

# On Wings of Song Short Guide

## On Wings of Song by Thomas M. Disch

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## Characters

The novel's protagonist, Daniel Weinreb, lives in a society that does not meet his spiritual needs. Disch treats his protagonist ruthlessly; Weinreb endures physical, sexual, spiritual, and intellectual debasement. *On Wings of Song* has the rambling structure often found in Victorian novels, but Disch is explicit about what is to be learned from the incidents and coincidences that form his story of an indifferent society. Weinreb wants to become a singer so that he may "fly," which in *On Wings of Song* means to use an electrical apparatus to free the spirit from its body while one sings. While serving time in prison at the age of fourteen for the ridiculous crime of delivering to homes a newspaper that carries advertisements for pornographic movies houses, Weinreb is told how to learn to sing: "Make a mess of your life. The best singers always do." The speaker is Gus, a derelict who sings well, and who offers to coach Weinreb in exchange for sex. Weinreb refuses Gus, but he later submits to homosexual and heterosexual abuse in order to gain what he wants: survival, his wife, to sing, and to "fly." He achieves his desire to sing well, but loses his wife to the lures of "flying," never "flies" himself, and does not survive; he is cut down at the seeming apex of his life by bullets fired by a woman who represents the mindlessness of society. At the end, Weinreb seems more hopeful and less cynical than when he was a youngster; he believes that an unseen force guides him to success.



## Social Concerns

Disch's satirical wit gives his writing a biting flavor that sometimes seems out of place or heavy-handed, but makes his style distinctive. The wealthy and powerful Iowa farmowner in *On Wings of Song*, Grandison Whiting, wears a false red beard, kept secret even from his family, because he believes that by putting on or taking off the beard he changes his character.

The passage in which Whiting reveals all to the protagonist Weinreb is hilarious; the point of the falseness of outward appearances and of people's efforts to control how they appear is also sharply made. Good satire is like jabbing a long needle into its victim, and the needle is jabbed and wiggled about in *On Wings of Song*. Some Caucasians dye their bodies black because black skin is fashionable, but lest anyone mistake them for true Negroes they leave a finger, a portion of forehead, or other easily seen swatch of skin white.

These people are false aesthetes who wear an outward appearance of sophistication because they lack real appreciation of culture. Weinreb eventually reaches success as such a fashionably dyed man — he is the lover of a castrate who insists he have the black skin; he essentially gains the praise of critics and high society by singing inane songs about bunnies while in blackface. Racism, false learning, and the pretensions of lazy minds are each stabbed with precision.

## Techniques

On *Wings of Song* uses science-fiction elements, but seems to discuss contemporary society, and uses medieval fantasy and the structure of a Victorian novel. The fantasy enables Disch to create exaggerated symbols of aspects of society. For instance, "flying" represents the efforts of many people to escape the realities of life through inane entertainments or silly cults that promise ecstasy at the cost of a person's humanity. The bizarre mixture of genres also gives Disch flexibility in his novel; he may at once comment on present-day society and suggest what the future of society may be, all the while moving his protagonist through a world that seems realistic yet is filled with symbols. Disch has the distinction of having created a style all his own, and an ethos — however unhappy it may be — that forms a singular picture of the human condition.

# Themes

Disch bases his judgment on aesthetics; to understand Disch's work one must first understand that he is aesthetically motivated — that the music of his prose, the images he describes, and the plots he dramatizes are formed in part by what Disch deems beautiful and what he deems ugly. The most overt discussion of aesthetics among his novels is *On Wings of Song*.

*On Wings of Song* has the fantastic motif of "flying" and is set in the near future, both traits that seem science fictional. Yet, if one were to remove the "flying" motif from the novel, it would remain largely intact, and its future setting is too much like the present to be convincingly futuristic. In fact, *On Wings of Song* is not about science, nor is it a speculation about the future; it is about growing up in an amoral society that is contemporary, with fantastic twists that are symbolic. The multitude of references to literature and music and other arts that fill much of the space in *On Wings of Song* puts off some critics; Disch appears to be merely showing off. Indeed, Disch is showing off; his novels are filled with tricks and twists, making his prose exuberant and exciting, but he is not "merely" showing off; *On Wings of Song* is about the human spirit, about people seeking to be more than they are — artists, writers, and composers are, in the context of the novel, people who can help others become more than they are.

*On Wings of Song* presents its readers with most of Disch's ambitions and the problems he presents to critics. The novel's scope is large; Disch satirizes humanity. In Disch's novel the universe is utterly indifferent to mankind; no God intervenes in humanity's affairs to help people. People seek a oneness with the universe by becoming "fairies," the mechanically disembodied spirits of those who "fly." Any mechanism that has a repetitiously cyclical motion, such as a fan, is attractive to the "fairies," who join in the motions in an ecstatic loss of the sense of self.

The rotation of the Earth provides the greatest ecstasy. Flight thus resembles a religious experience; people gain a feeling of being something greater than themselves and a kind of spiritual euphoria. "Fairies" lose their humanity, their ability to think, and the ability to appreciate anything except the supposed cyclical rhythms of the universe. Whatever ecstasy their experience brings them is purchased at the cost of individuality and their ability to understand the universe. Weinreb does not "fly," but he achieves more than the "fairies."

## Key Questions

The novel's satirical elements offer an obvious place to begin discussion.

Disch lampoons the fine arts, artists, and art lovers; he needles censorship, restrictive laws, capricious law enforcement, and Midwestern cultural values.

Discussing what he lampoons and how he does it could make for a vigorous exchange of ideas. The novel's symbolism also invites discussion. Note how false faces appear everywhere and how to be successful in business or art, a person wears a misleading mask such as a false beard or imitation black skin.

These images imply a broad criticism of American society.

1. Why does Weinreb refuse to "fly"?
2. What is the relationship between the rich and the poor in the novel?
3. Why would people choose to "fly"?
4. What is On Wings of Song's view of the human spirit? How do characters satisfy their spiritual needs?
5. Disch's writing is notable for its graceful, flowing style. What are some examples of memorable phrasing or elegant descriptions?
6. What purposes do the arts serve in the society of On Wings of Song?
7. Does Weinreb triumph or fail at the end of the novel? Does his life have any meaning?

## Literary Precedents

*On Wings of Song* belongs to an important literary tradition: the bildungsroman. Notable members of the tradition are *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *David Copperfield* (1849) by Charles Dickens. A bildungsroman depicts the education of someone from childhood to adulthood and is usually autobiographical in many of its major elements. Of the great bildungsromans in English, *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) by Samuel Butler most closely resembles *On Wings of Song*. The two books resemble one another in tone and structure. The protagonist of *The Way of All Flesh* is oppressed by his family and society; both make demands on him that run counter to his sensitive nature.

He rebels against the demands made on him and suffers through moral and intellectual debasement. The tone of *The Way of All Flesh* is satirical, and the story is incisive and merciless in its treatment of its characters, as is that of *On Wings of Song*.





# Copyright Information

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