

The Ressurrectionist Study Guide

The Ressurrectionist by E. B. Hudspeth

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Plot Summary

In *The Resurrectionist* by E. B. Hudspeth, Spencer Black is born into a medical family. To help his father with medical research, Spencer and his brother Bernard go out late at night with their father to dig up, or “resurrect,” corpses from the graveyard. For Spencer's brother Bernard, this childhood experience leads to a healthy scientific interest. However, for Spencer it develops into sacrilegious desire to peer into humanity's early evolution, or perhaps its future.

Dr. Spencer Black wins early renown as a surgeon, but his interest in deformities and mythical creatures tempts him to use his surgical skills to fashion unholy creatures out of parts of various animals. He sews wings on a dog and a young woman, and his notebooks describe in detail the anatomy of such mythical creatures as mermaids, minotaurs, sphinxes, and harpies.

If Dr. Black seems like a normal person in the beginning, his interest in uncommon anatomical structures and mythical life forms turns him into a recluse whose mental stability is in question. He is pursued by colleagues and ex-colleagues who consistently deride his theories and his creations in the papers. When he loses his funding, he becomes a showman in a traveling road show with ‘freaks’ and deformed people. Dr. Black presents them as relics of ancient creatures and generates controversy wherever his show presents its spectacle.

When Dr. Black gets frustrated with fighting the crowds, he decides that they need evidence of his theories about the deformities harkening back to primitive mythical creatures. So, he uses his surgical techniques to graft together new kinds of creatures. When his wife is appalled by the creatures he is fashioning in his workshop, she attempts to burn it down. Instead, she is burned in the process.

Depressed and persecuted, but staunch in his beliefs about mutations and semi-human creatures, Dr. Black creates yet another road show, the Human Renaissance. While he does not say as much, it seems clear from his exquisite knowledge of the harpy that he has ‘resurrected’ his wife in the form of a winged woman who persecutes him with her hellish song. The narrative of his life presented here follows him from birth in 1851 to his disappearance in 1908. The last evidence of his life is a long, self-incriminating letter to his brother, apologizing for the abnormalities in his career and the monstrosities he has created.



Life and Writings of Dr. Spencer Black, 1851-1868

Summary

1851-1868—Childhood

The opening pages of *The Resurrectionist* describe the book as a historical account of an uncouth medical doctor. The materials presented here purport to have been donated by the Philadelphia Museum of medical antiquities, and also by the estate of Dr. Spencer Black. The introduction makes no evaluation of Dr. Black's controversial work, but presumes simply to present it to the public.

Spencer Black's mother died giving birth to him, and he always felt that death was close to life as he was living. His father is a talented surgeon who steals corpses, 'resurrecting' the dead, in order to use their bodies for medical research. An early journal entry describes the horrific spectacle of digging up the dead in the middle of the night. While Spencer Black has not yet disavowed his faith in God, he says that he was afraid of God's judgment and of his father's displeasure.

Spencer's father dies when Spencer is only sixteen, and a journal entry indicates that Spencer does not quite believe in his father's death, but expects him to leap back to life. Bernard, Spencer's brother, records in his journal that Spencer jumped into the father's grave, as if he could "seek out death's hiding place" (p. 14).

Analysis

In the morbid and hysterical atmosphere of an Edgar Allen Poe story, Spencer and Bernard Black were raised close to the graveyard, where the dead are merely a raw material for their father's research. When you combine the father's profession with Spencer's mother's death in childbirth, it is not a surprise that Spencer would have become a doctor with a morbid curiosity about abnormalities and a feverish refusal to accept the limits of known science.

Discussion Question 1

What tone and setting does Hudspeth establish for *The Resurrectionist*? What kind of language and images are used to establish the tone?



Discussion Question 2

How does the author use different historical forms of literature to present this novel as an objective historical record? What are the advantages and disadvantages for a work of fiction that poses as objective history?

Discussion Question 3

Where does this novel intersect with contemporary science about abnormality and death? What kinds of discussions are people having today about the issues that preoccupied Dr. Black and his father?

Vocabulary

tireless, curator, abnormalities, shrouded, controversy, scandalous, blasphemous, reproduction, anonymous, respectively, cadavers, anatomy, dissection, unrest, ordeal, wrathful, cemetery, curiosities, deceased, trepidation, phenomenon, patriarch, miracle, extensive, proper



Life and Writings of Dr. Spencer Black, 1869-1877

Summary

1869—The Academy of Medicine

After the death of their father, Bernard and Spencer move to Philadelphia, where they continue the medical training they had begun in Boston, the city of their birth. Spencer begins to keep a journal in 1869, and his first entry reflects his ecstatic joy at being human, with so many complex anatomical systems keeping him alive. He says that death is freedom from consciousness, and he says that consciousness is a symptom of a mystery.

The author says that Spencer Black and his brother part ways when Spencer pursues anatomy and his brother pursues the natural sciences, fossils, and history. The narrator says that great changes are taking place at the time in the field of medical science. Sterilization, anesthesia, and the science of bacteria and infection are changing the nature of surgery, reducing pain and giving patients a much better chance of survival. Spencer Black begins to study physical abnormalities during his time at the Academy of Medicine, and he writes his first paper on the skeleton of a pair of conjoined twins. Spencer is obviously a brilliant student, but even his mentor, professor Denkel, is wary of his interest in abnormalities and mutations. Spencer finds work making illustrations for a botanist, whose close study of insects introduces Spencer to the process of metamorphosis. His illustrations of the cicada insect, in particular, fascinate him with the possibility of emerging from the ground, reborn, after laying dormant for years.

1870—Ward C

Bernard finishes his studies and moves to New York, where he works at the New York Society of Science, but Spencer remains in Philadelphia, where he acquires a reputation as “one of the country’s brightest young scientists.” (p. 22). He is fascinated by abnormalities and studies operable birth defects. Dr. Black enters into a special surgical program with Dr. Holace, who is originally supportive, but will come to be a critic of Dr. Black’s. This new program at Ward C enjoys several early successes, as children with extra fingers or fused fingers are successfully operated on, and patients begin to come from far and wide.

Dr. Black publishes his first controversial paper, “The Perfect Human,” which is not received well, but word of the successes at Ward C has already begun to spread, and he and Doctor Holace have become famous nonetheless.

1871-1877—Marriage and Transformation



Dr. Black's success leads him into marriage with Elise Chardelle, a well-educated woman from a prosperous family in Chicago. They marry after only three months of courtship. Their son Alphonse is born nine months after their wedding. The narrator says that the surgical program at Ward C suffers a setback when a young girl dies in a surgery intended to remove a parasitic twin. Dr. Black feels guilty for his failure, even though other doctors determine that the death was "unpreventable, uncontrollable, and unforeseeable." (p. 29).

In reaction to this failure, Dr. Black imagines that the laws of science should not be so strictly adhered to, and he says that sometimes they need to be relinquished if the health of the patient is at stake.

Spencer Black and Elise have another child, a girl who dies after only a few days of life. In 1876, they have another child whom they name Victor. Dr. Black does not rejoice in his second son, though, because his setbacks at Ward C and his deepening obsession with mutation and deformation have turned him into something of a recluse. He even goes so far as to speculate that ancient mythological animals have been hidden from scientists in the present, as part of a vast scientific conspiracy.

Analysis

1869—The Academy of Medicine: Already, the reader can see Dr. Spencer Black's preoccupation with transformation and abnormality taking shape. And already, his mentor and his community are opposed to this interest. Still, the book grounds Dr. Black in the medical technology of his time, amidst theories of evolution and progress in medical science.

1870—Ward C: As is often the case with stories of scientific hubris, Dr. Black's biography begins with early success, as he benefits by the new medical technologies for surgery. The cause of his eventual downfall is nevertheless present early in his career, as his mentor, professor Denkel, and his colleague Dr. Holace, are both opposed to his interest in mutation.

1871-1877—Marriage and Transformation: In this chapter, early success gives way to complicating factors such as the death of a girl and surgery, and the death of Dr. Black's second child, Elizabeth. Both of these events turn him inward, toward his own research and his overriding fascination with mutation and, now, mythical animals. It remains to be seen how his medical talents will be altered, or developed, by his fascination with mythical creatures.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the development of Dr. Spencer Black's medical career and the career of Dr. Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel. How are they similar? How are they different?



Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Dr. Black's career inspire you with hope? In what ways does it inspire you with dread? How or where does the author give you any clues about how he views Dr. Black and the issues his work raises?

Discussion Question 3

What kind of troubles do you expect Dr. Black to encounter, as he sets out on his research into mankind's mythical history? Are you hoping that he will be successful in the end, or that his unnatural science will be shut down?

Vocabulary

empirical, succumbed, commodity, endeavor, chronicling, soot, reigns, symptom, practitioner, amputations, prodigies, infection, charismatic, raucous, carbolic, sanitary, anesthesia, dramatic, fatal, peculiar, mutations, fruitless, specimens, transcendence, symbolize



Life and Writings of Dr. Spencer Black, 1878-1887

Summary

1878—The Fawn-Child

While visiting a carnival, Dr. Black makes a life-changing discovery. In a showcase of abnormalities, he finds a fawn-child, a boy whose knees bend backwards and whose feet resemble hooves. The boy even has tufted hair on his head and a small set of horns. Dr. Black concludes that this boy is not simply an abnormal human being, but that he is evidence of an ancient race of satyrs. He acquires the body and carefully dissects it, making detailed notes as he proceeds.

1879-1887—The American Carnival

After dissecting and writing up his notes about the fawn child, Dr. Black attempts to publish his paper, but he is met with rejection. His interest in the fawn child leads the Academy of Medicine to terminate his funding, and Dr. Holace becomes his enemy. Dr. Black joins the American Carnival, where he displays skeletons of deformities along with analyses of how and why the bones were misshapen. His family travels with him, and his wife acquires a reputation as a motherly caregiver to the other performers. Dr. Black is distressed about the fact that he is presenting his highly scientific work to the roughshod audience that comes to the carnival, but he rises to the occasion and becomes a successful showman and proponent of his theories.

Nevertheless, his show often brings controversy, as ministers and scientists mock him, and one debate even ends in a brawl. Dr. Black's experience brings him to the realization that he needs evidence to convince his audience about the value of his ideas, so he retreats from the public eye and fashions monstrosities by sewing. For example, he sews a child's head on top of a turkey's body. By 1883, he has made "a miraculous cabinet of curiosities" (p. 41) which consists of preserved replicas of mythical creatures. When he exhibits them, his show is extremely successful, but his success is accompanied by controversy and trouble with the police. Soon, his work has polarized his audience into believers and critics, but, in general, the publicity is still favorable.

By 1884, however, he has to renounce his relationship with Dr. Holace. Then, tragedy strikes again when his son Victor dies of typhoid fever. In grief over his son's death, he begins to experiment with grafting live tissues. By 1887, his wife Elise has to write to his brother Bernard for help. In an excerpt from Bernard's journal, the reader sees the unholy creation of a dog with rooster's wings sewn on its back. Bernard and Elise both confront Dr. Black with their outrage, but he insists on the virtue of his work. Confronted with his intransigence, Elise gives her sons to Bernard, who takes them to New York.



However, Alfonse, the older one, returns to his father and works as his assistant. With her boys safely away, Elise goes to Dr. Black's workshop with a pistol to shoot the creatures Dr. Black has created. She breaks an oil lamp on the floor to burn down the workshop. However, she is caught in the flames and is seriously burned and blinded. With Alfonse, Dr. Black tries to operate on his wife, but she is in too much pain, and he has to stop.

Analysis

1878—The Fawn-Child: The preserved remains of the fawn-child confirm Dr. Black's suspicions about the mythical prehistory of human beings, but the confirmation sets him off in an unhealthy direction. He departs from the science of his peers, which has made him so successful. In a symbolic gesture, his own body rebels against him, as his unholy work cannot create a sense of health and vivacity about him, rather a sense of feverish obsession and sickness.

1879-1887—The American Carnival: Surely, Dr. Black is missing an ingredient common in other people. He does not see any reason to stop his research into mutations and mythical creatures. His insistence on creating them will lead to his downfall. Even his wife tries to stop him, but it seems that even her severe burns, blindness, and opium addiction will not be enough to turn Dr. Black away from his obsession.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the Fawn-child have such an effect on Dr. Black, and what does the body prove for him?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast the scientific institute and the carnival. How are they similar? How are they different?

Discussion Question 3

Debate the proposition that Dr. Black is just like the charlatans who surround the carnival's freak show atmosphere.

Vocabulary

artifacts, marvels, bizarre, ridicule, humiliation, conjoined, exception, obsession, deformation, paramount, promoter, excessive, resemblance, cashmere, ruminants, vitalized, reputation, mythological, berated, specimens, vehemently, reluctance, larceny, persecution, taxidermied



Life and Writings of Dr. Spencer Black, 1888-1908

Summary

1888-1908—The Human Renaissance

After the fire and the tragedy of his wife's blindness, Dr. Black resolves to expand, not restrict, his interest in mythical anatomy. He begins work on a new show, the Human Renaissance, which features living creatures fashioned out of parts of different animals, such as a beagle with wings on its back. Some of the performers in the Human Renaissance are Dr. Black's former patients from Ward C, who have now been given wings or tails or transplanted legs. In one show, Dr. Black seems to transplant legs onto a man, who walks within an hour of the operation. This show makes Dr. Black more and more threatening to mainstream scientists and doctors, but it also brings him a huge following among the sick and deformed, who come to him hoping for a cure. He grafts wings on the back of a girl who was born without arms. He proposes the idea of self-resurrection, the idea that he can put people back in touch with their mythical roots.

At the 1893 World's Fair Exposition in Chicago, Dr. Black is mocked and ridiculed. On the third day of the show, the crowd kills some of his animals and burns his artifacts before forcing him to leave. This marks the end of Dr. Black's public performances, although he continues to exhibit his creatures and propose his theories to private audiences. In 1895, he meets a wealthy, eccentric naturalist named Alexander Goethe, who has his own cabinet of curiosities. At the beginning of the 20th century, Dr. Black takes The Human Renaissance to Europe and the Middle East, where he claims to have the power to raise the dead. The author includes eyewitness testimony that he transplanted a man's legs in front of the audience, but further testimony casts his operation into doubt. Critics say that he is nothing but a magician or trickster. In 1901, in Budapest, one of his creatures, the Serpent Queen, attacks and kills an audience member. This puts an end to his performances for good.

The narrator says that Spencer's brother Bernard has been taking care of Spencer's son Samuel since 1887. Over that time, Bernard has received periodic letters from his brother. In these letters, which the narrator includes, Dr. Black's tone ranges from prophetic to "inebriated nonsense." (p. 60). The letters express regret for the sufferings Dr. Black has caused, although they also brag about the achievements he has accomplished. The narrator says that Dr. Black had negotiated with a publisher to bring out the *Codex Extinct Animalia*. Only six copies appeared, and Dr. Black disappeared in 1908, never to be heard from again.

In his last letter, Dr. Black seems to indicate that he has turned his wife Elise into a "wretch, a filth soaked thing whose foulness is exceeded only by her demon song." (p.



65). He claims to have saved her. At the same time, he fears that she has become the agent of his death and judgment.

Analysis

1888-1908—The Human Renaissance: The trajectory that started with Dr. Black's turn into personal obsession follows him to the end. Scientists and medical people shun him, and crowds assemble in large numbers to see the spectacle of his work. He is pushed further and further from the mainstream of life, tragically convinced of the necessity and benefits of his work. He retreats further and further from society, and his life ends largely offstage, as the last evidence of his work is visible only in rambling, disjointed letters to his brother. It would seem, though, from his final letter, that Dr. Black has finally seen himself in the light the scientists have seen him in all along. He has only succeeded in creating the creature who will judge him for his hubris. His wife has become a Fury who "pounds the air with her wings and bellows Hell's song in [his] ear." (p. 65). He is judged in the end, and his work is reduced to a perversion and curiosity, a warning to the straggler who would stray from the lines of legitimate scientific inquiry.

Discussion Question 1

In your opinion, has Dr. Black progressed beyond the limits of science, or has he merely created fanciful illusions? Explain.

What does the author think about Dr. Black's progression? Justify your answer.

Discussion Question 2

In what way is Dr. Black's self-resurrection different from people who get tattoos and piercings or otherwise radically alter their bodies today?

Discussion Question 3

Is Dr. Spencer Black's story a tragic tale or a horror story? What elements lend it to either genre?

Vocabulary

vessel, irreconcilable, pertaining, millennium, optical, promotional, elaborately, extreme, wrought, transplants, mainstream, afflicted, sanctimony, pilgrimages, defects, composition, revered, ancient, decried, regressive, eugenics, devastated, wretched, itineraries, ferocity



Codex Extinct Animalia, Part 1

Summary

Codex Extinct Animalia

The narrator describes the Codex as “an anatomical reference manual, a common endeavor among naturalists at the time.” (p. 66). He says that it is not known whether there are still specimens that correspond with these drawings. In the sections for the other ten animals, a brief description is followed by numerous drawings to illustrate the anatomical structures, from bones to muscles and organs.

Sphinx Alatus

In the entry for the Sphinx, the narrator says that Dr. Black likely anticipated that his specimens would be destroyed, so the Codex is a map for other scientists to follow. Dr. Black says that sphinxes typically had the head of a ram or goat, although they developed human minds and advanced intellects.

Siren Oceanus

In the narrator’s introduction, the siren, or mermaid, is presented as a plausible sea creature, which many naturalists had been willing to believe in. The narrator also points out that in spite of the opposition, Dr. Black also had a great deal of support from scientists who made similar claims themselves.

Within his entry on the siren, Dr. Black says that mermaids have always been part of the lore of the sea. He says that the siren was originally described as a bird, and that it is not clear how it became an ocean creature. He says that he himself believes in a mammalian origin, similar to the dolphin or whale.

Satyrus Hircinus

The narrator says that Dr. Black refers to physical remains of the satyr, but he says that there is no evidence of any specimen. Dr. Black suspected that the satyr was capable of holding “a heavenly song in its throat, a dancer’s weight in its gait, and a child’s mischief.” (p. 90). Dr. Black himself says that the satyr had much in common with the Minotaur, although it is not clear whether satyrs had human or goat’s ears.

Minotaurus Asterion

The narrator says that the Minotaur has the worst traits of men and bulls, and Dr. Black says that it is difficult to understand the origin of this creature. The historical record, for instance, alternates between a satyr-like creature standing upright on two legs, or a centaur-like creature, on four legs with two human arms. Dr. Bach speculates that the Minotaur was an omnivore, not a ruminant, like the cow.



Ganesha Orientis

Departing from Greek mythology, Dr. Black's next specimen is a ganesha, the Indian God with an elephant head. The narrator includes the myth of Ganesh's birth, a rare intrusion of myth into an anatomical resource. The creature described here has an elephant's head and four human arms, and Dr. Black says that it was likely a creature of quite high intellect.

Chimæra Incendiarius

The narrator says Dr. Black insisted that the chimæra was not a random mutation, but a fully-formed creature. Dr. Black himself says that he cannot understand how one creature could have three different heads, nor can he explain the snake-like tail, which did not give the creature any snakelike capabilities, like slithering.

Analysis

Codex Extinct Animalia: The Codex that follows is presented as a naturalist's reference tool, which indicates all of the major anatomical structures in the species Dr. Black describes. The lack of specimens, to provide confirmation of the drawings, would present a problem for Dr. Black's theories.

Sphinx Alatus: Dr. Black presents his theory about the evolution of the Sphinx, which is so brief that it skims over enormous amounts of evolutionary change. The transition, for instance, from a Rams head to human head is not addressed, but the images show the Sphinx of Thebes, with the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle in the head of woman.

Siren Oceanus: The siren is, perhaps one of the most plausible of the creatures in Dr. Black's Codex. He speculates about the siren's origins, and concludes that it must have been a dominant species.

Satyrus Hircinus: The description of the satyr seems to rely on the presence of actual specimens, for the description is very brief, but then the images of the familiar creature describe it in detail.

Minotaurus Asterion: Dr. Black attempts to bring scientific and evolutionary reasoning to the Minotaur, which is clearly a creature of the unconscious, or mythic consciousness. Is not clear what value the debate has, over whether the Minotaur had a four-chambered stomach like a cow, except to show Dr. Black's scientific knowledge.

Ganesha Orientis: Dr. Black's discussion of the Ganesha presumes that the creature was in fact real, although, again, the absence of any specimens places a heavy burden on Dr. Black's testimony, and would strain most scientists' credulity.

Chimæra Incendiarius: True to its name, the chimæra is an enigmatic creature to Dr. Black, and the most remarkable thing about it is his inability to explain how the creature kept itself alive and moved, with three heads competing for primacy.



Discussion Question 1

What is the most interesting part of the Codex, is it the drawings, or the descriptions of the extinct creatures?

Discussion Question 2

How does the Codex change or expand your view of Dr. Black's work, as described in the narrative?

Discussion Question 3

What is the appeal of these anatomical drawings of unlikely creatures? Is it like the carnivalesque fascination with spectacular visions, or the scientist's schematic breakdown of systems and bones and muscle?

Vocabulary

explanatory, musculature, viscera, naturalists, characteristic, reference, codex, depicted, predators, decisive, taxonomist, folklore, demote, evolutionary, attributes, mammalian, intact, superiority, physiological, acquainted, shortcoming, bestowed, pedigree, decomposed, ascertain



Codex Extinct Animalia, Part 2

Summary

Canis Hades

The narrator says that Dr. Black experimented on dogs, so he might have actually created a three-headed dog, and Dr. Black says that the Canis Hades is an animal of which he has seen numerous specimens.

Pegasus Gorgonis

The narrator says that the Pegasus was one of Dr. Black's actual preserved creations. However, Dr. Black himself says that the creature does not live, only that it could have lived. He says that the specimens he has seen had air sacs which would have given the creature tremendous breathing potential and that the bone structure of the Pegasus does not differ from the structure of common birds.

Draconis Orientis

The narrator says that the Eastern Dragon may well have existed, as there are other amphibians that resemble it in Asia. Dr. Black says that he has not studied the Western Dragon, which probably closely resembles the leviathan or hydra.

Centaurus Caballus

With the Centaur, as with the Pegasus, the narrator speculates about the pulley system Dr. Black must have used to create the creature. The actual existence of specimens is hardly avowed, although Dr. Black hints at the possibility that future science will unearth more information about the Centaur.

Harpy

As the narrator points out, the Harpy is the longest of the entries in the Codex, as Dr. Black made the most drawings of its anatomy. He details its skeleton and musculature, as well as its internal and reproductive organs. This must be what his wife looked like by the time he was finished 'saving' her.

Analysis

Canis Hades: Considering that two-headed animals are not completely unheard of, the Canis Hades seems like it might be the most plausible of the mythical creatures, although it is not a creature with a branch connecting to human evolution.



Pegasus Gorgonis: Dr. Black had created a winged dog and a bird with a human head, so this creature is closer to (artificial) plausibility than many of the others. He goes to lengths to say that it might have actually existed, though he does not refer to actual specimens of the animal.

Draconis Orientis: The dragon opens the door of speculation on further kinds of dragons, which Dr. Black himself has not been able to study. It is the only one so far that he proposes might still be alive.

Centaurus Caballus: The Centaur is described as a future mystery for science rather than a historical fact. It is a potential branch of human evolutionary history.

Harpy: This is the creature Dr. Black invested himself most in, as he describes his wife as a Fury in his last letter. The detail indicates that he likely created one of these creatures himself, and the final drawing gives the reader a picture of what a God-haunted scientist might see in the terrifying face of the loved one who could only be saved by the most radical surgeries.

Discussion Question 1

Which of these creatures would you most like to see? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does modern science prohibit the creation of creatures like these, and is it right to prohibit them?

Discussion Question 3

What role do each of these creatures play in myths? Which would have been the most fearsome to create? Why do you think the Harpy comes last?

Vocabulary

experimented, polycephalous, perished, mutations, auxiliary, regulatory, ancestry, adapted, massive, posture, construct, wonderment, breadth, proportion, tremendous, governing, extraordinary, plausible, amphibian, authenticity, intimate, defensive, native, reconstructed, corroborate



Characters

Dr. Spencer Black

This person was born to a surgeon who asked him to help corpses for medical research. This person been developed an unhealthy interest in abnormalities and evolutionary oddities in humans.

Bernard Black

This is the doctor's elder brother, a renowned scientist in his own right.

Elise Chardelle Black

This is the wife of the infamous doctor. She is burned and blinded in a fire she starts to destroy the doctor's unholy work.

Joseph Warren Denkel

This person is a professor at the Philadelphia Academy of Medicine and mentor to the main character of the novel.

Jean DeLain

This person is the botanist and traveler for whom the main character does illustrations of specimens.

Dr. Joab C. Holace

This person is a colleague of the main character's at Ward C. When the main character begins to dabble in unusual theories about mutations and deformities, this person becomes an uncompromising critic.

Alphonse

This person is the son of the infamous doctor and an assistant in his work.

Symbols and Symbolism

Fawn boy

This is a preserved corpse of a body that showed goat-like legs and goat-like horns on its head, leading Dr. Black to believe that satyrs were not far off from the evolutionary line human beings ultimately took.

Corpses

These decaying human bodies were dug up for medical research in the mid-1800s.

Harpy

This is a creature composed of a woman with a bird's wings. It is likely the creature Dr. Black has turned his wife into, through radical surgery.

Darwin's Beagle

This is a dog with bird's wings stitched onto its back and offered to the public as a spectacle.

Human Renaissance

This is another traveling show Dr. Black puts together, filled with examples of living creatures he has made. Some are human, some animal, and some a little of both.

Settings

Ward C

This is the surgical center where mutations are corrected. It provides the basis for the main character's early fame.

Philadelphia

This is the city where the main character and his brother take their medical training.

Boston

This is the city where the main character and his brother are born and raised. It is also the place where they help their father dig up dead bodies for medical research.

New York

This is where Dr. Black's brother Bernard raises Samuel, Dr. Black's son by Elise, after Elise gives the boy up.



Themes and Motifs

Overcoming Death

A 'resurrectionist' is someone who steals dead bodies. The definition does not include bringing them back to life. However, the intention in conducting medical research is to gain knowledge and skills that will allow the doctor to cheat death in protecting patients. Spencer Black and his brother are both involved in digging up corpses for their father, and they have a flexible relationship with death, treating corpses as raw material. Spencer goes on to use living creatures as raw materials for creating new hybrid creatures. His work stretches the term 'resurrectionist' to include someone who is bringing to life ancient mythical creatures who have long ago died out of human genetics.

Mutations of the Human Being

Dr. Spencer Black is tempted by the possibility that mutations are not merely deformities, but evidence of ancient structures trying to reassert themselves from the mythical past. Taking his cues from the strange creatures of art and myths, Black believes that these mythical creatures were not metaphors for unconscious states or elements of stories, but actual creatures. Tempted to identify the human history and to argue for a new definition of 'mutation' and 'deformity'—not as imperfections, but as historical realities—Black is driven by ego and pride. He refuses to admit that his surgical skills have created hybrid creatures instead of actual mythical creatures, and his blindness to this distinction makes him a madman in most people's eyes. If his audience just blinks to the fact of his surgical interventions, though, it could look very much like the creatures Dr. Black imagines as actually having existed.

Surgical Skill

Dr. Spencer Black, like Dr. Victor Frankenstein (Black's son, not coincidentally, is named Victor), has tremendous skill as a medical student. He is a prodigy of a surgeon, owing, perhaps, to his early experiences as an assistant to his father. But Dr. Black is not motivated simply by medical skill. He wants to redeem his mother's death in childbirth, the loss of his daughter Elizabeth, and the death of Meredith Anne Heath, who died while Black was trying to separate her conjoined twin. Black's surgical skills had made him a popular doctor and made Ward C an important destination for patients with uncommon features like extra fingers or fused fingers. These same skills make Dr. Black a successful showman, for he can create the evidence his audiences need to see, in order to believe in his theories. However, this sleight of hand—substituting a surgical creation for the living creature itself—leaves Dr. Black in disrepute in the end.



Macabre Carnivals Vs. Reputable Science

After his early success as a surgeon, Dr. Black becomes a popular showman when his obsession with mythical creatures takes him away from medicine and makes him a pariah in the eyes of his fellow doctors. He becomes a good showman at the carnivals where deformities are exhibited. The carnival crowds are large and enthusiastic, but the controversies that surrounded him as a doctor follow him as a showman. Preachers and townsmen argue against his 'evidence' and try to prevent his show from coming to their towns. The people, though, seem to be more fascinated and tolerant because there are always people with diseases or strange conditions who want to be cured by Dr. Black. In spite of the fascination and tolerance, Dr. Black can never escape from controversy. Even though he replaces his medical funding with the funds that come from his carnival and then from the Human Renaissance show, he is doomed by the disapproval that comes from both the medical-scientific community and the general populace.

Judgment for Sins

Except for the rare collector, Mr. Goethe—whose collection is conspicuously kept secret—there is no one who supports Dr. Black in his quest for evidence of creatures from the prehistory of humans. He is fighting against public opinion and professional humiliation almost from the beginning. Even if his creations have a certain fascination for the crowds, they are never free of controversy. This opposition leads Dr. Black to leave science behind and to take creation into his own hands. He fashions creatures that appall his wife and brother. When they try to destroy his laboratory, Elise's injuries only subject her to her husband's unholy creativity. He 'saves' her by operating on her again and again, but the implication is that she has become a Fury, a Harpy, a woman who sings a hellish song, and has the ability to destroy him. Finally Dr. Black sees the horror of his creations and expects to be destroyed by them.

Styles

Point of View

The Resurrectionist is written as an academic presentation of the work of Dr. Spencer Black. The narrator uses materials ranging from journal entries to letters to promotional material from Dr. Black's shows to piece together a narrative of Dr. Black's life. Spencer Black's own writings are not the only ones included. The narrator uses testimony and letters from his brother, his wife, his colleagues, and members of the public to testify to the strange life and obsessions of the doctor.

Language and Meaning

As a tale of the nineteenth century, The Resurrectionist uses archaic language and sophisticated vocabulary to tell the story of Dr. Black and his obsession. The language does not, however, rise to the level of symbolic meaning. The book is presented as an academic narrative of Dr. Black's life and work, so it does not aim for the resonance and metaphorical depth that an obviously fictional novel might have aimed for. Nevertheless, the narrative is not entirely overt, as there is a mystery surrounding the true nature of Dr. Black's creations. Also, his whereabouts became a mystery after 1908. The book does not devote too much detective work to these questions, merely presenting the evidence in Dr. Black's Codex and his journals and letters.

Structure

The Resurrectionist is stitched together from numerous sources, but it is told in a linear, chronological narrative, starting with the birth and childhood of Spencer Black, through his development as a doctor, then showman, then independent researcher. The book is then supplemented with the Codex, which provides a naturalist's perspective on the animals Dr. Black created or theorized.



Quotes

When one dies they neither ascend to the heavens nor descend to hell, they instead become cured—freed from an illness and healed from the suffering of mortality.

-- Spencer Black (2, Page 16)

Importance: In a journal entry, Spencer Black uses medical language to describe what happens when people die, ignoring the spiritual or moral aspects of death. He treats consciousness as a condition to be cured and death as a state for experimentation by scientists.

Our consciousness, our awareness, is a symptom of our body and it is secondary to the mystery of our physical chemistry.

-- Dr. Spencer Black (2, Page 16)

Importance: In an early journal entry, Spencer Black describes his fascination with the medical side of human nature, to the exclusion of consciousness and morality. This preoccupation will make for a good deal of controversy and misery for him.

The miracle of life is granted, and how that miracle can be effective is a nuance that I am most interested in understanding.

-- Spencer Black (2, Page 16)

Importance: Spencer Black is recognized as a prodigy, but his interest in mutations makes him suspicious to his mentor and his fellow students.

Simply stating that an object is in disrepair does not allow that object the benefit of the new identity.

-- Spencer Black (3, Page 23)

Importance: Early in his career, Dr. Black is already beginning to look for something like health and intention in the structures that others would say are deformities and mutations.

Unlike the traditionally accepted theories of evolution and natural selection, Black's view stressed that mutations are not accidents; instead, they are the body attempting to grow what it once had thousands of years ago.

-- Narrator (3, Page 24)

Importance: This belief marks the turn where Dr. Spencer Black departs from known science and enters into a region of his own abnormal interest.

My heart turned foul and my skin tightened the length of my body when I saw what my God-damned brother had done.

-- Bernard Black (5, Page 46)



Importance: When Elise calls Bernard to see what Spencer Black has created in his laboratory, Bernard is horrified by the obscene creations there, which Elise tries to destroy.

Dr. Black introduced his theory of self-resurrection—the idea that he could unlock the body's natural memory of its ancestral past by giving it real physical reminders.

-- The narrator (7, Page 53)

Importance: Beyond merely being interested in mutations and myths, Dr. Black has gone beyond all limits by creating creatures that are no longer properly human, as they are fashioned out of different animals. This might strike a chord with the human's unconscious desires and early religions, but it is horrifying to his audiences, especially to scientists and medical men.

A wretch, a filth soaked thing whose foulness is exceeded only by her demon song." (p. 65)

-- Dr. Black (7, Page 65)

Importance: Dr. Black is not clear in this letter, but he seems to indicate that he has turned his wife into a Harpy, a Fury who calls his name from her hell.

It is worth noting that, for all the scientists opposed to Black's work, there were many who supported him, and even made similar claims of their own.

-- The Narrator (Codex: Siren, Page 78)

Importance: The narrator is indicating that scientific consensus has always been elusive and that Dr. Black is not the only scientist proposing a variant of human evolution.