The Thanatos Syndrome Short Guide

The Thanatos Syndrome by Walker Percy

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Contents

Characters

In a 1986 Paris Review interview, later reprinted in the "Writers at Work" series, Percy had kind words to say about the namesake and model for his Thanatos Syndrome protagonist: "My ideal is Thomas More, an English Catholic . . . who wore his faith with grace, merriment, and a certain wryness." Percy went on to say: "Incidentally, I reincarnated him again in my new novel and I'm sorry to say he has fallen upon hard times; he is a far cry from the saint, drinks too much, and watches reruns of M*A*S*H on TV." Percy forgot to mention that More is also just out of prison, after serving two years for selling amphetamines to truckers. Although More plays the role of detective in the investigation into the behavioral irregularities in West Feliciana, he hardly fits the stereotype of fictional private eye. He is tall and well built, yet he is a pacifist who avoids confrontation. Even when he is backed into a corner, More looks for a way out. At one point in the book, he instructs a character called Uncle Bob Hugh to aim for the ear when gun play becomes unavoidable. The unusual shootout, in which one member of the pedophile gang at Belle Ame is shot through the ear lobe while another has the seat of his pants shot off, occurs at the end of the novel. More, Uncle Bob, and Vergil Bon confront the child abusers and gather evidence of their crimes. The only character missing from this scouting party is Dr. Lucy Lipscomb, More's attractive young cousin.

On the other side of justice are a few pillars of the community who join in something called the Blue Boy project. Bob Comeaux, the chief physician at the Fedville clinical complex, and John Van Dorn, a renowned scientist whose photo has appeared on the cover of Time magazine, divert heavy sodium from the reactor's coolant system into the local community's water supply. This brings about dramatic behavioral changes. Some people lose their ability to speak and begin babbling like toddlers again. Some develop a stunning computerlike total recall of facts and data, a twentypercent increase in intelligence quotient (IQ), and computational abilities. Others shed their old inhibitions and display a sudden casualness in their sexual demeanor. None of this is enough for the creators of the Blue Boy experiment, who go much further when they begin increasing the amount of sodium coolant in the water to the point where it begins to impact on female menstrual cycles, thus robbing the residents of sexual drive and eliminating teenage pregnancies, venereal diseases, and AIDS. Another dimension of the program, which is racist and patronizing, leaps out in the scene in which Comeaux gloats over rows of "darkies" who after being exposed to sodium coolant, willingly and happily work the fields of the local jail, just like in the good ol' days of plantation prosperity.

The worst part of all this is that otherwise respectable and well-meaning doctors, like Max Gottlieb, More's old friend and colleague from Love in the Ruins, become part of the program convinced that it is legitimate science. The harsh irony of a Jewish doctor being involved in such a social "betterment" scheme is obvious. This aspect of the novel involves one of its most important, complex, and enigmatic characters: Father Rinaldo Smith, who goes to live in a remote fire-tower where, on a diet of soup and jello, he performs a weird kind of penance. Just like Tom More, Smith has lapsed in his faith and his priestly duties and bears a heavy burden on his soul. Smith tells More in the

confession scene that lies at the philosophical heart of the novel that he visited Germany as a youth in the 1930s and is haunted by his infatuation with Nazism.

Yet, just like Graham Greene's tortured, but ultimately noble figure of a "whiskey priest", Father Smith is Percy's spokesman of anguished truths. The reader can only marvel at the author's subtlety and restraint, which is akin to Thomas More's own narrative position in his book Utopia.

Social Concerns

Walker Percy was forty-five years old when he began his literary career in 1961. His first book, a slim novel set in New Orleans, was called The Moviegoer. Warmly received by both critics and the public, the book won the National Book Award and became a best-seller. What is more, The Moviegoer has subsequently proved so popular that it has never been out of print. In the twenty-six years that followed, Percy wrote twenty-six more books; his last novel, published shortly before his death, was The Thanatos Syndrome, a book that was a fitting culmination to his improbable career. Within two weeks of its release, the novel soared into the Top Ten of several national bestseller lists, became a dual main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and sold out its first printing of seventy-five thousand copies. In a 1984 interview, Percy had summed up his first novel, The Moviegoer by noting that "it's probably a good novel to teach ... because academics, after all, are interested in ideas, and this is a novel of ideas as well as, I hope, a good novel in its own right." Percy might well have been talking about The Thanatos Syndrome, for that same description applies to that book as well.

This novel, which is set in the nearfuture, recounts the adventures of psychiatrist Tom More as he investigates a mysterious and sinister conspiracy that involves the diversion of heavy sodium coolant from a nuclear reactor for a secret experiment on an unsuspecting public, an organized ring of sexual abusers and pedophiles, and mind control. More's namesake is the writer, philosopher, scholar, diplomat, and statesman Sir Thomas More, who was beheaded in 1535 by King Henry VIII after refusing to renounce his faith in the Roman Catholic church. More is also remembered as the author of a speculative political essay entitled Utopia. That seminal book, written in Latin, tells the story of a traveler who goes in search of the best possible form of government. The word "utopia", coined by More, came into common usage and is now applied as an adjective ("utopian") to describe other books that suggest a blueprint for the future—among them Francis Bacon's The New Atlantis (1627), and Jonathan Swift's classic Gulliver's Travels (1726). Sir Thomas More's integrity and steadfast dedication to his ideals, which brought about his execution, earned him a reputation as a man of integrity and enlightenment—"a man for all seasons," as he was dubbed in a 1966 Oscar-winning film of the same name.

Appropriately enough, a reviewer for the newspaper Newsday hailed Walker Percy, the author of The Thanatos Syndrome and creator of the fictional Tom More, as "a writer for all seasons."

Like Percy's earlier novels, The Thanatos Syndrome is compelling reading and is a book that brims with ideas. In less than four hundred pages, the author effectively employs a variety of literary styles, themes, and genres. This is a novel that can be read on several levels. It is a clever medical crime thriller, a subtle and comically understated novel of Southern manners, and also a thought-provoking philosophical tract.

Percy skewers many aspects of society; as he told interviewer Ashley Brown, "A good deal of my energy as a novelist comes from malice, the desire to attack things in our

culture, both North and South". Yet underlying Percy's feistiness there is a common thread—what he felt were disturbing similarities between the cultural and medical practices of the Weimar Germany of the 1920s and present-day America. In the world of The Thanatos Syndrome, removed into a familiar and only marginally different future, the author relates his fears as he imagines a decision of the United States Supreme Court that establishes a morally perilous precedent. The fictional Doe v Dade case links the coming of "personhood" in children to their acquisition of language, thus fixing it at about eighteen months, and allows for the termination of the life of younger children, who for genetic, medical, and intellectual reasons are deemed unfit to live. Through the practice of "pedeuthanasia" Percy alludes to the 1973 landmark pro-choice decision reached by the real-life Supreme Court in the case of Roev Wade. In that case, the court ruled that state laws banning abortion during the first six months of pregnancy are unconstitutional because they violate the "right to privacy" arising from the Fourteenth Amendment. As a staunchly Catholic writer (he converted as an adult, following a near-fatal battle with tuberculosis), Percy draws a parallel between fictional pedeuthanasia and real-life abortion, which is an anathema to the Roman Catholic Church.

Whether or not one agrees with Percy's position in the abortion debate, there is no denying the importance of the issues that he raises in The Thanatos Syndrome. However, Percy's concerns are even more wideranging. The author's comparison of fictional pedeuthanasia and real-life abortion does not signify a mistrust of science. "I don't have any quarrel with science," Percy told an interviewer shortly before his death in May, 1990. In an earlier Tom More novel, Love in the Ruins, written in 1971, the protagonist states a case for believing in science, its laws, its rationality, and its ability to contribute to the good of society.

What troubled Walker Percy were any politicians, soldiers, scientists, and other leaders of any political stripe who dictate policies of national "salvation". These people take advantage of the public's laziness or apathy in doing as they like, and then they look for scapegoats when things inevitably go wrong. Ultimately, Percy was vitally concerned about civil rights and access to information, including information about scientific experiments that may affect the population at large. That his apprehension was valid has been made all too clear by the bizarre history of the past half-century—in which we have seen everything from hydrogen bomb testing to covert mass medical experiments involving radiation exposure, hallucinogens, and various pathogens.

In The Thanatos Syndrome, a renegade group of doctors and scientists administer heavy sodium ions to about a hundred thousand people of an area called West Feliciana through the water supply. That they are able to do so echoes the kind of mischief that was afoot in Watergate, Irangate, and similar episodes. Percy was far too good a writer and The Thanatos Syndrome is too intelligent a book to reduce such complex issues to a standoff between the forces of good—represented by the innocent citizenry—and evil—in the guise of a sinister group of technocrats. The actions of this Fedville clique, spearheaded by a character called Dr. Bob Comeaux, and under the scientific tutelage of one John Van Dorn, are motivated by a concern for the decline of the quality of American life. This time, however, it cuts deeper than Cold War paranoia of a concern for material affluence. As Van Dorn puts it, the country has been attacked

by plagues of almost biblical proportions: crime, teenage suicide, drug abuse, and AIDS. Van Dorn cites frightening statistics to prove his point. Unfortunately, as Percy makes clear, the fact that the Fedville doctors attempt to cure symptoms, rather than underlying causes of the problems that concern them, only heightens the tragedy.

Techniques

The most remarkable thing about The Thanatos Syndrome is the consummate skill with which Percy weaves so many important ideas into such a readable package.

Although the first-person narrative, along with Tom More's sympathetic character, draws readers in, Percy interrupts his story at various points to interject with case histories, a confessional monologue, a highly impressionistic sequence of short, disjointed paragraphs during More and Lucy's lovemaking, and the concluding rhythmic, emphatic sermon, which reads like a rolling free-verse chant. Percy has set the novel in the very near future and jumps back and forth between past and present, as he did in his novel Love in theRuins.

The book's positive, upbeat ending sits well with the rest of the story, since it follows the structural pattern of classical comedy in its grim and unsettling theme, visible in the title of The Thanatos Syndrome (from the Greek word for death: thantos).

Even though the novel deals with some horrific issues, everything ends peacefully and without a loss of a single life. When retribution is exacted, it is in a restorative and integrative way. More and his wife are happily reunited. Lucy's husband returns home. The culprits accept their punishment/ penance, which is in the form of hospice work. The Blue Boy project is dismantled, and its ring-leader, Comeaux, is peaceably persuaded to convert Father Smith's ailing hospice into a refuge for patients formerly destined for euthanasia or pedeuthanasia.

In a triumph of the comic spirit, the other primal mover of the sodium conspiracy, Van Dorn, regresses to the level of a primate, having been pressured by More to ingest a heavy dose of sodium coolant.

Kept in a cage with a female gorilla named Eve, this unlikely human Adam frolics with her until his return to his former self; then he becomes a celebrity as an author of My Life and Love with Eve.

On another level, The Thanatos Syndrome is a deftly written suspense novel, combining elements of a detective story and the action thriller. Of course, this is no accident: Percy admitted to patterning the book after The Invasion of the Body Snatchers, the classic sci-fi film in which the pursued hero investigates bizarre changes in the local population. Early in the book—as in the film—the protagonist is suspected of delusion and paranoia for "imagining a conspiracy, a stealing of people's lives, an invasion of body snatchers."

Why did Percy choose to cast what is at heart a very serious book as a fast-paced, popular thriller? His reasons were as practical as they were realistic. "There is nothing wrong with the adjectives 'philosophical' and 'religious,' but when you apply them to a novel, it is enough to make the novelist turn pale," Percy explained.

Themes

The most common criticism of Walker Percy's novels is that they are repetitive.

Although The Thanatos Syndrome is different from any of his other books, some of themes do echo throughout his fiction. This is a testimony to the novelist's fervent belief in the importance of highlighting certain key problems and issues, and to his belief that their continued presence in our lives demands continued fictional (and nonfictional) scrutiny.

Percy, who himself had medical and pathology training, described this kind of philosophical book as a "diagnostic novel." Although the emphasis is clearly on the book's ideas and moral themes, The Thanatos Syndrome is also a medical thriller. As such, it was almost inevitable that the author would revisit a theme that he dealt with on numerous occasions in earlier novels: the relationship between the "abnormal" and the rest of the nominally healthy and sane society.

The recovery of the "real" through pain, suffering, or illness underlies almost all of Percy's fiction. It is rooted in his conviction (with a nod to pioneer psychologist Carl Jung), that at least some of our neuroses, psychoses, anxieties, or depressions may be more than just symptoms; they may actually be resources for learning something about our inner "selves."

The relationship between the sane and the abnormal in the novel seems curiously reversed, almost like in Saul Bellow's Herzog.

It may be worth noting that the author himself described his fictional design as combining Bellow's depth of character and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s, outrageousness and satire. In fact, this relation is reminiscent of the Renaissance courts, where the royal "fool" was granted a special dispensation to speak truths that would be punishable coming from the lips of others. In The Thanatos Syndrome words of apocalyptic warning are spoken by Father Rinaldo Smith, an aging, decrepit, and cranky priest who is given to seizures, catatonia, and bouts of odd behavior. While he is hardly a figure to command respect, Smith is a typical Percy creation whose purpose is to make us question who really deserves to be branded as "crazy."

Are the people who are routinely condemned as insane, unfit, and abnormal (in a clear allusion to eugenists making decisions which are based on racial and intellectual attributes) to be disposed of in mental asylums, prisons, or even through painless and humane euthanasia? Or are they blessed with a clearer vision, one so penetrating that the rest of us are blind to its sense? The paragons of the Feliciana community: John Van Dorn, scientist sans pareil, and Bob Comeaux, the super-physician, turn out to be ruthless and immoral techno-wizards, happy to turn the local population into unwitting guinea pigs. On the other hand, the same Father Smith, whose sermon outrages, bewilders, and alienates his parishioners, does so because he cautions them that the line between pedeuthanasia and eugenic murder is thin.

"Tenderness leads to the gas chamber," Father Smith tells a shunned church audience; like Herzog, he becomes a madman who dares say things that no normal person would. "No one doubts the malevolence abroad in the world," Percy observed in a 1987 interview. "But the world is also deranged. What interests me as a novelist is not the malevolence of man, so what else is new? But his looniness."

Another important theme of The Tlwnatos Syndrome is the spiritual dimension of God's grace. Almost all of Percy's books are a form of fictional protest against a complacent and secularized society in which selfproclaimed believers attest only to their superficial identification with a given church rather than to the extent of their spirituality.

Walker Percy was no religious dogmatist, although there is no doubt he was a staunch Roman Catholic; he was more interested in spiritual communion with God than in any sectarian creed. If Tom More remains a Catholic—albeit a lapsed one who openly confesses the uncertainty of his beliefs and a general lack of interest in religion—his beloved wife is a Presbyterian-turned-Episcopalian. As Percy noted in one of the subsequent interviews, they donate their money to television evangelist Jimmy Swaggart.

The search for salvation and grace was clearly more important to Percy than a cozy dogmatic acceptance of any superficial form of worship without substance.

Any discussion of Percy's themes would be incomplete without considering his treatment of science, always at the forefront of his life as well as his creative efforts—especially in the context of the intellectual tensions between science and religion. While Percy is keenly aware of the perils and limitations of the scientific inquiry in a way that is inextricably tied to his Christian view of the human condition, there is nothing in this novel to suggest the kind of antitechnological bias that characterized many twentieth-century Christian writers. Percy's last novel, like those before it, is informed by and sympathetic to science as well as Christianity.

Key Questions

The Thanatos Syndrome is an ambitious, profound, topical, and thrilling book that is written in Percy's typically resonant and yet erudite prose. In your discussion of this novel, you may wish to consider the following questions: 1. Did you find that the use of the crimethriller genre detracted from the novel's philosophical dimensions? Did you find that the philosophical dimensions detracted from your enjoyment of the suspense and mystery of the thriller?

2. What points of similarity do you see between the real-life historical figure Sir Thomas More and Percy's Tom More? Between Utopia and The Thanatos Syndrome?

3. Given his many failings and a checkered past, did you find Tom More a likeable character? Why or why not?

4. Do More and Lucy Lipscomb conform to the detective-sidekick model familiar from the classics of detective fiction?

5. Why would the author raise one of the more important themes in the novel in a sermon delivered by a rambling, senile, and generally oddball priest known as Father Smith?

6. Is The Thanatos Syndrome an existential novel? If so, in what sense? Can you identify a clear allusion to Camus' The Plague in the first pages of Percy's book?

7. Despite the book's grimness and its weighty philosophical implications, it is in many ways a humorous novel. What elements make it so?

8. Can you detect any parts of the book that would identify Percy as a linguist and student of signs?

Related Titles

In many ways, The Thanatos Syndrome seems like a sequel to Love in the Ruins.

However, it was not planned that way. The main character in Love in the Ruins was quite a radical departure for him. Moved to write such a sweeping work—even if confined narratively to the first four days in July—by America's impending bicentennial, Percy dealt with a subject no less grand than the state of the country: the psychic state of man in the latter days of the second millennium. Given the epic and, at times, mythical scope of his design, it is no wonder that More invents a futuristic contraption called the ontological lapsometer. With this portable device, and with the hilarious—and ruinous—help of the Devil himself (appearing as Art Immelman, a most peculiar foundation bureaucrat), More attempts to diagnose the ills plaguing society.

To do this, he uses a spectrum that ranges from what he calls "angelism" (pseudointellecrualized abstraction) to "bestialism" (total mindless hedonism).

Love in the Ruins was, in the words of a New York Times reviewer, "Percy's biggest novel to date," and it remains the comic, epic and philosophical gem in his entire oeuvre. None of the book's concerns, including the more topical ones, such as the race riots of 1968 alluded to by the Bantu riots and upheavals in the novel's Feliciana, have lost any pertinence for the contemporary reader (witness the Los Angeles riots of the 1990s). Its language, rich, lusty, and quirky like Tom More himself, remains one of the greatest achievements in American letters. The novel is Walker Percy at his best: a writer who continues to thrill readers the world over by the sheer power and inventiveness of his story-telling, albeit always at the service of a more philosophical Muse.

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