

Seven steps to heaven

Introduction

- This novel is set in the exciting yet uncertain period beginning in 1991
- The year after the release of Nelson Mandela and other prisoners
- The title suggests that there are 7 steps to take to lead you closer to God, this is seen as a spiritual journey and given that the life he leads it is ironic
- When you get an extract: this extract introduces the theme of.... Which is evident throughout the novel. In this essay I will elaborate on the theme as it connects with....

Themes

Stereotyping

- Stereotyping is defined as 'a false or negative assumption about an individual or group of people
- 'People are like onions my mother would say they have many layers' As such people do not fit into any specific grouping, as each individual is complex like the onion.

Racial stereotyping

- Racial stereotype refers to the false or negative assumptions about a particular race
- There are many instances of racial stereotyping in the book.

"Yo bro, I'm talking to you". "Yo, nigger, where you from, huh?"

- Patrick and Sizwe have a complex relationship
- during their first meeting, Patrick speaks to Sizwe in a pseudo-black American accent
- He sees Sizwe and immediately presumes that since he is black and that he is from city and would converse in this language style.
- Sizwe is confused and in some cases offended by the way Patrick speaks.
- Ironically, Patrick stereotypes Sizwe when he himself defies stereotypes because of the way he speaks and dresses "baggy jeans and a Lakers shirt".
- He is hardly the stereotypical version of an eloquent Irish literary student.

"All you whites are the same. Every time we give you a hand of friendship, you chop it off"

- this is from an argument that takes place between Sizwe and Patrick when Patrick gives his manuscript to Sheree and he is not happy about it.
- Sizwe is enraged when he says these words
- He is referring to how white people take advantage of black people and this is a broad generalization and stereotypical towards black individuals

- Patrick's black girlfriend's parents are also guilty of placing a racial stereotype.
- When they hear that Thembi is dating an Irishman, they are elated.
- In their minds, they imagine a "gallant Irishman" who is respectable and works hard when in fact Patrick does not live up to these qualities because he is more in nature like the "black monkeys in our country" that they detest so.
- We also find out that he is also a male prostitute, which creates an additional stereotype to being gay. As many people believe that gay men sleep around.

"White peoples shit is refined unlike black people's shit that is brown like bricks",

- This is Thulani's view on white verses black people
- He is stereotyping both races by implying that white problems are easy to over come, they live an easier lifestyle and black people do not
- He also calls his friends "baboons" which could implies that they are not clever and act like animals

Sexual stereotyping

- Sexual stereotype is a negative assumption about a particular sex.

"where are your balls" "fokken moffie"

- Sis Joy encourages him and taunts him with words that cast doubts on his sexual identity
- Sis Joy casts being gay into a negative light
- She accusing gay men of being feminine and soft

"Moffie bitch".

- During the same argument, Sizwe lashes out and calls Patrick this
- This is a homophobic comment, which is ironic since Sizwe is gay too, but shows the reader how sexual stereotypes also feature in this novel.

Reverend Tembe.

- He has an adulterous relationship and then runs off with his mistress.
- This is shocking to read because a Reverend in one's mind is seen to be a respectable, law abiding man who would honour his wife and congregation.
- However in all truthfulness, that is a stereotypical view of what a Reverend should be since everyone is merely human and battles with the desires of the flesh.

"A lot of men who know that I am a dyke are always amazed about the way I dress."

- This comment is made by Sheree, sizwe's publisher
- She is lesbian but does not dress like the stereotype attached to the identity of a lesbian which is usually that of mens clothing
- Sheree on the other hand dresses in sexy clothing

Class stereotyping

Identity

- This novel preoccupies itself with the problem of identity
- Using image of “making soup” or “peeling onions it depicts the complexity of characters associated with the protagonist Sizwe Dube: these characters are Thulani Tembe, freedom Cele and Vusi Mntungwa
- Thulani Tembe is seen as his alter ego
- Thulani complicates his identity as it indicates a layered personality
- The fact that the protagonist’s persona has many faces is known as multiplicity
- Sizwe’s uncertainty about who he is ironically confirms his multiple identity
- This novel involves a writer and a book that is difficult to finish, it shows the presence of “a book within a book”

- Sis Joy encourages him and taunts him with words that cast doubts on his sexual identity “where are your balls” “fokken moffie”
- Sis Joy casts being gay into a negative light
- Later in the novel Sizwe exhibits gay/bisexual behaviour=this adds a new dimension to being multiple
- One can also say that he is ever changing due to his heterosexual then bisexual relationships in the novel

- Through the novel there are signature phrases that uphold layered multiplicity
 - “People are like onions, they come in layers”
 - the use of the aphorism is significant as it shows the many sides of characters
 - these sides are facets you discover as you ‘peel’ the onion to reveal character depth

- The incident when he talks to Thulani in the mirror
- It is not Thulani but himself: his alter ego
- At face value Sizwe is somewhat delusional
- The conversation shows that his identity is split and unstable
- Sizwe’s identity is complex and multiple as the “oneness of two and three” suggest
- The mirror allows Sizwe literally to stare himself in the face
- While he sees Thulani in it, the mirror lays bare his soul and brings to view the confrontation with himself
- It is a device that allows us entry into his psyche, which is clearly split
- As he looks into the mirror, he sees Thulani haunting and taunting him, this scares the barman who witnesses his rants

Multiplicity

- Multiplicity refers to the situation whereby a certain scenario is repeated twice or more in the novel.
- It also applies to characters identities that are always changing
- The theme of multiplicity is reflected through the novel Seven Steps to Heaven whereby we find another novel written by Vusi Mtungwa "Ramu the Hermit". As well as "oneness of two and three
- Which complicates characterization as it defies a simple and straightforward character development
- When we read the novel Seven Steps to Heaven, we also read another novel and this is a true reflection of multiplicity.
- Patrick switches the way he speaks depending on who his audience is which adds to another theme in the book of multi-layering personas.

Characters

Sizwe Dube

- Protagonist
- Talented but strange writer
- Defies his identity by asserting that he is a successful writer
- His writing defines him through others
- He successfully writes as someone else: Vusi Mntungwa his nom de plume
- He has a childhood friend named Thulani Tembe, who haunts him later in his adult life
- Thulani eventually becomes part of him: part of his split self
- As a writer he experiences writers block and as a result takes heavily to the bottle
- For a while he is sexually involved in heterosexual sex with Nolitha
- This is replaced by an intense relationship with Patrick McGuinness
- Sizwe uses Nolitha for sexual gratification
- Sizwe is a complex character who suffers with low self-esteem and eventually displays psychotic behaviour as he cannot come to terms with his identity.
- This is largely due to his fixation with his relationship with Thulani, his best friend whom he is in awe of and wants to emulate.
- They have a sexual encounter with the same girl.

Thulani Tembe

- Thulani as a young boy is very charismatic, well- read and well- spoken with an easy going charm who does not have to try hard.
- Even in school if he does not know anything his smooth talking and general knowledge usually gets him out of situations.
- We know for sure that Thulani Tembe "lived" and was a close friend of Sizwe.
- We last learn of Thulani when he leaves Exclusive Park after having burnt his teacher by petrol.
- Hereafter, where do we read of the real "living" Thulani again? or is

Freedom Cele, Thulani?

- Freedom Cele replies to Sizwe's letter from jail.
- Does Thulani die in Zimbabwe or is it Sizwe's hallucinations again?
- After Thulani leaves Exclusive Park, his mother phones Sizwe to collect Thulani's writings and according to the novel, it is Thulani who writes "Ramu the Hermit"

Thulani and Sizwe's relationship

- They met as children, when they meet he refers to him as the "yellow boy"
- Their relationship was ever changing
- From childhood camaraderie and experimentation with sex and liquor
- Serious re-evaluation of relationships with their fathers and woman in their lives
- Both are intelligent and have a flair for writing which leaves us wondering whether their attitude to sex is not inconsistent with their obvious intelligence
- Both characters are different in that Sizwe suffers from low self-esteem, he has to try hard to get somewhere. Thulani is very charismatic and well-spoken with easy going charm and does not have to try hard
- Sizwe is a complex character who suffers with low self-esteem and eventually displays psychotic behaviour as he cannot come to terms with his identity.
- This is largely due to his fixation with his relationship with Thulani, his best friend whom he is in awe of and wants to emulate.
- To understand this we have to go back to their childhood.
- Thulani as a young boy is very charismatic, well-read and well-spoken with an easy going charm who does not have to try hard.
- Even in school if he does not know anything his smooth talking and general knowledge usually gets him out of situations.
- Sizwe, on the other hand, is always working hard for what he wants and has to try harder.
- This divide is not so deep whilst they are in school.
- Both write well and it is always Thulani who helps edit his work and give him ideas on how to do it.
- He respects his friend's opinion.
- It is only after Thulani disappears and Sizwe looks at his writing that his jealousy escalates.
- This jealousy makes him question his own abilities and eventually leads to extreme jealousy of his friend's abilities.
- Sizwe knows he cannot write like that and the use of the anagram throughout the book "Words Kill, Swords" is significant.
- The play on the words creates meaning, as through these stories that are made up of words, they are like swords that ARE SLOWLY KILLING Sizwe.
- He cannot accept that his friend writes better than him.
- His friend has given him permission to publish his works under an assumed name and Sizwe can pass it off as his own.

