The M.D.: A Horror Story Short Guide

The M.D.: A Horror Story by Thomas M. Disch

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Contents

Characters

Billy, later William, is the protagonist, although in an interesting twist of the plot he turns out not to be the major figure in Mercury's schemes; he is, in fact, secondary. Normally well behaved, Billy opens the novel with an act of defiance when an aspect of his spiritual life is threatened—when Sister Symphorosa tries to ruin Christmas for her class by telling them that Santa Claus is a myth and that believing in him is a sin. Billy needs his spiritual life; his everyday life is unpleasant, lonely, and even frightful.

When Mercury offers him the power of the caduceus, he accepts it in the hope of avenging those who abuse him.

From first to last, he does not seem to fully understand one of the most important aspects of his power: That he cannot control it. He first creates a curse to hurt one person, only to have it fall on his brother Ned, whom he would not choose to hurt; Ned falls into a coma. Later, when angry at Henry, he places a curse on some leaves, declaring that the person who touched them would lose all his hair; he changes his mind and tries to burn the leaves, but a curse once made cannot be undone, and then his grandmother falls victim to the curse instead of Henry.

When he helps Sondra with her alcoholism, he drives her to suicide; typical of the novel's handling of ideas, alcoholism is not an absolute evil because in Sondra's case the affliction was actually helping her to survive an otherwise unbearable existence. Throughout the novel, William thinks himself smarter than he is, and he never fully foresees the consequences of his actions. In this, he represents the entire ethos of the novel and perhaps its principal idea: Every action has consciences, and when people choose to do evil, the consequences can extend far beyond their intentions—the evil they do rules them, not the other way around.

Mercury makes infrequent appearances, but his influence is felt throughout the narrative; eventually Disch reveals that the events of the novel were planned out by Mercury in advance. Even so, a point crucial to the success of the novel and the logical culmination of its themes is that not even Mercury fully understands the consequences of his own evil; his triumph of murderous insanity, Judge, chooses a direction away from Mercury. Although Mercury can manifest himself in many forms, his accounting of himself as one of the Ancient Greek gods seems literal within the context of the novel. The caduceus is Mercury's symbol; for the Ancient Greeks, it represented knowledge; in the modern world, it symbolizes the medical profession. Mercury was, as Disch points out, the god of thieves and criminals, who would pray to him for success in their crimes. He was also a mischievous god, playing pranks on both gods and humans. He is thus a good representative of the confused mixing of good and evil that is fundamental to Disch's view of human experience: He represents knowledge as well as criminality, and his pranks can be either good or evil. His motivations in the novel are not as clear as they might be, but then again he is a spiritual mystery whose actions may shape numerous events unseen; the novel's conclusion suggests that he is trying to create a

perfect human instrument for his power, so that he may rule humanity as the dominant god.

The novel is well populated with lesser characters who disappear and reappear as needed. Lyman, an object of racism and of Billy's revenge, as well as a thieving bully, becomes a goodhearted minister; his encounter with Billy seems to have had a contrary effect: Instead of pursuing a life of greed and cruelty, the events have influenced him to take a profound stock of his spiritual life, and as a grownup, he tries to do good. He also presents an idea common to Disch's fiction: Goodness is no protection against evil.

Lyman's evil deeds resulted in his having evil inflicted upon him; his later efforts to do good still result in terrible evil being visited upon him. Disch takes this idea a bit further than before by suggesting through Lyman and other secondary characters that the key issue is spiritual; whatever evil is done upon him, Lyman's spirit is probably saved by his contrition and goodness.

Disch creates a hierarchy of characterization in the novel. Mercury is echoed in William: Each seeks through hidden means to dominate their chosen realms.

Both Mercury and William are echoed in Judge, the monster who mixes religious fervor and murderous evil in almost pure forms, much as mercury and William mix religion and evil. Even among briefly appearing characters, there are echoes: For instance, Sgt. Janet Beale is like William; both belong to do-gooder professions, and both defile their professions by their greed and their amoral disregard for the well being of others. Lyman, Henry, Ben, and Judith also each echo the others: They are caught up in events that they only are dimly aware of, and each tries to become good, and each suffers greatly for misunderstanding the consequences of their actions.

Social Concerns

In The M.D., Thomas Disch examines the modern American family, schools, religion, and the medical profession.

Divorces and remarriages have generated an extended family of biological parents, step parents, half-siblings, and step-siblings; often the step-relatives are kinder and more loving than the biological ones.

As the narrative evolves, home becomes a vague concept; it varies according to how young Billy, the central character, is moved among his relatives. The confused family life serves to exacerbate William's antisocial outlook, enhancing his feelings of persecution and making him eager to find some order in his disordered life. He is easily seduced by Mercury's promises of power.

School is a frightful place, populated by bullies and cruel teachers, as well as students who seem indifferent to the suffering of others. Disch begins his tale by introducing Sister Mary Symphorosa, a sadistic kindergarten teacher who believes hitting children solves just about any problem they may present. She is delighted to inform her students that Santa Claus does not exist and that it is sinful to believe that he does; this will ruin Christmas for many of the youngsters, a prospect that pleases her.

That Billy attends a church school ties the issues that evolve out of his confrontation with Sister Symphorosa into the religious themes of the novel. Like school, religion can be frightening; like family life, it can be confusing. Sister Symphorosa portrays Santa Claus as part of pagan beliefs, yet he is also a person who really lived and is a saint in the Catholic faith—is he pagan and false or Christian and true?

Mercury plays on the confusion by presenting himself to Billy in the form of Santa Glaus. Billy, who clings to his belief in Santa Claus in order to have something in his life that is steady and reliable, finds Mercury's promises of power and simplicity appealing and the step from Santa Claus to pagan god is easy. This social theme creates a complex view of religion that is expanded upon as the plot develops. There are good sisters at the church school, as well as bad ones; there are good ministers as well as bad ones, and religious faith ultimately keeps Judge one step from damnation. Religion is a powerful shaper of the lives of the characters: The bully Lyman becomes a somewhat confused but good minister, trying to expunge his sins by ministering to the spiritual needs of people; on the other hand, a television ministry with a fictional figure as its leader indoctrinates the simple-minded into a bitter, closedminded faith in which people are easily consigned to hell. None of this is presented as simply as it is, here; Disch does his best job yet of trying to show how religious faith can be both beneficial and insidious—even the small-minded, crazed, murdering Judge is somehow able to draw on a debased version of Christianity to defy great evil.

Of the other social concerns touched on in the novel, the medical profession stands out, although it is not the central concern of the novel, in spite of the tide.

Billy grows up to be William, and William has taken his childhood fascination with how the human body works to its logical conclusion and has become a medical doctor. But he is not a physician devoted to the needs of his patients; his childhood wish for power has matured into a wish to dominate his profession. His goal is to acquire money and influence, and his supernatural powers enable him to take his desire into ghastly extremes. Becoming a physician when AIDS has become a dominant concern in the medical profession, he cures so many victims of AIDS that his success leads to acquiring government money for more research and high stature in society. However, in order to preserve life, he must take it: He has no Godlike power to create what was not already there, so whatever he does, life and death must remain in balance.

Therefore, he creates ARVIDS, Acute Random Vector Immune Disorder Syndrome, a plague he unleashes so that he may always have a surplus of power for his caduceus, the power of which he uses for healing those with AIDS. What William becomes is an exaggerated representative of a modern aspect of medical practice: The physician who is in the profession for the money and the glory, not the healing. He has a way of outcompeting rivals for research grants and builds his career atop those grants.

Techniques

One of the outstanding characteristics of The M.D. is its prose style, which is fluid, graceful, even seductive: He did not finish his threat, for he had taken the caduceus into his bleeding hand and at once a tremor passed through his body, like a wind moving through him, an electric wind that tore at the tissues of his body, twisting and reordering atom and molecule, shattering the crystal lattices of the DNA as a greater wind might shatter the windows of a house, and ever, as it moved through the lymph and in the muscles and along the veins and arteries, gathering new force, wreaking new destruction, inflicting new pain, pain so unimaginable that simply from the wonder of it Ned could not have spoken.

Note how the prose flows as dynamically as does the action, as well as the metaphors such as "electric wind." Disch's prose is like poetry, richly dense with striking images that carry both ideas and action at the same time.

The novel has many of the trappings of typical horror fiction. There is a mad scientist (William), tormented grotesques (Bubby, Ned, Lyman, Judge), tampering with spiritual matters that were best left alone, and gore and entrails. Like a vampire, William sucks the life out of living things in order to give life to the dead and dying; the elm trees are a symbol of the undead. Like Victor Frankenstein, William tampers with the wellsprings of life. Like the Invisible Man, he madly schemes against his enemies, unaware that he is in fact the ultimate victim of his own actions; note how William finds himself in one of the concentration camps he helped create and how he is destroyed by his evil, unaware until the end that he was not Mercury's special chosen one.

Important to note is how Disch includes these and other trappings of horror fiction and then turns them topsyturvy, showing their absurdity and then using that absurdity to advance his themes. For instance, Billy uses his caduceus to curse some candy, making some thieving children's teeth rot and fall out; this has the grotesque qualities of a horror story's revenge theme, but it is also silly, suggesting that the revenge is trivially cruel and that revenge in general may prove ultimately to be pointless. After all, one of the victims still manages to become a man of God. For another example, look at the novel's climactic fire.

Ned's stumbling is both horrible and ridiculous, and the person who sets matters right is a stupid, cruel madman.

There is no benevolent scientist driving a stake through a vampire's heart here; no romantic clash between the monster and his creator to be fought out on remote ice floes; The M.D. is closer to H. G. Wells's The Invisible Man (1897; see separate entry) with its satirical and pathetic conclusion. This is not to say that the novel and its ending are not serious in their presentation of themes. At the end, evil is confounded by its own foolish schemes and evil deeds are revealed, underneath all the narrative, as self-destructive idiocy.

Themes

Spirituality is the key to events throughout The M.D. Early on, Billy learns that he can see aspects of life that other people cannot; if he concentrates and looks just right, he can see a little of the spiritual world that is always active and infusing itself into human experience.

This makes him special, and for much of the novel it seems that this is why Mercury is drawn to him. But the spiritual realm is a complex place, and it turns out that Billy did not influence Mercury, that instead Mercury created Billy through generations of genetic manipulation. The point, here, is that the spiritual world can work on people in subtle, profound ways and it is mostly human vanity that makes William and others think that they are actually in control of their spiritual lives.

The complex way in which spirituality is worked out in the novel enriches it as a reading experience; no one has a simple spiritual life: For instance, William's complex family extends beyond the living to include the dead; Henry's spirit attempts to identify the source of his family's ills and to help them solve those ills.

Key Questions

Disch's fiction tends to be controversial and The M.D. features most of his fiction's controversial traits: a dark vision unrelieved by a happy ending; a satirical humor that lances cherished American values; and the depiction of the basest human motivations. That the novel offends some people and not others could be a good way to draw group members into a discussion of the novel's merits.

An element to pay particularly close attention to is the novel's language; how does Disch's beautiful prose affect his unpleasant subject? Another important element is the sense of humor: Why does Disch invite one to see the ridiculous in dark subjects such as bullying, theft, incest, racism, mental illness, hereditary diseases, AIDS, mass murder, and spiritual evil?

1. On Wings of Song, The Businessman, and Disch's short fiction of the 1980s and 1990s have focused on spiritual matters, consistently speculating on the relationship between human beings and spiritual life. Through these works, does Disch create a uniform vision of human spirituality? How does spirituality affect his characters; what does he imply about spirituality and how people interact with the world?

2. Disch's large canon of dark satire contrasts markedly with his more happy tales, mostly for younger readers. For instance, The Brave Little Toaster exalts love, loyalty, courage, and cleverness: It is a hopeful book. In addition, the short story "The Happy Turnip" celebrates the link to communion of life and uses dinner as a symbol of each individual human being's link both to family and to all life.

How do you account for this seeming divergence of attitude in Disch's fiction?

Why would the author of numerous bitter satires at midlife begin leavening his canon with works of hope and joy?

3. How does The M.D. deviate from traditional horror fiction? Is it a true horror novel, or does it use the trappings of horror fiction for another purpose?

4. What does Mercury hope to accomplish in the novel? How successful is he?

5. How insane is Judge? Why does he choose to die?

6. Is William the center of the events of the novel or only a means to an end?

7. Why must William take life in order to give life?

8. Why are human spirits not immortal? What makes them vulnerable? (Remember what happens to Henry's spirit.)

9. What is the vision of the afterlife in The M.D.? What is Disch saying about everyday life with his depiction of the interaction of humans and spirits?

10. Many characters perform evil deeds during the novel. Who of them is redeemed? Who is not? Do their fates have anything to do with how they lived their lives?

11. How do people define themselves and others in The M.D.? What roles do jobs, schools, age, and race play in how characters interact?

12. Why would Billy think that the motion picture Young Frankenstein (1974) was scarier than the 1931 motion picture Frankenstein?

Literary Precedents

Horror fiction is full of self-important cliches, making it a ripe target for selfparody and outright satire. The most famous satire is almost certainly The Invisible Man, in which a mad scientist spends his time trying to frighten villagers who either ignore him or think him annoying.

Both Griffin of The Invisible Man and William are only dimly aware of the personal consequences of their actions, and they share the delusion of being greater than they are, as well as the desire for revenge upon their enemies. Both The M.D. and The Invisible Man share as a common ancestor the greatest of all madscientist tales, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus (1818; see separate entry). Like William, Victor Frankenstein brings life to the dead, and as in The M.D. the deed brings with it great evil that visits itself on their families and friends. The pompous Frankenstein comes to learn the evil of his ways and tries to make amends; both Griffin and William remain trapped in their grandiose views of themselves. On the other hand, both Frankenstein and Griffin are victims of their societies, but William is a spiritual victim more than a social one. In The M.D., Billy watches the motion picture Frankenstein (1931), enjoying the monster's murder of the little girl; this simultaneously exhibits Billy's blossoming depravity and links The M.D. to Frankenstein.

Related Titles

Disch's The M.D. and The Businessman: A Tale of Terror (1984; see separate entry) are closely linked by themes and subject matter. The Businessman offers a more extensive view of the spirit world and how it interacts with the world of the living, and much of the plot flows from a conflict between good and evil spirits. As in The M.D., evil is portrayed as grotesque, debased, and downright stupid, and as in The M.D., literary conventions are turned topsy-turvy as it is the living who haunt the dead. The comedy in The Businessman is broader and plainer than in the M.D., although it too has satirical purpose, as when a statue of the Virgin Mary hops madly along in an effort to catch the elevator to Heaven.

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