To Say Nothing of the Dog Short Guide

To Say Nothing of the Dog by Connie Willis

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

As is often true in comedic works, the characters in To Say Nothing of the Dog are not very complex. The protagonists, Ned and Verity, are sympathetic and easy to identify with; the supporting characters are usually even less realistically rounded, although a single identifying characteristic makes them memorable, much in the style of Charles Dickens. For instance, Lady Schrapnell is bossy, Warder is rude, Finch is deferentially and politely helpful, Tossie is spoiled, Professor Peddick is equally obsessed with fish collecting and by the idea that individual actions determine the course of history, and so on.

Through their actions, Ned and Verity demonstrate the novel's important social concerns and themes. The two meet because Verity has chosen not to accept the dictum that historians cannot change history, and saves a cat from being drowned.

Her impulsive nature, tender heart, and willingness to sacrifice general principles in specific cases (even though, as it turns out, her actions jeopardize all of history) are matched by Ned's, as he reassures Verity that he would have done the same thing.

Both characters begin by prioritizing life: the life of the cat, the life of Professor Peddick, the life of Terence's dog, Cyril. But these choices, aside from the problem of affecting the continuum, are fairly simple as most people would agree that saving the life of another human or of a much loved animal companion is the proper moral choice. The fate of a building or object judged ugly by their own aesthetic standards is more difficult. Ned and Verity, like other characters, are less understanding of those goals. It appears, by the development of these characters' opinions, that wanting to change or destroy what one does not find attractive is a common, perhaps universal, human trait, but to want to preserve something for its historical value—which is another way of saying that the object was valuable to other people, even if they are no longer present and their values have been abandoned, is a nobler and more difficult pursuit.

Characters remain fairly consistent throughout the book; growth and change are not primary in this comedy. Even so, many of the main characters do experience some growth: Ned and Verity come to understand Lady Schrapnell's obsession with rebuilding Coventry Cathedral; Terence St.

Trewes learns that what appears to be the ideal of Victorian femininity is not as desirable as a well-educated, sympathetic soulmate; Tossie discovers that being the ideal of Victorian femininity is not as rewarding as making the most of her natural gifts; and even Lady Schrapnell, whom the protagonists spend most of their time fearing and avoiding, turns into a more sympathetic presence as she shows that she shares their horror at the aesthetic appearance of the bishop's bird stump. Lady Schrapnell, whose presence is only indirect and behind the scenes until the end of the book, is one of the more interesting characters. At first, she appears to be the antagonist, working against Ned and the other historians; then, as Ned and Verity gain an appreciation of her goal, if not of her methods, she seems to be simply the agonist, the force setting events in

motion; but by the very end, it becomes apparent that her actions are directed by the same force that has been manipulating Ned and Verity. The continuum, aligned with the Victorian concept of a Grand Design, affected by time travelers from over six hundred years in the future, has been working to restore itself to prevent a breakdown that could destroy history. Once they understand this, Ned and Verity's opinion of Schrapnell changes, but the fact that this alteration is not actually a character change on Lady Schrapnell's part but a change in the major characters' perception of her is an interesting twist on traditional character development.

Social Concerns

The primary social concern in To Say Nothing of the Dog focuses on our relation to the past. Many consider this a peculiarly American concern, a suspicion which seems to be shared by the narrator, Ned Henry. The novel, which takes place in England, shows early work on the time machine occurring at Oxford, suggesting that the English connection to the past is somehow more secure and accessible, even tangible, than elsewhere. It is also significant that Lady Schrapnell is American, not English. A certain amount of nationalism comes into play, as it is pointed out that Lady Schrapnell, who devises and coordinates the plan to rebuild Coventry Cathedral in Oxford, is American by birth, only having gained English nobility through marriage. Her desire to. rebuild the cathedral arises from reading her great-great-greatgreat-grandmother's diary, where her ancestor records a life-changing visit to Coventry Cathedral where she saw the bishop's bird stump. The original cathedral, which had been partially destroyed in the Blitz in 1940 (ironically, destroyed by earlier renovations which had weakened the structure), had later been sold by the Church of England to a cult, been burned and restored, and eventually been turned into a shopping center. It takes an American to bring back what could be considered a national treasure, and most of the English characters do not seem grateful.

Judgments made by people of later periods almost always differ from the ideas of earlier eras. For instance, when Terence and Ned are on the river together, Ned admires the beautiful, unspoiled scenery, while Terence laments how industry has, to him, ruined the landscape. The architecture Ned and Verity admire, Mrs. Mering and her friends dismiss as "medieval," which, of course, it is, literally as well as figuratively.

The artwork Mrs. Mering and her contemporaries admire, Ned and Verity and their peers dismiss as cluttered, sentimental, and, in essence, ugly. The reader is led to agree with the travelers from the future and Baine that Victorian artwork such as the bishop's bird stump is unattractive, because they are sympathetic and the reader agrees with other judgments they make. As a novelist cannot show his or her audience an object but must describe it, Willis does everything in her power to convey the message that the bishop's bird stump is bad art: the sympathetic characters criticize it while the unsympathetic characters rave about it; the description itself, highlighting its crowded nature and mixed themes, agrees with our usual notions of aesthetics; and even though the multiple scenes are meant to be representational, no one can agree on what a given scene is meant to portray.

This revulsion to the art of the time runs counter to the nostalgic appreciation of previous eras that people tend to begin with. It is easy to romanticize the past, but studying the real conditions that existed reveals that all times have their own problems. In the Victorian period, despite the elegant depiction suggested by the classical learning of Professor Peddick and Terence, and Terence's ability to quote poetry for all occasions, not all was in fact so Utopian.

While Willis only lightly touches upon some of the problems brought about by the Industrial Revolution and increased urbanization, she does address sex-, nation-, and class-based inequities. For instance, the prejudice against educating women is central to the Tossie-Baine plot. Because of Tossie's annoying qualities and the fact that Terence, a generally likable character, predicts that Professor Peddick's niece Maud would be a bluestocking, overly educated for a woman, the reader may agree with the general attitude, excusing the misogyny as a product of its time. However, by the end of the novel, any doubts are resolved: Terence finds he prefers the well-educated Maud to the thoughtless Tossie; at the same time, Baine reveals that he thinks Tossie is petulant and spoiled not because she is naturally disagreeable but because her natural talents have never been encouraged.

Once he begins educating her, she does not immediately become perfect, but her demeanor improves markedly.

Tossie's reformation is doubly significant as she overcomes the expectations she has acquired from her society for her sex and the prejudices taught her as a member of her class. Before her change, Tossie frequently reminds Baine that he is a servant.

To Ned's non-contemporary eyes, the Merings' treatment of their butler is ridiculous. They treat him nearly as subhuman.

They changed his name to suit their convenience, and never consider whether their demands of him are reasonable, often giving him multiple Herculean tasks to accomplish simultaneously. In fact, Baine, as a servant, is not even allowed to express his opinions without permission. Ned notes that this attitude is why Karl Marx wrote his Manifesto. Baine's curiosity about America and its opportunities for people of lower classes also serves as a challenge to the novel's earlier seeming Anglocentrism. When Baine and Tossie flee to America where their mismatched class status will not be objectionable, and Baine will be able to pursue a different career, America's advantages become obvious. (Humorously, Baine considers movie acting to be the best way to capitalize on his considerable intelligence and skills.) In another example, the Merings discourage Terence's infatuation with Tossie until Mrs. Mering discovers that he is from a titled and wealthy family. England's traditions and connection to the past turn out to be a potential burden as they inhibit change that could bring about beneficial, progressive transformation; America's comparative social openness allows greater personal freedom.

The high-handed attitude toward workers is not restricted to Victorian times, either. When Ned travels back in time to witness the building of the cathedral in the medieval period, he sees a woman (an ancestor of Mrs. Mering and Lady Schrapnell) behaving the same way. Interestingly, Ned, while feeling sympathetic for the workers and servants, and while he compares the dictatorial women to each other, does not typically compare himself to the other oppressed workers. Class is, however, still important in the future of this novel. Determined by money more than birth, class contributes largely to Lady Schrapnell's dominance. Her influence begins when she offers to buy equipment for Oxford they could not otherwise afford. Her role as benefactress is overshadowed by

the tone of her commands: she treats the time travel workers with as little consideration as the Merings treat their servants. Because this is a comedy, her failure to comprehend the ridiculousness of her demands is treated humorously, but the potential for tragedy lurks behind her orders. Not only does she force the historians into exceeding the safe parameters for jump frequency, resulting in Ned and numerous other historians being severely time-lagged, but she sends historians to periods for which they are not properly trained. Lady Schrapnell's imperial tactics seriously undermine the potential benefits of her projects. Apparently, despite the initial contrast set up between England and America with England seeming more connected to a long history and America with the advantage of lack of tradition, the two countries are more similar than different: America cannot guarantee that its members value modern ideas of equality and fairness, and England is often oblivious to its history.

Techniques

In To Say Nothing of the Dog, Willis combines a number of literary techniques effectively to create this unusual blend of science fiction, comedy, romance, and mystery, such as point of view, setting, characterization, narrative exposition, and comic techniques. The story is told from Ned Henry's first-person limited point of view. This choice is well suited to the story because it allows Willis to maximize the humorous and suspenseful aspects of the story at the same time. As an unprepared visitor from the future to the Victorian era, Ned's knowledge of the society and customs are necessarily limited, a fact which can and does place him in many awkward situations; his innocence and lack of understanding can be felt by the reader, who, unless well-versed in Victorian manners, may be as puzzled as Ned. Because the story is also a mystery, narrating it from Ned's point of view allows the author reasonably to withhold information or clues from the reader, who can only learn information when Ned does.

Finally, the first-person limited viewpoint works well for Ned's romance with Verity, as the reader should be able to identify with Ned's situation, not knowing whether Verity reciprocates his affection, as this is how most romances begin.

The first-person point of view also works well as a mechanism for portraying the setting, especially the Victorian one, more actively than on the conventional thirdperson omniscient viewpoint. As Ned sees a new scene such as the river crowded with boats or the Merings' drawing room packed with furniture and bric-a-brac, the reader learns not only what the setting looks like but how Ned responds to it, which contributes to his characterization as well. Because he is from a different era, Ned's surprise at certain scenes feels natural and, once again, helps the reader identify with the protagonist.

In an unusual twist, Willis also uses the first-person point of view as an interesting occasion for stylistic variation. As it turns out, one of the symptoms of severe time-lag is a tendency to maudlin sentimentality—a characteristic shared with the Victorians.

Thus, when Ned waxes eloquent on, for example, the beauties of the river Thames, it sets the scene by describing the physical setting, reminds the reader of Ned's timelagged state, and also corresponds with the prose style of the period. Fortunately, Ned's eloquence is only set off sporadically during the period when he is most time-lagged.

Willis could, of course, have used this style throughout in third-person point of view, but the unfamiliar florid, wordy prose style would be difficult for most modern readers to tolerate in such large amounts.

Willis tends to utilize dialogue heavily in most of her writing, especially her comic writing, perhaps reflecting a certain Hollywood influence which she admits to elsewhere. To Say Nothing of the Dog is no exception. Examining each character's first line of dialogue reveals significant aspects of the characters almost instantly.

Ned's—"'We came round Radford way,' I said, fairly sure the verger wouldn't have been out that direction. 'A milk lorry gave us a lift,'"—demonstrates that he is quickwitted enough to fabricate a plausible excuse in difficult circumstances. Finch, Mr. Dunworthy's secretary, factotum, and eventual Victorian butler extraordinaire, enters with "let me help you there, sir." Verity's first line, "I don't see why not," introduces her as a young woman who is an independent thinker not afraid of authority as she argues with Mr. Dunworthy; readers are immediately cued that she is not to be seen as strident by the qualifier that her voice "was sweet rather than stentorian." Terence, who has a mild habit of getting himself into difficult situations, enters the novel with "I'm late." Looking at Tossie's first two lines, one to Verity and the other ostensibly to Terence, is equally instructive: "Look, Cousin, it's Mr. St. Trewes. . . . I told you he would come!" emphasizes her unfounded confidence and faith in her own conclusions. "Did the dearie doggums come to see his Tossie? Did he know his Tossie missed her sweetums Cyril?" more or less speaks for itself as an indicator of her juvenile thought and appalling sentimentality.

Willis's expository technique, the means by which she reveals information she wants to convey to the reader, is fairly distinctive.

As Ned attempts to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the bishop's bird stump and of the apparent time travel incongruities, he continually reviews the clues to himself in interior monologue, typically by quoting a key line from another character that seemed insignificant at the time but which has come to appear important. Sometimes he cannot identify its significance, which allows the reader an opportunity to analyze and put together the clues before Ned. In this way, Willis can introduce clues subtly, later highlight them as important in case the reader failed to note them the first time, and even return to them later. This, in addition to Ned's first-person descriptions, ensures that the reader can follow not only the story but the characters' journey along that path.

Themes

The concept of time travel clearly invites social commentary and, as in her previous works, Connie Willis delivers, granting readers a humanistic vision of humanity whose central values, beliefs, and behaviors remain unchanged over time.

One of the central thematic issues at work, coinciding with the social concern of clarifying our relation to the past, is that of preservation. Willis examines several different facets of the question how, given limited resources, we decide what is worth preserving from the past. Lady Schrapnell decides Coventry Cathedral is worthy of being rebuilt and is willing to pour money into that project; however, at times it seems that Lady Schrapnell's abrasive personality undermines the value of what she is doing as an unsympathetic character who often functions almost as an antagonist. Lady Schrapnell does not seem like a character whose value judgments the reader can trust.

At the same time, other alternatives for the cathedral such as turning it into a shopping center make the project less objectionable, and showing the building's deep emotional value to different characters from the time of its building and throughout history reinforces the probability that Lady Schrapnell's goal is not inherently wrong.

Other issues of preservation are raised by the discussion of time travel. One of the "laws" of time travel is that nothing significant can be brought forward from the past— it is impossible to bring forward the Mona Lisa because it already exists once at present, and the same is true for other treasures.

However, one time-traveler accidentally breaks part of the law, revealing a whole new corollary to this rule, and raising once again the question of "significance" and value.

Another theme that surfaces most noticeably in the interactions with Professor Peddick and his nemesis, Professor Overforce, is the question of what determines historical outcomes. The aptly named Overforce holds that natural forces acting on populations determine history; Peddick staunchly maintains the primacy of individuals. At the end, Overforce capitulates. Ironically, however, Ned and Verity discover that their actions have, to a great extent, been guided by the continuum, which itself is an impersonal natural force. The final word on the subject seems to be that details so small they are never noticed have the greatest effect, a thesis Willis develops in further detail in her earlier novel Bellwether.

Key Questions

Because time travel almost automatically entails comparing two societies, it can be an excellent way of pointing out the good and the bad in our own society and in others. To Say Nothing of the Dog takes this one step further since the historians are not traveling from our own time but from the near future, encouraging the reader to consider what our society will be like in, say, a hundred years—whether it will be like the one Willis portrays or, if not, how it will differ, in addition to how it is like the past.

Since no one can know what the future will be like, extrapolating probable futures from our present can be an entertaining exercise.

1. What period from the past would you most like to visit, and why?

2. If you could change one historical event, what would you change? How do you think that would affect our present society?

3. Do you agree with Willis's conclusion that history turns on events so insignificant that they cannot be identified?

4. Professor Peddick and Professor Overforce disagree over what determines the cause of history, individual actions or impersonal forces. At one point, Ned says that both are equally important, but at the end of the novel, Professor Overforce reportedly changes his mind to agree that individual actions are more important than impersonal forces. Which character do you agree with? Which character, if any, do you think voices the author's opinion?

5. Most communities have certain homes, buildings, or neighborhoods designated as of historical significance. What do you know about such areas in your town? What criteria would you use to determine what ought to be saved—the oldest, the most beautiful, the most famous, or something else?

6. Saving and rebuilding buildings costs money. A nurse in To Say Nothing of the Dog says, "Do you know what fifty billion pounds could do for medicine?

. . . We could find a cure for Ebola II, we could vaccinate children all over the world against HIV, we could purchase some decent equipment. With what Lady Schrapnell is spending on the stained-glass windows alone, Radcliffe Infirmary could build an entire new facility with the latest in equipment." A protester asks, "Do you know how many trees we could have planted in Christ Church Meadow for the cost of that building?" Do you think Lady Schrapnell is immoral for spending so much money to rebuild a cathedral? What do you think the best, most moral, thing to do with so much money would be? Does the government have a responsibility to help preserve historic sites?

7. If you could go back in time and save either an extinct species such as the dodo or the passenger pigeon or rescue a destroyed work of art such as a missing Shakespeare play or a missing Bach sonata, which would you do? Why?

8. Lady Schrapnell's bossy behavior is very effective. Are there ever times when it is appropriate for people to put their own priorities ahead of consideration for other people? What would some examples be?

Literary Precedents

To Say Nothing of the Dog continues a long and rich tradition of time travel plots in science fiction from classics such as Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward and H. G. Wells's seminal The Time Machine to the more recent movie Terminator, James P. Hogan's Thrice upon a Time, Kage Baker's In The Garden of Iden and the rest of the Company series, and a virtual host of other works exploring the often paradoxical nature of time travel.

In the novel Willis herself suggests other subgenres for comparison and a few specific works. For instance, much of the early part of the book is an extended tribute to Jerome K. Jerome's comic novel Three Men in a Boat, To Say Nothing of the Dog. Ned Henry draws attention to many of the shared attributes to that work, though most of the similarities are fairly superficial details either of setting or of plot. The plot on a larger scale shares more with romantic comedies and classic detective fiction, united most relevantly in Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey stories, especially Strong Poison and Gaudy Night. Agatha Christie mysteries in general and the Hercule Poirot novels in particular come in for a number of literary allusions as well. Ultimately, however, To Say Nothing of the Dog is a unique blend of genres and influences that owes most to Willis's own insights and humor.

Related Titles

In addition to the science fiction time travel, romantic comedy, and classic detective novel traditions, To Say Nothing of the Dog is important within Willis's oeuvre.

The most obvious connections to other Willis works are her award-winning Doomsday Book and "Fire Watch," both of which also feature Mr. Dunworthy as the professor in charge of Balliol College's time travel at Oxford University. In To Say Nothing of the Dog Willis continues to explore not only the physics of time travel, working out the "laws" and limitations, but a little more on the psychology of the historians doing the time travel. However, this novel is, in comparison, not so much driven by character as by the plot and solving the mystery of what happened to the bishop's bird stump; Doomsday Book and "Fire Watch" both focus to a much greater extent on the historian's adjusting to the ramifications of traveling backwards in time and understanding the historian's occasionally tragic inability to appreciably alter the lives of the people they meet or affect the outcome of historical events. Furthermore, because To Say Nothing of the Dog has a much lighter tone than the earlier works, it feels more closely related to Willis's other romantic comedies such as "Blued Moon," "Spice Pogrom," "At the Rialto," or even Uncharted Territories. In practice, perhaps it is closest to another Willis time-travel romantic comedy, "Time Out," although the settings and physics are quite different.

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