

Lily and the Octopus Study Guide

Lily and the Octopus by Steven Rowley

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Plot Summary

Note: Citations in this study guide refer to the June 2016 Simon and Schuster first hardcover edition of *Lily and the Octopus* by Steven Rowley.

Lily and the Octopus is a novel by Steven Rowley in which forty-two-year-old Ted Flask must face the heartbreaking decision to put his beloved dog, Lily, to sleep. When the novel begins, Ted suddenly notices one night that Lily has a tumor on her head—something he will come to call the “octopus” because he looks at the tumor as though it was something squeezing the life out of Lily like an octopus. Ted imagines the octopus is alive, and is a creature that must be defeated in order to save Lily’s life. The octopus becomes Ted’s arch-nemesis.

Lily is a huge part of Ted’s life. She has been his constant companion for twelve and a half years and has been with him through all the trials of his life in that time, including the bad relationship he had with Jeffrey for six years. Ted does everything from watching movies to playing Monopoly with Lily, though Lily herself does not actually play Monopoly. Ted also imbues Lily with her own voice and speech, though she does not actually speak in words but instead through her actions and manners. Everything that Ted does, Lily is somehow made a part of.

Several options are given to Ted at the vet relating to Lily’s future. These include surgery, pills, and radiation, but surgery is determined by Ted to be out of the question because of Lily’s advanced age. Ted consults his mother and his best friend, Trent, about the situation. Both offer Ted reassurances. Ted, at the same time, goes to see a therapist named Jenny who helps Ted to recognize that his sadness and worry are a form of pre-grieving, with the idea being that Lily may not survive the octopus. Ted reluctantly accepts this and hates himself for imagining that there could be a time without Lily.

Seizures, temporary blindness, and pain follow for Lily as the tumor cannot be done away with. Attempts to deal with the tumor without surgery are shown metaphorically in the novel, with Ted and Lily boarding a fishing trawler and heading out to the open sea to battle the giant octopus intent on destroying them both. While the metaphorical octopus is defeated, the real octopus cannot be subdued. Ted must then make the heart-wrenching choice to put Lily to sleep. Ted is absolutely devastated and takes comfort in Trent’s friendship.

Ted also comes to realize that, since Jeffrey, he has not truly been living life. He has been depressed and trapped in his own little world, receiving much-needed comfort and kindness from Lily. He reflects kindly on the lessons Lily has taught him—such as showing spontaneous affection and always finding something to be optimistic about—and he begins applying these in his own life. As the novel comes to an end, Ted decides to go out on a date with a guy named Byron he has met online. Not only does he practice the lessons Lily has taught him, but Ted decides to tell Byron all about Lily.



Pages 1 – 64

Summary

In the opening of the novel, a few lines from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Law for the Wolves" are presented.

In the first chapter, titled "The Octopus," forty-two-year-old Los Angeles resident Edward "Ted" Flask speaks directly to the reader. Ted describes his twelve-year-old dog, a dachshund named Lily, with whom he sets aside time on Thursday nights to talk about younger guys they find attractive, such as Chris Hemsworth, Chris Evans, and Chris Pine. While discussing Chris Pratt, Ted notices an octopus sitting on Lily's head. Ted is perplexed by this. Lily says she does not want to talk about it. Ted cannot understand how he could not have noticed it before. Ted can sense the octopus is a burden for Lily, so he asks her if it hurts. Lily explains that it does sometimes. Ted cuddles up with Lily the way Lily cuddles up with him when she knows he needs her. Ted recognizes that the octopus will sooner or later have Lily, whom he equates to snail, a whelk, or a crab.

Part 1 of the novel is titled "Camouflage" and opens with the chapter "Friday Afternoon."

In "Friday Afternoon," Ted goes to see his therapist, Jenny. Ted has been in therapy since his last relationship with Jeffrey ended eighteen months before. That relationship lasted six years but Ted explains that it should have lasted only four. Ted's dating life is in a rut. Between this and the bad past relationship, Ted realizes he has his own octopus but does not tell Jenny about this. Instead, he thinks about how much he wants to get home to Lily. Ted also realizes that, like the octopus, he is walking through life hiding in plain sight as though he is invisible. Jenny encourages Ted to date, including pursuing something with one guy Ted seems to particularly like but won't commit to because Ted isn't sure if the guy likes him back. Ted comes to accept that he needs to live life without waiting for everything to be settled.

In "Friday Evening," Ted is worried that his life has not yet come together the way his friend Trent said it all would by the time they were twenty-nine. Ted recalls how it was the day before he turned thirty that he found Lily. Ted meets Trent for dinner, telling him about Lily's octopus. He explains he has a vet appointment on Monday. Trent asks Ted how old Lily is, but Ted declares he will not allow the octopus to have Lily.

In "Friday Night," Ted explains that he enjoys playing Monopoly with Lily on Friday nights. Lily does very well at Monopoly. Ted does his best to avoid acknowledging the octopus, wanting to wait until Monday to deal with it. Instead, Ted tells of how he drove into the country to buy a puppy, and that when he arrived, Lily—the runt of the litter—chose him by breaking free of the game her brothers and sisters were playing to come say hello to him.



In “Saturday Late Afternoon,” Ted goes out for a date with the handsome guy he has met online. The guy explains he is quitting his job as a flight attendant to become a professional dog walker because people in L.A. will pay anything for their dogs. Ted realizes things are going nowhere with this guy. When the guy asks Ted if he has any pets, Ted says no. He desperately seeks a way to end the date early so he can go home and watch a movie with Lily as they always do on Saturday nights. When the guy says he does not want kids, Ted knows he has his way out.

In “Sunday, 4:37 A.M.,” Ted wakes up suddenly, panicked that the octopus has finally killed Lily, but he is relieved to feel that she is still breathing. Lily has slept in Ted’s bed every night since she was fixed as a puppy, and she prefers to sleep under the blankets at the foot of the bed. Ted wants to burrow down to the bottom with Lily, knowing what will soon come.

In “Sunday Night,” Lily and Ted eat pizza every Sunday, a ritual that comes from Ted’s childhood when his mother would always order pizza on Sundays to break from cooking. While Ted is preparing to order pizza, the octopus comes to life and Lily has a seizure. It lasts half-a-minute, and Ted comforts Lily as it subsides. Ted tells Lily to nap after she insists he order the pizza, which he does. While Lily is sleeping, Ted confronts the octopus and orders it to leave. The octopus refuses. Ted tells the octopus he will not let it win, but he knows deep down the octopus will not go.

Part 2 of the novel is titled “The Invertebrate: Five Years Earlier,” and opens with the chapter “Stuck.”

It is now five years before. Meredith, Ted’s sister, urges him to come visit San Francisco. Ted explains that he and Jeffrey are preparing to return from Christmas in New York with Jeffrey’s family while a snowstorm bears down on them. Meredith blurts out that she is now engaged to her boyfriend, Franklin, having been proposed to while visiting his family in San Francisco. She explains that they will be getting married before returning to Washington, D.C. Ted agrees to bring Jeffrey to the ceremony which will be held at city hall. While Jeffrey attempts to find coffee, Ted sees that Jeffrey has received a text message from a guy named Cliff asking if Jeffrey is back yet and saying he wants to play. The message worries Ted, but it also causes him to think about how Lily always asks when he’ll be coming back whenever he goes away. Ted knows that Lily knows he is always coming back because she trusts him.

In “Backbone,” back home in Los Angeles, Ted runs some last-minute errands before heading to San Francisco when Jeffrey calls him to tell him something is wrong with Lily and that she can’t walk. Ted rushes home to discover Lily cannot stand, and then rushes Lily to the vet. Tests reveal that Lily may have a ruptured intervertebral disc, meaning she will need spinal surgery. It will cost six-thousand dollars. Jeffrey does not want a hand in making the decision. Although he is worried about the cost, Ted is worried about Lily more. He agrees to the surgery.



Analysis

Author Steven Rowley argues that there is no kind of relationship in the world like that between a dog and his or her owner from the very start of his novel. This is apparent in the conversation Ted has with Lily where they talk about the attractiveness of actors. It is clear from this alone just how close Ted and Lily are, and how much a part of Ted's life Lily happens to be. Ted's horror at discovering the octopus—the tumor—on Lily is not at all disgust but deep and abiding concern for Lily. Indeed, Ted's very decision to name the tumor and to consider the tumor his and Lily's arch-nemesis is evidence of how dear Lily is to Ted.

The reader should note that the naming of the octopus is consequential: Ted sees that the tumor, like an octopus, is squeezing the life out of Lily. At the same time, the octopus becomes symbolic of burdens that everyone carries. For Lily, her octopus happens to include old age and the pain caused by the tumor. For Ted, his own octopus happens to be depression and a sense of fear of the future following his breakup eighteen months before with Jeffrey. In many respects, Ted and Lily struggle with their own octopuses much the way that Captain Ahab struggles with the white whale in *Moby Dick*. The reader should not be afraid to draw similarities between the struggles of the characters of *Moby Dick* and the struggles of the characters of Lily and the Octopus. For Ted, destroying the octopus is a question of saving Lily's life and his special relationship with Lily—once again underscoring Steven Rowley's point that relationships between people and dogs are unlike any other relationships in the world—pizza, Monopoly, cuddling, and all.

As Ted struggles with the octopus in the present and struggles to deal with Lily's condition in the present, he cannot help but remember the past and draw on similar experiences. Rowley argues that memories are immensely powerful things. They can be heartbreaking and heartwarming, reassuring and disconcerting. Lily's current plight brings to mind Lily's only other major medical situation—a time five years before when she lost the ability to walk due to a slipped disc. The surgery was immensely expensive—but allowed Lily to come through well. Ted dwells on this memory because it is a time when Lily faced a serious challenge to her life but the challenge was handled. Ted worries whether the same outcome will be possible now.

It is through recalling the past that another important theme slowly becomes apparent. Rowley slowly begins building on the argument that, though one must be prepared for hard times, one cannot live in fear of them. Ted's fears in life—his octopus—have not only to do with Lily, but with himself as well. As he confesses in his writing but does not confess to Jenny, Ted does indeed have a fear of the unknown future. Ted has been waiting to live because he is waiting to know that everything uncertain is settled first. But this prevents Ted from truly stepping out and living. Likewise, Ted's refusal to call Lily's octopus what it is—old age and a tumor—also denotes his refusal to accept hard times as they are. He will not allow himself to consider that the octopus may be something other than what he refuses to accept.



Discussion Question 1

What is Ted's life like in general? What is his relationship with Lily like? Why is Lily such a big part of his life?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ted come to see Lily's tumor as an octopus? Why does Ted refuse to directly consider the problem as it is?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ted begin to recall the past from five years before? What happened in this time? What relevance does it have in the present?

Vocabulary

gauchness, confounding, subcutaneous, validations, soporific, witticisms, bewildered, probative, monologue, interminable, sonorous, emphatic, ominous,



Pages 65 – 123

Summary

Part 2, “The Invertebrate: Five Years Earlier” continues with the chapter “We’ll Take a Cup of Kindness Yet for Auld Lang Syne.”

On the way home from the animal hospital where Lily has been left for surgery, Ted and Jeffrey grab Chinese food to go. Ted calls his mom about the situation. His mom comforts him, telling him it is natural to be so upset because Lily is his baby. Later that night, Ted receives a call from the vet who explains that Lily has come through the surgery fine. The vet is cautiously optimistic that Lily will slowly but surely and fully recover. Knowing that Lily will be fine motivates Ted to attend his sister’s wedding.

In “I’m Afraid There’s No Denyin’/I’m Just a Dandy-Lion,” Ted gives the reader a list of eight times he was cowardly, ranging from walking more manly as a child at his father’s insistence to causing a breakup by becoming cold and distant rather than directly breaking up with the guy. Ted then reveals the one time he was courageous, and that was leaving Lily behind while he left Los Angeles for his sister’s wedding in San Francisco.

In the chapter “The Tonga Room and Hurricane Bar,” Ted and Jeffrey land in San Francisco and Ted receives a voicemail saying that Lily continues to recover and to show good vitals. Meredith meets Ted and Jeffrey at the airport. She explains that she has not yet told their mother about the wedding. Now in San Francisco, Ted calls an old mutual friend named Aaron to get together with him, Jeffrey, and Meredith for drinks. They decide on an impromptu bachelorette party for Meredith at the Tonga Room of the Hurricane Bar under the Fairmont Hotel. As they drink, Ted frequently thinks about Lily and how she will be able to walk again because of his choice to go ahead with the surgery.

In “The Vow,” Ted wonders what Franklin’s Chinese parents think about Franklin marrying a tall white girl with their ceremony being attended by two tall gay guys. When the judge who oversees the ceremony turns out to be Chinese, Ted thinks it puts Franklin’s parents more at ease. Ted finds San Francisco City Hall to be beautiful and historic. After the ceremony, Meredith calls everyone in the family to tell them she is now married, then hands the phone to Ted to deal with the fallout. Ted can only think about Lily and why no one is asking about her. During Ted’s call with his mother, she explains she has put a check for a thousand dollars in the mail for Lily’s surgery and then begins to cry because of the wedding. Out at dinner later, Meredith asks Ted if he is happy. She says that she is worried about him.

In “Squeezed,” Ted and Jeffrey must squeeze Lily’s bladder each time it fills up to help her use the bathroom until she is able to do it herself again. Ted must keep exciting toys away from Lily, including her red ball, so that she does not injure herself. Ted is happy

when he helps Lily to do her business and congratulates her on being to stand on her own.

Part 3 of the novel is titled “Suction” and begins with the chapter “Monday.”

In “Monday,” the novel returns to the present. The octopus remains on Lily’s head. Ted brings Lily to the vet. The vet asks what the problem seems to be. Ted explains the octopus. The vet says that the word “octopus” is as good a word as any. The vet decides to run some tests to see exactly what is being dealt with. While waiting, Ted looks through old photos of Lily on his phone. He notices the octopus, very small, first appearing after his return from a trip to Hawaii several weeks before. He wonders if he brought the octopus back with him, and if it is his fault Lily now has an octopus. The vet explains they are only able to extract a few cells from the octopus, and hopefully it will tell them whether or not the octopus is malignant or not. Plans for the octopus will be discussed midweek. On the way home, Ted and Lily get ice cream.

In “Tuesday,” Ted and Trent head out for a drink on the beach. Ted admits to not being happy but says he is especially worried about Lily. Ted’s days are routine, a mix of working from home doing freelance writing to spending time with Lily and other friends. Ted and Trent then discover that the gay bar they have come to is no longer a gay bar but a hangout for restaurant workers.

In “Friday,” Ted admits to having withdrawn from his social life for the week but cannot bring himself to talk about this easily with Jenny. He describes Lily’s octopus and says that initial inconclusive tests mean the vets want to put Lily under anesthesia to take a larger sample. Jenny believes that Ted is not only trying to get rid of the octopus, but that he is grieving with the possibility that the octopus may not be able to be removed. Jenny says that it is natural and normal to begin grieving the loss of a loved one before the loved one is actually lost. She explains that grief is a pathological condition, not something that is temporary, and that people come out of it on the other side. Ted explains he thinks of the poem “Funeral Blues” by W.H. Auden whenever he grieves, having learned it in college. The poem includes a line about stopping the dog from barking with a juicy bone.

In “Sunday,” even though it is June, Ted buys a frozen turkey to cook as the centerpiece of a “Thanksgiving dinner” simply to celebrate the things he is thankful for in his life, such as Lily. Lily is thrilled with the prospect of turkey. Ted wonders if he is deranged for having a Thanksgiving dinner in June. Ted and Lily talk about their first Thanksgiving together when they had Tofurky during one of Ted’s bouts with vegetarianism. Ted invites Trent over for dinner. When the meal is ready, everyone gives thanks for that which they are thankful. Ted gives thanks for his family and especially for Lily. Ted realizes he is actually already in mourning, understanding that there may not be a November.



Analysis

Steven Rowley's argument that the relationships between people and dogs are unique and unlike any other continues to hold sway in this section of the novel. As the reader knows, Ted would have refused to attend his sister's wedding had he not received word that Lily would be all right. At the same time, Ted is thrilled and elated beyond belief that Lily will be okay. Five years later, Ted's relationship with Lily can be seen in how much time he spends with Lily, both as a matter of working at home and as a matter of simply wanting to spend time with her. Lily and Ted have no wild expectations of one another, but find happiness in the other's love and acceptance, as well as comfort in just spending time together. Lily's condition causes Ted to withdraw from what little social life he has for the week in order to spend more time with Lily.

Five years later after Lily's successful back surgery, Ted brings Lily to the vet in the hopes that, like in the past, Lily will be fine again. Here, Ted relies heavily on the past for reassurance in the present. As Rowley argues, memories are immensely powerful things. If things with Lily can be made right once, they can be made right again—or so Ted wills himself to believe. Ted believes that a fight must be had against the octopus to save Lily's life. Yet, the reader will note that this clashes with Jenny's consideration of Ted's situation. Jenny argues that Ted is already in mourning for someone he has not yet lost—but also notes that this is normal. This is in keeping with Rowley's argument that one must be prepared for hard times, but that one cannot live in fear of them. Ted's refusal to address the tumor as a tumor (the vet notes that "octopus" is as good a word as any) speaks of his refusal to face the truth because he is afraid of what future that truth might bring.

As June gets underway, Ted comes to realize that he has indeed been living in fear not only of his future, but of Lily's future. His acceptance that there might not be a future for Lily long-term, and that the tumor (he still refers to it as an octopus) might be the death of her, are symbolized by the Thanksgiving dinner that he prepares especially in honor of Lily. Ted, in this moment, puts aside both memories of the past and fears of the future in order to live in the moment.

Ted's decision to live in the moment also brings to light yet another important theme that Rowley has laid the groundwork for. Rowley argues that dogs teach people all kinds of important lessons. One such lesson that Lily teaches Ted is to always be happy with the time that one has—to remember to live in the moment as it is. Past and future aside, Ted has Lily with him now in this moment and so he is thankful for, and determines to enjoy, that moment. Another important lesson that Lily has taught Ted is to give affection freely and spontaneously—something which he has no problem doing for Lily but has trouble doing with other people (note his emotionally close, but physically distant relationship with his mother). This will, of course, change in time.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways has Ted come to accept the situation with Lily as it is? In what ways has Ted not yet accepted the situation with Lily for what it is? Why is this so?

Discussion Question 2

What important lessons has Lily taught Ted that he now applies in his own life? Why do these lessons matter?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ted decide to make a Thanksgiving dinner in June? What deeper significance does this have regarding himself, and Lily?

Vocabulary

impromptu, splayed, fretful, flabbergasted, nostalgia, libidinous, pathological, gorged



Pages 124 – 180

Summary

As Part 3, “Suction,” continues in “Monday,” Ted cannot stop thinking about Lily while out shopping, recalling both good and bad memories, such as the time Lily fell down the stairs as a puppy to all of the Thanksgiving dinners they have shared. When two dachshunds go past on a leash, Ted dry heaves and scrambles back to his car. He reflects on the vet telling him that Lily might develop Enclosed World Syndrome as she aged. Ted reflects on how he has developed his own form of Enclosed World Syndrome by shutting out the world. At home, Ted takes Lily for a walk, allowing her the time to go at her own pace, and to sniff as she wishes. Ted worries that the octopus is here to stay.

In “Wednesday Night,” Lily has another seizure. Ted pulls Lily close against her as she seizes, terrifying Ted. Ted begins to feel horribly about all the nights he would become angry with Lily for not going to the bathroom on their pre-bed walks, angry she might ask to go out in the middle of the night. Ted apologizes to Lily, but lies about why he is apologizing so the octopus does not hear. He says he is apologizing because he is going to have to give her a bath.

In “A Complete List of Lily’s Nicknames,” Ted presents a complete list of nicknames he has given to Lily. These include everything from Silly to Bunny Rabbit to Monster Dot Com to Sweet Pea.

In “Saturday,” Ted considers sleeping in with Lily but then decides this would be giving in to the darkness. Ted decides to bring Lily to the ocean, to El Matador Beach just north of Malibu. While there, Ted tells Lily they have some decisions to make regarding the octopus. Lily does not like any of the options—surgery, radiation, or pills. When Lily sees a podwhale swimming in the water, she gets happy and excited like a puppy. She also says that sometimes she thinks of Ted as “Dad.”

Part 4 is titled “Ink,” and in this section of the novel the chapters are given numerical titles.

In Chapter 1, Ted is stunned to find Lily in the hallway, barking and growling at the corner. Ted realizes that Lily cannot see. Ted blames it on the octopus, as though it has released an ink sac obscuring Lily’s vision. Ted demands the octopus leave, but the octopus refuses. Ted then realizes that Lily’s blindness is permanent.

In Chapter 2, Ted and Trent go swimming at Trent’s pool. It has been a few days since Lily has gone blind, but she and Ted are getting by. She mostly remembers the layout of the house from memory, but still has difficulties from time to time. Ted has little patience with Trent. Ted considers that he himself is turning into an octopus.

In Chapter 3, Ted goes to see Jenny, who administers a Rorschach test. Every ink blot Ted sees reminds him either of the octopus or things such as cockroaches which remind



him of the octopus. Jenny explains the test is a good indicator of anxiety and hostility. Ted comes to consider that in order to defeat his enemy, he must become his enemy.

In Chapter 4, Ted purchases some inflatable sharks in the hopes they will scare off the octopus. Ted explains that they may eat the octopus, but they cannot eat his dog. However, when Ted brings Lily outside, the octopus is not bothered by the pool toys arrayed around him. Lily, however, takes things in stride by pouncing on the inflatable sharks, enjoying herself, and allowing Ted to enjoy himself as well.

In Chapter 5, Lily randomly humps Ted's leg, then lays down to sleep. This baffles Ted, but the octopus ascribes it to Freud. Ted's mom then calls, during which time Ted puts Lily's favorite ball by her feet. Ted reveals that Lily has gone blind. Ted's mom feels badly about this, yet also insists Ted should come to visit as Meredith and her family will be coming up to visit as well. Ted considers that Lily humping him may be a reverse parent thing, but then considers that he might be blind to the truth of something else. What this is, he does not know.

In Chapter 6, Ted meets a man with the best tattoos he has ever seen at the supermarket. The man gives Ted the number of his tattoo guy, Kal, whom he says has a real philosophical approach. Ted decides he wants to get a tattoo of something meaningful relating to Lily, so he goes to see Kal. Kal can tell Ted is hesitant, so Ted notes that memorializing someone who isn't gone can seem like giving up. Kal says death always wins in the end, and that there is no shame in surrender when it is time to stop fighting. Kal takes out drawing paper and charcoal and begins to sketch the things Ted is feeling. With Ted's approval, Kal begins the tattooing.

In Chapter 7, Ted calls Trent in the middle of the night, waking him up to express to him his fears about Lily's death. Ted then brings Lily outside and lays down in the yard with her on a blanket. Ted explains they are creating a memory. Lily finds it a nice thing to do. Ted tells her they will soon be leaving on a great adventure, but he does not know where they will go.

Analysis

Rowley's argument that though one must be prepared for hard times one cannot live in fear of them is beginning to sink in with Ted. Ted is slowly coming around to acknowledging the truth of things, but it is a terrifying ordeal for him. Ted is holding onto hope however he can, including once again returning to memories of the past. However, Ted's acceptance comes in small ways, such as allowing Lily to take her time on her walks, knowing that such time may be limited; and in larger ways, such as the near-nervous breakdown he has while out shopping when he sees two dachshunds on leashes go by. The reader should also note the idea of Enclosed World Syndrome, at least as far it relates to Ted: Ted has been living in his own world, but is, ironically, emerging from his enclosed world just as Lily's own world is beginning to enclose.



While Ted is slowly coming to accept reality that Lily is facing life-or-death circumstances, he chooses in the end not to stop living because of it. He decides that rather than stay in and do nothing, he and Lily will go out and do something. He brings her to the beach, for example, in order to enjoy the beautiful weather and the sunlight. These sorts of things make Lily very happy not only because she is enjoying the outdoors but because she is with her beloved master. In accepting reality, Ted is continuing to relish the moments and the time that he has, which in turn allows him to spend more quality time with Lily. The fictionally-constructed attempt to scare off the octopus with inflatable sharks gives Lily the fun and freedom to attack the sharks, living in the moment herself.

When Ted goes to see Kal the tattooist to have a tattoo done in honor of Lily, Kal relates an important idea to Ted. At some point, one must know when to give up the fight. At some point, the fight becomes more harmful than helpful. Ted's recognition of this idea is another step in the direction of accepting reality—but for the moment, Ted is prepared to fight. At the moment, fighting is still more helpful than anything. This can be seen as a throwback to the thematic argument that though one must prepare for hard times, one cannot live in fear of them. Instead, Ted is fighting them.

Discussion Question 1

How is Ted beginning to prepare for the hard times ahead by accepting what may come? Why is he finally able to begin considering a life without Lily?

Discussion Question 2

Instead of consigning himself to Lily's fate, Ted decides that he and Lily must keep on living while they have the time. Why is this so?

Discussion Question 3

While Kal argues that, at some point fighting becomes more harmful than helpful, Ted doubles down and prepares to fight. Why do you believe this is so? Do you believe Kal's argument is ever valid? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

wherewithal, Enclosed World Syndrome, metastasizes, terms of endearment, repartee, impediments, frivolity, envious



Pages 189 – 240

Summary

As “Ink” continues with Chapter 8, Ted heads into Chinatown and seeks out octopus. He purchases a large octopus from a fishmonger. He then purchases a cleaver from the fishmonger. At home, Ted shows the octopus to the octopus on Lily’s head. The octopus on Lily’s head wants to know who the octopus Ted has is. Ted says the octopus he has is named Lily. The octopus on Lily’s head says he has an Aunt Lily. Ted laughs that he does not have such an aunt anymore and then begins chopping up the octopus and feeding it to Lily, who loves the taste. The octopus on her head says he feels sick because he, too, can taste the octopus. The octopus begs him to stop, but Ted refuses. He tells the octopus to leave, then declares he is the octopus now.

Part 5 is titled “The Pelagic Zone” and this section of the novel opens with a few lines of Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The Law for the Wolves” in which two packs of wolves go to war with each other for control of the trail in the jungle.

In “Fishful Thinking,” Ted packs for the trip over the course of several days, including everything from blankets, toys, and a lifejacket for Lily to sweaters and books for him. The octopus has disappeared and Lily’s sight has returned. Ted and Lily hope he is gone for good. Ted has secured the rental of a fishing trawler known as Fishful Thinking. Ted explains to the man who is renting them the boat that they are headed to the pelagic zone, which the owner recognizes is what the Greeks referred to as the open sea. Aboard the boat, Ted reassures Lily he has brought along her red ball.

In “The Old Lady and the Sea,” Ted and Lily reach the pelagic zone. Fifteen days out, they both go swimming. Ted explains that he and Lily are out hunting the octopus so that they may stay together. Ted contemplates what a future without Lily may be like, but instead says he is thinking about falling in love again. Lily assures him that he will.

In “Scar Light, Scar Bright, First Scar I See Tonight,” as Ted and Lily get ready for bed, Lily notices a scar under Ted’s chin. Lily explains she also still has a scar from her spinal surgery. Ted explains he has figurative scars on his heart from Jeffrey. Scars come by as a result of the things that have been done. Ted secretly worries that the octopus is karma for something he has done.

In “Midnight,” Ted wakes up from a nightmare in which he is punching Lily in the face telling her to die. He realizes he is drunk. He comes to wonder what he is doing out at sea, and wonders if he could ever forgive the octopus. Ted believes that some things are unforgivable, especially what the octopus is doing. Ted writes I KNOW YOU’RE OUT THERE as a message in a bottle, and throws the bottle out to sea.

In “The Squall,” a bad storm approaches. The engine of the boat stalls, and water is taken on. Ted goes back and forth between bailing water and making sure Lily is okay.



Lily points out a ship bearing down on them in the gloom. The ship pulls up alongside the Fishful Thinking, and Ted and Lily are invited over for a whaler's game. The owner of the other ship, a deep sea yacht, has a dog named Goldie who insists Lily come over. Ted explains that he is out searching for the octopus. The old captain of the yacht prepares dinner and explains he is out searching for spoils. The captain reports sighting the octopus three days before, not far from where they are now. Lily comes over to explain that Goldie is a fish. The captain says Lily must have a hurricane raging inside of her—something only Ted, Lily, and the octopus know about. It is then that Ted knows the octopus has found them.

In "The Hunt," Ted smashes a bottle to hold the octopus at bay. He sees that the bottle contains his message. The octopus-captain attempts to kill Lily, but Lily escapes. Ted attacks, costing the octopus one of his arms. He and Ted struggle and fight, knocking over a lantern and starting a fire. Ted wonders where the octopus's dog is, but then realizes the dog was merely a fish in dog form helping out the octopus. Lily appears with a noose and secures it around the neck of the octopus. With Lily's help, Ted manages to gain control of the octopus, but the octopus takes octopus form, slithers out of the noose, and escapes overboard.

In "Drowning," now overboard, the octopus transforms into a gigantic version of himself and attacks the yacht. Ted knows his and Lily's only chance is to make it back to their own boat. Ted fires a flare gun into the octopus, causing it to retreat, and allowing him and Lily the chance to return to their own boat. Ted manages to get the engines to start while Lily mans the harpoon gun. Lily manages to net the octopus while Ted hauls it up in the trawler. Ted then strangles the octopus, pulling the rope so hard his fingers break. Ted and Lily then head back to California.

Analysis

Ted's relationship with Lily continues to be demonstrated to be absolutely unique. Ted's final efforts to destroy the octopus—all wishful thinking—are metaphorically represented by his adventures on the Fishful Thinking. Consider the fact that wishful thinking/fishful thinking relates to Moby Dick and fish tales, meaning tales that are not true in turn but are represented by the fish tale spun by Ted regarding a battle with the octopus. All the wishful thinking in the world, however, cannot avoid the future—but in the wishful thinking itself, the future is overcome. Ted and Lily are victorious against the octopus.

Ted's efforts to be victorious over the octopus come in many ways, shapes, and forms throughout the novel. In his mind, Ted concocts fanciful stories of heroism and revenge—ranging from the Fishful Thinking to the hacking apart of an actual octopus with a cleaver. The reader should also bring together here the argument that there is no kind of a relationship like that between a person and a dog, and that sometimes, fighting does more harm than good. Ted's relationship with Lily is certainly unique, and so it only makes sense that he continues to fight—both in real life, and in his mind. However, in real life, Lily's tumor remains undefeated.



Once again, the reader will draw comparisons between Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Ted's *Fishful Thinking* adventure transcribed by Rowley. Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* is unable to overcome his white whale, which serves as an omen for Ted. Although Ted and Lily stream home in victory to California, there is no such victory for Captain Ahab. A story is a story. Ted's oceangoing adventure is nothing more than a story.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ted create such an elaborate story in order to deal with Lily's octopus? Why is Ted able to overcome the octopus in this elaborate story?

Discussion Question 2

What purpose does Ted's purchase of, and hacking apart of, an octopus serve? Is this an attempt by Ted to deal with reality, or is this a break from reality? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Ted's fanciful attempts to deal with the octopus –such as actually purchasing and hacking up an octopus to imagining a *Moby Dick*-like story –do more harm or more good to both Ted and Lily? Explain.

Vocabulary

exotic, fishmonger, nonplussed, piqued, irony, meticulously, stoically, accentuates, figurative, kerfuffle, bellows, pinioned



Pages 240 – 301

Summary

The next section of the novel is titled “Infinity” and here the chapters are delineated by the hours of the day.

In “8 A.M.,” when Ted looks down at Lily, the octopus has returned, her breathing is labored, and Ted knows it will be their last day together. Lily is very weak and Ted realizes that the octopus has already won. Ted knows the decision has already been made.

In “9 A.M.,” Ted pulls out his records on Lily—everything from her pedigree papers to her medical papers to her vet records. He calls the vet to see about euthanasia.

In “10 A.M.,” Ted wants to give Lily anything she wants, so he tells her she can even have the entire jar of peanut butter. Ted wonders what the point in living is when all that ever happens in the end is death.

In “11 A.M.,” Ted and Lily stand in the kitchen. Ted knows it is the last time she will ever see the kitchen.

In “Noon,” Ted and Lily arrive at the animal hospital. Ted explains the situation to the vet. The vet tells Ted he is making the compassionate decision. Ted begins crying, and thinks that the Fishful Thinking has capsized. The vet explains two drugs will be administered: one, an anesthesia to cause her to sleep and relieve all pain, the other to cause a cardiac arrest which will lead to death within thirty seconds. The first drug is administered and Lily falls asleep. Ted kisses and strokes Lily as the second drug is administered. Lily passes on. Ted is heartbroken and cries, never being able to remember the last time he cried so much. Ted tells Lily he will love her forever.

In “1 P.M.,” Ted calls Trent to let him know what has happened. Trent invites Ted over. They drink vodka, take valium, and watch TV until Ted falls asleep.

In “2 P.M.,” Ted dreams he is aboard the Fishful Thinking. Lily is alive and happy in his dream. Red balls begin to fall from the sky. They bury and suffocate Ted.

In “3 P.M.,” Trent awakens Ted from his nightmare. Ted begins to reflect on his own life and on the idea that he has not really been living. He knows dogs do not play Monopoly, and he wonders how much of his time with Lily was a construct to mask his own loneliness. Ted cannot understand how he can have a family with Jeffrey and Lily and then have no family at all, or why everyone eventually goes away.

In “4 P.M.,” Trent orders pizza. Trent’s dog, Weezie, keeps them company. Ted wonders why, back at the vet, he simply did not pick up Lily and run away. Ted wonders if Lily remembered the past as she passed away.



In “5 P.M.,” Trent discovers that Ted has brochures with him—everything from bereavement counseling to pet cremation. A letter is among the brochures, telling Ted he has until Monday to decide what to do with Lily. Ted does not believe in God or the afterlife and does not need any keepsakes or ashes to remember Lily by.

In “9 P.M.,” Jeffrey calls Ted that night after learning from a text from Ted about Lily’s death. Jeffrey reflects fondly on Lily, but he and Ted also use the call to bring about closure.

In “11 P.M.,” at home, Ted continues to feel lonely and devastated. He takes a long hot shower. He wonders how Friday will be without Lily to play Monopoly. Ted becomes angry that Lily is no longer around, which causes more sadness and restlessness.

The final section of the novel is titled “Three Hearts” and contains one chapter titled “August.”

It has been a month since Lily died. Ted goes out on a date with a man named Byron he has met online. Byron is kind and outgoing and reminds Ted of Lily. Ted is glad to learn that Byron loves dogs. Ted dwells on the lessons Lily has taught him, such as living in the moment and giving spontaneous affection. Ted notes that octopuses have three hearts. Byron asks what Ted means by this, to which Ted explains he lost someone very close to him very recently. Ted can imagine Lily telling him one month is enough time to be sad. Ted takes Byron’s hand, the two go on a walk, and Ted begins telling the story of Lily.

Analysis

There is no kind of relationship like that between a person and a dog Rowley concludes as his novel comes to a close. Ted must face the utterly heartbreaking decision to put Lily to sleep since nothing can be done for her tumor. Indeed, Ted finally accepts the octopus for what it is: a tumor and not an octopus. He recognizes that he has been more harmful than helpful to Lily at least as of late, for they have gone past the point when fighting is actually helpful. As the vet notes of Ted’s decision, he has made the compassionate choice. Lily could live and suffer until she dies, or Lily can be put to sleep and be done with pain.

Ted is rightfully and understandably devastated when Lily is put to sleep. He has just lost his other half, and has lost the primary form of unconditional love, loyalty, and support he has in his life. Ted will be able to draw upon his life with Lily in the future, for he will be able to draw upon important and consequential memories that will stay with him forever. This, however, does not make things any easier for Ted to deal with. It is a hard time that has taught Ted an important lesson: though one must be prepared for hard times, one cannot live in fear of them. The tough time comes all the same. Nothing could be done for Lily.

Apart from wonderful memories, Lily’s lasting impression on Ted’s life comes by way of the lessons she has taught him. Ted himself directly acknowledges this. Two of the most



important lessons she has taught him—to show spontaneous affection and to live in the moment—Ted now applies in his own life. Out on a date with Byron, Ted does not hesitate to enjoy himself and does not hesitate to express affection through holding Byron's hand. Indeed, what is poignant is that Ted begins to tell Byron about Lily as Byron has appeared in Ted's life just after Lily has disappeared. There is a sense of continuity here as one love lost means another will be found. This is expressed symbolically in the three hearts of the octopus: one main heart, being Ted's, and the other two hearts, one being Lily's and the other being Byron's.

Discussion Question 1

What finally compels Ted to decide to put Lily to sleep? How does Ted feel about this decision? Why? How do others feel about the decision? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What important lessons has Lily taught Ted that he now employs in the present with Byron? Why are these lessons so important? Why does Ted decide to live by them?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ted decide to go out on a date with Byron? Why does Ted choose to use his time on the date to tell Byron about Lily?

Vocabulary

euthanasia, ambles, normalcy, ferocity, inequitable, spontaneous



Characters

Ted

Edward “Ted” Flask is the narrator and protagonist of the novel *Lily and the Octopus*. A single, gay man who is forty-two years of age and the owner of Lily, Ted is still reeling from his breakup eighteen months before with Jeffrey. Ted has been avoiding life, taking comfort in Lily, and fearing the future. When Lily develops a tumor, Ted is both horrified and angered, vowing to do whatever it takes to save Lily. A series of fanciful constructs and imaginings in which Ted replaces the tumor with an octopus enable Ted to help deal with the situation (in addition to his therapist). As Lily’s life runs down, Ted remembers his past with Lily and takes to heart the lessons that Lily has taught him—including giving spontaneous affection and living in the moment. When at last Ted is forced to put Lily to sleep, he is devastated. He takes comfort in his memories with Lily and puts to good use the lessons she has taught him when he begins dating Byron.

Lily

Lily is Ted’s dog. At twelve and-a-half years old, Lily is a sweet, loving, and loyal dachshund. Lily develops a tumor in the weeks preceding the novel’s beginning, noticed by Ted only as the novel begins. Lily, who has been Ted’s companion for more than a decade, loves the time she spends with Ted, loves living in the moment, and loves the affection that she and Ted show one another. Lily struggles through the tumor, including experiencing seizures and temporary blindness, until Ted at last decides enough is enough, and puts Lily to sleep.

The octopus

The octopus, as a character, is a fictionalized and animalized version of Lily’s tumor created by Ted as an arch-nemesis squeezing the life out of Lily. The octopus is diabolical, evil, and utterly cruel to Lily. The octopus defies Ted and Lily, vowing to continue to squeeze the life out of Lily. In Ted’s Fishful Thinking construct, the octopus is destroyed. In real life, Ted’s disguising Lily’s tumor as an octopus ultimately gives way to reality when the sad truth about Lily can no longer be avoided.

Trent

Trent is Ted’s longtime best friend. Former roommates who get together frequently to drink and do valium, Trent comes to support and comfort Ted through his struggles with Lily. It is Trent who especially helps Ted deal with Lily’s death after Ted has Lily put to sleep.



Jeffrey

Jeffrey is Ted's ex-boyfriend. Younger and selfish, Jeffrey cheated on Ted numerous times during their six-year relationship until Ted broke up with Jeffrey. Jeffrey blames Ted's lack of commitment for his infidelity. At the end of the novel, Jeffrey calls Ted to offer his condolences about Lily's death, but also to finally bring about closure with Ted.

Meredith

Meredith is Ted's very tall sister. Meredith marries a Chinese man named Franklin in San Francisco on a whim. She asks Ted to attend, to which Ted agrees. Ted, however, would not have attended the wedding had Lily's spinal surgery gone wrong, demonstrating that Ted values his dog over his sister, and demonstrating just how much Ted loves Lily.

Ted's mom

Ted's mom is a sweet and supportive woman who frequently attempts to get Ted to come visit, even though Ted does not. Ted's mom makes sure to call Ted frequently to stay in touch. She also sends him a thousand dollars—all she can spare—when Lily needs a back operation.

Jenny

Jenny is Ted's therapist. Blunt and straight to the point, Jenny challenges Ted about his life and the way he is living his life. She also comes to offer him perspective on Lily's coming death, saying it is normal and natural to pre-mourn a loved one's loss.

Vets

The vets who tend to Lily are kind but direct. They explain the treatments and options available to Ted and Lily regarding the tumor. A female vet comes to be the one who puts Lily to sleep, reassuring Ted that he is doing the compassionate thing.

The captain

The captain of the deep-sea yacht encountered by Ted out on the ocean during his construct of hunting the octopus is secretly the octopus itself in disguise. The captain takes on the disguise to lure Ted and Lily into a false sense of comfort before striking. The captain, upon transforming back into the octopus, is subdued by Ted and Lily, with Ted strangling the octopus to death.



Symbols and Symbolism

The octopus

The octopus that Ted discovers clinging to Lily's head is symbolic of undeniable burdens that people (and Lily) carry, is symbolic of Ted refusing to face the truth, and is symbolic of impending death. Such burdens may include the pain of old age (as in Lily's case with the tumor), fear of an unknown future, heartbreak from the past, and so on (as in Ted's case). In reality, the octopus is a tumor that Ted refuses to call a tumor in the hopes that he can avoid the truth about what the tumor could actually mean for Lily. He is in denial and cannot accept the truth. He likens the tumor to an octopus because, like an octopus, the tumor is squeezing the life out of Lily.

Monopoly

Monopoly is the game that Ted and Lily play on Friday nights, and represents Ted's loneliness. Ted prefers to spend his evenings in with Lily rather than going on. Ted does not actually play Monopoly with Lily, but pretends that he does. This is a construct which masks Ted's loneliness.

Red ball

Lily's favorite toy is a red ball, which symbolizes happiness for Lily and heartache for Ted. Lily is happiest not only when she is spending time with Ted, but when she is playing with her red ball as well. Ted has a dream about being suffocated by a downpour of Lily's red balls, which in turn symbolizes Ted's heartache over Lily's death.

“Funeral Blues”

“Funeral Blues” is a poem by W.H. Auden which recounts a funeral that Ted sometimes reflects on relating to sad times. Whenever Ted grieves, he reflects on the poem, having learned it by heart in college. This is especially true when it comes to Lily. The poem includes a line about stopping the dog from barking with a juicy bone. Ted realizes that he himself may have to be the one to stop Lily from barking—from being in pain—by putting her to sleep.

Inflatable sharks

Inflatable sharks are purchased by Ted as a fictionally-constructed way to try to deal with the octopus on Lily's head. Ted hopes the sharks will scare away the octopus. The octopus is unmoved. Lily, however, is thrilled with the toys and spends an afternoon



jumping on them and popping them. This makes Ted happy because it reminds him that there is still life and vitality in Lily.

Cleaver

A fish cleaver is purchased from a Chinese fishmonger when Ted purchases an octopus from the same fishmonger in Chinatown. Ted brings the cleaver and the octopus back to his apartment. There, he hacks apart the octopus and feeds it to Lily in the hopes that the octopus on Lily will give up and leave. In Ted's fictionalized version of life, this is exactly what occurs.

Thanksgiving dinner

Thanksgiving dinner is prepared by Ted in June with the primary intent of showing thanks for and feeding Lily, and represents his unfolding acceptance of the situation. Ted has come to accept that there may not be a November for Lily, so for the time being, he will ensure she gets to enjoy a Thanksgiving dinner. The dinner goes wonderfully. Ted invites Trent over to partake, and Lily is thrilled to have such delicious food.

Fishful Thinking

Fishful Thinking is the name of the fishing trawler which Ted leases to hunt down the octopus in his fictional construct of reality, and represents wishful thinking. Fishful Thinking doubles for the term wishful thinking, but also references Moby Dick and fish tales. This referencing bears in meaning tales that are not true, which are in turn represented by the fish tale spun by Ted regarding a battle with the octopus as a fictional way to deal with Lily's problem.

Three hearts

An octopus has three hearts, and these hearts come to symbolize the three hearts in Ted's own life. In some ways, Ted himself becomes the octopus because he causes Lily some pain by keeping her alive. With Lily gone, Ted as the octopus is also gone—but he realizes he still has three hearts. The main heart is his own, while the secondary hearts belong to Lily and Byron, respectively. Altogether, they provide a single form and a sense of continuity in Ted's own life. Ted has lost his beloved dog, but he may have just gained a great love in Byron.

Lessons

The lessons that Lily teaches Ted, Ted comes to apply in his own life both in honor of Lily and in memory of her. These lessons include things such as showing spontaneous

affection and remembering to live in the moment. Ted applies these lessons in particular toward the beginning of what appears to be a relationship with Byron, choosing to enjoy the date and choosing to hold Byron's hand.



Settings

Los Angeles

Los Angeles, California, is where Ted and Lily live, and where Ted works from home. Los Angeles is considered a city full of life in the novel, which proves to be a stark contrast to the decline and death of Lily. Ted and Lily go for walks throughout Los Angeles prior to her death. The day after Ted's June Thanksgiving, he goes shopping, only to nearly suffer a panic attack when he sees two dachshunds go by on a leash while thinking only of Lily.

Chinatown

Chinatown is located in Los Angeles. Ted travels to Chinatown's fish market in order to purchase an octopus. After purchasing an octopus, Ted returns to his apartment where he seeks to use the octopus from Chinatown to frighten away Lily's octopus by hacking it apart.

The Pelagic Zone

The Pelagic Zone is what the ancient Greeks called the open sea, and this is where Ted and Lily travel on a voyage to hunt down and kill the octopus. The Pelagic Zone is really a fictionalized construct in Ted's mind of vanquishing Lily's problem. It also illustrates his greatest detachment from, and refusal to face, the reality of Lily's situation.

The vet

The vet is where Ted brings Lily multiple times throughout the novel, each time for different reasons. Ted brings Lily to the vet when Lily is unable to walk and needs surgery. Ted brings Lily to the vet several times regarding her tumor and treatment options. Ted finally brings Lily to the vet to be put to sleep. Ted is heartbroken as a result, and breaks down in tears at the vet.

San Francisco

San Francisco is where Meredith's fiancé's family live, and is the city in which she is married. Meredith invites Ted to San Francisco to her wedding, but at the same time, Lily ends up needing surgery. Ted nearly does not go to San Francisco, refusing to leave until he knows that Lily is all right. In San Francisco, Ted enjoys his time with his sister and new family but looks forward to getting back to Lily.

Themes and Motifs

The unique relationship between a dog-owner and a dog

There is no relationship like that between a person and a dog argues Steven Rowley in his novel *Lily and the Octopus*. The bond between people and dogs is a special kind of bond, in which love, loyalty, and affection are freely and unconditionally given to one another. Happiness and companionship are found in such a relationship because each is wholly accepting of the other.

Ted has owned Lily for most of her life. She is his constant companion and the two spend as much time as they can together. Their time together is so valuable to Ted that he even works out a schedule for spending time with Lily: for example, eating pizza on Sundays and playing Monopoly on Friday nights. Ted and Lily accept and love one another for who the other is. Even simple things like watching movies and going for walks together mean the world to Ted and Lily. As a result, the loyalty between them is immense.

The love and loyalty between the two can be seen on clear display when, five years before the novel takes place, Lily needs emergency back surgery. Ted is willing to miss his own sister's wedding to make sure that Lily is alright. Only when Lily comes through the surgery and is given excellent chances of full recovery does Ted decide to travel to San Francisco for the wedding. The love and loyalty can also be seen in Lily cuddling with and comforting Ted whenever Ted is down, and Ted doing the same for Lily when he discovers the octopus.

The strength of the relationship between Ted and Lily can be seen in Lily's final weeks. Ted's difficulties in accepting that Lily will not see the autumn are manifested in everything from his refusing to call Lily's tumor what it is to concocting a story in his mind about going out on a sea voyage with Lily in order to defeat the metaphorical representation of Lily's tumor. When Lily must be put to sleep, Ted is absolutely devastated and reels for weeks afterward.

Sometimes, fighting is more harmful than helpful

Sometimes, putting up a fight is more harmful than helpful. When Ted learns that Lily has a tumor, he is determined to do whatever is needed in order to save Lily. Ted struggles with accepting that Lily cannot be helped for weeks—and only belatedly comes to realize that he is doing Lily more harm than good by fighting when it is too late.

To be sure, one must always fight. Rowley clearly concedes this in the efforts that Ted undertakes to take care of Lily at first, and to deal with the tumor. Initially, Ted draws on



memories of taking Lily to the vet to have her back fixed so that she could walk again. This memory steels Ted in the present as he is determined once again to help Lily.

At the vet, Ted and Lily are given a variety of options for dealing with the tumor. These include surgery, medicines, and chemotherapy. Each has their risks and side effects, but given Lily's advanced age, surgery is deemed to be too dangerous. All conceivable methods fail to get rid of the tumor, but still Ted carries on, hoping that he will find a way to deal with the tumor.

As Ted comes to learn through Kal the tattooist, sometimes fighting does more harm than good. Ted comes to realize that through fighting to keep Lily alive, he has been hurting her because it is Lily who has had to deal with the side effects of the tumor. Ted then realizes that he has become the octopus, so to speak, and decides the best thing to do would be to put Lily to sleep. The vet confirms that Ted has made the compassionate choice.

The lessons dogs teach people

Dogs teach people all kinds of important lessons the author asserts. Ted himself notes later in the novel that he has learned immense and invaluable lessons from Lily. As a result, and in honor of Lily, Ted will put these lessons to good use in his own life.

The lessons that Ted learns, though immense and invaluable, are also simple. For example, even when Lily is having a bad day she is able to enjoy the good things she still has in life. Struggling with the tumor, she comes to value the afternoon of attacking inflatable sharks. She comes to value time with Ted and time spent playing with her red ball all the more.

Ted also learns from Lily that the moment should always be lived in. While the past and the future matter, they should not take away from the present. Dealing with a tumor, Lily still revels in the moment at hand with Ted. At the same time, Lily teaches Ted that it is not a bad thing to show spontaneous affection. Lily is happy to cuddle with, lick, and nuzzle Ted no matter when.

When Ted comes to date Byron, he decides to put Lily's lessons to good use. He is willing to hold Byron's hand and enjoy the moment because of Lily. He imagines Lily telling him that he must live out these lessons, and that one month since her death is long enough to be have been sad. Despite the sadness of Lily's death, Ted focuses on the good things he still has in his life, and the good things that have just come to his life, such as Byron.

Memories are immensely powerful things

Steven Rowley explores the power of memories in Lily and the Octopus through Ted's recollections of the past. He also comes to focus on important parts of the present in order to create memories that he will have for the rest of his life.



When Lily's tumor appears, Ted vows to do whatever it takes to get rid of it. He reflects on a time five years ago when Lily was unable to walk due to a spinal injury. He remembers how taking Lily to the vet managed to save her life. Ted draws comfort from this memory and seeks to repeat it in the present.

Ted also draws on many other memories through the novel to take comfort and remember better times. He remembers how he came to purchase Lily, when Lily broke away from her brothers and sisters to come and say hello to him. He also focuses on making important memories in the present, such as laying out with Lily in the yard on a blanket to watch the stars in the middle of the night.

When Ted must put Lily to sleep, all he has anymore are the memories of Lily. These are bittersweet, for they are comforting because Ted finds love, happiness, and familiarity in them. These are also saddening because Ted will never have Lily to make new memories with again. But the memory of Lily and the things she has taught him help Ted to better live in the present. These memories and lessons allow him to go back out into the world and to try again for a social life, beginning with the first date with Byron. As the date continues, Ted decides to tell Byron all about Lily, drawing on memories of Lily to do so.

One must be prepared for difficulties but not live in fear of them

Though one must be prepared for hard times, one cannot live life in fear of them, argues Steven Rowley in his novel *Lily and the Octopus*. Hard times will happen to everyone at some point in their lives, no matter what. Some hard times are more difficult than others. But this does not mean one can live in fear of the future because hard times may be ahead. This is a lesson that Ted comes to learn through the course of the novel.

When the novel begins, Ted is not really living his life. Eighteen months out of a bad relationship, Ted is still emotionally struggling along. His dating life is essentially nonexistent. His social life consists of primarily one friend. Most of his free time is spent with Lily. Ted's fear of the unknown of the future, and of hard times to come, prevent him from stepping back out in the world and living.

When Ted discovers Lily has a tumor, he takes the opposite approach. He lives in denial of hard times at first, ignoring the problem to the point that he calls the tumor an octopus. He invents all sort of fictional conversations with the tumor in the hopes that he will manage to somehow will it away. He recalls good memories of times Lily pulled through medical emergencies to find comfort in Lily's present crisis. Ted's greatest denial of the problem comes through his *Moby Dick*-like adventure with Lily that he creates in his mind.

Slowly, Ted comes to accept reality as it is. His Thanksgiving dinner in June is his first acceptance that Lily may not be alive come November. Step by step, Ted begins to accept the truth of things: that Lily probably won't survive. At last, Ted must accept the



truth that Lily will need to be put to sleep. As Jenny notes, Ted has lately been pre-mourning the loss of Lily, a typical and normal thing—but it has prevented him from living a normal life out of fear of Lily’s death. Ted takes this lesson to heart, and vows not to worry so much about the future once Lily has gone.



Styles

Point of View

Lily and the Octopus is related from the first-person reflective perspective from the point of view of the main character, Ted Flask. The novel is essentially Ted's recounting of his life with Lily, and in particular, the final weeks of Lily's life. Because only Ted can tell the story of Lily's final days, it is fitting that Ted himself actually tell the story. Ted relates, in great detail, the struggles and moments of happiness in those final weeks. The first-person narrative mode also matters greatly in that Ted is not an open character: he is very closed around other people, so only the reader gains unfiltered and unrestricted access to Ted's deepest thoughts, fears, and emotions. Only by the end of the novel, as Ted reflects on the past with Lily, does he finally decide to open up to someone, with this someone being Byron. He begins to tell Byron about Lily, with the idea that everything that has come before Ted dating Byron in the present are the memories that Ted is recalling and reflecting in the novel.

Language and Meaning

Steven Rowley relates his novel *Lily and the Octopus* in language that is simple and sentimental. Ted is an average American who is educated and lives a relatively normal life. His simple life is reflected by his simple language. However, Ted's purpose in the novel is to reflect on the final weeks of Lily's life and the time he spends with Lily. Because the novel deals with such a heartrending subject as the end of the life of a dog, the language quickly assumes a very gentle, sentimental tone, which is in turn evocative of just how much Ted loves Lily. The simplicity and sentimentality of the language in turn allows the author to communicate his thoughts, feelings, and themes very clearly without having to dress them up. Consider how, in "The Octopus" on page 7, Ted sums up very succinctly—but lovingly—the best thing about dogs: "The very best thing about dogs is how they just know when you need them most, and they'll drop everything that they're doing and sit with you awhile." Or consider how, in the chapter "Sunday, 4:37 A.M.," on page 37, Ted's fears—fears that all readers who own dogs have shared at one time or another—that Lily may have died in the night, and the relief that comes after: "I put my hands on Lily's chest. Nothing. I press down harder while my own heart stops. And then it comes, the familiar rise and fall of her muscled torso. She's still here. She's okay." Finally, consider how Ted's declaration (on page 211 of the chapter "The Old Lady and the Sea") of needing to fight as the best possibility that he and Lily will not be forced apart: "It's the best chance we have of staying together."

Structure

Steven Rowley divides his novel into several large parts, with each part subdivided into chapters. Each part covers a specific expanse of time in the novel, and each chapter



therein covers the events, circumstances, and situations within that point of time. For example, the part “The Invertebrate: Five Years Earlier” deals with Lily’s ruptured spinal disc and Ted’s desperation to have Lily undergo surgery to save her life. Likewise, the titles of parts and chapters deal with the contents of those parts and chapters. For example, the first “Monday” chapter in the part “Suction” sees Ted bringing Lily to the vet on Monday, while the chapter “The Old Lady and the Sea” features Ted and Lily heading out to sea to do battle with the octopus, much the way that Hemingway’s old man went out to sea in his novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. The novel itself follows a pattern of Ted reflecting on recent events with Lily leading up to her being put to sleep. The novel is arranged in such a way so that everything Ted has reflected on leads up to his dating Bryon and telling Byron about Lily, where in turn the novel begins all over again.



Quotes

It's when Lily suggests offhandedly we also include Chris Pratt that I notice the octopus. It's not very often you see an octopus up close, let alone in your living room, let alone perched on your dog's head like a birthday party hat, so I'm immediately taken aback.
-- Ted Flask ("The Octopus")

Importance: When discussing the attractiveness of actors with Lily on Thursday night, Ted notices there is an octopus clinging to Lily's head like a hat. Ted has no idea how he could not have noticed the octopus before. He realizes the octopus is a burden to Lily, who explains it only hurts sometimes. The octopus symbolizes burdens in life. Lily's current burden is old age.

The very best thing about dogs is how they just know when you need them most, and they'll drop everything that they're doing and sit with you awhile.
-- Ted Flask ("The Octopus")

Importance: Ted speaks here about the wonders of owning dogs, including that they just know when people are not doing well and need some comfort. Ted realizes that in the present time, he can be there for Lily just as Lily has always been there for him. There is immense comfort in just simple touch, and Ted cuddles up with Lily to give her kindness and warmth.

I have to be better about living in the not knowing.
-- Ted Flask ("Friday Afternoon")

Importance: Ted goes to see his therapist, Jenny, who encourages him to date and pursue a romantic relationship with one guy that Ted seems to really like. Ted has refused to date this guy because he is not sure how the guy feels about him. Ted comes to realize he has been moving through life like the octopus, seen but not seen, with the octopus representing a fear of the unknown. Ted vows to stop living life in fear of what he does not know.

It. Cannot. Have. Her.
-- Ted Flask ("Friday Evening")

Importance: Ted gets together with his old friend, Trent, and explains the octopus situation. He also explains that Lily has a vet appointment on Monday morning. Trent asks how old Lily is, but Ted vows he will not allow the octopus to have Lily. In other words, Trent is being realistic regarding Lily's age and her health, while Ted is being optimistic and loyal, determined that the octopus—old age—will not take Lily.

I put my hands on Lily's chest. Nothing. I press down harder while my own heart stops. And then it comes, the familiar rise and fall of her muscled torso. She's still here. She's okay.
-- Ted Flask ("Sunday, 4:37 A.M.")



Importance: Ted wakes up panicked that Lily has been killed by the octopus. He feels for her to ensure that she is still breathing, panicked that she has died in the night. Ted is relieved that Lily is still breathing and still alive.

The hard work of healing begins.
-- Ted Flask ("The Vow")

Importance: Prior to attending his sister's wedding, Ted must take Lily to the vet for back surgery so that she will be able to walk again. Ted spends most of the trip to his sister's wedding thinking about Lily. As the wedding ends, he knows that he must now return home to help Lily recover. It will be a long road, but it will be worth it.

Why can't you focus on getting the octopus to leave and prepare yourself for the possibility that he may not?
-- Jenny ("Friday")

Importance: Ted goes to his usual therapist appointment with Jenny, where he finally tells her about Lily and the octopus. Jenny believes that Ted is both preparing to get rid of the octopus, but also preparing himself that the octopus may not be able to be removed. Ted is grieving without realizing he is grieving—demonstrating just how terrified of the situation he rightfully is. Jenny explains it is natural to begin grieving the loss of a loved one before it happens.

Dammit, Jenny. I am in mourning. That much is clear to me now... There may not be a November.
-- Ted Flask ("Sunday")

Importance: Ted makes a Thanksgiving dinner in June for himself, Lily, and Trent. Ted explains he is thankful for his family, but above all for Lily. Ted recognizes, as he says this, that his therapist, Jenny, was correct to say he is already in mourning. He realizes that there may not be a November to celebrate Thanksgiving with Lily.

I AM THE OCTOPUS NOW!
-- Ted Flask (chapter 8)

Importance: As Lily becomes blinded by the octopus and suffers additional seizures, Ted pulls out all the stops. He purchases an octopus from the fish market in Chinatown, then proceeds to hack up the octopus in front of Lily's octopus, then feeds the hacked-up octopus to Lily. Lily's octopus begs Ted to stop. Ted tells the octopus he has until that night to leave, or else. In so doing, Ted realizes he has become the octopus, the one in charge, the one who will bend others to his will.

It's the best chance we have of staying together.
-- Ted Flask ("The Old Lady and the Sea")

Importance: Ted and Lily head out to sea onboard the Fishful Thinking in order to hunt



down the octopus. The octopus has temporarily left Lily, leading to Ted's desire to destroy the octopus so that he and Lily might be together. Ted will do whatever it takes to make this happen.

The decision is already made.

-- Ted Flask ("8 A.M.")

Importance: The octopus returns with a vengeance, making Lily very weak and very much in pain. Ted realizes that it will be their last day together. He knows the octopus has won. He only has one choice left to make. He calls the vet to arrange euthanasia.

I begin the story of Lily.

-- Ted Flask ("August")

Importance: Ted goes out on a date with a man named Byron he has met online. Ted puts to use good lessons learned from Lily, such as showing spontaneous affection – and holds Byron's hand. Ted reveals he has lost someone very close to him very recently, and Byron asks to hear about it. Ted then begins telling the story of Lily.