

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

Summary

— an excruciating read

1. Intensely painful.
2. Mentally agonizing; very embarrassing, awkward, or tedious.

It isn't quite Greek tragedy, but it flirts with the conventions, as it does with farce.

in a Greek tragedy the implication is that the tragic (sad) outcome is an inevitable result of the key character's personal flaws. He or she was 'doomed' to disaster (death) from the outset.

There is a tragedy, someone might die or something bad happens.

- Zeus was considered the lord of the sky as well as the king of the gods.
- The gods ate ambrosia and drank nectar.
- They bled a substance called 'ichor'.

In theatre, a farce is a comedy which aims at entertaining the audience by means of unlikely, extravagant, and improbable situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humour of varying degrees of sophistication, which may include word play, and a fast-paced plot whose speed usually increases, culminating in an ending which often involves an elaborate chase scene. Farces are often highly incomprehensible plot-wise (due to the large number of plot twists and random events that often occur), but viewers are encouraged to try not to follow the plot in order to not become confused and overwhelmed. Farce is also characterized by physical humor, the use of deliberate absurdity or nonsense, and broadly stylized performances. Farces have been written for the stage and film.

It seems to explore the idea that Greek tragedy—as a philosophical underpinning for our lives—the purpose of our lives— may be all that's left for us in our post-modern world, and yet what thin gruel it is. (You are the cause of your own misfortune.) Even if you consort with the gods, even if your life unfolds in such a way that you ascend to almost godlike status, you are human and hence not immortal. Your end can/will be random and untimely (Chloe and Myles) with great pointless suffering (Anna) and you will be forgotten in merely a few generations. Nature is indifferent. Man is merely flotsam.

The Graces, or Charities as they were also called, were personifications of charm, grace, and beauty. Most often they were the daughters of Zeus and Eurynome.

Artistic creations/achievement may offer a glimmer of hope—Bonnard, great writing—(and this is a wonderfully written 'story') — (the identification of Max and Anna with Bonnard and his Marthe p114)

Professional critical appreciation of the arts does not, ... but amateur appreciation and understanding is a comfort. — The role of artistic activity in creating meaning in life.

It is also excruciating because the first person narrator, Max Morden is so complicated. On the one hand he is self-effacing to the point of severe self-deprecation:

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

[P56...Or better say, there is part of me still that is the kind of boy that I was then. **A little brute, in other words, with a filthy mind.** As if there were any other sort. We never grow up. I never did, anyway.]

["There's no need to **show off**, you know," she said crossly. Before I could reply—and what would I have said, anyway, since she was right—"]

[P130 I AM WELL AWARE OF WHAT I EXPECTED, WHAT I EXPECT, OF MY DAUGHTER, AND OF THE SELFISHNESS AND PATHOS OF THAT EXPECTATION. MUCH IS DEMANDED OF THE DILETTANTE'S OFFSPRING. SHE WILL DO WHAT I COULD NOT, AND BE A GREAT SCHOLAR, IF I HAVE ANY SAY IN THE MATTER, AND I HAVE. HER MOTHER LEFT HER SOME MONEY, BUT NOT ENOUGH. **I AM THE BIG FAT GOOSE, AND COSTIVE WITH THE GOLDEN EGGS.**]

[P148 Have I spoken of already of my drinking? **I drink like a fish.**]

[P153And what was it that she [Bun] saw? In my life it never troubled me to be kept by a rich, or richish, wife. I was born to be a **dilettante**, all that was lacking was the means, until I met Anna. **Nor am I concerned particularly about the provenance of Anna's money**, which was first Charlie Weiss's and is now mine, or how much or what kind of heavy machinery Charlie had to buy and sell in the making of it. What is money after all? Almost nothing, when one has a sufficiency of it...But come now, Max, come now. I will not deny it, **I was always ashamed of my origins**, and even still it requires only an arch glance or a condescending word from the likes of Bun to set me quivering inwardly in indignation and hot resentment. From the start I was bent of bettering myself.]

and his fears are the universal ones:

[And yet people do go, do vanish. That is the greater mystery; the greatest. I too could go, oh, yes, at a moment's notice I could go and be as though I had not been, except that the long habit of living indisposeth me for dying, as Doctor Browne has it."]

[She trained her camera on a fresh-faced hopeful but the pictures she produced were the mugshots of a raddled old confidence trickster. Exposed, yes, that is the word, too. P129]

as are his challenges:

[And now it was over, and something else had begun, for me, which was the delicate business of being the survivor. P109].

[I anticipate an apotheosis of some kind, some grand climacteric. I am not speaking here of a posthumous transfiguration. I do not entertain the possibility of an afterlife, or any deity capable of offering it. Given the world that he created, it would be an impiety against God to believe in him. No, what I am looking forward to is a moment of earthly expression. That is it, that is it exactly: I shall be expressed, totally. I shall be delivered, like a noble closing speech. I shall be, in a word, said. **Has this not always been my aim, is this not, indeed, the secret aim of all of us, to be no longer flesh but transformed utterly into the gossamer of unsuffering spirit?**]

On the other had he is self-aggrandizing, coolly critical of others, not likeable—to me. But his level of self-awareness and his skilful observation and conveyance in words of so many details of

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

life is compelling — as is his unrequited search for a 'mother', (except perhaps in his final reconciliation with Claire — I must pack up and leave the Cedars forthwith and let her take me home...where she will care for me...What am I to do? How am I to resist?...Oh , yes, life is pregnant with possibilities. P192)

—and his unrequited search for himself:

[p159 Anna is lodged in me like a knife and yet I am beginning to forget her. Already the image of her...is fraying...I have come to realize how little I knew her, I mean how shallowly I knew her, how ineptly. I do not blame myself for this. Perhaps I should. Was I too lazy, too inattentive, too self-absorbed? Yes, all of those things, and yet I cannot think it is a matter of blame, this forgetting, this not-having-known. I fancy, rather, that I expected too much, in the way of knowing. I know so little of myself, how should I think to know another?...But wait, no, that is not it. I am being disingenuous—for a change, says you, yes yes. The truth is, we did not wish to know each other. More, what we wished was exactly that, not to know each other. ...what I found in Anna from the first was a way of fulfilling the fantasy of myself.]

[p160-161 The question I am left with now, anyway, is precisely the question of knowing. Who, if not ourselves, were we? ...was I? The philosophers tell us that we are defined and have our being through others. Is a rose red in the dark?...Who was to know me, if not Anna? Who was to know Anna, if not I? Absurd questions. ...Anyway, where are the paragons of authenticity against whom my concocted self might be measured? In those final bathroom paintings that Bonnard did of the septuagenarian Marthe he was still depicting her as the teenager he had thought she was then he first met her. Why should I demand more veracity of vision of myself than of a great and tragic artist? We did our best, Anna and I. We forgave each other for all that we were not. What more could be expected in this vale of torments and tears? ...Yet for all that, I cannot rid myself of the conviction that we missed something, that I missed something, only I do not know what it might have been.] **Unconditional love**

We are asked as readers to be his confessor: to hear his confession, to sympathize with his dilemma—the repeated loss of his various 'mothers', and to forgive him for his ironic detachment. This forces the reader to reflect on the 'modern' meaning of forgiveness now that 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' no longer sets the example. (Is forgiveness mere forgetting that drains away all animosity?)

I don't understand the metaphoric use of the sea or if I do understand it—the great abyss—I am frightened by it.

I found this an excruciating read because it offers little or no comfort respecting the great mysteries and questions about life and our purpose and our chance for salvation, except perhaps the motivation to further explore Bonnard and the 'eternal' gifts inherent in his work.

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

Characters (in order of meeting)

'the Cedars' – a house

Miss Rose Vavasour

Mr. Carlo Grace

– “he was the one who appeared to be in command over us all, a laughing deity, the Poseidon of our summer, at whose beck our little world arranged itself obediently into its acts and portions. P90

Chloe Grace

Narrator's father — “My father used to whistle like that, am I turning into him?”

[She could not bring herself to speak his name; he was Gentleman Jim, or His Lordship, or, when she was in one of her rages or had taken too much sherry, Phil the Flute-player, or even Fart-arse the Fiddler. P147]

Colonel Blunden

Ballymore – the town

Ballyless – the village

Mrs. Constance (Connie) Grace

Myles Grace

– had webbed toes – pink and translucent ... the marks of a godling, sure as heaven. P45
– Was he mute or silent, silent or mute?... Deep down [his parents] were both, I am sure, a little afraid of him. That is no wonder either. It must have been like living with an all too visible, all too tangible poltergeist.

Christy Duignan the dairyman

Deaf Colfer who earned his living selling salvaged golf balls

Mr. (not Doctor) Todd, the consultant

– his name is a riff on Sweeney Todd – “Before the pit opened under our feet that day in Mr. Todd's rooms—which, come to think of it, did have about them something of the air of a sinisterly superior barber's shop— p68

Anna – Mrs. Morden

Max Morden – the narrator gives us his name for the first time on p10

Claire Morden – “Dear Clair, my sweet girl.” P33

Doctor French

Avril (overseer of the Duignan's farm)

The Golf Hotel – Billy the boy waiter – the man in the morning coat

Jerome – Claire's unsuitable suitor

Charlie Weiss (Anna's father)

— “Don't worry, it's not a Jew name” — “He was a crook, probably dangerous, and wholly, cheerfully immoral. Anna held him in fond and rueful regard.”

‘jug-eared Joe from the Field’ — a fringe like Chloe's was the certain sign of a girl who played with herself

Mr. Reckett, or Rickett, [perhaps it was Rockett?] the proprietor and projectionist of Rickett's Picture-House

Mrs. Strand—proprietor of the Strand Cafe

Serge – Anna's friend the fashion photographer

The Pecker Devereux – pronounced Devrecks

Vivienne Bun

— Miss Vavasour's friend – “an enormous person of indeterminate age” – “Vivienne's people own this house.”

Barragry – the publican

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

Plot — A journey

P 30 “The work I am supposed to be engaged in is a monograph on Bonnard, a modest project in which I have been mired for more years than I care to compute. A very great painter, in my estimation, about whom, as I long ago came to realize, I have nothing of any originality to say. Brides-in-the-Bath, Anna used to call him, with a cackle.”

p.117 The past, I mean the real past, matters less than we pretend. When Miss Vavasour left me in ...my room I...felt that I had been travelling for a long time, for years, and had at last arrived at the destination to where, all along, without knowing it, I had been bound, and where I must stay, it being, for now, the only possible place, the only possible refuge, for me.”

Structure

Books 1 and 11 – both roughly the same number of pages
first person narrative

Vocabulary

Recreant – cowardly

Costiveness – Slow, sluggish.

Flocculent – Having a fluffy or woolly appearance.

Louche world - Of questionable taste or morality; decadent

Casuistry – a resolving of specific cases of conscience, duty, or conduct through interpretation of ethical principles or religious doctrine 2: specious argument: **rationalization**

Knobkerries – African clubs used mainly in Southern and Eastern Africa. Typically they have a large knob at one end and can be used for throwing at animals in hunting or for clubbing an enemy's head. This knob is carved out of a tree trunk and the shaft is simply the branch that protruded from the tree at that point.

Assegais – a **pole weapon** used for throwing or hurling, usually a light **spear** or **javelin** made of wood and pointed with **iron**.

Anabasis –1. (Historical Terms) the march of Cyrus the Younger and his Greek mercenaries from Sardis to Cunaxa in Babylonia in 401 BC, described by Xenophon in his Anabasis Compare

katabasis 2. any military expedition, esp one from the coast to the interior

Nonplussed – at a loss as to what to think, say, or do; bewildered

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

Quotable Quotes

P9 It was said there was a church submerged in the sandy sea bed down there, intact, with bell tower and bell, that once had stood on a headland that was gone too, brought toppling into the roiling waves one immemorial night of tempest and awful flood.

P19 Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of Ballyless... and the Graces..., I cannot think why and it was as if I had stepped suddenly out of the dark into a splash of pale, salt-washed sunlight. It endured only a minute, less than a minute, that **happy lightsomeness**, but it told me what to do, and where I must go."

P45 Before, I saw myself as something of a buccaneer, facing all-comers with a cutlass in my teeth, but now I am compelled to acknowledge that this was a delusion. **To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow down into a place of wombly warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky's indifferent gaze and the harsh air's damagings.** That is why the past is just such a retreat for me. I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off **the cold present and the colder future**. And yet, what existence, really, does it have, the past? After all, it is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that. And yet.

P50 That is something I have always found with women, wait long enough and one will have one's way.

P51 Before Anna's illness I had held my physical self in no more than fond disgust, as most people do ... However when Anna's body betrayed her and she became afraid of it and its alien possibilities, I developed, by a mysterious process of transference, a crawling repugnance of my own flesh.

P53 What a little vessel of sadness we are, sailing in this muffled silence through the autumn dark.

p69 Are not the majority of men disappointed with their lot, languishing in quiet desperation in their chains?"

p72 Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it.

p 87 We carry the dead with us only until we die too, and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on into the unimaginable generations.... True, there will be something of us that will remain, a fading photograph, a lock of hair...yet none of this will be us, what we are and were, but only the dust of the dead.

P105 "Patient," Anna said to me one day towards the end, "that is an odd word. I must say, I don't feel patient at all."

P 115 "Look at you, poor Max," she said to me one day, "having to watch your words and be nice all the time." ... "What do you mean," I said, "having to be nice?" ... "You are not even allowed to hate me a little any more," she said, "like you used to." ... "Don't look so worried," she said. "I hated you, too, a little. We were human beings, after all."

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's

P118 A thing that always struck me was the contrast between nest and egg, I mean the contingency of the former, no matter how well or even beautifully it was fashioned, and the latter's completedness, its pristine fullness. Before it is a beginning an egg is an absolute end. It is the very definition of self-containment.

P136 (Anna's photographs) "They are my dossier," she said. "My indictment." "Your indictment?" I said helplessly, feeling an obscure panic, "Of what?" She shrugged. "Oh, everything," she said, mildly. "Everything."

LEM Notes for Best Book Club reading: **The Sea, John Banville**
Knopf, New York: 2005

8

Meeting: Feb 09, 2012 — 7:30 pm @ Cathie's