

Apocalypse and allusions: the end of the drowned world



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In J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, Kerans, the protagonist, decides to remain on Earth despite apocalyptic rising temperatures and dangerous levels of solar radiation. Kerans believes staying will fulfill some kind of spiritual purpose, as he wants to reconnect with prehistoric memories presented in the form of dreams. In order to achieve his goal, Kerans starts moving southward, going further into the jungles, though as he does so the temperature increasingly rises and the landscape becomes more and more dangerous. Ballard ends his novel with a sequence of important themes, starting with time and dreams, moving onto the importance of being remembered, and finally comparing Kerans' death to immortal figures.

In the first full paragraph on the last page, Ballard plays with the concept of time and dreams to evaluate Kerans' mission into the past. Ballard first describes Kerans, writing, "half asleep, he lay back thinking of the events of the past years that had culminated in their arrival at the central lagoons..." (198). Kerans is "half asleep" which results in him thinking of "past years" because in the novel sleep and the past are inextricably intertwined. Dreams act as a way for characters to travel back into a shared, unconscious memory of prehistoric times. Then, Ballard describes Kerans being "launched" into "his neuronomic odyssey," connoting a sense of journey and purpose in his adventure deeper into the jungles. Ballard almost alludes to Odysseus, who went on a highly reclaimed odyssey to make it back home. In a way, Kerans' journey is similar as he travels back to the time where his dreams come from, but unlike Kerans', Odysseus traveled home alive. During his half sleep, Kerans also thinks about "Strangman and his insane alligators," a reference which similarly plays with the theme of time (198).

Strangman rules the present, and to escape him, Kerans travels southward to go back into the past.

Finally, Kerans thinks about Beatrice “ with a deep pang of regret and affection,” causing the reader to wonder what Kerans regrets (198). Though Kerans and Beatrice split up so they both could “ pursue his or her own pathway through the time jungles,” Ballard still shows Kerans’ disappointment that they are not together (97). In a way, it makes sense that in traveling back into his past, Kerans regrets his inability to have a future with Beatrice. In this paragraph, Ballard plays with the theme of time, making references to the past, present, and future, all while Kerans tries to fall asleep. In the second paragraph, Ballard shows Kerans’ desire to be important and remembered, though almost no one will ever learn about his quest. After his strange daydream, and maybe because of it, Kerans hastily sits up and decides to write a note on the wall. With the “ butt of the empty .45,” Kerans scratches: “ 27th day. Have rested and am moving south. All is well. Kerans” (198). Though Kerans acknowledges that he is “ sure that no-one would ever read the message,” he still feels the need to leave it. Kerans’ actions demonstrate his need to give his quest some kind of meaning, because by writing a message it is almost as if someone is following his journey and that someone cares.

Additionally, Kerans demonstrates a kind of self-denial in this passage, as he writes that “ all is well,” but only after he “ tied the crutch to his leg again,” and wrote the message with his empty gun (198). Ballard shows the irony in this sentence, because Kerans cannot last long with an injured leg and empty gun. Clearly not all is well for Kerans, and although no one will ever

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read the message, Kerans still feels the need to lie. The message and his distortion of the present illustrates Kerans' need to validate his journey to continue moving southward. In the last paragraph, Ballard describes Kerans trek into the jungle with a finality that insinuates an ending, while also alluding to a new beginning. Ballard describes Kerans' end, saying, " So he left the lagoon and entered the jungle again, within a few days was completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats..." (198). Within a few days Kerans was " completely lost," aimlessly wandering around the lagoons and jungles in search for something greater than himself. Ballard writes this sentence with a sense of continuity and conclusiveness, as Kerans keeps moving haphazardly into the jungle, fighting different obstacles to seemingly no end, though readers know the only end is death. Ballard describes him going against " increasing rain and heat," and " alligators and giant bats," destroying roadblock after roadblock just like Odysseus. That being said, Kerans isn't working towards a definitive goal and will die without anyone knowing about his journey. Despite this, Ballard still describes Kerans as " a second Adam" (198). Ballard compares Kerans to Adam at several points throughout the book, almost alluding to a post-apocalyptic future on Earth that Kerans would create. For example, at the very beginning of the book Ballard says, " a point might ultimately be reached where a second Adam and Eve found themselves alone in a new Eden" (35). And further along, with Kerans and Beatrice basically alone on the Earth, they have a " tacit awareness of their symbolic roles," yet again implying some sort of connection between Adam and Eve, and Kerans and Beatrice (100).

Although Kerans probably never survives long enough to complete his new Adam-role, the fact that Ballard continues to compare Kerans to Adam gives his mission more purpose and meaning. Additionally, Kerans, as a second Adam, searches for “ the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun,” which allows Ballard to tie the last sentence to major themes in his book. First of all, “ paradise,” connotes Eden, which makes sense with Ballard’s allusions to Kerans as Adam. Additionally, the fact that paradises are “ forgotten,” ties into the prehistoric subconscious memories. Finally, the wording of “ the reborn sun,” implies a sense of new-beginning for the world, even though the sun causes the world’s end. Ballard perfectly ties together his novel in the last paragraph, melding together Kerans’ lurking death with a sense of immortality by comparing him to enduring figures, namely Adam and Odysseus.

The last page of *The Drowned World* ties together all of the major themes of the book and cohesively relates them together. First Ballard links the past, present, and future during Kerans’ half-sleep, laying the foundation for Kerans’ mission into the past. Then, Ballard begins to demonstrate Kerans’ need for validation when he scratches a message with the butt of his empty gun. Finally, Ballard shows Kerans as an Odysseus, Adam-like hero in order to justify his journey, while also showing the hopelessness of it. The finality and sense of continuity with which Ballard writes his last sentence is reminiscent of the last line of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, “ So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” In both of these 20th century books, the main character’s’ journey is not

necessarily finished by the time the book ends, but instead of giving the characters a future, both “ ceaselessly move into the past.”

Works Cited

Ballard, J, and Martin Amis. *The Drowned World*. Liveright Publishing, 2013.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 1995. Print.