

Wilson Study Guide

Wilson by Daniel Clowes

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Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Clowes, Daniel. *Wilson*. Drawn and Quarterly, April 27, 2010.

Wilson, the main character in the graphic novel *Wilson* by Daniel Clowes, is a man who repeatedly undermines his own best efforts to love his life. His dislike of others seeps out, even when he tries to pretend like he likes people. After the death of his father, Wilson attempts to reconcile with his ex-wife and learns he has a daughter. His attempt to get to know his daughter ends in Wilson getting sent to jail on a kidnapping charge. Through the course of the novel, Wilson attempts to find meaning in life.

Wilson's story begins when he learns his father has a fatal illness. Wilson leaves his dog, Pepper, with a dog sitter and travels to his old town to see his father in the hospital. During his visit, Wilson's father dies. Walking through the neighborhood where he grew up, Wilson is bombarded with memories of his past. He becomes lonely for his ex-wife, Pipi.

Wilson learns from his ex sister-in-law that his ex-wife went through some bad times after their divorce. She stooped to working as a prostitute at one point. After learning this, Wilson goes to the part of town where prostitutes work hoping to find someone who knows Pipi. He does not find her there. However, when he goes to eat at the Huddle House, where her sister says that she sometimes visits, Pipi is his waitress. Pipi recognizes Wilson before he recognizes her.

The two attempt to reconcile. Wilson even hires a private detective to find the daughter whom Pipi gave up for adoption. Discovering that Claire, the daughter of Wilson and Pipi, is unhappy with her adoptive family, Wilson decides that he and Pipi should take the girl out for a road trip. Even though Wilson imagines them living together as a happy family, Pipi admits to Wilson that she feels nothing for her daughter and that she is uncomfortable with the idea of having taken Claire from her family without having asked their permission.

Wilson next appears in jail. He has been found guilty of kidnapping Claire. Both Pipi and Claire testify against him. After four years in jail, Wilson finally gets in touch with his ex sister-in-law who tells him that Pipi died from an overdose of drugs. Wilson returns to his home in California to discover that his dog, whom he left five years prior when he went to visit his father, was sick and had to be put to sleep. Wilson grieves for the dog and pays her more respect than he did his father.

Wilson next initiates a relationship with Shelley, the woman who dog sat Pepper. He complains on the phone to his friend that their relationship is more like housemates than lovers. To his surprise, Claire contacts him one day to tell him she is married. She says that she has been through a good deal of therapy. She believes that she has come to terms with her past. While they are together, Claire shows Wilson pictures of his grandson. Wilson begs Claire to let him come live in Alaska with them, but Claire says



she does not think that is a good idea. Wilson tries to talk to his grandson via the computer, but his grandson ignores him.

The story ends with Wilson sitting in a chair, watching the rain. He comments to himself that he finally gets the meaning of life. He does not share that meaning with the reader.



Pages 7-20

Summary

Wilson tries to prove that he likes people. However, while walking his dog, he greets a lady who talks incessantly. Wilson winds up asking the woman if she ever stops talking. He wonders how he came to live in Oakland, California, since he had always hated the place when he was a kid. He tries to convince himself it is not a bad place. Then, he sees a bum using the bathroom on the sidewalk. Wilson next remembers his mother's death and gets himself into a depression.

In a restaurant, Wilson insists on sitting with a stranger because he wants to be able to see out of the window. The man is working, but Wilson tries to carry on a conversation with him anyway. Wilson first applauds the man for having a job and then curses him because he will not talk to him.

Wilson sits by the ocean trying to understand why his parents had once enjoyed doing so. He finally leaves because he is bored. In another restaurant, Wilson strikes up a conversation with a man about marriage. Wilson talks as if he is married. When he arrives home, he admits to himself he cannot believe his wife left him 16 years prior.

At the post office, Wilson asks a lady how much she thinks it will cost to mail his package. When he convinces her to feel the weight of the box, he tells her the box contains dog poop. While walking his dog, Wilson enjoys creeping people out by talking to them in a falsetto dog voice.

In the next scene, Wilson considers calling his father but he decides to put the call off to the following day. He knows he will regret his decision if he does not eventually call. While people watching, Wilson wonders why men dislike fat women so much. He thinks to himself how secure a man must feel with a fat woman because he has such a large woman with whom he can snuggle. On the other hand, Wilson thinks these fat woman are really disgusting.

Wilson gets a phone call from his father in which the discussion ends with Wilson asking his father if he has gone to the doctor yet. In the next scene, Wilson is talking with his dog sitter, preparing to go and see his father because of a serious illness. Even though he tells the woman who will sit his dog for him that his father is seriously ill, she does not seem as concerned for him as she does for Wilson's dog. He comments on the fact that people are sometimes more concerned about animals than people. Then, he contradicts his own argument by indicating that dogs were better creatures than people.

Analysis

Because this is a graphic novel, as much of the story is told through illustration as it is through words. The author uses the words and pictures to quickly demonstrate to his



reader that Wilson is highly critical of others, even though he tries to convince himself that he likes people. In the first scene, for instance, Wilson engages a woman in conversation, telling himself he loves people. When he quickly tires of the woman talking, he cannot help but ask the woman if she is ever quiet.

There are different versions of Wilson developed by the way the character is portrayed visually. For instance, Wilson appears as a typical man on Page 1. He is trying to fit into society, even though he discovers it is impossible for him to do so. This same “normal man” appears on Page 11 where Wilson shares a table with an unwilling man. This real Wilson is also the one who considers calling his father but does not do so. Then, later he takes a phone call from his father during which he learns his father is dying.

A cartoon-like version of Wilson with a bulbous nose and squat round body is used when Wilson thinks about his regrets about the past. It appears the author is trying to illustrate Wilson as a child, wondering how his life has turned out the way it has. Even in these sections of the novel, Wilson is still shocked by the way some people act, for instance the bum pooping on the sidewalk.

Wilson is a man who has trouble with relationships. Of course, this should be obvious because of the way he treats people. On Page 14, for instance, Wilson calls the old man who enters the post office an “old timer.” Then, after Wilson convinces a woman to hold a box and estimate how much it will take to mail it, he tells her it is full of dog poop.

Wilson appears to miss his deceased mother. He also misses his ex-wife, who left him 16 years ago. Meanwhile, he has not talked to his father in more than a year and admits to himself that he sometimes forgets that his father is even alive.

The one relationship that Wilson appears to be able to keep up is the one with his dog. Of course, he uses his dog as a way to creep people out. For instance, on Page 15 Wilson appears to enjoy creeping the man out who stops to pet the dog, Pepper, by talking to the man from the perspective of the dog.

Discussion Question 1

At this point in the graphic novel, what is the tone of this novel? How does the author develop the tone using pictures and colors, as well as words?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Wilson’s personality at this point in the novel.. Is he a jerk, or do you think he really tries to embrace life? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.



Discussion Question 3

One group of people, in particular, that Wilson picks out to criticize is fat women. What seems to be his hangup with larger females? Discuss his attempt to understand why men do not like them.

Vocabulary

preferences, replenishment, overabundance, primal, enablers



Pages 21-34

Summary

Wilson tries to strike up a conversation with a man at the airport. The man, who is a consultant, describes what he does for a living. However, Wilson does not understand the man's job because the man cannot explain what he physically does during his workday. Wilson is equally infuriated when a younger man tells him that he is in I.T. Wilson lines out a bunch of nonsense letters for his own job. Then, he tells the young man that he sounds ridiculous when he says that he is in I.T.

In a cab on his way to the hospital, Wilson is offended when a woman in the same cab says she is visiting a sick relative as well. She insists her sick relative situation is sadder because hers is a young person who is dying. She passes off Wilson's father as having had a good life because he lived until 82.

As Wilson visits the hospital, he believes that his father would suck his life out of him if he could. He thinks his father thinks he is a "miserable slob" (24) who "doesn't deserve the precious gift of life" (24). Later, when the nurse comes in she talks to Wilson's father, Edwin, like he is a baby. Wilson tells her that his father has a doctorate in comp lit from Columbia. He asks her to stop treating his father in such a condescending manner.

When it comes to his father's final moments, Wilson is disturbed because his father has no final words for him. Walking through his old neighborhood later and recalling memories, Wilson lies on the pitching mound at the baseball field and calls out to his father.

Wilson stops at a playground to meditate about the fact he is all alone. He is quickly irritated by a child crying and demands the parents make it be quiet. Wilson decides to call his ex sister-in-law. She criticizes Wilson because he is calling after such a long time.

Wilson apparently believes his ex-wife has become a prostitute because he asks a taxi driver to take him to a place where he can pay women for sex. The first woman he approaches has not seen anyone fitting Pipi's description so he asks her to give him oral sex. In the motel, Wilson admits to the prostitute he never thought about having a family until both his parents were gone. He mentions to her that Pipi was pregnant when she left him. He considers momentarily whether or not the child is alive. Then, he decides that Pipi probably had an abortion.

Analysis

As he interacts with people while his father is dying, Wilson makes a point of how people tend to downplay the death of an old person. Wilson says that death is death and loss is loss. It does not matter if a person is young or old. He is offended when the



woman riding in the taxi with him seems to pass off his father's death as being inconsequential because his father is elderly. She plays up her relative's death because that relative is young with children. She is blind to the fact that regardless of how old his father is, Wilson's father is still his father.

Wilson also points out how condescending people can be toward an elderly person who is sick or dying. He listens as the nurse talks to his father, Edwin, like he is a child even though Edwin is a tenured professor with a doctorate degree. In typical Wilson-style, Wilson cannot correct the nurse's treatment of his father without having to criticize her. In the same sentence that he asks her not to treat his father in a condescending manner, he treats the woman in the same condescending manner by telling her she is a "fat idiot" (25).

Wilson makes fun of the way that jobs in today's job market do not produce a tangible product. For instance, Wilson gets upset with a man at the airport when the man tries to explain to Wilson what he does for a living. Wilson wants to know what the man does physically at his job. The man, who is a consultant, does no physical labor. Wilson does not believe that one has a real job unless there is physical labor. So, he loses his temper with the man.

In the same way, Wilson makes fun of the young man who tells Wilson he works in I.T. Since Wilson is apparently fairly computer illiterate, the job description sounds like the beginning of alphabet soup. Wilson criticizes the man by listing a bunch of letters as his job description before telling the man that I.T. sounds ridiculous.

Along with its statements about society, this novel begins to develop somewhat of a plot in this section. After the death of his father, Wilson realizes that he is all alone in the world. In his grief, he reaches out to his ex-wife's family, hoping to locate her. There is a twist as Wilson talks to a prostitute he hired in hopes the woman might recognize Pipi's picture. He admits to that woman that Pipi was pregnant when she left him. He briefly considers that child might still be alive in the world. Then, he changes his mind and assumes Pipi probably had an abortion or she would have sued him for child support.

Discussion Question 1

Wilson points out in this section how people tend to think the death of a young person is somehow more tragic than the death of an older person. Do you think Wilson is justified in feeling as if his loss has somehow been diminished just because his father was old? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is it about Wilson's sudden realization that he has no family left that makes him decide to try to look up his ex-wife? What does the fact that Wilson never showed concern for his unborn child when his wife left him say about Wilson?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Wilson's frustration with the young man who describes his job in acronyms. As a society, there seems to be an increase in the number of acronyms used, particularly in the computer world. Do you find this frustrating like Wilson does, or is it just a sign of the times? Explain your reasoning.

Vocabulary

oligarchs, vitality, condescending, indigent, ghoulish



Pages 35-48

Summary

At Huddle House, Wilson admits to his waitress that he is hoping that his ex-wife will stop by the restaurant while he is eating there. He describes his ex-wife's life to the waitress who recognizes that he is Wilson before he recognizes her as Pipi. The two go out for drinks and Wilson tries to compliment Pipi on how good she looks. However, his compliment comes out distorted because he points out in his "compliment" that she has gained weight and that she looks good in consideration of what she has been through. At a movie after drinks, Wilson tells Pipi that he loved her, but that he could never seem to make her happy. She questions if he ever got a job, indicating the fact he did not work was some cause for her unhappiness. Pipi seems interested when Wilson tells her that his deceased father left him ten million dollars. Her interest in the money makes Wilson think Pipi has not changed.

In a bedroom scene, Pipi tells Wilson that she did not have an abortion. She put their daughter up for adoption. Wilson hires a private investigator to help him find his daughter. In the next scene, Wilson talks to a man about the stresses of fatherhood. After he describes how stressed he is because of his teenage daughter, he admits to the man that he does not even know the girl's name.

Back in the bedroom, Wilson watches Pipi as she sleeps. He thinks how strong she was to be able to come back from such a hard life. When he notices a tattoo on her hip, he puts on his glasses. The tattoo's words read as "Property of Sir D.A.D.D.Y Big-Dick" (41).

Pipi and Wilson find where Claire, their daughter, lives in a big house in the suburbs. Later, they see her at a mall where two teens are bullying her. Wilson threatens one of the teens about messing with his daughter. Claire overhears the comment. Wilson and Pipi take Claire to a restaurant to talk to her, but she can do nothing but cry. Later, Wilson walks through a park with Claire telling her that she should not think badly of the people who adopted her, even if they do not spend much time with her.

Wilson suggests to Pipi that they get back together and live near Claire. When Wilson indicates he would get a job, Pipi asks him about the ten million dollars his father left him. He admits there was never any money. He treats her as if she were stupid for believing him.

Claire lies to her adoptive parents and says she is going to spend the night with a friend. Actually, she goes on a road trip with Pipi and Wilson. Pipi seems hesitant about the trip.



Analysis

Even though Wilson tries to compliment Pipi, he cannot do so without being critical of her at the same time. His comment “I certainly never minded a larger woman” (36) indicates to Pipi that he has noticed that she has put on some weight. When he tells Pipi he had expected her have become “a bug-eyed freak” (36) because of her trials, it is uncertain if he is really being complimentary or not. He points out what she does not look like and chooses to not mention what she does look like.

It is clear through the discussions between the two that money was an issue during the marriage even though they had different ideas what the problem was with the money. Wilson indicates he tried to keep Pipi happy but Pipi’s question to him, whether or not he got a job indicates it was his lack of work and income that was a problem for her. Nothing has changed since he admits that he still has not gotten a job. Wilson, on the other hand, appeals to what he thinks is Pipi’s greedy side when he tells her that his father left him a good deal of money when he died. Her interest in the money causes Wilson to think she is as greedy as ever when he refers to her as “Same old Pipi” (37).

Wilson tries his hand at fathering when he finds the daughter whom Pipi gave up for adoption and they discover that she is unhappy. Claire is fat, her peers think she is bisexual and bully her because of her looks, and she claims that her parents do not pay attention to her. She is a very unhappy girl looking for a way out of her situation. Her adoptive parents are the sort of people whom Wilson particularly dislikes because they both work and because they live in the suburbs.

Pipi’s brief desire to reunite with Wilson seems to be fading once she realizes not only that he was not left ten million dollars by his father but also that he is still immature and deeming. Pipi obviously thought that Wilson was telling her the truth when he mentioned the money his father had left him. When she learns that there is no money, Wilson was just playing a mean joke on her, she suddenly does not seem as interested in being with him as she was before. In the car when they begin their road trip with Claire, Wilson asks Pipi “Isn’t this worth more than ten million dollars” (47) and then makes a smart remark about her sounding sincere when she answers “Maybe so...” (47). She curses him, displaying her frustration with his sarcasm and his fun at her expense.

The tattoo on Pipi’s back symbolizes that regardless of how hard she has worked to separate herself from her past, she will always have that mark of the past on her. This scene is humorous not only because it shows that Wilson is getting old, he has to put on his glasses just to read the tattoo, but also that Pipi cared enough about someone, even if it was a person called D.A.D.D.Y Big-Dick, to have his name tattooed on her back. If they choose to get back together, that tattoo is a part of her past that Wilson will never be able to ignore.



Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the way the Pipi and Wilson seem to value money. Why would their differing opinions cause them to have trouble in a marriage?

Discussion Question 2

Even though Wilson indicates he would like to start over again with Pipi, Pipi does not seem to be so sure. What sort of opinion does Pipi seem to have of Wilson? Use examples from the novel to defend your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the circumstances under which Claire meets her birthparents. What presumptions might Claire have made about Wilson in this initial meeting? What presumptions might Wilson and Pipi have made about Claire?

Vocabulary

desiccated, gauntlet, vocation, presume, compensatory



Pages 49-62

Summary

Wilson and Pipi have taken Claire to Polly's house for a visit. Wilson attempts to make small talk and endear himself to the family but Will asks him if he was the one who sent them a box of dog poop. Later, Claire, Will and Pipi sit on a dock together. Wilson talks about how fulfilled he feels since they are all together. Pipi however, is not sure about their situation. She admits she does not feel right about having kidnapped Claire.

When Wilson and Pipi talk to each other alone, Pipi admits to Wilson that she does not feel anything for her daughter. In the hotel room, Claire asks where Pipi is. Wilson admits they had an argument but that Pipi should be back soon. As he looks out the window Wilson says: "Oh fuck that fucking bitch" (53), indicating she has done something with which he is very displeased.

In the next scene, Wilson is in jail. He talks to his cellmate about how he had always wanted to go to jail and hopes to catch up on his reading. His cellmate tells him to shut up before he has anal sex with him. In a prison Bible study Wilson comments that he believes a person must have religion introduced to them before they have developed logic or reason in order to embrace it. He also indicates it is possible that severe brain trauma or drug use could regress a person to the point they would believe the teachings of the religious.

Wilson sobs in his cell wishing he had a chance to right the wrongs in his life. His cell mate thinks he wants forgiveness from his woman but Wilson says that he has abandoned his dog. After four years of trying to call Polly, she finally accepts the call. He learns from her that Pipi died of an overdose. Before he hangs up the phone, Wilson admits to his sister-in-law that he was the one who sent them the dog poop.

Still in jail, Wilson watches an icicle melt, still waiting for a profound breakthrough. Later, on the bus Wilson talks to a man sitting next to him about his newfound freedom. He compares it to having the flu. Back in Oakland, Wilson sets about trying to find Pepper. He notices there have been an influx of nail salons into the area. Even the building where Shelley once had her dog sitting service is now a nail salon. When Wilson does finally track Shelley down, he discovers that Pepper had to be put to sleep because she had an illness. Alone in his room that night Wilson apologizes to Pepper.

Analysis

Pipi faces serious distress in this section of the novel, though Wilson does not fully understand her feelings. Pipi is distressed because she feels no maternal feelings for her daughter, even though Wilson seems to take easily to Claire. The empty pool that illustrates the scenes in which Wilson and Pipi talk symbolizes Pipi's affection for her daughter. Wilson has been berating Pipi for not even being able to bring herself to smile



at Claire when Pipi makes her announcement. As usual instead of being empathetic, Wilson barrels over Pipi's feelings, making fun of her because she has finally spoken to him. This admission that she did not feel any love for her daughter must have been hard for Pipi to make. While she was already feeling uncomfortable because they had basically kidnapped Claire, Pipi is probably angry because of Wilson's callous response to her fear.

The author leaves many blanks for the reader to fill in by using context clues to move from one scene to the next. For instance, the action moves from Claire and Wilson alone in the motel room together waiting for Pipi to come back directly to Wilson in the jail cell. Because Wilson is looking out the window and says "Oh fuck that fucking bitch" (53) in the last panel of the scene where he and Claire are alone in the motel, the reader can assume that perhaps Pipi has alerted the police to their location. Later, when Wilson talks on the phone to his ex sister-in-law, the reader get more information about how Wilson came to be in jail. Pipi and Claire both testified against Wilson during the trial. He was sentenced to jail time.

Wilson's reaction to his dog's death is considerably more emotional than this reaction to his ex-wife's death. In Pipi's case, Wilson is more satisfied with her death of a drug overdose than anything because it gives him backing for his claim that she was doing drugs. When Wilson learns that Pepper had to be put to sleep, however, Wilson is beside himself. He is angry and blames Shelley for allowing his dog to be put to sleep before her time. He refuses to believe that nine years is a good life for a dog and believes she deserved more. The only time that Wilson came close to this sort of proof of an emotional attachment was when he mourned for his father on the pitching mound of the baseball field in his hometown.

Discussion Question 1

How does Wilson interact with the people whom he meets in prison? Are his interactions positive or negative?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Wilson's statement that "Once you hit a certain age, though, there's no way you're going to buy into all this horseshit. It's got to be before you develop any logic or reason... unless you get severe brain trauma, I guess... or become basically retarded through drug use" (55). What does his view of religion say about him? What is he saying about the people around him?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Pipi's role in putting her ex-husband in jail. Do you blame her for doing so? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

genetic, inscrutable, epiphany, degrade, euphoria, literally



Pages 63-77

Summary

Shelley and Wilson hold a memorial service for Pepper during which Wilson gives a very verbose eulogy. They have dinner together, and Wilson asks Shelley if she would consider dating him. She hesitates when she learns he has been in jail. Wilson later bemoans his fate when he insists on sitting with the same man at a restaurant because Wilson prefers to sit by a window. Although the man recognizes Wilson, Wilson does not recognize the man.

Shelley approaches Wilson while he is eating at a what appears to be a fast food restaurant. She tells him that she is willing to give him a try. Then, she cries because she is losing her job. Further along in the relationship, Wilson talks to a friend on the phone while Shelley is within earshot. He tells his friend that his relationship with Shelley is more like that of a brother and sister than lovers.

Wilson works on a computer, a device that he is sure is the worst creation in history. Even though he is connected to so many people through the Internet, Wilson says that he still feels terribly alone. Many people say that they would like to smash their computer, but they never do it. Wilson decides he will really smash his computer.

He next grieves the closing of bookstores. He says that he had imagined himself in his old age sitting in the garden reading a newspaper. However, the fact that computers were taking over print newspapers will make that impossible.

Claire gets in touch with Wilson. She meets him in a restaurant. She is a thinner, more attractive version of herself. She admits to Wilson she put a lot of hard work into therapy to overcome the problems she had as a teen. During their conversation, in which she tells Wilson about her husband and son, Wilson realizes he has a grandson. Wilson begs Claire to let him move closer to them so he can be a bigger part of their lives. Claire says that she does not think that is a good idea.

Even though he and Shelley do not have the passionate relationship for which Wilson hoped, he realizes he is happy to have someone with him. Shelley reminded him that he had called her a “man-hating blood-sucker” (74) and that he was moving to Alaska to get away from her. Later, Wilson tries to chat with his grandson over the computer. His grandson is more interested in playing “the catapilla game” (75) than talking to Wilson.

In the restaurant with the stranger again, Wilson decides that he is tired of worrying about his own mortality. He decides that he is a beautiful creature who has had a wonderful life. In the closing sequence, Wilson watches the rain and indicates that he has finally had his profound breakthrough. Even though he indicates what he has discovered is obvious, he does not share with his reader what it is.



Analysis

For a man who cries for his father's death only when he visits the ball field where they once practiced and compares the loss of his mother to never getting to see the ocean again, Wilson prepares a very touching eulogy for his dog. He admits to the man in the restaurant that he liked animals because he did not do well in relationships. Regardless, Wilson was more emotionally indebted to his dog than any other figure in his life.

Wilson boiled his relationship with his daughter down to her act of testifying against him at his trial. Even though he did not know Claire well and that technically he had kidnapped her, Wilson agreed to see her years later only because he wanted to tell her how he felt about her actions toward him. It is not until he learns that he has a grandson that Wilson believes that Claire is useful again. She stands up to Wilson when he asks if he can move to Alaska to be closer to them. She tells him that she does not need the drama.

Wilson continues to discuss his dislike of technology. While others around him say that they want to smash their computers, Wilson says he will be the first one to actually destroy his machine because he hates it so much. He hates it because he believes it does not make his life any easier. Also, it does not make him feel any less lonely even though he is connected to multitudes of people through it.

In the same line with his hate for technology, Wilson bemoans the loss of print newspapers and magazines. Because of the loss of this print media, Wilson has had to change the image he had of himself as an old man. He had wanted to be able to sit in the garden reading a newspaper like his father had done. He realizes that may not be the case for him.

Even with all of his failed relationships, Wilson realizes that his life has not been a complete waste. He decides that being alive and having produced a child and grandchild are enough to make him be happy that he has lived.

Wilson, who has spent much of his life trying to find a "profound personal breakthrough," indicates that he finally has this breakthrough. However, he does not share it with the reader.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the role of the man in the restaurant.

Discussion Question 2

What is the tone at the ending of the novel? How does the author develop this tone?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Claire's purpose for meeting Wilson again. Do you think she really wanted a relationship with him, or did she just want to put things right? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Vocabulary

recalibration, trajectory, totemic, marauders, accosted, innovation, mortality



Characters

Wilson

Wilson is the central character in this graphic novel. He is a man who has never found any real direction in his life. As he ages, he becomes more interested in finding meaning in life and connecting with people. Because he has such an abrasive personality and is openly critical of others, Wilson is not a popular man. He actually loves his dog more than he likes people.

Wilson is critical of religion; he does not like modern technology; and, he is condescending of people who have non physical jobs. He also does not like people who work hard for a living and live in nice homes. Wilson has never had a job and claims he does not buy into the idea of the rat race. He is, perhaps, unintentionally cruel to people he meets on an everyday basis because he cannot help but tell them what he is really thinking about them.

After his father's death, Wilson attempts to reunite with Pipi, his ex-wife, in the hopes that he can find meaning in his life. He hires a private investigator to locate the daughter whom Pipi put up for adoption when she left him. Although Wilson had hopes of starting a happy family with Pipi and Claire, Pipi turns Wilson in for "kidnapping" Claire. Claire testifies in the trial. Wilson is found guilty and put in jail.

Wilson is later contacted by Claire who apologizes to him. Wilson begs to be allowed to be a bigger part of Claire's life, but Claire refuses. She tells him that she does not think a closer relationship is a good idea. At the end of his journey, Wilson realizes not only his worth as a person, but he also believes he has a profound realization of the meaning of life.

Pipi

Pipi is Wilson's ex-wife. She left him sixteen years before the death of Wilson's father. It was the death of Wilson's father that made Wilson start thinking about Pipi again. Pipi, however, admitted she had not thought of Wilson much since she had left him.

Wilson gives the impression that Pipi had a hard life since she left him. He knows that she became involved in prostitution and believes that she even took drugs even though Pipi denies having used drugs. Wilson believes his suspicions about Pipi's drug use are founded when he discovers that she dies of a drug overdose while he is in prison.

When Pipi left Wilson, she was pregnant. She gave the baby, a daughter, up for adoption. Later, after Pipi and Wilson reunite with their daughter Claire, Pipi admits that she does not feel any connection to her daughter at all. It is apparently Pipi who turns Wilson in to the authorities for having "kidnapped" Claire.



Claire

Claire is the daughter of Pipi and Wilson. Her mother put her up for adoption when she was born. Claire was adopted by a family who lives in the suburbs. Her father works is a fund manager while her mother works in branding. Claire tells Wilson and Pipi that she is unhappy in her life and that her parents do not pay attention to her.

Pipi and Wilson first see Claire at a mall. She is overweight with a haircut so that her gender is questionable. They witness as two other teens harass Claire asking her what she is doing that night and calling her a bisexual.

After Wilson and Pipi take Claire for a road trip, Claire testifies against her father in the trial. Years later she comes back to apologize to him. She seems hesitant about him moving closer where he could have more interaction with her and her new family. She admits to Wilson she has worked in therapy for years to heal herself.

Shelley

Shelley is the woman who dog sat Pepper for Wilson while he was gone to visit his father. When Wilson did not return for several years, Shelley found an adoptive family for Pepper. After Wilson did finally come home Shelley had to break the news to him that Pepper had been put to sleep because of a serious illness. Shelley and Wilson held a memorial service for the dog.

Even though Shelley turned Wilson down when he first asked if she would date him, Shelley later came back to Wilson and asked if he would reconsider. Apparently, she had just lost her job. Shelley lived with Wilson, but Wilson commented that their relationship was more like the relationship between brother and sister than lovers.

Edwin

Edwin is Wilson's father. He worked as a tenured professor at a university. He had earned a doctorate in comparative literature.

Wilson and his father did not have much interaction with one another. Wilson considers calling his father when he realizes that he has not talked to him in more than a year. Edwin, however, calls his son before Wilson has a chance to call. Edwin tells Wilson that he is dying. Edwin says nothing to Wilson before he dies. Regardless, Wilson mourns his father's death when he goes to the baseball field where they once played baseball together.



Polly

Polly is Pipi's sister. She is also Will's wife and Paul's mother. Wilson believes that Pipi is more concerned about her sister's opinion of her than anything else.

When Polly finally answers Wilson's phone calls from jail, it is Polly who tells Wilson that Pipi died of a drug overdose.

Pepper

Pepper is Wilson's dog. Pepper is important in a good deal of Wilson's interactions with other people. While Wilson is in jail, Pepper has to be euthanized because of an illness. Wilson mourns Pepper's death more deeply than his father's death.

Jason

Jason is Wilson's grandson. He is the son of Claire and Judd. Wilson tries to talk with his grandson over the computer, but Jason is more interested in a computer game, even after Wilson shows him he has a Thomas the Tank Engine, a toy that Jason likes.

Will

Will is Polly's husband and Paul's father. Will is the one who asks Wilson if he was the one who sent them a box of dog poop.

Judd

Judd is Claire's husband and the father of Jason.

Paul

Paul is the son of Will and Polly.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Ocean

Wilson images the ocean as representing his mother in a comparison in which he tries to help the reader understand how he feels about his mother's death. He says that he feels about his mother the way a person might feel if they were told they could not ever see the ocean again.

Pepper

Even though Pepper is a character, Pepper is also a symbol of the good part of Wilson. She is what he truly loves and what connects him most to society.

A Box of Dog Poop

This box of dog poop is a representation of the animosity that Wilson feels toward his ex brother-in-law and sister-in-law/. He mails this box to them but denies it was him who sent it until after he learns that Pipi is dead. At that point he has no reason to hide his hate from them and admits that he sent the poop.

The Baseball Field

This baseball field is symbolic of the relationship between Wilson and his father. When Wilson walks through his town after the death of his father, he does not cry until he gets to the baseball field where he and his father once played ball.

Child Support

Because Pipi never sued him for child support Wilson assumes that she aborted the baby with whom she was pregnant when she left him. To Wilson, this lack of child support represents the lack of a child.

Pipi's Tattoo

Pipi's tattoo is a symbol of Pipi's life in prostitution. Even though Wilson had hoped that they could start their life fresh, this tattoo is permanent proof that her previous life will always be with her.



The Empty Pool

The empty swimming pool at the hotel where Pipi, Wilson, and Claire stay represents the lack of feelings that Pipi has for Claire.

The Computer

The computer is a symbol of progress. It reminds Wilson how the good days of the past are behind him.

Thomas the Tank Engine

The Thomas the Tank Engine toy is a symbol of Wilson's attempt to have a relationship with his grandson.

Newspapers

The newspapers that Wilson imagines himself reading in his garden when he is an old man symbolize the way of life before computers and electronic readers took over print media.



Settings

Oakland, California

Oakland, California is the place to which Wilson moved after he grew up.

Chicago

Chicago is the city where Wilson grew up. He returned to Chicago when his father got sick. It is where he reunited with Pipi.

Huddle House

Huddle House is the restaurant where Pipi works. Wilson went to this restaurant hoping to run into Pipi because her sister said she sometimes went there.

Polly's House

Polly's house is the place to which Pipi and Wilson take Claire during their road trip. They have a family dinner during their time together.

The Jail

Wilson spends six years in jail after he is found guilty of kidnapping Claire.



Themes and Motifs

Wilson's Relationship Failures

Wilson's life is dotted with failed relationships, caused mostly by his inability to keep his opinion to himself. Wilson's relationship with Pipi failed twice, and his attempt to have a relationship with his daughter ended in jail time for him. Wilson attempts a relationship with the woman who took care of Pepper for him while he was in jail, but his comments to her are again his own undoing.

Although there are no specifics given about what caused the relationship between Pipi and Wilson to disintegrate their first time, it is pretty certain that the derogatory way he treated her during their attempt to reconcile to one another is what caused her to turn against him again. Wilson is critical of Pipi not only when he and Claire are alone but also when Pipi is there. It must have been degrading for Pipi to hear the father of her child tell the stories of her troubled past. It should have been Pipi's choice to tell or not tell those stories, Wilson should never have gotten involved. Additionally, Wilson degrades Pipi when she admits to him that she feels nothing for her daughter, an admission that must have been a terrible truth for her to even mention. Wilson's lack of respect for his wife shows when she dies. All he seems interested in is the fact that she died of a drug overdose, proof, he believes that she had been doing drugs all along.

Wilson's relationship with his daughter is also not ideal. After she grows up and attends therapy, she refuses his request to be allowed to move closer to him. She tells him that she does not "want any more drama in my life" (73). She apparently visited him just to make things right between them, not really to start a closer relationship. She hints at this when she tells him that: "everything I am comes from my parents" (73) in reference to her adoptive parents. She does not seem to consider the time she spent with Wilson and Pipi as a good time in her life.

Even when Wilson starts a new relationship with Shelley he cannot help himself but begin destroying it with his words. Sitting on the couch, within earshot of Shelley, he tells a friend that there is no sex in their relationship and that is it more like that between a brother and sister. Shelley seems to be more quick to play Wilson's game with him. For example, when he is told by Claire that she does not want him to move closer to her family in Alaska, Wilson makes a big show of telling Shelley how lucky they are to have one another, even if there is not passion in their relationship. Shelley comes back at Wilson by reminding him that he had earlier told her that she was "man-hating blood-sucker" (74).

Wilson's Reaction to Loss and Grief

Even though there is no doubt that Wilson misses his mother and father after their deaths, Wilson mourns for his dog in a way that is more loving than the way he mourns



for his parents. Wilson and Shelley participate in a memorial service for Pepper but there is no mention of a funeral for Wilson's father even though he died during the time period covered by this novel. After the loss of his dog, Wilson begins dating Shelley, a relationship that does not turn out the way he thought it would. After his father's death, Wilson tried to reunite with his ex-wife, a reunion that definitely had bad consequences for Wilson.

Wilson's mother died before the span of time covered by this novel, so it is not certain the way he reacted when she first died. He does tell his audience that he was at first relieved because she had been so sick. Then, he describes her not being around to not being able to see the ocean again, a strange way to describe to loss of one's mother.

When Wilson's father dies, Wilson does show some signs he misses his father. His sense of loss is particularly obvious when he visits the ball field where he and his father once practiced ball together. Wilson lies on the pitcher's mound and cries for his father. He reacts to his father's death by getting back in touch with his ex-wife even though she left him sixteen years earlier. This relationship that Wilson initiated so soon after his father's loss turns out to be a mistake because Pipi winds up getting Wilson put in jail for kidnapping their daughter from her adoptive parents.

It is when Wilson learns that his dog, Pepper, had to be put to sleep while he was in jail that Wilson really shows emotion. He is at first angry with Shelley, for allowing Pepper to be euthanized. After he gets over his anger and accepts Pepper's death Wilson has a memorial service for Pepper. He even prepares and reads a eulogy while Shelley listens. Remember that there is not mention of a funeral or memorial service for Wilson's father. After Pepper's death, Wilson initiates a relationship with Shelley. The relationship is not passionate, as Wilson had hoped, and he attempts to sabotage it with his own words.

Wilson's Criticism of Functional Members of Society

Not only does Wilson not have a job, he also seems to nurse a grudge against members of society who do have employment. It appears that Wilson's lack of a job was an issue in his relationship with Pipi. It is also suggested that Wilson's father was critical of him because he had no job. While Wilson does not want to participate in what he calls the "rat race" (37), he is also critical of those who do. Particularly of note in Wilson's criticism of Claire's adoptive parents is his distress over Claire's home in the suburbs.

One of the first things that Pipi asks Wilson when they are getting to know one another is if he has gotten a job. Because it is one of the few questions she has for him, his lack of a job must have been an issue in their marriage. Pipi actually seems interested in Wilson when he tells her that he has inherited ten million dollars from his father, a gift that would keep Wilson from having to work.



The reader also suspects that Wilson's lack of a job might have been an issue between Wilson and his father. When his father is dying, Wilson thinks that his father must be thinking that he is a "miserable slob" who "doesn't deserve the gift of life" (24).

Wilson's distaste for the gainfully employed is particularly notable when he talks about Claire's adoptive parents. Even though they live in the suburbs, generally thought to be an ideal place to live, Wilson makes it appear they are living an awful life. He calls life in the suburbs "a living death" (42). He asks "what possible values could they share with us" (42). This indicates that he thinks the way he and Pipi are living is ideal, while working hard and buying a nice house is less than ideal.

Wilson's Opinion of Modern Technology

Wilson quickly shows a dislike for modern technology. Not only does he not like people who have jobs that involve technology, he also does not like the technology that makes those jobs possible. He indicates that he will crush his computer, an action other people only make empty threats to do. Wilson misses the way things were before computers, particularly in relation to print media.

One of the best examples of Wilson's ill opinion of modern technology comes when he begins trying to work a computer. He points out many of the faults of this new way to keep in touch with others. Even though he knows that he is connected to more people than he can imagine, he indicates that he also feels more lonely than ever. He feels as if the computer is draining the life from him, taking more than it gives. Even though many people threaten to use a hammer to crush their computers, Wilson says he will be the one who will actually do it.

Wilson also bemoans technology because it makes it impossible for a layperson to understand what a person who works in technology does for a living. The person either works with ideas and consulting, like the man on Page 21; or has a job including acronyms, like the one on Page 22, whose job type is impossible for people who are not familiar with the meanings of the acronyms to understand.

A final reason why Wilson does not like technology is because it is outdating the things that Wilson likes from his life. He is unhappy that print newspapers and magazines are becoming extinct because of computers and electronic readers. He is also unhappy with the fact that bookstores are going out of business. He sees this loss of print media and books as a direct result of computer technology.

Wilson's Attempt to Find Meaning in Life

Wilson's search for a personal breakthrough is finally rewarded at the end of the novel, even though the reader does not learn the manner of Wilson's revelation. He had spent years trying to determine what made his parents sit for hours by a lake, appearing as if they were thinking about life. In jail, and then later as he watches it rain, Wilson's



thoughts return to his parents' habit. After his life of bad relationships and discord, Wilson believes he finally understands what life is all about.

At one point in the novel, Wilson is pictured sitting by a lake. He says he remembers his parents sitting, watching the water. He felt as if they were thinking about deep topics. Even though Wilson thinks at first he may be getting some hint of a breakthrough, it does not materialize. He finally leaves because the lake is so boring.

While in jail, Wilson still tries to get in touch with what his parents might have been thinking about while looking at the lake. He stares at an icicle melting into a puddle. At the end of his time staring at the icicle, Wilson says that he still has no idea what his parents might have been thinking.

It is finally in the last scenes of the novel that Wilson gets his personal breakthrough about the meaning of life. As he sits watching the rain, Wilson indicates he finally understands. He does not say what he understands, but he does point out that it was obvious.



Styles

Point of View

Because this is a graphic novel, the dialogue is told from the first person point of view of the character who is speaking. Wilson is the central character, so he does most of the speaking. Also because this is a graphic novel, the story is not entirely told through the words, but also through the illustrations. Readers have the benefits of being able to see the characters' facial expressions to help determine exactly what a character might be feeling. For instance, on Page 47 when Pipi responds to Wilson that their time with Claire might be better than money, the reader can see the doubt on her face. In the next frame, the reader can see Pipi's frustration and anger after Wilson picks on Pipi for almost sounding sincere.

Language and Meaning

There is a good deal of bad language in this novel. Wilson and the other characters curse often. Of course, the cursing is to be expected because Wilson is such an outspoken person. He speaks his mind even if it is offensive to others. Language, of course, is limited to conversations between characters or a single character talking to himself. The balloons in which this language is contained are significant because of their color. For instance, when the balloons are pink instead of white, it means that Wilson is talking in his falsetto voice, the one he uses when he speaks as Pepper.

Structure

Exposition happens in the first few frames. The reader is introduced to Wilson's personality as he interacts with a variety of different people. The action begins to rise when Wilson travels to Chicago after having learned his father was sick. The climax comes when Pipi realizes she feels nothing for her daughter and turns her ex-husband in to the police for kidnapping Claire. The action falls through Wilson's jail time and his reunion with Claire and her son. The denouement comes when Wilson realizes he is a wonderful person and then has his breakthrough as he watches the rain.



Quotes

I love people!"
-- Wilson (Wilson)

Importance: Wilson's opening declaration that he loves people is ironic because he is obviously irritated by people and their behavior.

People get really creeped out when you walk in the fake dog voice."
-- Wilson (Dog Voice)

Importance: Even though Wilson does not like people, he treasures his relationship with his dog, Pepper.

Yeah, who gives a shit if an old man drops dead."
-- Wilson (Supershuttle)

Importance: This is Wilson's response to the woman who rides in the taxi with him on the way to the hospital. She thinks that her relative's death is more tragic than Wilson's because Wilson's father was old. Her relative is young. Wilson feels as if his loss is being downplayed because his father is old.

Surely you've thought about this moment. Surely there's something you'd like to leave me with."
-- Wilson (Deathbed)

Importance: As Wilson sits with his father before his death, Wilson begs his father for some final words. His father gives him nothing.

Nah, you're right. She prob'ly just got an abortion."
-- The Prostitute (Cheap Motel)

Importance: As Wilson talks to the prostitute that he hired about Pipi and her pregnancy, he wonders if he has a child somewhere in the world. He has assumed that because Pipi never sued him for child support, that she had an abortion. The prostitute agrees with him.

Don't you feel it Pipi? Don't you feel like we're doing the right thing for once in our stupid lives?"
-- Wilson (Pure Bliss)

Importance: Wilson asks Pipi her opinion of them finally being together with Claire. Even though Wilson sees nothing wrong with what they have done, Pipi indicates she is worried because they have taken Claire away from her family without their permission.



All she cares about is what that goddamn sister thinks. 'Did you see the way Polly looked at us? We're like something out of a horror movie compared to her family!' A horror movie!"

-- Wilson and Wilson quoting Pipi (Fucking Bitch)

Importance: When Claire asks when Pipi is coming back to the hotel room, Wilson gives her more information than she wants by telling her that Pipi is overly concerned with what her sister thinks of her. In this quote, Wilson mocks the way that Pipi compares their family to one from a horror movie.

You urinated on the heating grate, chewed my address book, and shredded two sofas. But in doing so, you taught me the valuelessness of those and all objects, their only worth beyond dull utility as a vessel for those totemic toothmarks."

-- Wilson (Eulogy)

Importance: Wilson's eulogy for his dog is both touching and verbose. It is ironic that he has a memorial service for his dog, but there is no mention of a memorial service or funeral for his father.

Everybody says they want to smash their computer with a hammer and never touch the damn thing again, but I'm going to do it. I'm really going to do it."

-- Wilson (Powerbook)

Importance: When Wilson begins to try to work with a computer, he is frustrated with the new technology. While others only threaten to smash their computers, Wilson says that he plans to really destroy his computer.

I always imagined myself in my old age, sitting out in some garden reading the Sunday paper like my dad... or maybe and Ellery Queen mystery magazine."

-- Wilson (Gone)

Importance: Wilson makes a statement that print books and newspapers will soon be a thing of the past because they are being taken over by electronic readers and computers.

I am a beautiful creature! I'm a living monument to nature's genius! I'm alive and breathing and strong! I'm a father! A grandfather! A million-in-one fucking miracle!"

-- Wilson (Beautiful Creature)

Importance: Despite his failures, Wilson recognizes that he has done some remarkable things in his life.

Dogs are the most wonderful creatures on the planet."

-- Wilson (Dogsitter)

Importance: Even though Wilson does not like people, he treasures his relationship with his dog, Pepper.