

Apocalypse as Revelation: Collectively Considering the Two Endings of Cloud Atlas

William Koloc

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this excerpt, Will conducts a careful **close reading** to **analyze** the chronological ending of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*. He begins by selectively choosing pieces of **evidence** from the novel, creating a strong foundation for his analysis. Importantly, this analysis goes beyond merely interpreting individual pieces of evidence; it is grounded in a surprising and compelling **argument** about his source.*

Excerpt

At the chronological ending of *Cloud Atlas*, Zach'ry has two key revelations about human nature and the insignificance of his life as an individual, leaving the reader with a conclusion void of any resolution or gesture towards change. Zach'ry lives in a post-apocalyptic society in Hawai'i ("Big Isle") where his people, the valley folk, often clash with the violent, cannibalistic Kona tribe. His chapter culminates with a brutal attack from the Kona that presumably kills all of his tribe members, but he narrowly escapes with the Prescients—a technologically-advanced tribe who visit and observe the valley folk. Shortly before the final pages of the chapter "Slooshas' Crossin'," Zach'ry makes this statement about belief: "People b'lief the world is built so an' tellin 'em it ain't so caves the roofs on their heads'n'maybe yours" (Mitchell 282, emphasis in original). Here, Zach'ry draws a connection between having a revelation that one's worldview is wrong and the catastrophic image of roof caving in. The text alludes to the kind of apocalypse that the reader must look for as the end of the section approaches: moments of realization that cause Zach'ry's life as he knows it to come crashing down.

The first of these moments comes when he cannot stop himself from killing a Kona warrior to avenge his family and realizes, "[I]n our busted world the right thing ain't always possible" (Mitchell 301). Whether it is referred to as "Old Georgie" or, as Meronym calls it, "human hunger," some deeper, violent part of human nature inside of Zach'ry leads him to sacrifice his view that souls are irrevocably tarnished by murder and kill the Kona anyway. He recognizes that his belief system and a world fraught with violence and death are not compatible. The second apocalypse occurs as Big Isle fades from Zach'ry's view on the kayak and

he remarks, “Yay, my Hole World an’ hole life was shrinked ‘nuff to fit in the O o’ my finger’n’thumb” (Mitchell 308). Zach’ry realizes not only that his world is busted, but that it is also small and inconsequential. All of the death and struggle that it took to make it to the Prescient kayak fade away into a tiny speck on the horizon of a vast ocean. This is the last that the reader hears from Zach’ry; the final chronological scene depicts a future generation looking at the orison of Sonmi—a digital recording of a character from a former chapter that has become a God-like figure for the valley folk—that “speaks in an Old-Un tongue what no un alive und’stands nor ever will,” as if to mirror the reader’s frustration and confusion with the lack of resolution after Zach’ry’s revelations (Mitchell 309). The end of “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” when examined independently, is profoundly desolate; Zach’ry’s “roof caved in,” but there is no indication of how it could be rebuilt or if it is past repair, revealing that even though the novel is chronologically over, it remains far from finished.

Zach’ry’s meditation on clouds as migrating souls reveals that he is merely one individual in a connected, fluid network of others within the text, and a more cohesive ending can be found by looking at the novel’s characters collectively. Right before Zach’ry recognizes Big Isle’s smallness in the kayak, he looks to the sky and ponders the soul:

I watched clouds awobbly from the floor o’ that kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an’ tho a cloud’s shape nor hue nor size don’t stay the same, it’s still a cloud an’so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud’s blowed from or who the soul’ll be ‘morrow? Only Sonmi the east an’ the west an’ the compass an’ the atlas, yay, only the atlas o’ clouds. (Mitchell 308)

The simile “souls cross ages like clouds cross skies” uses a cloud-filled sky to depict some kind of human essence flowing across time and reincarnating in different bodies. The word “awobbly,” which invokes a very unstructured, erratic image, illustrates the fluidity of the clouds’ movement. The question of “where the clouds blowed from or who the soul’ll be ‘morrow” indicates an ambiguous relationship with time, further revealing that souls move freely in no set direction. A simple change of the wind’s direction could “blow” a cloud into the past, or, in the case of *Cloud Atlas*, an inversion of the novel’s chronological structure could send a soul right back to the nineteenth century. Zach’ry claims that the only way to answer these lingering questions about souls and time is an “atlas o’ clouds”—some kind of map that allows one to look at individual souls as an aggregate and draw connections between them. Therefore, Zach’ry’s apocalypse is only one cloud in a vast atlas; the chronological ending on its own naturally feels insufficient and unfinished because it is merely a small part of a greater network in the novel that transcends time. If the reader hopes to find any greater clarity as the text flows back into the

past, they are called to take a step back and draw connections between characters and their experiences rather than isolating them.

Author Commentary

William Koloc

This excerpt comes from my midterm paper for ENG446: The Novel Since 2000. The prompt was, “Consider endings. Choose one or two invocations of apocalypse throughout which to make an argument about one novel’s concern with futurity. Why is the end of the world so present in your chosen novel?” and the professor expressed that it should be a short paper that relied heavily on rich close readings. *Cloud Atlas* is such an action-heavy novel that sends the reader through a whirlwind of events and time periods that scholarship rarely takes the time to slow down and close read passages, so I made it my mission to show how fruitful it could be to do a deep dive into the chronological and physical endings of the text.

When I began writing this paper, I bit off far more than I could chew. My scope was too broad; I was trying to tackle a topic more well-suited for a thirty page paper than a five page one. I met with my preceptor four days before the paper was due, and she essentially told me that I should scrap most of the draft, which was pretty crushing. Instead of stubbornly sticking to what I had, I decided to return to the passage about clouds in the excerpt above. Slowly but surely, I began finding subtle and important connections between the two endings—repetition of specific words, similar imagery, character parallels, etc.—that helped me build a far more specific but still meaningful argument. I think effective close reading is not something that is done after a paper’s outline is set in stone, but rather it is the centerpiece—the core of the analysis where you can discover those “Ah ha!” moments that make really strong and exciting arguments.

I hope that this excerpt shows that when your argument is not landing like you want it to or you are stuck, sometimes taking a deep breath and returning directly to the text that you are working with and close reading can help you reorient yourself. I have found that some of my best writing comes after I finally let go of an idea that is simply not working and go back to the fundamentals, even if I am afraid that I will not have the time to finish.

Editor Commentary

Natalia Zorrilla

When I first read Will's paper, it had been years since I'd last read *Cloud Atlas*. I vaguely recalled the novel's odd chronology: the story follows a number of characters from the past into the future, then reverses to follow those same characters back into the past. Mostly, I remembered feeling confused, frustrated, and unsatisfied. Neither the novel's chronological ending nor its physical ending seemed to provide any closure: I wasn't sure quite what to make of either. Will's essay, however, offered me a richer interpretation of *Cloud Atlas*. Through careful **close reading**, he argued that a reader—like me—would be wrong to consider the two endings in isolation. Instead, he wrote, the novel *tells* readers to find meaning in the connections between characters. And despite my initial skepticism, I found myself convinced by him.

Why is this essay's **close reading** so effective? I think the answer is twofold. First, Will's close reading is rooted in well-chosen **evidence**, grounding his **analysis**. Second, however, this analysis goes beyond mere examination of the text to make a surprising and compelling **argument**.

Of these two successes, **evidence choice** is the most immediately obvious. In a passage where Zach'ry ponders the nature of the soul, for instance, Will identifies several subtly important words and phrases: "souls cross ages," "awobbly," "morrow," "atlas of clouds." By selecting such a meaning-rich passage, he provides himself diverse opportunities for **analysis**. Ultimately, although he spends a full paragraph discussing the passage, it never feels repetitious. This kind of careful evidence choice is the fodder of good **close reading**. Here, it fortifies and substantiates Will's **analysis**.

Importantly, while Will's **close reading** is grounded in the text, it does not merely examine the text. Sometimes, **close reading** can feel disunited: even as it interprets many different pieces of a text, it never quite explains how or why those pieces fit together. Will's **close reading**, on the contrary, interweaves multiple strands of **analysis** to form a cohesive **argument**. Together, his readings of "souls cross ages" and "awobbly" and "morrow" come to suggest that the soul has a fluid and free relationship with time. His reading of "atlas of clouds" shows why that conclusion matters: it helps us make sense of the fluid structure of *Cloud Atlas* itself. In this way, his **close reading** provides more than scattered interpretations of the text; it makes a strong and satisfying **argument**. Through Will's analysis, even the most skeptical reader of *Cloud Atlas* can find new meaning.

Works Cited

Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2019.

Bios

William Koloc '25 is a first-year from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is pursuing a prospective concentration in English and is on the premedical track. He has always had very diverse academic interests and enjoys integrating both STEM and humanities into his studies. He is considering certificates in global health or creative writing, and hopes to begin writing in an extracurricular setting in the coming semesters. He wrote this paper as a first-year.

Natalia Zorrilla '23 is a Philosophy major from San Diego, California, receiving certificates in Latin American Studies and Values and Public Life. In addition to being a Head Fellow in the Writing Center, she serves as the Financial Vice-President of the Princeton Debate Panel and the President Emeritus of the Princeton College Democrats. She loves crosswords, bad reality TV, and (perhaps most geekily) Dungeons and Dragons. She wrote this as a junior.