

Life and Death

In *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson and *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O'Brien, both main characters are blatantly confronted by death. The subject of death is ignored in everyday life; however, both novels force the reader to contemplate death in the same context as contemplating life. The authors use this method to further the development of the main characters by showing how the characters approach the large amount of death that surrounds them. In *Jesus' Son* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, the manner in which the main characters interact with death directly reflects the way in which they understand and interact with life.

Fuckhead from *Jesus' Son* lives in a constant state in flux between life and death. As an addict, by constantly taking any drugs he can get his hands on, he is never fully alive, but within the context of the book, he encounters death several times but never fully dies. He comes close to achieving both, but never really reaches the climax of either. Fuckhead embraces both life and death for what it is. He lets death surround him and lets life surround him, both having equal weight in his head. Fuckhead cannot wholly experience or understand life or death for Fuckhead is a silent observer of both life and death.

Through using drugs, Fuckhead plays with his relationships with life and death. While high, Fuckhead escapes from life and kills his ability to personally experience raw life and emotion. Due to this, he is driven to seek out the experience of life and death in others. During the car crash in the beginning of the novel, Fuckhead watches the husband die. Fuckhead explains that he "looked down into the great pity of a person's life on this earth. I don't mean that we all end up dead, that's not the great pity. I mean that he couldn't

tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn't tell him what was real" (Johnson 8). Fuckhead wants to understand what it is like to die. He is so curious about death that he doesn't attempt to help the man, he just watches blood bubble from the dying man's mouth and wonder what he's thinking as he slowly passes on. Later, Fuckhead watches the raw emotion of life. In the hospital, Fuckhead observes the doctor telling the wife about her husband's death. Fuckhead explains,

from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated in there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere (9).

Fuckhead finds comfort in experiencing a moment of pure emotion. He looks everywhere to try and find pure instances of life. Life is beautiful and life is heartbreaking, that's what is so wonderful about it. He finds both beauty and heartbreak in the death of the husband. Beauty is found in the love shared between the husband and the wife and utter heartbreak is found in the death of the husband. Fuckhead desires to have the capacity to experience life the way the wife does and he desires to have the capacity to experience death the way the husband does.

Fuckhead walks the fine line of both life and death for he doesn't understand the difference between them. He tries to understand by describing a very intimate and blissful instance that represents one of the happiest times in his life. Fuckhead explains,

I'd been staying at the Holiday Inn with my girlfriend, honestly the most beautiful woman I'd ever known, for three days under a phony name, shooting heroin. We made love in the bed, ate steaks at the restaurant, shot up in the john, puked, cried, accused one another, begged of one another, forgave, promised, and carried one another to heaven (45).

His fullest and happiest moments contain chemically induced, unethical happiness.

Fuckhead's description of a wonderful moment in his life has the corruption of drugs,

therefore he isn't organically experiencing life. He escapes from it. Also, the passage leaves the reader to question, "Are they happy? Or have they just died?" Fuckhead does not understand happiness, and he certainly does not understand what life is really is. Later on in the book, Fuckhead explores the idea of dying while incorporating philosophical concepts that pertain to life. He explains,

Think of being curled up and floating in the darkness. Even if you could think, even if you had an imagination, would you ever imagine its opposite, this miraculous world the Asian Taoists call the "Ten Thousand Things?" And if the darkness just got darker? And then you were dead? What would you care? How would you even know the difference? (80).

Fuckhead describes dying in such a beautiful way. One just floats away gracefully; it seems to be a peaceful release from constant thought processing that is constant in life. He clearly has no fear of death; he seems to even look forward to it. He describes death just as charmingly as he describes one of the happiest times in his life. To Fuckhead, life and death are so similar that he believes once you die, you can't even tell the difference. Fuckhead is lost in a flux between life and death and so he sees everything for what it is, he understands both life and death equally. Fuckhead distinguishes life and death from each other only by name, in every other sense he finds them equivalent.

Conversely, in *In the Lake of the Woods*, John Wade is terrified of both life and death. Wade is secretive by nature and uses this strategy to cope. When Wade feels distraught, instead of talking through his emotions, he hides behind the fictional mirror he created inside his head as a child. When Wade was young the mirror gave him strength for "he felt calm and safe with the big mirror behind his eyes, where he could slide away behind the glass, where he could turn bad things into good things and just be happy. The mirror made things better (O'Brien 65-66). He used the mirror to hide from situations such

as being lonely as a child and the suicide of his father. Wade was a secretive, overweight child, who really had no interest in making friends. To shield himself from being lonely, Wade would retreat behind his mirror because “[behind] the mirror...John was no longer a lonely little kid. He had sovereignty over the world...everything was possible, even happiness” (65). In the mirror, John found the courage to perform his magic tricks in front of others and, when he is older, put up a front as a politician. Happiness behind the mirror was still possible even after the suicide of Wade’s father. When Wade felt distressed over his father’s death, he would retreat behind the mirror where his father was still alive. In the mirror “he could read his father’s mind. Simple affection, for instance. “Love you, Cowboy,” his father would say” (65). Behind the mirror Wade could fix both being lonely in life and the death of his father. Wade uses the pretend mirror in his head to push forward through life and the death surrounding him.

Pretending is something that Wade does successfully throughout his life to cope with his fears. When Wade’s father emotionally abused him as a child he pretended his father was a better person and retreated behind his mirror (67). When Wade presented magic tricks for his friends he pretended he was a great magician and that the magic he performed was real. When Wade participated in politics he adapted the persona of a happy, outgoing, and respectable man. When Wade fought in the Vietnam War he adapted the persona of Sorcerer and left him behind when he returned from war. After Wade’s father died he pretended it never happened; he would lay awake at night and talk to his dad “cradl[ing] his pillow and pretend[ing] it was his father, feeling his closeness” (14). After Wade witnessed his squadron commit war crimes and murder 500 innocent people, he

tricked himself into believing it hadn’t happened the way it happened...he pretended it didn’t matter much; he pretended that if the secret stayed inside him, with all the

other secrets, he could fool the world and himself too...Sometimes the trick almost worked. Sometimes he almost forgot (68/148).

Wade has a hard time handling his life and must make up personas and other characters to overcome the hardships of life. He also has a hard time handling the death that surrounds him; hence, why he pretends the death of his father and of the innocent people of Thuan Yen never happened. Wade is constantly pretending in order to meet life's expectations and in order to deal with the strong force of death surrounding him.

Wade is also constantly trying to have power and control over everything in his world. The death of Wade's father, his obsession with magic, his relationship with his wife Kathy, his political ambitions, and his alteration of military documentation all centralize around his need for control. As explained earlier, Wade is able to recreate his father in his head after death, therefore controlling the existence of his father. Through magic, Wade has control over the minds of his audience members. He confirms, "Power: that was the thing about magic" (71). Wade's performance of illusions places his observers into the position of the fool for he has tricked them into believing his lies are truths. When Wade first began dating Kathy he finds satisfaction and power in spying on her. "Like magic, he thought—a quick, powerful rush. He knew things he shouldn't know. Intimate little items...finesse and deception, those were his specialties, and the spying came easily" (32). By spying on Kathy he takes away her right to share with him only what she wants him to know about her, he has control over her life and her actions by knowing everything. Wade has the power to know anything he wishes about Kathy, while Kathy is limited in what Wade will share with her about himself therefore giving him the power to control what she knows about him, as well.

Wade's political ambitions and political standing give him control over the people of Minnesota. Through politics, Wade wins the love of the people and the power of their vote. He eventually loses the love of the people and the power of their vote after it is revealed that he is a war criminal. Wade tries to hide and control his association with the war crimes committed at Thaun Yen when he alters military documents and removes his name from the platoon list. According to Wade, "it helped ease some of the guilt," the fact that he could physically remove himself from what happened at Thaun Yen (269). By erasing himself from the horrific murder of 500 innocent people, he has the power to control history. Wade approaches his life with a need for control and he approaches the death around him with a need to have control over reality and the past. Wade's desire to have control over people and situations in his life and also in death speaks of his untrustworthy and obsessive nature. Whether it is in the context of life or death, Wade constantly struggles for control.

In conclusion, both characters approach life the same way they approach death. Fuckhead approaches life and death with acceptance and a craving to understand while Wade approaches life and death with fear, secrets, and a hunger for control. Both characters choose to filter life and death through lenses. Fuckhead uses drugs (a form of control) and an observatory stance while Wade uses his mirror, control, and different personas. Through this, the reader can understand the ways in which the characters approach and comprehend life, which adds heavily to the development of the character. After thoroughly exploring both novels, it is clear that the manner in which the main characters interact with death directly reflects the way in which they understand and interact with life.

Works Cited

Johnson, Denis. *Jesus' Son: Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992. Print.

O'Brien, Tim. *In the Lake of the Woods*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994. Print.