More Die of Heartbreak Short Guide

More Die of Heartbreak by Saul Bellow

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Contents

Characters

To explore the spectrum of the happiness, frustration, grief, and trauma generated by the search for love, Bellow offers a whole gallery of characters, each of whom illuminates a section of that broad range of experiences and emotions. The narrator, Kenneth Trachtenberg (this name may be Bellow's joke; Stanley Trachtenberg is a leading critic of the novelist's works), is a professor of Russian literature. Raised in Paris, he has returned to America, perhaps out of a masochistic desire to see his dreams of culture and a decent life shattered for good, perhaps to be near his uncle, Benn Crader, and certainly to be out of the glare of his sexually spectacular father, Rudi, who effortlessly attracts, couples with, and dismisses women. Kenneth's father is what males would like to be sexually (because he has so many women) but whom males also hate (because while each imagines his own conquests as based on love, the evidence of such Don Juan types shows that love has nothing to do with sexual power). Rudi Trachtenberg accepts his sexual desirability as something completely natural, like having blue eyes, and does not confuse his attractiveness with feelings of love.

Kenneth Trachtenberg is the kind of hopeless schlemiel that is very familiar in American literature who imagines that he can unite the twin mysteries of sex and love and win a girl primarily through love.

Although Kenneth announces that he is telling the story of his uncle's disastrous romantic liaisons, it soon becomes clear to us, and from time to time, to Kenneth himself, that Kenneth is attracted to his uncle because Benn is another version of himself.

Kenneth's own love life is as botched as his uncle's. The one great love of his life is Treckie Sterling, the mother of his three-year-old daughter. Treckie finally ends her relationship with Kenneth in order to travel the west coast flea market circuit with a snowmobile enthusiast.

"Sterling," with its suggestion of purity, is ironic, for Treckie seems to have little integrity or even emotion, since she just accepts whatever comes along. When Kenneth ransacks her bathroom in a rage, she is not personally offended. She sees the rampage as a gesture and asks Kenneth if there is anything else he wants to destroy. Furthermore, although Kenneth is repelled by Treckie's fondness for rough sexual partners (a predilection revealed by the bruises on her legs to which Kenneth frequently refers), he fails to notice that he is attracted to her for mostly physical reasons, namely her petite size. His anger over the loss of his daughter seems more motivated by the insult to his pride than any feeling for the child.

The fact that Kenneth and Treckie never married reflects, not only her offhand approach to life, but also his own tentative, fearful view of love and sexuality.

The central plot of the novel concerns the marriage of Benn Crader (Crader suggests the word crater, a depression or caving-in of the earth), Kenneth's shy and gentle uncle,

to Matilda Layamon ("lay a man"), a great beauty and representative of a Midwest bourgeois family headed by her father, a doctor. Benn is a world-famous botanist whose good income and travel schedule make him a reasonable catch for Matilda. As the novel progresses, the Layamon family's real motivation for making this match becomes clear—greed. Years earlier, Benn's uncle Harold Vilitzer, a mafia-style chieftain and political figure, had cheated Benn's family out of some real estate holdings that are now worth fifteen million dollars. The Layamons want to use Benn to attack Uncle Harold and get the money for themselves. Against his better judgment, Benn half-heartedly tries to carry out the Layamons' plan, but only succeeds in hastening Uncle Harold's death. To escape this and the Layamon disaster, at the end of the novel Benn takes off for Antarctica to study rare lichens.

A subplot of this action involves Harold's son Fishl, the only one of Harold's children who really loved him, but who had been cast aside years ago. By failing in his attempt to reach atonement with his father, Fishl, like everyone else in the novel, embarks on the futile crusade for love. As Benn puts it when a reporter asks him about the danger of nuclear contamination from Three Mile Island, "I think more people die of heartbreak than radiation."

Bellow provides a series of further observations on sexuality apart from love.

Girls in a Kyoto nightclub exhibit their sexual organs in such a clinical fashion that Benn is terrified and immediately flies back to the United States; in a parallel scene, Doctor Layamon takes Benn on his rounds as geriatric crones offer their genitals for inspection. The doctor, who is such a grotesque character that he might have come from a novel by Tobias Smollett, implies to Benn that this is what life comes down to. Another recurring satiric motif is the account of a court case (suggested by a factual incident) in which a girl claims to have been raped and after sending one of her attackers to prison, recants her story, saying it was all a mistake. One of Benn's girl friends seems to have a perfect body and no mind at all; still another, one of the many aggressive middle-aged ladies who populate the novel (for example, Treckie's mother, who propositions Kenneth, and his former student Dita, who also pursues him), corners Benn, and when he demurs, cries out, in a phrase which might have served as an alternate title for the novel, "What am I supposed to do with my sexuality?"

Social Concerns

M ore Die of Heartbreak strongly conrasts the efforts of its two main characters to find and express love within a rapacious urban, even global society.

The narrator and his uncle are besieged on all sides by parvenu in-laws clawing for more, big city political bosses with their gangster companions, and new age entrepreneurs. That the gangsters emerge at the end as the most human characters in the novel is an indication of just how superficial and corrupt society has become. The quest for love seems fruitless.

Techniques

Bellow's use of first-person narration, as in this novel, has perplexed critics, who feel that a narrator should bring more immediacy to the story. But here, as in Herzog (1964; see separate entry), much of the action is relayed to the reader second hand in the form of conversations and telephone calls between Kenneth and Benn. Although this device helps to flesh out these characters, some critics have complained that it keeps readers from experiencing many of the plot incidents themselves and reaching their own conclusions about the meaning of the action.

Benn's close affinity with plants gives rise to a number of symbolic elements.

Kenneth repeatedly notes that his uncle's slightly arched "Russian" back makes it look as if he is hiding a "wing case" under his coat. Thus Benn can be seen as an insectlike creature who moves from plant to plant, interacting with each in the loving relationship that is missing from the human side of his life. A measure of how Benn's marriage to Matilda has shattered his life is his realization that an azalea, which had comforted him when he saw it at a distance, is actually artificial.

A variation of the "wing case" symbol appears when Benn views the movie Psycho and compares Matilda's shoulders with those of the transvestite murderer, Norman Bates.

Themes

The novel's theme, one of Saul Bellow's favorites, is the continual human effort to find love that is both real and lasting. When the main characters glimpse a relationship that seems to offer more than just the physical, it turns out to be ephemeral. What is eternal is the old sexual itch, which may or may not involve love. The resulting confusion leads to a gender battle that Bellow presents as alternately tragic and comic. The narrator of the novel defines its theme as "sexual abuse" and sees no reason why this term should be limited to the manipulation of children for the gratification of the powerful.

Key Questions

One issue worth discussing is how broadly the satire of More Die of Heartbreak reaches. Do the sexual and love elements apply to human beings universally or to only certain groups of human beings such as middle-aged men, upperclass Americans, or academics? Symbolism is a major aspect of the narrative, suggesting Bellow's intentions when composing the narrative. Names, places, and plants usually have meanings beyond themselves—they represent comments on characters and events that the characters themselves cannot make—only the otherwise hidden hand of the author can make them.

Comparisons of More Die of Heartbreak to other novels by Bellow should be approached cautiously. It is very easy to slip into discussing a Bellow novel other than the one everyone read for a group's discussion, and a discussion can quickly become diffuse as a discussion gets lost in other narratives. Even so, if everyone in the group is familiar with Bellow's other fiction, it can help in understanding More Die of Heartbreak if the motifs and characterizations it has in common with much of Bellow's other work can be identified.

For instance, the character lost in a world in which love is a fine concept but an elusive reality appears often in Bellow's work. The use of humor to indicate the triviality of some human concerns also appears elsewhere. Finding these traits in some of Bellow's other works may help to put the concerns of More Die of Heartbreak into a large perspective, illuminating what Bellow hopes to achieve in his novel.

1. Does More Die of Heartbreak have a character who serves as a moral center for the narrative? Who, if anyone, has a clear set of moral standards for behavior?

Are the standards good ones?

2. How does the search for love complicate the lives of the characters?

3. How does the novel distinguish physical love from spiritual love?

4. How similar are Kenneth and Benn?

In what ways do they contrast? How does Bellow use their similarities and differences to advance the themes of More Die of Heartbreak?

5. Why is Kenneth not more upset than he is over the loss of his daughter?

What might his behavior in this matter suggest about his attitudes toward women in general?

6. Why is Treckie Sterling emotionally detached from the passions around her?

How are her emotional responses tied to her liking rough sex?

7. The names of characters often seem to represent ideas or to be puns in More Die of Heartbreak. Go through all the names in the novel and identify those that represent ideas or puns. What sorts of ideas do the names tend to represent?

How do the names further Bellow's effort to develop his novel's themes?

8. How well suited is Matilda Layamon to be the wife of Benn Crader? Was such a marriage an inevitable part of Benn's life?

9. What point might Bellow be making in the disastrous efforts to avenge the loss of money to Harold Vilitzer?

10. Is Benn's effort to escape the Layamons an inevitable product of his personality? How well foreshadowed is it?

Does it in itself foreshadow anything?

11. How representative of the themes of More Die of Heartbreak is Benn's declaration, "I think more people die of heartbreak than radiation." Is this the case for the characters in the novel? What characters do not suffer from heartbreak?

12. Dita cries, "What am I supposed to do with my sexuality?" Does the narrative offer any answers for her question? Does it represent any universal human concerns?

13. What does Bellow imply with his mentionings of genitalia without romantic undertones? What do Benn's reactions to seeing unemotional presentations of genitalia suggest about his expectations?

Are his responses typical for men?

14. Why would Bellow use the device of having much of the narrative told in conversations between Kenneth and Benn about past events? Is the distancing from the action that this device creates useful for any purpose? Would you prefer a direct, as it happens, third-person narrative?

15. Why would the miserable love lives of people be funny? What techniques does Bellow use to make the misadventures of his characters humorous?

16. Does More Die of Heartbreak show signs of a decline in Bellow's powers as a storyteller? Does it show signs of a decline in his ability to create complex novels with great thematic depth?

17. In what ways do plants figure in the narrative? Might their symbolic value help explain why Benn journeys to Antarctica?

Literary Precedents

Although Bellow's work places him squarely in the tradition of American Realism which goes back to William Dean Howells and Henry James, the satiric slant and the weighted naming of the characters in this novel suggest such eighteenth-century iconoclastic writers as Fielding and Voltaire. The breadth of his social portraiture brings to mind Dickens and Balzac. Finally, Bellow, at least in More Die of Heartbreak, which tells a terrible story but is nevertheless full of laughs, is also in the camp of contemporary black humorists.

Related Titles

Most critics regarded The Dean's December (1982), Bellow's novel published immediately before this one, as a failure, and opinion is divided on whether Bellow regained his form with More Die of Heartbreak. The rambling, digressive first-person narrator and lack of direct action have been familiar features of Bellow's work since Herzog (1964; see separate entry), and some think that he has used this technique too many times; others regard such an approach as merely Bellow's way of telling a story and find the addition of humor in this novel refreshing.

Another motif, which appears in several of Bellow's other works, is the insistent contrast between human and other forms of life. Benn's plants seem closer to real existence than humans do, because they do not have to think about it. They achieve a kind of nobility by living in an eternal "now," like the eagle in The Adventures of Augie March (1953; see separate entry) and the lions in Henderson theRain King (1959).

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