

The drowner by robert drewe essay essay sample

Literature



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The structure of a novel enables it to embody, integrate and communicate its content by revealing its role in the creation and perception of it. A complex structure such as that of Robert Drewe's work *The Drowner*, published in 1996, refers to the interrelation or arrangement of parts in a complex entity¹. Drewe's novel is a multi-faceted epic love story presenting a fable of European ambitions in an alien landscape, and a magnificently sustained metaphor of water as the life and death force². The main concerns of the novel include concerns about love, life, death and human frailty. These concerns are explored through the complex structure of the novel. That is, through its symbolic title, prologues, and division into sections. The complexity of the novel is here, in its inter-twining of the different aspects of structure and the way in which they all 'communicate' to further the underlying concerns. These concerns are in turn explored by the attainment of an in-depth analysis and understanding of them. The title *The Drowner* explores the main concerns of the novel through the different representations of 'drowning'. As a result the title itself is a complex structure of the novel.

According to Robert Drewe 'as an occupation, drowning was somewhere between a trade and an art'³. However drowning is more than just an occupation, it is to Will a way of life and tradition. However Will is not a drowner but an engineer, and here it becomes symbolic of Will's life. Although through his rationality he left behind drowning, he speculates that engineering is "in its hydraulic potential maybe just an extension of drowning"⁴ That is, although through Angelica he enters a new world and life, drowning is symbolic of his past and continues to influence his present.

Here the past is presented as an inherent part of life and an aspect of human frailty in the way that we succumb to it.

In the same way it is through his discussion of drowning that he courts Angelica, also becoming representative of their sexual rapport. For Will says "The male sun sinks into the female sea"; he appears to impose his subjectivity onto her, to reduce her to a malleable object and whilst she is content to allow him to 'sink' to her depths, certain sex scenes between them see his attempts to love her meet a cold unresponsiveness. In many instances he also has no strong sense of her 'self'⁵, and thus Will is quite literally presented as 'Drowning' in their relationship. Thus the concern of love and the often unequal power struggle between the two participants are raised.

The title here signifies the destructive nature of love. The title is also associated with death, presented through the deaths by drowning such as Hammond Lloyd, Kate and the allusion to Ophelia, which were primarily as a result of love, showing the inter-twining of the destructive nature of love and drowning (death). Again the title is multi-faceted exploring the life giving and taking qualities of water as the harbinger of death as well as the idealising and fear of it. Kate's eulogy clearly explains this as drowning is idealised for it "transported our beloved peablossom, our gossamer darling to heaven" and feared as it "pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay/ To muddy death". Throughout the novel there is an absence of the word suicide, and death, instead it is drowning, signifying human frailty and death as a universal fear. Much like the title, the prologues explore similar concerns although it is by presenting two contrasting scenes.

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Despite this the title continues within the prologue and the novel through the motif of water. It must also be noted that the two prologues signify the key plot events throughout the novel. Both prologues are erotic, passionate and sensual. Yet one is a dream whilst in fever and the other is lust. They are also somewhat illusions and concerning Angelica. As a result they provide insight into her complex character, of her 'actressy' qualities and of her playing her part⁶. Ultimately the prologues are heavily based around the exploration of love. The first prologue is highly sensual and fluid though it is short lived by the danger symbols of "hot flowers and foreign hot climate birds", here the 'watery fluidity' of the prologue is contrasted with the sudden heat and 'foreignness'. This foreignness is encountered later in Africa where Angelica becomes 'depressed' and their intimacy is lost.

In the prologue their relationship is purely physical; it is the need for more than sex in Africa that crumbles their relationship. Again the dangerous and destructive nature of love is represented, in relation to Angelica and Will's opposing lives presenting the view that their relationship is lust not love. In the second prologue too Angelica is the central focus, however she is physically absent and only through Will's fever and dreams is she present. There is a clear contrast here in the absence of Angelica and the loss of a fluid tone. Instead it is onerous, unsettling and agitated. It is only once Angelica is gone that Will becomes sick, and it is then that he thinks of her. Here human frailty and human frailty as a product of love are explored. Human frailty is explored in our need to love and be loved as well as the fear of solitary.

This prologue is after Angelica's departure later in the novel. Will's yearning for her, even after she has hurt him further emphasises this as well as the fever itself showing the mental and physical fragility of humans. The division of the novel into sections and the conflicts within them could be read as separate sets of short stories; they are however linked in the concerns explored through them. The Drowner has 9 sections, each a chronological progression of time, experience and romance as well as setting. The section 'woman kissing cockatoo' raises new characters and with them new concerns. It is here that the lavishing of water is replaced with the harshness of the desert; it was "largely a landscape without noise". It seems to reverse the 'essentially musical structure' of the previous sections held together by the 'leitmotiv of water'⁷; the absence of it creating a realistic outlook. The conflict met here is rather shock at Axel Boehm, a man, and his alertness to a women's difference and needs in the outback; "that was just a woman passed by".

When in a later section he turns out to be female, his secret is the converging of all the parallel lines coursing through The Drowner. That is, his hermaphroditism is an exploration of change; Axel is transformation incarnate⁸. The very art of Axel through his photography is capturing the moment and changing it inexorably into something else. It is what survival in the outback depends on; "With subterfuge, light and chemicals Boehm can turn a dusty dryblower into a mining magnate". Here change is presented as causing conflict, and the struggles to adapt to it emphasise human frailty. In the same way Axel 'changes' through his art, and here it is the conquering of change that results in a resolution. Between Will and Angelica too, only

once they have changed themselves does their relationship succeed. For Angelica this is in Hammond's death and motherhood and for Will, the way in which he adapts to life without Angelica in Western Australia.

The unsettling nature of change is also presented in 'Blackwater', in Africa, in the ambiguity and artless placing of the section, as well as the absurdity of "shark smells" and "bottlers". This in turn destabilises their relationship. The exploration of change is furthered in the last section of the novel 'The Reservoir', in which Locke's "big poem of unrequited love and the death of an old drinking companion" recounts the impossibility of love and life without change. At this point many characters have undergone significant changes through conflicts they have encountered, for Locke he is an undertaker. He does not bury the dead but signifies death. For him however nothing changes, he is as lonesome as ever, and the novel concludes with him wanting to take back his poem.

Although this may suggest change, he does not achieve any victories or gains, he simply continues to exist. Here a bleak outlook is presented with the absence of change, although Drewe gives a feeble ounce of hope in the Afghans steely acceptance of death. Essentially in his entirety Locke acts as an exploration into the need for love, acceptance and belonging. Unlike Locke, Will achieves a certain self-awareness as he gazes into the water "he thought of change of the way events in the desert had gradually become a becoming. A change in the levels had occurred, from potentiality to a higher level of reality". The changes he thinks of are representative of him and of Angelica, as in the conclusion of the novel the two find love in equality.

Suggesting that only after Angelica's abandonment of her 'actressy'

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qualities, and Will's confidence increase does their relationship blossom. This then becomes an exploration of love as well as change. It is evident that The Drowner is a 'big' novel, and within this, it is extremely complex in its structure.

Almost every word, sentence, title, and sub title in The Drowner contributes to an understanding of the concerns it explores. This is through the multiple meanings they evoke and what they stand for. The Drowner in its complex structure stands the risk of falling prey to becoming over complicated, however Drewe manages to balance the complexity of the structure of the novel with the complexity of the concerns raised and explored. In this way, without the complexity of the structure, such a vast range of concerns and underlying concerns within them could not be explored. Further the use of a complex structure throughout represents the challenging and complex ideas of life presented in The Drowner, and that readers constantly come across throughout theirs.