

# THE GOOD CEMETERY GUIDE

## *Study Notes*

Consuelo Roland and Winifred Thomson

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### INTRODUCTION

#### **Why you should read this novel**

Consuelo Roland's *The Good Cemetery Guide* (2005) explores society's hypocritical and fearful attitudes to dying from the perspective of Anthony Loxton, a third-generation funeral director with his own problems. Anthony embarks on a journey of discovery that takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride that raises the bigger truths of existence.

#### **Characters in the novel**

You will notice how many characters/situations are introduced through a death. Note the ways in which the characters seem very "alive". What techniques are used by Roland to present the various characters so that they can be "seen" and believed in?

Make a list of the various characters in the novel, noting on which page they appear and perhaps separating Male and Female characters. As you read, notice how some become more important. It is mostly women who act as the "guides" to Anthony's future, using their intuition and showing surprising resilience in a patriarchal society. Yet significantly, the almost stereotypical male image of abuser of his position and strength (Anthony's own father is an important example) is contrasted to the wisdom, compassion and loyalty of male characters like Sweet and Mr Pinns.

#### **The novel's themes**

A common literary theme is the opposition of appearance and reality. This duality underlies the thematic structure of *The Good Cemetery Guide*. The Anthony-Tony dichotomy (are they separate or are they joined?) provides much of the in-built tension.

Paradox and contradiction permeate the novel. Characters face complex dilemmas and predicaments and have to make important choices about how they want to live their lives. Death is contrasted to Life, Freedom to Duty, Love to Loyalty, Family to Self, Religion to Secularism, Village to City,

Tradition to Modernity and Reality to Magic. These could be described as themes embedded in the narrative. Consider other possible themes.

Geographical and historical factors are the external factors which shape the novel's characters and the problems they grapple with, but it is human foibles and emotions that make it difficult for individuals to see to the heart of things. This is perhaps the central theme of *The Good Cemetery Guide*.

N.B. A theme is a broad idea, message or lesson conveyed in a story. Themes explore timeless and universal ideas.

### **The novel's structure**

The novel is divided into two parts. In Part 1 the "real time" is the space of a specific period in the life of Anthony Loxton, Funeral Director, aged 34. However, flashbacks, acting as stories within a bigger story, take the reader back in time and introducing characters important to Anthony as a child or who will become important later. Scenes and memories of his childhood are woven into the account of his adult life, culminating in the life-changing day dealt with in chap. 12. In Part 2 the action is more linear. Consider why the book is structured into two parts.

### **Place in the novel**

One possible definition of a novel is a triad of person, plot and place which attempts to explain the human condition. In the novel the fishing village of Kalk Bay, with its harbour onto the sea and a railway line, exerts a strong sense of place on many of the characters, affecting their daily decisions and choices. This is contrasted to the sense of adventure or placelessness represented by Miss Langebaan, Alexandra Bing and Aurora Morningstar, amongst others. Consider why the author refers to the Kalk Bay of the novel as a "town of fable" in the preface.

### **Symbolism in the novel**

As you are reading this novel, you will notice that there are a number of OBJECTS which acquire a symbolic sense. For example, Anthony finds that he can escape through books; the books symbolise the world "out there". Find others and list them as you read.

There are also many references to ANIMALS: make a list of these animals. For example: the various cats, seals, seagulls.

There are numerous references to TRAVEL. Anthony's first acquaintance with "far-away places" comes via Miss Langebaan who makes the children in her class imagine Canada. Later, Miss Langebaan leaves for India and when we hear of her death, we find out that she died in Morocco. Note how the paper

skeleton from Mexico (another symbol/object) and thoughts about the country join. Anthony's travel experiences are vicarious, because later in the story (Chap. 22, p.210) we discover that Anthony hasn't travelled far at all. Travel becomes a metaphor for going beyond what is known and safe, as the characters experience complex contradictory emotions about village life.

Consider the significance and importance of the various symbols.

### Some General Questions

- To what degree is the title a metaphor for the novel?
- Can you judge a book by its cover? What about this cover?
- Write your own "blurb" (short description) for the back cover. What would you say to made readers buy the book or loan it from the library?
- How does the author incorporate the fishing village of Kalk Bay and the surrounding landscape into the action of the novel?
- How do the chapter titles help to place the reader?
- The story is narrated in the third-person present tense, entirely from the main protagonist's view-point, except for chap. 25. Do you think this is an effective technique? Why?

N.B. It is useful to remember that the *narrator* is a creation or construct of the *writer* just as the characters are.

- How is the "character" Tony important? Is he an "alter ego"? Consider this in relation to terms like dualism and dichotomy.
- How has Anthony changed by the end of Part 1? And after Part 2?
- Why did the author make Anthony Loxton a Funeral Director?
- Is Anthony the only character with a secret life? Are secrets good things?
- Discuss irony in the novel. Is irony the same as "tongue-in-cheek"? How does it differ to satire? Find examples.
- Consider the Loxtons, but also Grethe's family and the Beauchamp family. How is family life depicted? Are family duty and loyalty the same thing?
- What role does religion play in the novel? Who is the most religious character? Who is the least religious? What role does magic play?
- What is the significance of the moments in the novel that are magical or somewhat unreal?
- Is Death a character in the novel?
- Is there a hero in this novel? And a heroine?
- Divide into groups and discuss the following questions. Has this novel changed your attitude to life and death in any way? Could you see yourself working as a professional in the funeral industry? Give reasons. Share your answers with the class.

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## PART 1 THE BONE COLLECTOR

How does the title of Part 1, “The Bone Collector”, pre-empt the plot? Read the prologue and the lines of poetry by Rilke at the beginning of Part 1 carefully. What do you think they might mean?

### CHAPTER 1: FIRST GLIMPSE

In this chapter we are introduced to Anthony Loxton as a five-year-old child. His age at the time of telling the story (“real time”) is thirty-four (p. 21).

- Use a table with headings like those below to keep track of the many character/s in the novel. Start with names and add more details about them as you read. It would be useful to keep page numbers for easy reference. By the end of this exercise it should be clear whether the character plays a major or minor role.

| Chapter | Title(of chapter) | Page | Character<br>(major/minor) | Event/s | Symbol/s |
|---------|-------------------|------|----------------------------|---------|----------|
| 1       |                   |      |                            |         |          |

- How does the opening sentence announce one of the major themes of the novel? Is it a good start to the novel?
- Find other words for the profession of “Funeral Director”.
- On p. 5 we read that Anthony’s father “...has a way about him that Anthony thinks he might copy some day when he also has dead clients.” Why does Anthony the child anticipate he will become a funeral director?
- Write a list of Anthony’s physical as well as psychological traits. Do a similar list on Anthony’s father. What do you learn from these two lists?
- What does the fact that both father and son have the same name tell you? Can you think of other situations where sons have the same name/s as their fathers or even their grandfathers?
- What do you discover at this early point in the novel about the relationship between Anthony and his father? Bear these thoughts in mind when you come to later incidents.
- How do you feel about the fact that Anthony has an imaginary “best friend” (p. 8)? Have you ever thought of having an alter ego?
- Find evidence of Anthony’s feelings about Tony. Keep a list of Tony’s asides and comments. What do these tell you about Anthony? How might this dual personality influence later actions taken by Anthony?
- Perhaps you could explore other diminutives: Patricia/ Pat; Patrick/ Paddy; Andrew/ Andy etc... what do you feel about your own name?

- We have the first glimpse of Anthony's mother. She is only referred to as "his mother" or "Ma". Why is this so? What does it tell us about Mrs. Loxton?
- Discuss Anthony's parents and their relationship with each other and their attitudes to Anthony.
- Comment on this extract (p. 8):  
 "... sometimes his mother and father are more comfortable with the dead than with the living, it is just a matter of habit, although his mother always crosses herself three times before starting with a dead client."
- How does Mr Loxton's insistence on "respect" influence Anthony's life? Is his father a good example of this respect? Consider the word *respect* in your own life.

As a piece of comparative literature read Chaps. 1V-V11 of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens – young Oliver goes to work for Mr Sowerberry (an undertaker). Compare the descriptions in *Oliver Twist* with those in *The Good Cemetery Guide*. What differences are there?

## CHAPTER 2: MORTAR AND PESTLE

- What is the implied metaphor of a Mortar and Pestle?
- In this very short chapter we are fast-forwarded to the adult Anthony waking up to a normal funeral parlour working day. What similarities are there to Chap. 1?
- We learn that Tony is still around. "...Tony. The diminutive of Anthony. The shadow Anthony. The stranger that lives within." Why might this be important as the story unfolds?
- We also have something of a mystery. Why should Anthony's mother regard having to do the Wednesday night duty as a punishment? What does Anthony do on a Wednesday night that's important enough to face Ma's anger every week?

## CHAPTER 3: BLUEBIRDS

- At the beginning of this chapter we meet Miss Sophia Beauchamp. Later in the novel (P. 263) Anthony exclaims: "Some fairy godmother!" Think about stories you know which have a fairy godmother as one of the characters. As you read on consider Miss Sophia in the light of how a fairy godmother should behave.
- On p. 14 there is a flashback to a violent scene from Anthony's childhood where he is beaten with a belt by his father. What might the real reasons be for the father's anger?
- "It is the thought of Tony still being around somehow that helps Anthony get off the floor..." Is Tony a good or a bad influence?
- Anthony is allowed to watch his mother wash her hair on a Friday while the radio plays in the background. How does this early scene set

the stage for the many references to HAIR and MUSIC that are found throughout the novel?

- “But they are never truly joined, just reconciled. It is really Tony that she could love, if he didn’t keep himself out of sight all the time.” What does this extract on p. 17 tell us about Ma? And about him?
- “Anthony never tells on his mother, it is another secret that he keeps, never letting his father know that just once a week on a Friday afternoon he loses control of his household.” What does this extract on p. 18 reveal about the Loxton marriage? And about Anthony?
- Discuss the use of irony with regard to possible themes (for example family love versus duty) in the passage at the bottom of p. 19 that starts with “For some reason his mother stops listening to the Friday afternoon *World Hit Parade*.”
- What do you learn about the Loxtons in this chapter? As parents? As human beings? Are their values going to influence Anthony for the rest of his life?
- Do Anthony’s parents know about Tony? Substantiate your answer from the text.

#### CHAPTER 4: SHIRTS

- Consider how the writer constructs the love-scene between Tony the Fox and Lily. Why are we, as readers, only given fragmental information? For example, her red hair, the “am-enjoying, must-have expression on her face”, the little reference “What if she has AIDS?”
- Read the description of Anthony’s making coffee. Why does the writer give such detailed descriptions of fairly ordinary actions? Could you imagine this highly “visual” scene as being part of a film?
- A popular psychological concept is that of NATURE and NURTURE. The concept examines and weighs up to what extent genetic inheritance or outside influences affect a personality. How important is this issue in the novel?
- How do the shirts serve as a theme in this chapter? What does the reference to his late father’s shirts tell you? Why had Anthony refused to wear them?
- How does this chapter anticipate the dramatic events of chapter 10?

#### CHAPTER 5: OUT OF THE BLUE

- How is the expression “out of the blue” significant? How is the motif of blue used to hook the chapter together?
- Why does the writer give a definition of “chalk” at the beginning of the chapter?
- We are introduced to a teacher who taught Anthony for a while at the Bay Primary School. On p. 31 we hear about “...that breathless enthusiasm that she always carries with her...” What do the classroom

scenes and details given about Miss Langebaan tell us about the influence she has on Anthony?

- What role do relatively minor characters like Jethro Padua and Old Henry play in the novel? Is there a reason that we meet these two characters in the same chapter?
- Read the scene on p. 33 that starts: “At playtime Anthony can see the sea over the buildings...” Discuss the vivid imagery of the sea in this chapter and in the novel.
- What do Tony’s mutterings reveal about the other side of Anthony?
- Can you think of a reason for Anthony not naming his sickly baby sister?
- What is revealed about the parents during this period of the Loxtons’ family-life?

#### CHAPTER 6: A MOTH TO THE FLAME

- This chapter takes us back to the adult Anthony described in Chapter 4 (SHIRTS). Consider the use of images like “lucky tie” and “shrivelled apple core” to express complex emotions.
- On p. 39 Anthony “...plucks a few strings in the air”. Then on p. 40 we read about his encounter with the “redhead”. There is a strange conversation in which Lily tells Tony (the Fox) that she wishes to donate her organs on her death. Why is this conversation important? How is it connected to the main theme?
- On p. 42 we read about the “invention” or “outing” of Tony the Fox. Is the blurb on the back-cover accurate? Is the Anthony/Tony adult “relationship” different to the childhood one? Are they still “best friends”?
- Is Anthony *more* or *less* real than Tony? Discuss this idea. Perhaps you could expand your discussion into how real are actors, film-stars and entertainers? Which is their real self?
- Notice that Anthony/Tony the Fox does not lie about either of his existences; he just doesn’t tell about the other life. Why doesn’t he? Should he?
- Note the closing paragraph of this chapter on p. 44: “He likes the dead... Who is he to judge?” Do you think Anthony means it? Find examples to support your view-point.

#### CHAPTER 7: TIME OF BOOKS

- In this chapter we read about Anthony’s encounter with Sweet. In what way does meeting Figlove and Sweet change the young Anthony’s life?
- On p. 49 Anthony describes his books as “just school books” to his parents. Why would he do this? Why do you think Mr Loxton reacts in the way he does to Anthony bringing books home?

- How are books important in Anthony's life? Compare his book encounters with Miss Langebaan and the librarian to the books in his father's study.
- Are books important in your life? Which books?
- How is the sister described? Examine the narrator's descriptions of this little girl's life. What important elements seem to be missing? Can you explain why?
- On p. 51 we read: "He doesn't dare ask questions. What answers might she give?" What answers *might* Anthony's mother give?
- We are introduced to the Skytop cemetery (p. 53) which will become important later. "*This is the place where the wind blows and nobody goes.* Tony uses it for a line in a song. Anthony feels he is sometimes over the top." Would you say Tony is more like a friend or a brother? Why?
- In what way is Anthony's first guitar lesson with Sweet at the age of thirteen a coming-of-age? What effect does this new friendship have on Anthony?
- Later in this chapter on p. 57 we learn that Sweet has died and that Anthony has inherited the guitars:  
"Anthony hugs Sweet's jumbo guitar, grasping the gift as a drowning fisherman knows his moment of rescue when he has been plucked from the monstrous waves. He knows he will never let go. But other rescues are more tenuous. Ma."  
Examine and explore this simile. How is it important in Anthony's life?
- Write a paragraph using "I" (as if you were Anthony) and express what you feel about your mother.
- What do we learn about Anthony from the people he likes?

## CHAPTER 8: RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- At the beginning of this chapter, we return to the adult Anthony Loxton, and his day-to-day activities as a funeral director. Discuss the use of irony in this chapter, particularly with reference to the Loxton Rules of Engagement. Are these rules reasonable in a business environment?
- "*An interesting absurd phenomenon, the Collector.*" What does the keeping of these mementoes tell us about Anthony? Is he a cold-hearted collector as Tony suggests on p. 60?
- Notice how the funeral tales behind the mementoes are juxtaposed to a long-ago church service where Grethe Marais' presence results in Anthony's first erection (p. 61). Why do you think the author has Anthony's first sexual experience take place in a church?
- This episode acts as the background to Anthony's first meeting with the "temptress" Lily who is described as "a large woman sashaying across the room with seduction in mind, billowing red hair." How is her hair important in the context of her character and the novel as a whole?
- Tony the Fox's other life tries to intrude, but he resists the temptation of the word "undertaker" (p. 64) and does not tell Lily he is a funeral

director in the day-time. Is this omission the same as a white lie? Consider the different types of “temptation”, ironic and real, that arise in this chapter.

- Lily leaves in her Volkswagen Beetle: “a glorious orange ascending through the scarlet gap between sea and sky.” How is this symbolic? What later scene picks up on this imagery?

#### CHAPTER 9: COME INTO MY PARLOUR

- We are back with the adult Anthony at his day-job. Are there other books you can think of where the author shifts time frames in this way?
- What do the vignettes relating to the Loxton Funeral Parlour clients tell us about Anthony and his attitude to his inherited profession?
- Which is your favourite funeral tale in the novel? Why?
- What do we learn about Anthony’s relationship to his mother in this chapter?
- This is the first time Lawrie Wilkes the pharmacist is mentioned. What kind of a person is he?
- Consider the last paragraph on p. 73 that starts “But Anthony isn’t so sure any more...” as it relates to the major themes of the book.

#### CHAPTER 10: WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

- Explain/ anticipate what this chapter heading means.
- We follow Anthony as he gets through the routine activities of an undertaker. Ask yourself if this is an “ordinary” life.
- “It is on this routine Thursday that the unthinkable happens. The two worlds of Anthony Loxton and Tony the Fox meet and collide.” How would you describe the scene on p. 74 where Anthony eventually passes out? Hilarious? Grotesque? In poor taste? Why?

Examine the scene on pp.77-78 where Anthony talks to the Rasta gravedigger. Read the beginning of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, act V scene i where gravediggers are preparing the grave in which Ophelia is to be buried. In the midst of the tragedy of this death (Ophelia’s) elements of very robust humour are introduced. Comment on similarities between the two scenes.

- What is it about Lily/her death that makes Anthony break his “Rules of Engagement” and become involved? What are we learning about him?
- Examine the scene on p. 81 in which Anthony confides in the dead Lily. What is he revealing about himself?
- What is the effect of this dramatic episode on the two personae that are Anthony/ Tony?

#### CHAPTER 11: ANGELS MAY HAVE BEEN PRESENT

- Tony the Fox “does some detective work” and with the help of the barman and Grethe Marais finds out more about Lily. Notice how Tony reacts to Grethe. How is her role in the novel becoming more important?
- As you find out about Lily let her write her autobiography. As the genre of fiction gives great liberty, you can write your (her) life-story even though she has died.
- On p.86 Tony discusses burial and cremation with Grethe. As you read this conversation, what do you imagine Grethe’s attitude to Tony/Anthony might be?
- Why does Anthony say on p. 89 “Tony the Fox doesn’t exist”?
- “Anthony can’t explain why he wanted to bruise Grethe Marais. Unless it’s because she has a way of looking at him as if he’d been made of plastic.” Try to put into words what Anthony can’t explain (p. 90).
- “Anthony Loxton has done something outrageous.” What outrageous thing has he done (p. 94)? Are his actions justified?
- Consider the last paragraph that ends with the words: “As if she has some options left.” What are you anticipating?

## CHAPTER 12: IN ABSENTIA (The last chapter of Part 1)

- How is Grethe Marais’ presence significant?
- Have a group discussion on the first section of this chap. (pp. 96-97) with specific reference to the paragraph where the Hare Krishna group are described. “He can’t get rid of the odd conviction that everyone is in their appointed place. The orange-clad magi\* bring gifts, the small boy is a portent of things to come, the tourists are voyeurs, and the floating family are well-wishers sent by Neptune.”

In a way this scene could be considered an Epiphany- something important is revealed - and like the narrator in T.S. Eliot’s poem, *The Journey of the Magi* (\*), there is a death rather than a birth:

“...were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was birth, certainly,...  
... this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death...”

- “With Lily as the guest of honour in absentia, they drink pink champagne to the sun and listen in silence to the sea crashing below...” How does this scene on p. 97 compare to a “usual” funeral? How does it compare to Anthony’s private send-off ceremony for Lily?
- Read the account of Lily’s send-off on p. 98 which ends with “...when the good wind comes he lets the balloon go.” Remember the earlier reference to balloons on p. 92 shortly after Anthony learns of Lily’s death: “*A farewell party. Goody. I love a party especially if there’s balloons.*” This is a “Tony” remark. Do you think it has any connection

to Anthony's action here? Consider why a balloon might be symbolic at this point of the story.

- What does Grethe's matter-of-fact attitude tell us about her? How does Grethe react to the Tony persona? Is the "disguise" important to her? Explain.
- Does the revelation that she knows about his secret persona change things?
- Compare the effect Grethe has on him to the brief "encounter" with Lily. Why do his feelings for Grethe appear to be contradictory?
- Read the conversation between Anthony and Grethe on pp. 102-103. What is the narrator revealing about their differences in attitude and outlook?
- Discuss p. 104, the last page of this chapter. Why does he say, "*I do not want to die just yet*"? How has Anthony changed by the end of Part 1?
- Read the prologue and the lines of poetry by Rilke at the beginning of Part 1 again. Check the notes you made at the beginning of Part 1. Has your understanding changed?

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Consuelo Rolando

## PART 2 SINGING IN THE DARK

How does the title of Part 2, “Singing In the Dark”, pre-empt the plot? Look at the extract from the *Letters* of Raine Maria Rilke. What words and ideas in this extract touch you? How would you relate them to the story? Remember that Part 1 is also preceded by a quotation from the work of this German poet.

The narrative in Part 2 progresses in a linear, sequential fashion while Part 1 had a more circular structure, with flashbacks to significant episodes of Anthony’s youth. Do you think this structure works well? Why?

### CHAPTER 13: KALK BAY NEWS

- What items of news are given in this chapter? Which one do you consider most important?
- Imagine that you/your group have to report to the editor of *The Echo* and each of you is responsible for one of the stories here. How would you persuade the editor to put your story first?
- Does the change of order (if any) alter the rhythm of the story? Justify.

### CHAPTER 14: THE SISTERS

- What does the description of Miss Sophia’s appearance tell us about her?
- Later in the novel (P. 263) Anthony exclaims: “Some fairy godmother!” As you read on consider whether Miss Sophia fits into the story stereotype of a fairy godmother.
- Why had she thought of killing her sister? Does this make you feel any different about her?
- Look at the telephone conversation with Grethe on p. 125. “The telephone seems to know so many secrets already, one more won’t matter.” Do you ever feel this way about talking on the telephone? Explain. Refer to the later telephone conversation with Paul Drissen. Try acting out the conversations, presenting them as scenes in a film.
- What does the purchase of the Skytop cemetery mean in Anthony’s life?
- Why does he remember Sweet at this point?
- It seems that the influence of Tony is changing. Why might this be?

### CHAPTER 15: GRETHE’S GIFT

- What does the re-appearance of Laurie Wilkes signify?
- The author uses a present-tense narrative style for the long section (pp. 134- 137) that begins in the middle of p. 134 with the paragraph: “He

avoids looking at Ma as he talks. But slowly the temperature in the room is rising. He senses the colour creep back into her cheeks.” What is the effect of this technique?

- How does the Miss Antonia’s death bring Anthony and Ma together? Why is it that Anthony sees a chance of reaching Ma through Miss Antonia’s death?
- Ma reveals that she knows about Anthony’s guitar playing at the club, as well as about Anthony and Grethe. How does Anthony react to this? What does this suggest about Ma?
- How do you feel when your parents “suddenly” know about what you might think of as your “private” life? Explain why you think it’s a good idea that your “private” life be kept secret/off-limits, or not.
- Comment on the last line and the use of the word “(p. 144”. What is the symbolic significance of the robe?
- What is the true nature of Grethe’s gift, considering the effort involved in creating the robe? How do Tony and Miss Sophia react to the robe? Who is the gift really intended for? What do we (the reader) learn from this chap. about Grethe?

#### CHAPTER 16: ANTONIA’S JOY

- How does Miss Antonia’s death move Anthony and Grethe’s relationship forward?
- What sinister elements are there in this chapter which affect the action?
- “At the moment of epiphany Ma leaps into the dream world.” How is Anthony’s dream of playing his guitar in the Skytop cemetery at the end of this chapter (p. 144) an “epiphany”?  
Relate this dream back to “...tenuous rescues. Ma.” in chap. 7 (p. 57), and also to your group discussion on the first section of chap. 12.

N.B. The word, “epiphany” has several meanings: one is a religious one when the Infant Jesus was revealed to the Wise Men; it also means the revelation of a superhuman being. It comes from Greek and its parts mean the removal of a veil.

- It might be useful to keep a record of the dreams that are recorded in this novel. Why are they important? Do you believe in the power of dreams?

#### CHAPTER 17: THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

- This is a new stage in Anthony’s life. He starts to plan his life. What are things he does to change his life?
- Why did Anthony not have birthday parties when he was a child?
- How would you have handled the disappointment the child Anthony experiences when his father refuses to go to the park with him to play with the ball Ma buys him as a birthday present?
- Anthony starts opening Sweet’s boxes of books. Do you like to collect favourite books or do you prefer lending books from the library? Why?

- What does the absence of Grethe in this chapter tell us?
- What role does Aurora Morning Star play in Anthony's metamorphosis?

N.B. Consider the meaning of Names and the importance of Naming in the novel.

- How is Anthony's decision to get himself a cat significant?  
N.B. Consider his childhood memory of the cats never staying and Tony's cat remarks.
- Look at the description of the "nice young couple", Augustus and Alexandra Bing. What makes them different to the other characters we have encountered so far?
- How would you describe Anthony's feelings for Alexandra Bing? How is his attraction to her different from his brief sexual encounters with the "moths" attracted to Tony the Fox?
- When Alexandra refers to Grethe as "that little half breed girl" on p. 154 Anthony cannot remember what Grethe's face looks like. Why?
- At the end of this chapter we read, "He jumps at the sound of Tony's voice. Who asked for your opinion anyway? Go away." What does this tell you?
- See if you can find out which famous book the title of this chapter alludes to and what the implication is.

#### CHAPTER 18: THE ALMIGHTY

- What does the re-appearance of Grethe Marais mean to Anthony? Once again, their meeting is in connection with a death.
- The conversation between them is not given in direct speech here. Can you think of a reason for this?
- What does the comment "the second betrayal" tell you?
- Why does Anthony think that he might not be able to "do" Grethe's father's funeral?
- When Alexandra returns what does her treatment of Anthony show about her? What effect does this have on Anthony?
- Alexandra's exclamation "Even if it was just for my golden hair!" on p. 163 echoes a line from a poem by W.B. Yeats, as reproduced below:

*For Anne Gregory*

*"Never shall a young man  
Thrown into despair  
By those great honey-coloured  
Ramparts at your ear,  
Love you for yourself alone  
And not your yellow hair."*

What does the question tell us about how Alexandra sees Anthony, and men in general?

- Why does Anthony not do embalming himself? (This will surface again in Chap. 25.)
- What has happened to change the relationship between Anthony and Alexandra? How do you feel about this change?
- What do you think about Alexandra having an “African” name (“Akuaba”) and her explanation on p. 163?

N.B. Consider the meaning of Names and the importance of Naming in the novel.

- Why does their relationship ultimately not work? Consider the description of their lovemaking on p.166.
- What do the last words in this chapter show about Anthony?

#### CHAPTER 19: COLD TURKEY

- When is the expression “cold turkey” usually used? Does it have a double entendre meaning here?
- Why does Anthony think of himself as “a rehabilitated heroin addict” on p. 172? Is this an apt description for the circumstances?
- Once again the author uses present-tense narration: what does this show?
- What is the purpose of the scene with the distraught young widow, “a pretty woman”, at this stage of the novel?
- “There is good business coming from Langa, Gugulethu and Kayalitsha.” What do you feel about this sentence on p. 172? Is it cynical? Unfeeling? Matter-of-fact? Could it be considered a summary of the novel? Justify your answer.
- Anthony hears that Grethe might be leaving Kalk Bay. What does his reaction and drunken escapade at the theatre tell us?
- What indications are there in this chapter that Anthony is “being resurrected”? You’ll find clues in the references to his appearance, his clothes, his interest in his work.
- What indications are there that all is not well with Ma? What do you think of Anthony’s handling of the situation?
- It is through Ma that we are made aware of sinister forces at work. Is this effective?
- Read the last sentence of this chapter. How is the liaison with Alexandra significant in terms of the central concerns of the novel?

#### CHAPTER 20: MIRAGE

- Try and find all the instances of the word “mirage” used in the novel. Explain why the author includes a dictionary definition of the specific word “mirage” with its synonyms and origin, below the title of this

chapter.

NB. This is only done in one other place: chap. 5, p.57.

- Look at the structure of this chapter and see how the references to Mexico give the chapter a “shape” or an atmosphere. How does this affect you? And how does it tell something about Anthony that isn’t explicitly told?
- Why are italics used to present the travels in Mexico?
- “Listen to that sound, Anthony. That’s the sound of your heart beating. Isn’t that a wonderful sound! You can hear all the music you will ever need to hear in that sound.” Why do Sweet’s remembered words (p. 186) work to galvanise Anthony into action?
- “For days he replays this scene. He drives himself mad...” (p. 195). Why?
- Present the scene where Anthony visits Grethe (pp. 186 –196) as a play. Compare the dramatised version with the prose version in the novel. What have you learnt from the exercise? Explain.

#### CHAPTER 21: SEA WITCH

- Who is the “sea witch” of the title?
- The final words of this chapter are given to Anthony by the Mexican skeleton: “*Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.*” Why is it significant that this idea comes from the skeleton and not Tony?
- Comment on Anthony’s reflection: “*Today I swam in the sea.*” What is important about this? Is this an appropriate reflection for an adult? Explain.
- How is the childhood memory of playing “ching chong cha with secrets” on pp. 208-209 significant? What does the flashback tell us that we don’t already know?
- Imagine that you are Anthony and write a letter to a friend about the incident with the dog in the sea.

#### CHAPTER 22: THE WRECKERS

- Why did Anthony wish he’d taken the train when he was a child? Would it have changed anything?
- What do you feel about train rides? Why should the prospect be so exciting for Anthony? Why is Anthony nervous?
- The train ride is marred by the threatening presence of a man glimpsed in a reflection on glass. Why is this person presented like this?
- “For the right address with a sea view, people will kill.” Comment on the irony/humour of this remark. Are there other examples of this kind of remark?
- Look the scene where Anthony and Grethe have their picnic. What do the questions they ask each other tell us about how their relationship has changed?

- “The man whose A-shaped shadow....” What does this image on p. 215 suggest to you? Consider visual mediums like film, theatre, comic books etc.
- “It’s difficult to see the heart of anything, so we make up the stories that we want to believe.” How far is this (p. 218) true of the characters in this novel? Have a group discussion in the light of this statement.
- Explain the conversation between Ma and Anthony on p. 219 that starts with “You’re not like him, Anthony.” What does this reveal?
- Anthony asks Grethe on p. 219 about the abuse inflicted on her by her father. What are the parallels between Anthony and Grethe’s circumstances that this revelation might suggest?
- There is a sudden change of mood and tempo on p. 223. “Murder, mayhem and sabotage...” What do you think about this?

#### CHAPTER 23: AN EVIL MAN

- Notice that the love story is in the background of dramatic events for now. What does the author want us to feel about this?
- How does Ma escape the fire that almost destroys the Loxton Funeral Parlour?
- As you did in Chapter 20, act out the scene between Tony and Grethe and the nurse. What does Tony’s sexual reaction to the nurse show us?
- Why is the name of the baby sister who died in infancy only revealed at this point?
- Anthony’s mother is referred to only as “Ma”- never Mrs. Loxton, and we never learn her given name. Why?
- What significance does the re-evocation of the Mexican desert have here?

#### CHAPTER 24: VERTIGO

- “An incomprehensible message is being beamed down from outer space.” Discuss the images evoked here.
- What significance do the items have that Anthony salvages from the fire? What would *you* want to save from a burning house? Why?
- Tony admits to Grethe that he has never “been to the other side.” Does this make you think of Anthony/Tony as a limited person? Why?
- “According to this famous French sociologist, all people can be divided into one of three categories from birth: mutant; mutineer or *mouton*, French for ‘sheep.’ ” What does Grethe’s “conundrum” tell us about her?
- Why do you think Tony always (silently) remarks on Grethe’s choice of words?
- Dreams – day-dreams like castles in the air or pursuing dreams as well as sleep dreams - play an important role in the novel. An interesting theme could be the power of imagination. Can you think of other dream themes?

- “We. *A short two-letter word.*” How does the emphasis on the importance of language contribute to the novel’s universal themes?
- How does this chapter work to bring the reader back to reality?
- Why did Ma confess to Anthony that she started the fire?
- When Laurie Wilkes visits Anthony in hospital the chemist enquires about Ma and refers to the baby sister who died. Why do you think he never attended the funeral for Anthony’s father? Is there a reason we are left to make our own inferences?

#### CHAPTER 25: A LETTER FROM INDIA

- Aurora Morning Star, the writer of the letter, calls Anthony the “good cemetery guide”; this is the title of the novel too. Consider irony and ambiguity as you play with different possible meanings of “good cemetery guide”.
- Throughout the novel, the voice has been that of the narrator from the Anthony/ Tony point of view. What is the effect at this point of another voice?
- How does this letter from a relatively minor character, which re-awakens memories of an uncomfortable childhood incident, give us a different perspective?
- Consider the significance of this letter “from India” in relation to some of the novel’s central concerns.
- In what way/s does the chapter work to surprise the reader? Does it in any way pre-empt the ending? Could it have been left out?
- Write a letter in reply to Aurora Morning Star from Anthony.

#### CHAPTER 26: DIAMONDS AND SNOEK

- Consider the title and content of this chapter in relation to the theme of place/placelessness, and in the light of chap. 25.
- What is the significance of the new house where Anthony and Ma live? How had the old Loxton house shaped their lives?
- “*The liquid in our glasses is the colour of a rare pink diamond. How strange the life of a diamond is: from a hundred per cent carbon deep in the earth to rare precious stone-bouncing light. As strange as the life of a man.*” Comment on this extract (p. 259) as it relates to the themes of redemption and rejuvenation.
- Consider the different types of confessions made in this chapter and how they work to bring different strands of the story together to a conclusion. Consider how secrets can affect lives. How many times is the word “secret/s” used in the novel?

#### CHAPTER 27: POSTSCRIPTS

- When is a post-script usually written? What does it mean here?

- The chapter starts with Tony's and Grethe's ecstatic love-making "that rocks his soul", and refers to the music of the *Nutcracker Ballet* for the wedding. Is this an appropriate musical finale for the novel?
- How is the presence of the seals symbolic?
- Grethe and Tony are married in a wedding that is almost an apotheosis of both of them. Read the description of the bride and of the groom. Identify the elements of a conventional wedding and notice the ways in which the conventions are *not* observed. Consider this scene in terms of the novel's central concerns.

N.B. The word "apotheosis" means to elevate to divine status.

- Do you think their marriage will be a good one? Why?
- Is this how you would have ended the novel? Is it appropriate to have a "happy ending" considering the fear of death theme which lies at the heart of the novel? Try writing a different "darker" final chapter and share it with the members of your group/class.
- Who is your favourite character? Write a letter (approx. one A 4 page/ 300 words) to this character.

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## FINAL NOTES

Send an e-mail to Consuelo Roland, author of *The Good Cemetery Guide*, via the comments box on the Home Page of the website [www.goodcemeteryguide.com](http://www.goodcemeteryguide.com). Suggestions for the improvement of the study notes and/or the Teen Talk page on the website will be gratefully received and considered for inclusion in future releases.