The Island of the Day Before Short Guide

The Island of the Day Before by Umberto Eco

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Contents

Characters

Roberto de la Grive is an Italian nobleman who becomes "the only being of our species to have been cast away on a desert ship." The other important characters in The Island of the Day Before are his various teachers, his alter ego, Ferrante, and the women he loves.

As a child, Roberto experiences a delusion that will affect his life for many years: He imagines that he has a bastard brother who hates him and is always trying to do him mischief.

Roberto only rids himself of the specter of "Ferrante" by making him the male lead in a piece of fiction and killing him off — and that in turn is possible only because he finally realizes that Ferrante is a projection of unfulfilled parts of his own psyche.

That psyche has been through the wringer in his short life. He is drawn to male teachers and role models, and always loses them. At the siege of Casale, even though there is little actual fighting, he watches the death of his father and of the Cyrano-like Frenchman Saint-Savin. On the ship, he is left to grieve in utter solitude after the German Jesuit Father Caspar Wanderdrossel bravely dons a diving bell and marches off along the ocean floor, never to be seen again. Roberto's experience of love has been unhappy as well. He genuinely suffers all the conventional agonies of the amorous poet of the Baroque, but never manages to go beyond sending passionate, unsigned letters to his chosen ladies.

Even in his fiction, it is Ferrante who enjoys the favors of the elegant Parisienne Lilia; even in his fantasies, Roberto can only strand her on a rock off the opposite shore of the island, and set out to rescue her in his last, undescribed swim.

Being marooned on the Daphne gives Roberto the time he needs to sort through all his experiences and to confront and overcome his phobias and neuroses. With Father Wanderdrossel's help, he heals himself of the mysterious affliction of the eyes that has made him avoid sunlight since his father's death. He also gives full consideration to all the half-digested theories he has heard in Europe, and begins to think for himself. He disposes of his alter ego, and belies his history of irresolution and passivity by setting out to rescue Lilia, despite the probability that he will die in the attempt. Whether his last swim is madness or triumph, of course, is a question of interpretation.

Social Concerns

Eco's recondite fiction seems to have ' little to do with social concerns, as most would define the term. He writes of characters and issues apparently remote; yet it would require no great ingenuity to find many comments directly relating to contemporary problems in The Island of the Day Before. Eco examines the literary and philosophical issues that interest him, no doubt reasoning that questions as to how we perceive the world and how we communicate with one another are even more fundamental than economics or politics.

Techniques

A complete study of the techniques Eco uses in The Island of the Day Before would have to be as long as the novel itself. Even a quick survey of a few of the narratorial ploys, however, suggests the remarkable qualities of Eco's third novel.

Like The Name of The Rose (1980), The Island of the Day Before is presented as if it Were based on a recently-discovered manuscript. The modern narrator takes on much more responsibility this time, since the papers Roberto left on board the Daphne constitute a narrative full of gaps. Indeed, they were never conceived as a connected story, unlike Adso's confessions. With much show of diffidence, the modern narrator conjecturally fills in the gaps and pieces together the tale. By this method, Eco succeeds in evoking Roberto's seventeenth-century sensibility, while the modern narrator intervenes to supply background and clarification.

This dual narrative is especially appropriate because Eco emphasizes the continuity between the two periods. Another technique he uses to this end might be called apparent anachronism. He startles us by portraying men of three hundred fifty years ago speculating on atomic theory, or entrusting their lives to diving gear. Even Roberto's delusion — that he will be able to travel back in time if he can reach the island and cross the line into the day before — calls to mind one of the persistent themes of twentieth-century science fiction: time travel.

Eco's prose in this novel takes on some of the sumptuousness of the Baroque passages supposedly quoted from Roberto's writings. Like his protagonist, he revels in conceits, antitheses, paradoxes, and labyrinths. He relishes compiling vast catalogues of birds, plants, clocks, theories — to name but four examples — in sentences of a massive, architectural beauty. The style fits the matter: only a Baroque prose could possibly do justice to the complex psychological and philosophical problems which obsess Roberto throughout the novel.

Themes

Like Eco's other novels, The Island of the Day Before reflects his background and interests as one of the world's foremost semioticians. He pursues theoretical and practical problems of signs and signification through the labyrinths of nature and society, and through verbal mazes of his own making. The overarching theme of the novel might be expressed as follows: how perception and experience alter each other in a never-ceasing dance.

Perception is conditioned by experience, but also modified by rhetorical training, philosophical systems, and special lenses. Roberto de la Grive and his contemporaries view the world through their complex, antithetical wordplay. Roberto becomes so enmeshed in the letters he writes and the fictions he imagines that ultimately he can no longer separate external reality from the reality inherent in his words.

His fascination with the various orthodox and heterodox philosophies he encounters profoundly affects his vision of the world: He tends to see according to the system that preoccupies him at the given moment. Eco reinforces this theme by filling the pages with lenses, ranging from mirrors (with many allusions to the myth of Narcissus), to telescopes, to the great Speculum Melitense reportedly installed on the island, to the, tinted glasses with which Roberto protects his traumatized eyes from the tropical sun. There is even a diving mask, granting Roberto access to an undersea world which stimulates his imagination as much as anything he has seen above the surface.

New ways of seeing change Roberto's life; in turn, his experiences make him question his perceptions, and keep him searching for new and deeper visions.

Several of Eco's many themes are bound up with the vessel upon which Roberto lands after his shipwreck. The Daphne by its very name stimulates his metaphor-happy mind: He recalls the unattainable nymph who became a tree, and imagines trees becoming a ship, and he associates his own unattainable love with the ship on which he is marooned. It is a microcosm, just as his isolated boyhood home was a small world unto itself, as the besieged city of Casale where he had so many formative experiences was a kind of island.

This sort of thinking naturally sparks memories of his early life, which assists the narrative, and strengthens the thematic connection between his past and his present. Finally, the frustration of his plight — being so close to the island, but unable to reach it — represents his lifelong inability to take decisive action and realize his dreams.

These are only a few of the many themes of this extraordinarily rich novel. Eco says enough about such fundamental matters as love, friendship, intellectual endeavor, ambition, and art to supply several lesser books.

It is likely that scholars will be discovering and analyzing themes in The Island of the Day Before for a long, long time.

Key Questions

Like his earlier novels, Eco's most recent work evokes the past in accurate and exhaustive detail, and its historical insights provide numerous topics for conversation. The philosophical and scientific problems which the characters find so compelling still matter, and Eco's framing of the questions could lead to unusually productive discussions. The important fictional and historical figures in the book are intriguing singly and in the combinations Eco arranges. Finally the ambiguities of the last pages should provoke spirited debates.

1. What really caused Roberto's eye problems? What really cured them?

2. Why does Eco fill the Daphne with plants and animals? What significance do they have for Roberto? Do they have different meanings for us from those that they have for the characters?

3. What does Roberto learn from his experiences during the siege of Casale?

What exactly is it about war that disturbs him?

4. What do you make of Father Immanuel's machine, the "Aristotelian Spyglass"? Does it offer genuine insights, or merely superficially impressive arrangements of words? Does it represent an individual's quirkiness, or a general tendency of the age?

5. Does Eco expect us to believe in the miracle cures supposedly produced by the Weapon Salve? Judging by its curative power and other mysterious properties, what is the symbolic value of this substance?

6. Why can't Roberto talk to women?

7. In what ways do Roberto's swimming lessons and solo experiments in the water parallel his plunges into the world of ideas?

8. We know now that crossing the International Date Line into "the day before" produces nothing more than a slight paradox of the calendar. How does this knowledge affect your reaction to the schemes, dreams, and struggles of the characters to find the Line?

9. Eco devotes considerable erudition and imagination to an in-text analysis of the symbolic possibilities of the Dove. Does he seem to favor a particular meaning or set of meanings? Does Roberto see the bird with his eyes or with his imagination?

10. Why does Eco never provide any concrete evidence of the fate of Caspar Wanderdrossel?

11. Does Roberto's fictional resolution of his long-standing problems with Ferrante and Lilia seem healthy to you? Does he solve his problems, succumb to them, or what?

Literary Precedents

Clearly, any tale of shipwreck and isolation in the Western tradition calls to mind such precedents as Homer's The Odyssey (1050-850 B.C) and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719). Eco knows that, and he pays several tributes to earlier works, most obviously in the mysterious footprint Roberto spots on the Daphne before he has met Caspar Wanderdrossel face to face.

With its resident menagerie, the ship also recalls Noah's Ark, and Eco devotes a number of brilliant passages to exploring the associations. One could go on listing sources and precedents for many pages. There is no more selfconsciously literary author writing today than Umberto Eco; in a sense, all that he has read serves as a precedent for his fiction, and he often seems to have read everything.

Related Titles

Eco's others novels, including his second work, Foucault's Pendulum (1988), have many features in common with The Island of the Day Before. Also, his voluminous writings on literature and semiotics are well worth consulting by readers who wish to gain deeper insight into his fiction.

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