingold Beer ads, with an almost explosive smile, and so young looking that I wondered how long she could have been a nurse. Her complexion was so fair, her lips so red, her eyes so blue, that she reminded me of a patriotic image in pastels, the winner of some title such as Miss American Flag" (103).

Symbols and Symbolism

The Catheter

Symbolically, the catheter represents the beginning of what Broyard refers to as "the diminished self": his genitalia no longer function and he must rely on medical aids. It furthermore represents the impotence that comes with male aging and illness. When Anatole Broyard was diagnosed with prostate cancer, he had a catheter inserted into his urethra while the doctors ran tests. The catheter hurt and even caused him to go to the emergency room once, as a scab had formed around it.

The Transit of Venus

The Transit of Venus represents the importance of art and literature in the healing process and rebukes what Broyard sees as an overly rationalized approach to medicine. In "Part Two: Toward a Literature of Illness," Broyard describes his experience reading Shirley Hazzard's book, The Transit of Venus while in the hospital. This work allowed Broyard to transcend his circumstances by entering into the literary sublime.

Castration

Castration symbolizes the loss of virility and the impersonality of modern medicine in Intoxicated by My Illness. Broyard recounts that his doctor, a very famous urologist, wanted to remove his testicles in order to stop the cancer. Like the catheter, this suggestion symbolizes the diminished self, in a literal and more extreme sense. Broyard refused this advice because, it would make him unhappy and that, in turn, might worsen his condition. This decision indicates that his urologist was out of touch with the human reality of castration, approaching Broyard as merely a broken machine and not a human being.

The Urologist’s Sanitary Cap

The urologist's sanitary cap is symbolic of the sterility and distance that Broyard felt between himself and his doctors. It also is representative of the author’s artistic, aesthetic sense in an environment that is sadly devoid of art and aestheticism. The first urologist that Broyard saw was a boring, nondescript-looking man who suggested that he have a cystoscope. Though Broyard felt an initial antipathy towards this doctor, the final blow came when he saw that, before the procedure, the urologist had placed “what looked like a clear plastic shower cap” over his surgical skull cap (38).

Paul Breslow's Book

Paul Breslow's book, described in "Part Five: The Literature of Death 1981-1982," symbolizes the patient's endeavor to leave an indelible mark in history and not be forgotten. In a sense, Breslow's book represents the quest for immortality. Broyard describes his writer friend, Breslow's dying wish to finish his novel. The author explains that Breslow felt that "unless he completed his novel he would be a failure" (85).

The Horse Collar

The horse collar, or the neck brace worn by Broyard's father in the initial stages of his illness, represents the beginnings of the death of his father's masculine virility and his descent into the subhuman figure that his cancer made him. The opening line of "Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said" reads: "When I saw my father with the horse collar around his neck, I knew immediately" (90). Here, Broyard is faced with the reality of decay and death as it attacks his once strong and macho father.

The Toolbox

The toolbox is another powerful symbol present in "What the Cystoscope Said" representing the weight of patriarchal strength. Broyard describes the box as extremely heavy and he struggled when he first picked it up. Indeed, the weight of it almost caused him to collapse. In this scene his father teaches him how to lift and hold the box, symbolizing the passage of masculine power from father to son.

Miss Shannon

Miss Shannon, as a beautiful young woman, represents vitality and sexual virility. When Broyard first saw her he described feeling the urge to "seize her and fuck her in the middle of the floor, and thus by sympathetic magic to resuscitate those failing men to whom she must have seemed more a mirage than oasis" (105). Surrounded by decay, Miss Shannon maintained "an astonishing freshness" and an almost constant smile (105). Therefore, she is a symbol of almost aggressive youthfulness, that offends Broyard to the point that he feels he must dominate her sexually.

The Western Paperback

The western paperback that Broyard read while his father was in the hospital, represents the performance of masculinity in Western culture. The cowboy main character is unafraid of death, and therefore indicates the shame of masculine vulnerability.

As he describes:

“The hero was the usual superman, but instead of being grim-jawed or tight-lipped he had a sense of humor. His name was Happy Jack or something like that, and he had a homely Will Rogers kind of philosophy. Toward the middle of the book he got off a remark that wrenched me suddenly back to reality. In a crisis, everything wrenches you back to reality. He said, ‘I want to have so much fun that when I die I’ll laugh like hell’” (117).

Anatole Broyard's father's final breath

Broyard's father's dying breath is symbolic of the transfer of manhood and patriarchal responsibility from father to son.

Just before his his father died in "Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said", Broyard recounts that:

"[...] he gave a huge sigh and shot a great breath into my mouth. I caught it full, and it went all through me. I swallowed it like toast, not knowing if it was poison or elixir. I swallowed it full, and it inflated me until I swelled incredibly in the mirror of his eyes" (125).

This final moment carries interesting implications, as it essentially means that the father must die before the sun truly becomes a man.

Settings

Cambridge, Massachusetts

In the summer of 1989, Anatole Broyard moved from Connecticut to Cambridge Massachusetts. Here, in his new home, he discovered that he could not urinate and decided to seek out a urologist. Broyard loved Cambridge explaining in "Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor," "I had always wanted to live in Cambridge and I was almost persuaded that I couldn't urinate because I was surprised by joy, in C.S. Lewis's phrase. Like Israel for Portnoy, Cambridge was a transcendent place for me" (33).

The doctor's office in Boston

In an important scene in Part Three, Anatole Broyard describes sitting in what he assumes to be his urologist's office in Boston. He gives a rich description of the room in the following passage:

"Sitting in his office, I read his signs. The diplomas I took for granted: What interested me was the fact that the room was furnished with taste. There were well-made, well-filled bookcases, an antique desk and chairs, a reasonable Oriental rug on the floor. A window opened one entire wall of the office to the panorama of Boston, and this suggested status, an earned respect. I imagined the doctor taking the long view out of his window" (35).

From this setting Broyard built a three-dimensional image of his ideal doctor; indeed, the room essentially became the doctor's essence. However, the image was shattered when his real doctor entered the room and instructed Broyard to follow him to different, modern, and nondescript office.

This setting is significant because it is representative of Broyard's belief that doctor's should share more of themselves with their patients,

Bringham Hospital

Broyard descriptions of his time in the hospital are filled with wit and introspection. One of the first hospitals he was examined in was Bringham Hospital located in Brookline, Massachusetts. Here, he shared a room with "a kind of thug who growled when he spoke because he had a broken jaw and a drug habit" (10). This man continuously sprayed deodorizer in the room and kept the television and radio on simultaneously. In Bringham Hospital, Broyard had a painful catheter inserted into his urethra that was the cause of much discomfort. In a comical scene, the author describes the day they took the catheter out:

"Finally, they took out the catheter and they said, Now you'll be able to pee again. After a while I felt this Niagara-like rush mounting in me, like the rush of orgasm which you hear approaching in the distance. I leapt out of bed. I did a skip and sprinted toward the bathroom. I didn't make it. I splashed urine and blood all over the floor. My roommate, the hoodlum, who has drawn blood in anger, jumped out of bed with expression of horror. He began mopping the floor with a sheet. Illness is not all tragedy. Much of it is funny" (46).

Paul Breslow's hospital room

Paul Breslow was a writer friend of Anatole Broyard who died of cancer at the age of 47. Before his death, Broyard visited him frequently at the hospital. Breslow was determined to finish his novel before he died and had a contraption suspended over his hospital bed so that he could write lying down.

Kings County Hospital

Kings County Hospital is where Broyard's father died in the short story that makes up Part Six called "What the Cystoscope Said." It is described as overcrowded, cold, and machine-like. In one passage Broyard described it in the following terms:

"There's no use pretending that Kings County was a chamber of horrors. It wasn't—It was just a hospital with too many sick people and too few well ones to take care of them. Actually, it gave me a feeling of confidence. It impressed me as a place where everyone had gotten down to brass tacks. It was a huge factory for repairing human organisms, a factory whose commitments always exceeded its capacity, a sort of sweatshop, in fact, but one where each man did his best with whatever he had." (102)

Themes and Motifs

Doctor-Patient Relations

“Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor” is essentially an indictment of the aloofness doctors assume when treating the critically ill. Throughout Intoxicated By My Illness, Anatole Broyard critiques the modern doctor-patient relationship. Broyard wants doctors to share more of themselves with their patient, entering into a healing relationship in which both parties are mutually trusted and respected.

The central problem the Broyard has with both of his urologists is that they are too nondescript and do not have conversations with him: they are silent, effective, and entirely impersonal medical machines. He gives one Kafkaesque description of a group of doctors at Saint Vincent’s Hospital in the opening paragraph of the essay recounting:

“I had a very curious relationship with the doctors. They came in groups of six. They seemed to be attached to each other like Siamese sextuplets. They looked at me. They shook their heads, and they left me lying in a pool of sweat. I was never diagnosed” (33).

In this scene, the doctors are painted as so aloof that they appear not quite human and even monstrous. Furthermore, their voyeuristic observation did not help Broyard as the doctors never reached a diagnosis. The same characteristics are carried over to his urologists who, while they are described as brilliant men and effective doctors, are mostly silent and intangible. Their disconnect is, in Broyard’s opinion, detrimental to the healing process because in his words:

“Choosing a doctor is difficult because it is our first confrontation with our illness. ‘How good is this man?’ is simply the reverse of ‘How bad am I?’ To be sick brings out all our prejudices and primitive feelings. Like fear or love, it makes us a little crazy. Yet the craziness of the patient is part of his condition” (36).

This ‘craziness’ is only aggravated by the doctor's detachment. In a strange reflexivity, both doctor and patient become inhuman, the doctor a life saving god and the patient a degenerate shell of his former self. This imagery can be seen in “Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said” where Dr. Windelband is compared to Saint Peter while Broyard’s father becomes grotesquely weak. Broyard is sympathetic to the difficulty of becoming emotionally attached to a dying patient that you cannot save, but nonetheless calls for a middle ground between that and absolute aloofness. He details his vision of an ideal doctor-patient relationship in the following passage:

“Not every patient can be saved, but his illness may be eased by the way the doctor responds to him-and in responding to him the doctor may save himself. But first he must become a student again; he has to dissect the cadaver of his professional persona; he must see that his silence and neutrality are unnatural. It may be necessary to give up

some of his authority in exchange for his humanity, but as the old family doctors knew, this is not a bad bargain" (56).

Style

Throughout Intoxicated by My Illness, Anatole Broyard reiterates the necessity of having one's own personal "style" of illness by demonstrating his own through his chosen art form: writing. He explains:

"[...]it seems to me that every seriously ill person needs to develop a style for his illness. I think that only by insisting on your style can you keep from falling out of love with yourself as the illness attempts to diminish or disfigure you. Sometimes your vanity is the only thing that's keeping you alive, and your style is the instrument of your vanity. It may not be dying we fear so much, but the diminished self" (25).

This claim factors into Broyard's call for the presence of the arts in medicine. Whereas a purely scientific approach to healing turns patients into an impersonal case study, the introduction of narrative and "style" makes them unique thus preventing their identity from being taken over by illness.

Broyard's insistence on style and vanity runs counter to the archetype of the martyr that is often applied to illness. Indeed, the movement away from communal dying to dying in solitude that the author chronicles in "Part Five: The Literature of Death 1981-1982" promoted the trend of dying in silent dignity and thus not forcing the reality of death on the living. Dying in style means that your death becomes a form of artistic expression, a beautiful addition to the story of humanity. Furthermore, to die in style means to take control of one's illness by treating it as simply a development in the narrative of their life story. As Broyard explains: "Adopting a style for your illness is another way of meeting it on your own grounds, of making it a mere character in your narrative" (62).

Broyard assumed a style of illness by including it in his art. As a writer and literary critic, he treated cancer like a book, analyzing its nuances and symbolism. In so doing, he simultaneously demystified his cancer and turned it into a terrifyingly beautiful artwork. Indeed, Broyard not only stayed in love with himself but fell in love with his illness, becoming more intoxicated by it the more he wrote about it. The title of the collection, Intoxicated by My Illness, is informed by this central thesis point.

One can truly see the author's development of an illness style when comparing his late writings with the early short story that forms Part Six, "What the Cystoscope Said." This 1954 work fictionalizes the death of Broyard's father from bladder cancer, a condition similar to the author's prostate cancer. Broyard comments on this early endeavor to confront illness stating "When my father died, I tried to write a novel about it, but I found that my whole novel was written politely" (22). While "What the Cystoscope Said" is a very well written and moving work, it is nonetheless filled with comforting clichés. The first four parts of Intoxicated by My Illness are far superior to this work precisely for the fact that Broyard developed his own fearless style of illness.

Illness Literature

In “Part Two: Towards a Literature of Illness,” Broyard calls for the development of a canon of illness literature because he believes that reading is an essential tool towards death acceptance. This is important to the author because he believes that great literature can help a critically ill patient transcend their at time wretched circumstances, becoming empowered in the process. Though certain authors, Thomas Mann, Malcolm Lowry, and Oliver Sacks included, were able to capture the essential beauty of illness, Broyard claims that there is a serious dearth of literature that tackles the subject with fearless integrity. That is to say that a great deal of writings on illness and dying approach the topic using the safety of motivational clichés and motifs. In Broyard’s words:

“For me, the trouble with most inspirational books is that you can feel them trying to inspire you. They’re more “inspiring” than believable; you don’t feel that you can trust them. I don’t trust anyone who tells me that he loves me when he doesn’t even know me” (17).

In order to create a sincere genre of illness, Broyard calls on the patients themselves to take up the pen and start writing their own stories. Acting as a guide he proclaims that:

“The patient has to start by treating his illness not as a disaster, an occasion for depression or panic, but as a narrative, a story. Stories are antibodies against illness and pain. When various doctors shoved scopes up my urethral canal, I found that it helped a lot when they gave me a narrative of what they were doing. Their talking translated or humanized the procedure. It prepared, strengthened, and somehow consoled me. Anything is better than an awful silent suffering” (20).

Personally, Broyard saw himself as a potential illness critic in much the same way that he was a critic of literature. In his words: “[...] I am a critic, and being critically ill, I thought I might accept the pun and turn it on my condition” (19). From this angle, Broyard approaches his illness with great artistic scrutiny, finding hidden nuances as one would in a work of art or literature. He contrasts his work with that of Susan Sontag, who discredits the use of metaphor when talking about critical illness stating that

“[...] metaphors may be as necessary to illness as they are to literature, as comforting to the patient as his own bathrobe and slippers. At the very least, they are a relief from medical terminology. If laughter has healing power, so, too, may metaphor” (18).

This argument factors into Broyard’s call for a style of illness; metaphors allow for creativity which allows for uniqueness. By establishing the importance of a cannon of illness literature, Broyard attempted to give power to the critically ill by giving them a voice.

Magic and Medicine

In Intoxicated by My Illness, Anatole Broard expresses his belief that the language of magic should be re-introduced into medicine to establish a profound connection between the doctor and the patient. Medicine, in Broyard's view, having become subsumed by technology "deprives [him] of of the intimacy of [his] illness, makes it not [his] but something that belongs to science [...]" (47) Very few people speak the language of medicine, and those who do not are alienated from the healing process. Broyard believes that doctors can bring patients back into the healing fold with the addition of magical language. To introduce this argument Broyard uses an example from an indigenous culture:

"In The Sorcerers of Dobu, Reo Fortune pointed out that each man in the Dobuan tribe 'owned' several diseases, such as tertiary yaws, incontinence of semen, and elephantiasis of the scrotum. These were his patrimony, which he used as curses or weapons in defending himself against his enemies. If I "own" my disease, perhaps I too can conjure with it, even use it against itself." (47)

Modern medicine, with it's esoteric terminology and technology, robs the patient of this power. Broyard wants his doctor to discuss his prostate not as a diseased organ but "as a philosopher's stone" (54). This allusion to alchemy, or attempts by medieval scientists to turn lesser elements into gold, is indicative of the patient's ability to transform one's illness into art. In order to mediate between the sterility of modern medicine and the magical thinking of the layman, Broyard suggests that" "[...] there should be still another specialist-a combination of soothsayer, clown. And poet-to help answer the patient's questions" (54). In many ways, Broyard himself assumes this role, using his literary prestidigitation to include clinically ill reader in the healing process that they has for decades alienated them.

This magical approach to healing and death can also be found in Broyard's earlier writing "What the Cystoscope Said." Here, the author approached his father's illness and death through the lens of ancestral spirituality. As his father weakened, Broyard grew stronger until the climactic scene in which his father, through this final breath, essentially gives the author his masculine life force. This process seems to be a benevolent vampirism, in which his father was a willing donor.

Broyard also speaks of magic in the selection of a urologist. While sitting in the doctor's office he analyzed the signs of his belonging determining in the end that his "magic seemed good" (35). Indeed, when he found out that the office he was sitting in was not that of his actual urologist he felt betrayed and was forced to, in a process similar to that of a reader of aura's, glean the nondescript doctor's magic from the little information provided. In the end, he decided that this new doctor was lacking in both style and "magic," and chose to change urologists (39). As he explains: "I realized that I wanted my doctor magic as well as medical ability. [...] I wanted a doctor who would answer to my absurdity and triumph over it" (39).

The Diminished Self

The main reason that Broyard encourages patients to create their own style of illness is to prevent them from having to experience what he refers to as “the diminished self” (25). When one is critically ill, their bodies rapidly deteriorate and much, if not all, of their physical beauty is lost. Broyard claims what one can avoid becoming diminished in one’s own eyes by focusing on the power of the mind and creativity. However, the author does not shy away from detailed and tragic descriptions of the ravages of illness. For his part, he details his struggles with impotence during his prostate cancer treatment. One of his urologists wanted to completely remove his testicles, essentially rendering him genderless, making him less than a man, and in his eyes less than human. Broyard refused this treatment and avoided seeing himself as diminished by focusing on the strength of his mind and the “permanent orgasm” of simply being alive (28).

Anatole Broyard seemed to learn the importance of self-love during illness from two of his friends’ and his father’s deaths from cancer. The first, an unnamed writer who died of lung cancer, lost his voice after an unexpected stroke and

“For a month lay in his hospital bed trying to talk to me and his other friends with his eyes. He was too depressed or too traumatized to write on a pad. He died not of cancer exactly, but of pneumonia, as if his lungs had filled with trapped speech and he had drowned in it” (20).

Another one of his friend’s, Paul Breslow, spent his final days frantically trying to finish his novel in spite of the fact that he could not move from his bed and suffered from constant pain brought on by cancer. The strongest imagery that Broyard provides of a diminished self is that of his father who in “Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said’, goes from an archetypal figure of masculinity to an infantile, monstrous shadow of his former self. After Broyard's father’s cystoscope Broyard describes entering the room to find:

“Sprawled on the table, incredibly out of place, lay a plaster Prometheus, middle-aged and decrepit, recently emptied by an eagle, varnished and highly glazed as though still wet. Or perhaps, when you looked closer, this was just an illusion, born of an idea, and what actually lay there was only an eviscerated rooster, plucked white, his skin shiny with a sweat more painful than blood… Whatever it was, it wasn’t my father. It might have been an old man, trembling and staring into eternity, [...] but he was not in the least like, bore no resemblance whatsoever to, my father [...]” (96-97).

Descriptions such as these demonstrate the ease with which one can give up their fight with illness when faced with their diminished selves. Broyard describes this process as a type of “soul loss” or “a sense of terrible emptiness, a feeling that your soul has abandoned your ailing body like rats deserting a sinking ship” (40).

Styles

Point of View

All of the six works collected in Intoxicated By My Illness are told from the point of view of the author Anatole Broyard. However, they were not all written at the same time and present different perspectives based on the period in which they were conceived. Parts One to Four were all written during Broyard's tragically brief battle with prostate cancer and, therefore, are told from the enlightened, pensive view point of a dying man. Here, Broyard reflects on his life, the nature of dying, and the raw beauty of illness. His point of view is that of a man faced with death, straining to see beyond the veil into oblivion.

Parts Five and Six differ from the first four in that they were written before Broyard fell sick. In "Part Five: The Literature of Death 1981-1982", Broyard takes on the keen-eyed, pointed view point of the literary critic, analyzing books on dying and culture with great enthusiasm and interest. This exercise is similar to "Part Two: Toward a Literature of Illness " in that it is essentially a bibliography of books on the subject of illness and dying. However, the viewpoint in the two works differs in that Part Five represents Broyard's attempts as an outside observer to understand death while Part Two is written from the perspective of someone who is actually dying. "Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said," written in 1954, is told from the perspective of Broyard as a young man. Here, the point of view is that of a boy entering manhood, and growing in strength as opposed to losing it as Broyard recounts in Parts One though Four.

Language and Meaning

Broyard uses very complex and succinct language throughout the book. All of the works included are written using an academic vocabulary and only seldom slip into colloquialism. This linguistic style reflects the that of his primary publisher, The New York Times, known for it's sophistication. Broyard writes with an academic and aesthetically mature audience in mind, and does not attempt to pander to less learned audience. This is not an attempt to alienate non-sophisticated readers, but rather to be as concise as possible.

Structure

Intoxicated By My Illness is a compilation of Anatole Broyard's writings on illness, death, and dying. It consists of six works written at different times of his life. They are not organized to reflect the linear progression of time with Part Six being comprised of a short story written in 1954 when Broyard was a young man. This structure is designed to depict Broyard as a multi-faceted, complex character, that was more than just his cancer.

Quotes

When my friends heard I had cancer, they found me surprisingly cheerful and talked about my courage. But it has nothing to do with courage, at least not for me. As far as I can tell, it's a question of desire. I'm filled with desire—to live, to write, to do everything. Desire itself is a kind of immortality.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part One: Intoxicated by my Illness paragraph One)

Importance: This quote is a manifestation of Broyard's endeavor to accurately depict illness. The author sees much of the general public's vision of illness as based on an inaccurate projection of idealized suffering. Broyard also wants to make clear that one's reaction to a fatal illness does not have to be passive anger.

I'm not a doctor, and even as a patient I'm a mere beginner. Yet I am a critic, and being critically ill, I thought I might accept the pun and turn it on my condition.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Two: Towards a Literature of Illness paragraph One)

Importance: Here, Broyard lays out his tactic or style for writing about his illness. As a literary critic he seeks to read the nuances of his illness as he would a book, analyzing almost as a work of art.

The patient has to start by treating his illness not as a disaster, an occasion for depression or panic, but as a narrative, a story. Stories are antibodies against illness and pain.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Two: Towards a Literature of Illness paragraph One)

Importance: Broyard believes that the arts should be reintroduced into medicine. For him, medicine, in attempt to be supremely effective, has become mechanical and inhuman. Storytelling is a way for humans to relate to one another and sharing stories makes the experience of terminal illness less frightening.

I think that only by insisting on your style can you keep from falling out of love with yourself as the illness attempts to diminish or disfigure you. Sometimes your vanity is the only thing that's keeping you alive, and your style is the instrument of your vanity. It may not be dying we fear so much, but the diminished self.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Two: Towards a Literature of Illness paragraph One)

Importance: This quote outlines one of Broyard's major thesis points: the necessity of developing a style in the face of illness. Though Broyard's illness style is literary in nature, he does not mean that all terminally ill people should become writers. Rather, he means to say that one should not be passive and take control of the illness that seeks to destroy them by creating their own approach to it.

Choosing a doctor is difficult because it is our first explicit confrontation of our illness. "How good is this man?" is simply the reverse of "How bad am I?" To be sick brings out all our prejudices and primitive feelings. Like fear or love, it makes us a little crazy. Yet

the craziness of the patient is part of his condition."
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor paragraph One)

Importance: In this quote, Broyard outlines the strange mirroring that occurs between doctor and patient. While the doctor is a paragon of rationality and science, the patient devolves into a more primitive state out of fear. Broyard argues in Part Three that doctors must find a common ground between these two states of being in order to relate to - and thus better heal - their patients.

The knowledge that you’re ill is one of the momentous experiences in life. You expect that you’re going to go on forever, that you’re immortal. Freud said that every man is convinced of his own immortality. I certainly was. I had dawdled through life up to that point, and when the doctor told me I was ill it was like an immense electric shock. I felt galvanized. I was a new person. All of my old trivial selves fell away, and I was reduced to essence.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor paragraph Two)

Importance: Here, Broyard outlines the transformative power of illness. Essentially, Broyard believes that being diagnosed as seriously ill lifts the veil of the death-denying illusion and reveals the actuality of death. His use of the term "galvanized" is of particular interest because it is an allusion to re-animation; he feels reborn at the instant he finds out he is going to die. Broyard's brilliant mixture of polarized terminology adds to his vision of a nuanced approach to illness.

I would hope that my doctor’s authority and his charisma might help to protect me against what the anthropologist Richard Shweder calls “soul loss,” a sense of terrible emptiness, a feeling that your soul has abandoned your ailing body like rats deserting a sinking ship. When your soul leaves, the illness rushes in. I used to get restless when people talked about soul, but now I know better. Soul is the part of you that you summon up in emergencies. As Mr. Shweder points out, you don’t need to be religious to believe in souls or to have one.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Three: The Patient Examines the Doctor paragraph One)

Importance: In this quote the reader is given insight into Broyard's particular brand of spirituality. Throughout the book, Broyard speaks of self love in almost transcendent terms. This is because he sees it not as essential to the survival of one's physical body, but to the survival of one's legacy, a version of immortality akin to the soul. He believes that doctors, should they adopt a more nuanced approach to doctor/patient relations, are in a position to prevent a patient falling out of love with themselves thus, in essence, saving their soul.

In a sense, illness is a drug, and it’s partly up to the patient to determine whether it will be a low or a high.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Four: JOURNAL NOTES May-September, 1990 paragraph Three)

Importance: Here, Broyard solidifies his claim that patients have absolute agency over their experience of illness.

"At the end, you're posing for eternity. It's your last picture. Don't be carried into death. Leap into it.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Four: JOURNAL NOTES May-September, 1990 paragraph Two)

Importance: This quote equates death to the artistic mediums of photography and performance. It reiterates Broyard's insistence on finding one's own style of illness.

Good books should be revisited, just as we revisit places or paintings or listen again to a piece of music. I've usually found that a second reading of a good book is even better than the first, because this time you're prepared for it, like someone who stretches and limbers up before exercising. Though the pleasure is just as great, it's more of a conscious pleasure than a blind surrender.
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Five: The Literature of Death 1981-1982 paragraph One)

Importance: This quote illustrates Broyard's deep love of literature and his craft. It also gives the reader insight into his personality outside of his illness.

His mouth was open and his breathing was hungry. They had removed his false teeth, and his cheeks were so thin that his mouth looked like a keyhole. I leaned over his bed and brought my face before his eyes. "Hello darlin'," he whispered, and he smiled. His voice, faint as it was, was full of love, and it bristled the hairs on the nape of my neck and raised gooseflesh on my forearms. I couldn't speak, so I kissed him. His cheek smelled like wax. His hand came up, light as a feather, on my shoulder. There was a chair against the wall. I pulled it up to the bed and sat down, taking his hand in both of mine.
-- Anatole Broyard and his father (Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said paragraph One)

Importance: This interaction between Broyard and his father is significant because it demonstrates the change in character brought on by the approach of death. His father goes from being a stoic and macho to affectionate and weak. It shows how illness allows one to drop societal expectations and express raw emotion.

You want everybody on earth to stop what they're doing and come to say good-bye personally to you. You want humanity to see you off, the way close friends see you off on a boat. The idea of unanimity, two billion people's sympathy, is the only commensurate condolence. I did my best. I tried to refuel him with filial devotion, to plug him into some unequivocal center or source, some socially recognized certainty, by virtue of which he could say, "Therefore I am," and through which he could feel himself perpetuated.… I tried to radiate sonlight, to show him his way and warm him on his journey … but I concentrated myself so hard, so crystalline, willed myself so clearly, that I could only twinkle like a diamond."
-- Anatole Broyard (Part Six: What the Cystoscope Said paragraph Two)

Importance: This quote is in reference's to Broyard's father's request to have more people with him as he died. It is significant because it gives a unique perspective on the need for community in death and the unnaturalness of the modern ostracization of it.