

***Look Both Ways* – Study Notes**

The Setting

The narrative of *Look Both Ways* happens over three hot days, starting on Friday and ending on Sunday. It revolves around the lives of several characters who live in the inner suburbs of a city. The setting is important. Firstly, because we can easily lead anonymous lives in the city – disconnected from the people and communities around us. This is one of the challenges facing a number of characters in the film. Secondly, the particular cityscape that the director, Sarah Watt, focuses on, is a particularly industrial one – there are constant images of train tracks going in many directions and of trains hurtling past. These images re-inforce the confusion of the main characters. The heat, as well, makes palpable the inner emotional tension, burden and frustration of the characters. In the background of the narrative is the derailing of a train at Arnow hill in which many people have died. This tragedy is dominating the headlines of the news during the three days of the narrative. However, what is important in Watt's film is the drama that unfolds in the foreground. While the bigger picture is the tragedy of Arnow hill, Watt wants us to see the importance of the individual whose story doesn't make the news.

The Narrative

The events of *Look Both Ways* happen over a weekend. The weekend, of course, should be a time of relaxation, but all the characters have been markedly affected by different, but linked, events. The fact that the narrative happens over such a short period time, symbolizes how quickly things can change in life.

Friday:

The main crises for each character happen on the Friday:

- Nick learns of his cancer. He is unable to find out any more detailed information about it – or what are his “chances” – until the following Monday when he will see a specialist.
- Meryl, walking home from the train, witnesses a man (Rob, we later find out his name to be), get run over by a freight train.
- Andy and Nick attend the accident scene. Nick captures several photos – the immediate, shocked distress of Julia when she realizes it is her partner who has died. And the traidriver, sitting down, slumped over, bewildered by what has happened.
- Andy, arriving home from covering the story, is told by Anna that she is pregnant to him.

Saturday:

On Saturday we learn more about the crises facing each character and how the characters initially intend on coping with their crises:

- Nick sees images of death everywhere. He struggles to have a conversation with Andy about what is really on his mind. He accidentally meets Meryl again, goes to her apartment and sleeps with her. He leaves while she is asleep.
- Phil begins to make some changes to his participation in family life
- Anna reveals to Andy that she has booked tickets to London and will be going over there to work
- We see that that Train Driver has something of a distant relationship with his son.
- Julia can't bring herself to make funeral arrangements for her partner.

Sunday:

On the Sunday the crises of each character are brought to a head and resolved.

- Nick takes Meryl to meet his mother. He argues with his mother about his father's struggle with cancer. On the way home he says to Meryl that he can't have a relationship with her because he has cancer. Meryl gets angry with him – they part. It rains, they reflect on their actions and come together in the end.
- The Traindriver goes to Julia's house and takes a condolence card. His son goes with him.
- Andy looks after his kids and tests his theory about the train accident being a suicide, before tapping on Anna's window.
- Phil is at the birthday party for his daughter and gives her a present that she really wants.
- A small girl is found amidst the wreckage of the Arnow Hill accident.

The Characters

Nick:

Nick's struggle with the news he has cancer defines his character in *Look Both Ways*. Naturally, the news he has cancer frightens him immensely, and everywhere, like Meryl, he begins to see death – "I've been seeing death everywhere this weekend." All the characters, in some way, are alone in the film, and this heightens their inner struggle with their problems. Apart from Phil, Nick tells no one, until Meryl at the end, that he has cancer. Partly this is because for Nick he doesn't know how to tell someone he has cancer. His brief attempt at a deeper conversation with Andy is: "Do you believe in God?" But partly it's because he has no one to tell – he seems to be disconnected from the world, and the people, around him. Unlike the other characters in the film, the brief glimpses we get of Nick's apartment show it to be tidy and orderly. It doesn't really seem

to be a home – “I bought a place as an investment for the future. I thought I’d live in it a while before I go back overseas.”

Nick’s struggle with the news he has cancer makes him flashback repeatedly to what he saw of his own father’s struggle with cancer. “Mum, he was scared,” Nick begins to say in his longest speech in the film: “Why should he have been nice. He was fighting a war. There’s always this stuff in the papers about this brave battle with cancer. But then you’re also supposed to accept it and then have this nice everyone gather around at the end and hug each other death. When’s that turn around supposed to happen?” Nick doesn’t feel like he can be brave – or that his struggle needs to be a “brave battle with cancer.” But Nick’s challenge is to find a way to let someone in to help him. To reconnect with the world.

Meryl:

Nick and Meryl are constantly compared and contrasted as characters in the film. They are both, of course, visual artists – Nick a photographer and Meryl a paint artist. Both see the world around them, and in particular “death,” in terms of their visual medium – Nick through montages of photos, Meryl through animations of her own, savage death. Nick sees these things because of his cancer. For Meryl it’s about *her* father dying at the start of the film. In the opening sequences of the film we see a tv in the house of Meryl’s mother showing the news of the Arnow hill crash. We can just make out the voice of Meryl and her mother talking and see the flowers that people have given Meryl’s mother. As an audience we don’t know that someone has died – we focus on the news of Arnow hill. This emphasizes how Meryl’s character feels unimportant, jostled out of the picture – “Why isn’t my picture on the front of the paper, why isn’t everyone who loses someone on the front bloody page.” It takes her to the end of the film to be able to say this.

What prevents Meryl from being able to talk about how she feels is “the bloody polite gene” – “I don’t need to spend my whole weekend, my whole bloody life being polite to people like you. That’s the only thing stopping me, the bloody polite gene.” It’s “the bloody polite gene” that prevents Meryl from talking about how she really feels. When Nick says at the start of the film that her father dying is “terrible,” Meryl responds with: “There’s always somebody worse off.” She keeps perpetuating the idea that her feelings aren’t significant. However, her art does allow her to express her feelings – she paints wild landscapes of turmoil and loneliness. One picture shows a woman huddling in a foetal position, all alone.

Nick and Meryl are compared in other ways. Both characters wear blue. At the start of the film, where they walk home together, we see a very good representation of this. Nick is all in blue – his clothes tidy and orderly like his apartment. Meryl wears a blue t shirt, and loose fitting pants and a shirt over the top of her t shirt. She seems to be chaotically carrying lots of baggage in this scene – and this stands for, in a way, her baggage as a character that can be seen (in her pictures) but not actually spoken about. Blue is the colour of water and

the sky – it represents life and hope – two things that Nick and Meryl are both struggling with, but which they are able to embrace in the end.

Andy:

The houses that Nick, Meryl and Andy live in tell us something about them as characters. Nick's house shows us that he is disconnected. Meryl's house is ramshackle, filled with her art – her art reflecting important ideas about her as a character. Andy's house is a mess, filled with rubbish. It reflects the emotional mess inside him. "You think everyone's got an agenda!" Anna says to him at one stage. This is very true of him. When Anna first tells him she is pregnant he asks her: "Did you do this on purpose?" His view of the world is cynical. He can't accept that Rob may have tripped in front of the freight train. Instead, his "slant" is that he jumped in front of it. Andy is an angry character, the line from *Macbeth* (the play he goes to review on the Saturday), perfectly describing him: "It's a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury." He's angry about Anna being pregnant, about the photo of Julia being on the front page when – "It wasn't about her. It was about a guy jumping in front of a train," and he's angry when he's five cents short at the milkbar – "It's five cents...You know what, this is it, this is all the small minded shit in the world, this narrow minded stuff that gets thrown on the people without any relevant importance to anything." He's also an uncertain character. In one highly symbolic scene at the cricket on Saturday he trips over a pram. Andy's challenge is to be less cynical, less angry, to accept, as Anna says to him, that "things just happen!"

Anna:

Being pregnant creates a major life shift for Anna. In the scene where she first tells Andy of her pregnancy, she fidgets with a cigarette – still drawn to a life of no responsibility. Whether to smoke or not is a recurring question for her, as she struggles to accept the responsibility of being pregnant. Her house, like that of Meryl, Nick and Andy, tells us something about her character. She lives with another young woman and they lead the lives of young people, talking about trivial things – like how Julia looks in her picture on the front page. Becoming a parent will change all this. She suggests to Andy that, "Well you have the baby...what's stupid. I have the baby you take it home. You be in charge." Together – her and Andy – they need to find a way to cope.

Phil:

Phil is a workaholic and has become disconnected from his family. The news that Nick has cancer makes him think about what matters most in life. He gives up smoking and begins to pay more attention to his family. Initially he doesn't realize that it will be his daughter's birthday on the Sunday and his wife is bemused by his attempts at giving more attention ("are you having an affair," she asks when he gives her some flowers"). However, on the Sunday he gives his daughter a cricket bat which she really likes and we can clearly see that his wife is pleased by the change in him.

Julia:

Of all the crises that characters face in the film, Julia's is the most horrific – her partner suddenly, brutally dying when he was run over by a freight train, her grief bared publically on the front page of the next's days newspaper. Nick, Meryl, Andy, Phil and the Traindriver all have existing personal issues that they need to deal with. Julia doesn't seem to – the brief glimpse we have of her and Rob together seems to show a happy couple. His sudden, tragic death, shows how quickly fate can change. Julia is silent throughout the film, not speaking until her interaction with the Traindriver at the end. The death of Rob has silenced her as a character.

The Traindriver:

The Traindriver feels a deep guilt at having run over Rob. The way his body language is captured on film clearly shows this. He is nearly always sitting down, slumped over, and sometimes framed by objects around him – such as a doorway. Like Julia, he is silent for most of the film. Grief silences Julia – guilt silences the Traindriver. Like other characters in the film, though, he needs to connect with those around him in order to move on with his life. This event, for the Traindriver, becomes a catalyst to reconnect with his son.

The Traindriver's son:

The Traindriver's son appears to be estranged from his father at the beginning of the film. However, what his father is going through brings he and his father closer together. In the end, the son accompanies the traindriver to Julia's house to give her a condolence card and to apologise for what happened. This marks a reconnection between the Traindriver and his son.

Joan (Nick's mother):

Nick's mum is a very pragmatic person. She says that her husband was "difficult" when he had cancer. Nick objects to this, but his mum continues with one of the most important quotes of the film: "Your father's death wasn't the sum of his life. It doesn't matter how life ends, it matters how it was. I couldn't give him my way of coping, and you couldn't give him yours. Everyone has to find their own way of coping with their own death... and life." The challenge for almost every character in the film is to find a way of coping with their life.

The Themes

Connection, Disconnection and Community

The characters live in a community in *Look Both Ways* but are unaware of. Nick and Meryl live close to each other, but have never know each other. They both live near Julia, but it takes the horrific death of Rob to bring her into their lives.

Andy and Nick play in a cricket team together. Andy's ex wife takes the kids swimming at the same pool as Meryl. On the Sunday, the kids go the party of Phil's daughter. The characters are so close to each other, but so far away.

Many of the characters in *Look Both Ways* are alone or somehow feel disconnected. As Meryl says, "Sick of this stupid job, not having any money, not having my own home, don't have children, don't have a partner to share anything with." The challenge for the characters is to connect with their community. As Nick's mum says, "Everyone has to find their own way of coping with their own death... and life." The characters initially try – and fail - to cope on their own. In the last chapter of the DVD of *Look Both Ways*, significantly titled 'Connectivity,' we hear the lyrics to *Lonely Won't Leave Me Alone*:

*There was a time I thought I knew
About life and what to do
And now it's plain I know nothing at all
I should have known better*

*Lonely won't leave me alone
Tried I tried but you won't let go
It's a pain that won't go away
Lonely won't leave me alone*

This song is sung as the characters finally connect with each other realizing that "lonely won't leave me alone" and what they thought they "knew" about life was really "nothing at all."

Looking Both Ways

The two headlines for Sunday's newspaper in *Look Both Ways* (when Andy goes to buy it from the milkbar), is "Our Lucky Lotto Winner" and "Train Death Count Rises." Tragedy and good fortune side by side (another example is Nick seeing a wedding as he plays cricket. While he thinks about his death, people are celebrating life). This is one meaning of 'look both ways.' Meryl complains at the end of the film, "Why isn't my picture on the front of the paper, why isn't everyone who loses someone on the front bloody page." In focusing on her, and not the bigger Arncliffe tragedy, this film is putting her on "the front bloody page." This film looks both ways in looking at the lives of ordinary people, rather than what is big and spectacular.

Another meaning for look both ways is that the characters in the film are at a crossroads in their life – a point where they need to make some decisions about "choosing" life – which direction they are going to head in. In a way the characters have been like the trains so frequently pictured in the film – they stay in one direction, doing things on their own, not looking around them, not being able to connect. They need to get off the rails and look in either direction.

Grief & Loss

Julia, Nick, Meryl, Joan and the Traindriver are all dealing with some kind of loss or grief in the film. And as Nick's mum says, "Everyone has to find their own way of coping with their own death... and life." The main theme of the film is really connection, and this theme of grief and loss is explicitly link to connection – characters can't cope with grief and loss on their own.

Fear

"He was scared," Nick says of his dad's struggle with cancer. And, "There's always this stuff in the papers about this brave battle with cancer. But then you're also supposed to accept it and then have this nice everyone gather around at the end and hug each other death. When's that turn around supposed to happen?" Nick is deeply afraid of the cancer he has and the illness ahead of him, his argument with his mother is really a round-about way of seeking affirmation that it is find to be frightened. Meryl, too, is afraid: "I don't need your photos to remind me of all the bloody shit in the world. I know it's awful. It scares me stupid. It scares everyone too stupid to do anything." Fear threatens to overwhelm both these characters. To scare them "too stupid to do anything." However, by connecting with each other, they find a way – as is shown in the closing montage of photos of Nick and his cancer – of dealing with this fear.

The Symbols & Techniques

Colour:

Red and blue are colours used throughout *Look Both Ways*. Meryl and Nick both wear blue, and Meryl paints with blue. Blue, as was discussed above in the section about Meryl, represents life and hope. Joan, Meryl's friend, Julia, Phil's wife, Anna, Andy's ex wife and Meryl all wear red at different points in the film. Red is a much more vibrant colour than blue. Red can be associated with feelings such as danger, but in the context of *Look Both Ways* it's also a colour that can be associated with life – with blood, with being alive. The link between all the characters, of course, is that they are women – women who have had to respond to the issues of men in their live and have been able to endure and survive.

Music:

Music is an important technique in *Look Both Ways*. The tone of the music and the lyrics give us an insight into the inner emotional lives of the characters. The lyrics for *Lonely Won't Leave Me Alone*, seen above in the theme section, reflect on how the characters are making connections with each other in the end. Earlier in the film we hear the song *Crashing*. We hear the below lyrics as we see scenes of Nick choosing the photo of the distraught Julia that will be on the front cover of the newspaper. He also looks through his pictures of war, famine and natural disaster, before searching the internet for images on testicular cancer. Meryl

paints, Andy writes, “when a man is crushed to death by a slow moving train do we accept that as an accident.”

*If I stepped into the light
And left my reflection
Standing in doorways
And not look behind*

*If I coloured by the signs
In shadows and tones
Kissing in corners
And not look behind*

*If I slipped into the quiet
A melody strong
Glowing in darkness
And not look behind*

*If I stepped into the light
And left my reflection
Standing in doorways
And not look behind*

*If I fell between the lines
Distant and drawn
Waiting by streetlights
And not look behind*

*If I let the moments rise
Discover and fall
Hanging in hallways
And not look behind*

*I'd go crashing to the end
Crashing to the end
Crashing to the end
Crashing to the end*

The characters do all feel like they are “crashing to the end.” The others lyrics in the song speak about an intense loneliness. Towards the middle of the film comes Lisa Miller’s song *Eleven*. While this plays we see Julia struggling to write a funeral speech about Rob – she also discovers that her picture is on the front page of the paper. Meryl creates a small memorial to Rob beside the traintracks and Anna walks through a sprinkler, taking childish joy at the feeling of the water on her in the hot weather.

*Unpack, I'll get around to it.
Don't think I like the sound of it.
Unstack before the next load's in.*

*Came back, to make a start on it.
This time, get to the heart of it.
If I can find out where to begin.*

*Stalling, you know that I'm stalling.
What do I need all of this time for?*

*Only reading headlines
And too long avoiding deadlines
I think I paid that bill before.*

*So I'll wipe off the old messages
And white-out the wrong passages
And write out a list I can't ignore.*

*Calling, is that someone calling?
I'll just turn the music up a little louder.*

*Play dumb, you think I don't know I play dumb.
I only hope I don't play dumb
'til you believe I am.*

*Falling, feels like I'm falling.
Why don't you just grab me by my shoulders
and shake me out of this.
Make me see my senselessness
And wake me before the eleventh hour.*

The lyrics clearly tell us about the feelings of Julia. She's "stalling" – because she's finding it difficult to come to terms with her grief for Rob. Meryl and Anna are both "stalling" in a sense, too – struggling to work out how to move on with their lives.

Animation:

Like music, the animations through the film give us an insight into the inner emotional lives of the characters – in this case just Meryl and Nick. Nick sees things through his medium, Meryl through hers. As an audience, we are encouraged to look at things through a different perspective in order to better understand the themes of the film.

Birds:

Images of birds are seen at several points throughout the film. The birds flock together, flying as a group. One way we can interpret them as a symbol, is that they represent connectedness and community.

Trains:

Trains rush by in *Look Both Ways*. They symbolize many of the attributes of the characters in the film. Their failure to look both ways, to keep going in their own direction on their own, the moving from one spot to the next spot without enjoying the elements of their life.

Quotes

Nick: So what are my chances?

Doctor: Look, I really don't think there's any point speculating in that sort of way.

Phil: Where are you going? Which hospital?

Phil: You go home. I'll sort out everything here.

Andy: Do you know how many supposedly accidental deaths last year could have been suicide?

Andy: Did you actually see him trip?

Meryl: Well, no, but he must have tripped.

Andy: Did you get my slant?

Nick: They guy could have tripped.

Meryl: There's always somebody worse off. You know, somebody's mother, father or brother have died when their house burned down.

Meryl: Maybe it was meant to be. Maybe he was an axe murderer, a rapist about to commit his first crime. Maybe the right thing happens... Cancer: my star sign.

Andy: Did you do this on purpose?

Meryl: Ha...shock proof!

Meryl: I'll have to work all weekend or otherwise I might not have a job on Monday... Should make it a clean sweep, nothing of anything.

Meryl: Sick of this stupid job, not having any money, not having my own home, don't have children, don't have a partner to share anything with.

Andy: Do we accept that it was an accident?

Andy: It wasn't about her. It was about a guy jumping in front of a train.

Phil: This is not about you, Andy.

Meryl: I supposed everyone has to witness something ghastly one day. You know, your fifteen minutes of bluhrrrr...

Meryl: Did you want something?

Meryl: It's not as if I knew him.

Andy: You'll probably win an award. Well, if you die, which you might as well as now. Don't you guys say you only ever take one great photo.

Nick: Do you believe in God?

Andy: Have you ever got anyone pregnant?

Phil: Apparently, it's good to stay up. Optimistic.

Nick: Poverty, war, natural disasters then back to the mini-bar.

Nick: I've been seeing death everywhere this weekend.

Meryl: So do, I imagine it happening all the time.

Nick: Do you see it when you look at me?

Meryl: No, no I don't see anything at all.

Nick: Ha...well that's good. I don't even know your name.

Meryl: Do you see death when you look at me?

Nick: No. No I don't.

Macbeth Play: It's a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.

Andy: Where does that leave us?

Anna: You say.

Andy: Yeah, sure...

Andy: It's five cents...You know what, this is it, this is all the small minded shit in the world, this narrow minded stuff that gets thrown on the people without any relevant importance to anything.

Nick: I bought a place as an investment for the future. I thought I'd live in it a while before I go back overseas.

Andy: We're going to stay here until we get a glimmer of knowledge.

Nick: Well it wasn't much fun for him.

Nick: Why did you say dad was difficult?

Mum: He was. He was difficult when he had a cold.

Nick: Mum, he was scared.

Nick: Why should he have been nice. He was fighting a war. There's always this stuff in the papers about this brave battle with cancer. But then you're also supposed to accept it and then have this nice everyone gather around at the end and hug each other death. When's that turn around supposed to happen?

Mum: I don't know. When it's inevitable. When it would have been better for him to find peace. He made it so hard for himself.

Nick: I didn't do anything. He was terrified.

Mum: Your father's death wasn't the sum of his life. It doesn't matter how life ends, it matters how it was. I couldn't give him my way of coping, and you couldn't give him yours. Everyone has to find their own way of coping with their own death... and life.

(Nick's) Mum: Why do you have to be so bloody independent?

Anna: Well you have the baby...what's stupid. I have the baby you take it home. You be in charge.

Anna: I didn't do this deliberately. You were there too.

Anna: You think everyone's got an agenda!

Andy: And they don't?

Anna: No, things just happen!

Nick: I can't really start anything.

Meryl: I met you on Friday, we slept together on Saturday, you took me to meet your mother on Sunday. And now you can't start anything. That's the tightest little relationship I've ever had. And if you think I'm upset because you don't want to see me, then how dare you. Maybe I was going to say thanks but no bloody thanks. I don't need this bloody crap. I don't need to spend my whole weekend, my whole bloody life being polite to people like you. That's the only thing stopping me, the bloody polite gene...Maybe I don't like you, or what you do. I don't need your photos to remind me of all the bloody shit in the world. I know it's awful. It scares me stupid. It scares everyone too stupid to do anything. My dad died two weeks ago. Why isn't my picture on the front of the paper, why isn't everyone who loses someone on the front bloody page. So what if I wanted you to like me. So what if it's shallow and stupid to want someone to like you.

Meryl: You're dumping me because you've got cancer?

Nick: I got cancer in my lungs, I've got cancer in my balls, in my legs, my arms, my brain.

