

Life, Consciousness, and Existence in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*

Dr Priscilla Sam, Associate Professor, Department of English, Buddha P.G. College, Kushinagar,
Uttar Pradesh - 274403

Abstract

Life After Life takes protagonist Ursula Todd through a variety of lives in twentieth-century Britain. Each chapter describes an alternative path that Ursula's life could follow, ending with her (often premature) death. In some versions of Ursula's story, Atkinson provides her main character with slightly different circumstances, which adjust the trajectory of her life. Atkinson's novel has broad implications concerning success and happiness, as Ursula's reincarnations raise the question of what constitutes a good life or a better life. In treating each possible storyline with equal validity, Atkinson argues that there is no right version, forcing readers to evaluate which of Ursula's lives they find most compelling or satisfying, and to evaluate their own idea of what makes life fulfilling.

Introduction

Ursula experiences a multitude of lives and each version of her life is slightly (or sometimes vastly) different. Arguments begin to emerge in the novel about fate and choice, as certain details or actions that Atkinson includes have large ramifications on Ursula's life while some circumstances remain relatively unchanged. Ursula's life begins prior to the start of World War I and in later chapters, she is in her thirties throughout World War II. War is thus a near-constant presence in Ursula's life and, despite several attempts to escape its perils, it becomes unavoidable. Atkinson never describes a battlefield scene, but she demonstrates how war disrupts the balance of life both in its widespread fatalities and in its disturbance of social norms. Ursula grows up in the country in early twentieth-century Britain, a time and place that prescribes relatively rigid gender roles to its citizens.¹ Women are associated with domesticity, motherhood, and chastity, while men are associated with work, strength, and violence. Yet because the storylines in which Ursula and other characters strictly adhere to these gender roles lead to far more negative consequences.

Fate Vs. Choices

Each of Ursula's lifetimes is slightly (or occasionally significantly) different. Certain events

¹<https://vibdoc.com/life-after-life-litchart.html>

or actions that Atkinson includes have enormous repercussions on Ursula's life while other circumstances remain essentially untouched. The book claims that while little actions can alter one's life, it's impossible to foresee exactly how or even if they will.

In many of Ursula's lives, simple choices can have huge consequences. In the earliest version of Ursula's delivery, she is suffocated by her own umbilical cord, and Doctor Fellowes is delayed by a snowstorm. Alternatively, Sylvie keeps a pair of scissors in her chamber and can cut the cord herself, allowing Ursula to live. Ursula's disappearance would have profoundly affected their dynamic and any interactions she has in succeeding versions of her life. Ursula's actions also affect her life. An abusive spouse and forced kissing by her brother's friend, Howie, result in Ursula being pregnant, aborting the child, and marrying an abusive husband. In another alternative, Ursula chooses to be confrontational with Howie and ignore his approaches, blocking the rest of that timeline. In another reality, Ursula chooses to travel Europe after school and marries a German called Jürgen, causing her to spend the war in Germany rather than Britain. Due to her decision, she is stranded in Germany with her little daughter, Frieda, and intends to kill herself and her daughter to escape the Germans. These instances show how even seemingly inconsequential choices can have a ripple impact on her and others life.

However, some aspects of Ursula's existence remain resistant to change, even little changes, limiting Ursula's ability to anticipate the implications of her actions. Bridget, the family's maid, goes to London to celebrate the Armistice with her boyfriend Clarence. She returns with the illness, killing herself, Ursula, and Teddy. In other versions, Ursula tries to avoid the calamity by avoiding interacting with Bridget when she returns, but Teddy gets sick and infects Ursula. In another, Ursula tries to leave a letter on Bridget's door, but her cook Mrs. Glover catches her. In another, Ursula pushes Bridget in the garden, causing her to trip and hobble to London. Bridget is ultimately stopped when Ursula pushes her down the stairs, shattering her arm. Thus, Atkinson shows that changing events is difficult when other characters strongly desire them. To get away from home swiftly, Ursula enrolls in a secretarial college and works for the Home Office after being raped, having an abortion, and being ostracised by her mother. The fact that people often have several motives for their acts and that tiny changes in their life may not alter their greatest decisions shows that people often have multiple motivations for their activities.²

However, despite Ursula's life changing dramatically during the story, Atkinson doubts whether global events can be influenced. In one version, Ursula lives after the war and talks to her nephew

²<https://www.chatelaine.com/living/books/our-next-book-club-pick-life-after-life-by-kate-atkinson/>

Nigel about what would have happened if Hitler had died before World War II. It seems conceivable that World War II would not have occurred, and that many more people would be alive today if Goering or Himmler had taken his place. In another universe, Ursula shoots Hitler in 1930, precipitating her own death when other Nazi officials shoot her shortly after. No one knows if Ursula's actions were in vain because Atkinson does not write after her death. Thus, the book indicates that some choices can shape history and have tremendous repercussions on the globe, while other fates are much more impossible to prevent. This implication claims that life is unpredictable and that individuals have limited capacity to shape the world at large.

Family and Love

Despite the multiplicity of narratives, one component of Ursula's life remains fairly constant throughout the book: her family. Ursula's ties with her parents and siblings are important in her life, although their love isn't always shown to be unconditional. Different members of Ursula's family react in very different ways as Ursula undergoes various traumas and the family encounters collective hardships. Because of these various characteristics, the ability to receive love and support in times of crisis is the most vital aspect of having a family.

Ursula's love aids her to endure multiple horrific incidents when she receives support from various members of her family, particularly her father Hugh, aunt Izzie, and brother Teddy. Hugh is a loving father figure who is always there for his five children, even when he is summoned to fight in World War I. But it is his attitude to Ursula's abortion, which she obtains after being raped and becoming pregnant, that is probably his greatest act of charity. Instead of retaliating severely, as Sylvie did, he takes her to the hospital and remains with her for days, holding her hand until she wakes up, sparing her from what she refers to as "the black bat" (death). Izzie, Ursula's aunt, also lends a hand in her support. Izzie's apartment serves as a safe haven for Ursula on multiple occasions, including when she falls pregnant, when her husband Derek abuses her, and when she needs a place to stay during World War II after her own apartment is bombed. Despite the fact that Izzie's assistance is occasionally misdirected, she never evaluates Ursula the way Sylvie does and always tries to help her. Teddy is another source of support for Ursula, especially when she is being abused by her husband. Teddy is described by Ursula as devoted and affectionate in their childhood, and he lives up to this description when Derek goes to Izzie's apartment to retrieve Ursula and finds Teddy there as well. Derek starts beating Ursula because he thinks she's sleeping with Teddy, and Teddy fights him to save her. Though his attempt to save her fails and Ursula dies as a result of her injuries, Teddy's

commitment is evident throughout Ursula's life, as he provides her with essential care and support when she encounters additional hardships during the war.

When Ursula's family fails to support her, she is often traumatised to the point of sadness, and in some cases, they cause her death directly or indirectly. Maurice, Ursula's older brother, mistreats her and her older sister Pamela on a regular basis. In one version, he buries her as a new-born under a pile of leaves; in another, he tosses a doll of hers off the roof, which she chases down and falls to her death. Maurice is entirely unconcerned with her in later timelines, and he tells her coldly that Teddy has died, nearly "bemused by [her] anguish." Consequently, despite the fact that she shares the same familial ties with Maurice as she does with Teddy, his lack of love for her causes her to become estranged from him, and in some cases, fatal. Sylvie's affection for Ursula is unquestionably larger than Maurice's, but it is also far more changeable than Hugh's. In regards to Ursula's abortion, Sylvie has the polar opposite attitude to her husband. Sylvie believes Ursula is solely to blame for the rape, and when Ursula returns home from the hospital, Sylvie treats her with disdain and refuses to let her see her therapist, Dr. Kellet. Ursula marries Derek as a result of Sylvie's reaction since he is the only one she feels she can trust, and Sylvie tells her that no guy would want her now that she is not "intact." Derek is abusive and eventually kills Ursula, proving how Sylvie's callousness can be quite dangerous. In other timelines, Sylvie is not as frigid to Ursula, but this timeline has an impact on how Ursula (and readers) perceive the others, knowing that Sylvie's affection is unreliable in times of stress.³

Family ties are special, but not all ties are equal. The Todd family is a model of a normal, friendly family. In times of difficulty, Ursula's family members' support and love (or lack thereof) can have profound effects on her health and happiness.

War and Death

Ursula's life begins before World War I, and she is in her thirties throughout World War II. Ursula's life is thus dominated by war, despite her best efforts to avoid it. Atkinson never depicts a battlefield, but she shows how war upsets the balance of existence, both in terms of casualties and global societal conventions.

The death and destruction caused by World War II is unlike any other death in the story since it impacts all European inhabitants. The London bombings compel Ursula to face several terrors. In one life, Ursula is knocked out in a bomb shelter and discovers her neighbour Lavinia Nesbit's

³Sarah Anne Miki Chihay: The Unseen World: Denarrative Desire in the Contemporary British Novel

headless, legless body. Even though she is not in the battlefield, she is undoubtedly fighting for her life. In a parallel universe, Ursula is part of a rescue squad searching for survivors of a bombing. In one case, she described two victims' injuries as "head injuries, fractured femur, broken collarbone, broken ribs, definitely a crushed pelvis." Mr. Palmer, a friend from the rescue squad, is blown apart by the explosions. She also shovels "unidentified bits of flesh" and once kneels on a child's body. Even though Ursula is distant from the battlefield, the war's horrors are carried to her home. The fight rages on even outside Britain. In a previous life, Ursula travelled to Germany and married Jürgen, a German. Ursula is still in Germany when war breaks out, preventing her from fleeing. Ursula imagines a "swift, clean death" with her daughter Frieda wrapped in her arms. Ursula buys tablets from a pharmacy and offers one to her daughter before taking one herself. "As she was leaving, she realised something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed," Atkinson writes. Thus, war not only kills and destroys, but also drives people to extreme measures to avoid the misery and suffering it brings.

Aside from the mass fatalities Ursula must face during the war, its destruction has far-reaching repercussions on life. During World War I, the Todd family becomes more pragmatic. Due to food shortages, Sylvie boils down slivers of soap, refurbishes caps, reuses sheets, and kills a cherished hen. During World War II, people must wait hours in line for a loaf of bread, and Ursula must smuggle eggs from their country house to the city since food is limited. In several versions of the war, Ursula had affairs with a married Crichton, a government employee named Ralph, and a childhood friend named Fred Smith who emerges in the ruins of London. In one chapter, she describes making love with Fred as being urgent: "survivors of tragedies must practice—or persons anticipating calamity must practice—unrestrained love." Because the future is unpredictable, gratifying today's needs becomes much more acceptable. Small societal conventions are broken. When the electricity goes out in London, a guy finds Ursula and walks her part of the way home. She admits that before the war, she would never have linked arms with a stranger, especially a man, but the prospect of bombs outweighs any possible consequences.

By contrast, Atkinson's earlier events are not war-related. Unlike her childhood deaths, she must face the horrors of war, the inevitable shifts in her social connections, and the decisions to live or die.

Gender Roles and Expectations

Ursula grew up in the countryside in early twentieth-century Britain, in a time and place where gender roles are quite fixed. Men are connected with work, strength, and aggression, whereas women are associated with domesticity, motherhood, and chastity. However, because narratives in which

Ursula and other characters rigorously follow these gender norms have considerably more bad effects than those in which they do not, the rigidity of these roles has been shown to be more destructive than helpful.

Ursula and Sylvie's commitment to traditional female roles results in negative experiences and, in some cases, Ursula's death. Sylvie is a typical woman who believes that a "woman's highest calling is to be a mother and wife," despite the fact that she admits that her life is repetitive. She expects her daughters to follow in her footsteps by keeping a high social status, marrying a respectable man, and starting a family. This course, however, is disturbed by a friend of Maurice's named Howie, in the first of Ursula's coming-of-age chapters. Howie violently kisses Ursula on her sixteenth birthday. She gives in to him, recasting the kiss as a way to cross "the triumphal arch that led to womanhood." But, she says, when Howie rapes her on her home's stairs and she is unable to defend herself, this arch doesn't seem so triumphant. Her aunt Izzie brings her to undergo an abortion once she falls pregnant. Sylvie therefore holds Ursula responsible for her near-death experience, a particularly harsh ruling considering the reality that women in British society are frequently kept in the dark about sex and its effects. This episode puts Ursula into a tailspin, and Atkinson shows how it will affect her future interactions with males. Mr. Carver, her typing tutor, frequently touches the girls and makes them type blindfolded—she indicates that he masturbates while doing so—all of which Ursula accepts because she feels powerless to resist him. Ursula marries Derek Oliphant later in this timeline and becomes Sylvie's perfect wife, taking care of the cleaning, cooking, and delighting her husband. Despite Ursula's best attempts, she becomes sad, and Derek beats her to the point where he destroys her teeth, nose, and jaw, and forces her to wear a sling around her right arm. When she tries to hide in Izzie's house, he tracks her down and beats her again, killing her this time. This chain of events demonstrates how imposing damaging gender stereotypes and roles—when males are allowed to be aggressive and women are expected to endure it for the sake of social norms—can have disastrous effects.

However, after this sequence, Ursula realises the importance of defying social rules, leading to a much more empowered series of lives. Ursula stands up to Howie on her sixteenth birthday, hitting him on the cheek in a "very unladylike way" to prevent him from kissing her. Rather than shying away from this power, she refers to it as "a little triumph for her new femininity," as opposed to the prior version, in which being kissed is a womanhood win. Because of Ursula's actions, Howie does not attempt to rape her, and she does not get an abortion or face Sylvie's ostracism. When she travels to the typing college and organises a "revolt" against Mr. Carver, this time refusing to accept his sexual impropriety, her empowerment is further emphasised. Instead of marrying Derek, Ursula stays

alone in London and has an affair with Crighton, a married man (in other, future lives she takes up with another man named Ralph as well). When Pamela learns about her affair, she is concerned that the man is having an affair with Ursula, but she also admires Ursula for "becoming [her] own woman." Ursula isn't always so self-reliant—there are alternate versions of her life in which she marries and has a child, as well as one in which she accepts a kiss from a different, less pushy lad named Benjamin Cole. However, by learning to stand up for herself, she defies gender stereotypes and finds significantly more satisfaction in later lifetimes.

Conclusion

Life After Life is a fascinating and incredible book that one could enthusiastically suggest to a friend. The writing transitioned between various eras and demonstrated how things evolved, such as the changes between World Wars I and II. It is interesting to read about Ursula's youth and being able to connect it to others from that era. On the flip side it can be noted how slow the novel started out. It would get off track and talk about things that had nothing to do with the tale, which made the book drag on. Further, certain events (such as Ursula's birth) kept repeating themselves, which seemed superfluous. Despite these weaknesses, *Life After Life* is a fantastic novel that deserves to be more widely read.

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