

Evening Class Short Guide

Evening Class by Maeve Binchy

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Characters

The signature style of a Binchy novel is a large cast of often eccentric characters.

Because she chooses to tell the stories of her focal characters one at a time in this novel, readers are given detailed glimpses into their backgrounds and personalities.

Binchy sculpts them with fine features.

Even the more minor characters, however, are painted in a trompe l'oeil style that gives them a three-dimensional quality. Neither Nell Dunne nor her daughter Brigid is a focal character; yet Binchy places them in a scene that reveals much about the state of their souls and underscores the apathy of the household: Mrs. Dunne had her paperback folded back on itself, as she so often had. She gave the impression of someone waiting in an airport rather than being in the center of her own home.

Brigid as usual was eating nothing officially but pulling little bits off the edge of the dish and taking bread and butter to mop up a bit of juice that spilled, and in the end eating more than if she had been able to take a sensible portion.

Bill reveals his sad home life to Lizzie in a single sentence: "My mother tells me she's worn out pouring tinned sauce over the frozen chicken." That of Kathy and Fran is revealed just as succinctly: "Mam had gone to Bingo, Dad was at the pub."

Tony O'Brien's lack of any home life is revealed in a scene in the school staff room where he is "mixing a headache seltzer in a glass."

Binchy's talent for drawing character is so deft that no one, however minor his or her role might be, is ever neglected.

When Aidan needs a private moment with Tony, he directs a boy named Declan to go to the classroom and have students open their Virgils. Binchy plays out the conflict between the two teachers, but a few pages later, she returns and with a few quick strokes draws a face on the bit-player and sketches a profile of his classmates: Declan spoke in low tones. "I think they were arm-wrestling," he said. "They were purple in the face, both of them, and Mr. Dunne spoke as if there was a knife held to his back." They looked at him, roundfaced.

Declan was not a boy with much imagination, it must be true.

They got out their Virgils obediently.

They didn't study them or translate them or anything, that had not been part of the instructions

Binchy's talent for drawing lifelike characters is the hallmark of her fiction.



Social Concerns

This novel centers on people brought together by an evening class in Italian at Dublin's bleak and shabby Mountainview School. The outward condition of the school serves as a metaphor for the inner lives of the characters. All are in some way weather-beaten and in need of refurbishment.

Like Maeve Binchy's other novels, *Evening Class* is set in Ireland. Unlike her other novels, the time setting is the 1990s, and there is a relaxation of Catholicism's hold. Binchy's young female characters speak openly about birth control and family planning, and divorce is now an option. These changes in the laws of the Irish Republic affect several characters, while evolutions in social values influence others.

The first eight sections of the novel focus on the individual stories of the major characters. Section one centers on Aidan Dunne, the stodgy, forty-eight-year-old Latin teacher at Mountainview who finds himself passed over for the principalship in favor of the livelier, tougher Tony O'Brien. Aidan has always been a meticulous teacher: He knows his students' names, is a paragon of preparedness, and serves as a role-model by being a good family man. Tony, by contrast, is a womanizer, a heavy smoker, and comes to his geography classes each day prepared with only a hangover and a charming smile. Yet the school board feels that Tony can move the school forward and is the right man for the future. The disappointed Aidan feels betrayed by changing values: "Someone moved the goalposts about what was acceptable and what was not, and they hadn't consulted [him] first."

Aidan's dining room represents his other disappointment in life. His wife Nell works nights as a cashier in a fashionable restaurant. Daughters Grania, 21, and Brigid, 19, spend evenings dating and socializing. The unused dining room is the void left by changes in the family unit. Aidan considers refurbishing the room as a study and a place to display boxed-up memorabilia from a youthful visit to Italy. But it is not until fortune awards him a "booby-prize" as Director of evening classes at Mountainview that he seriously considers making the necessary alterations.

The spur to create the first evening class is Nora O'Donoghue, who returns to her native Dublin after a twenty-year stay in Sicily. Now known simply as "Signora," she feels like an alien in Ireland.

Like Aidan, Signora's life has shifted its center. As a youth, she had followed the man she passionately loved to Sicily and had scandalized her family. Despite Mario's prearranged marriage to another woman, Nora stayed on and earned a simple living sewing and guiding English-language tours so she could be near her beloved. She watched his marriage, the baptisms of his children, and other events in his life through a windowpane.

Now, at nearly forty, Signora has neither a surrogate nor a real family. Mario's widow politely asks Signora to leave Sicily after he dies in a car accident. And when she



returns to Dublin, Mrs. O'Donoghue treats her prodigal daughter "as if she had died already." Teaching Italian classes at night is a form of resurrection for Signora.

Bill Burke joins the class because his future poses a problem. His parents are elderly, and he faces the burden of caring for an older sister whose mental age will always be eight years old. He is also attracted to Lizzie Duffy, a flighty spendthrift whose personality is further complicated by family insecurities. Both women need a safe and solid life. Learning Italian is Bill's way to increase his value at the bank where he works with Grania Dunne. He hopes a second language will insure his promotion so that he can properly support the women he loves.

Although Kathy believes that she is Fran's sister, Fran gave birth to the girl when she was exactly Kathy's age. Fran works in a grocery store to provide the fees for Mountainview so her daughter will earn the Leaving Certificate she never earned for herself. But the teachers tell Fran that Kathy takes her work too seriously and fears failure; she needs a distraction that will be fun. Italian classes and the hope of a trip to Italy one day seem to be the perfect prescription.

Lou Lynch unwittingly did a favor for a mobster once and cannot get himself out of the system he stumbled into. The lure of enough money to buy a big engagement ring for Suzi Sullivan and make a down payment on a house keeps him tied to his outlaw family. But the solidity of being a respectable family man tugs at him, too. Lou is forced to join the Italian class because the mob needs a safe place to transfer illegal goods two evenings a week. The remote Mountainview annex with its increased traffic on Italian class nights provides it.

Connie's mother nurtured her on low-fat spread and no desserts so that she would attract the right husband. Let down by her father, who died when she was young and left her mother an inheritance of gambling debts, Connie never learned to trust men. When she marries Harry Kane, Connie discovers she is frigid. She also discovers that Harry is involved in shady business dealings and has scammed many honest people, including her former boyfriend, Jacko.

Connie joins the evening class because it is held in the working-class neighborhood where Jacko lives. Now divorced from Harry, Connie hopes for a second chance at real love.

Laddy was born of rape and raised on violence. In the Ireland where he was conceived, his mother had only three choices: disgrace, disappearance, or marriage. By choosing marriage, Rose "joined the ranks of women who accept violence because it's easier than standing up to it."

Because Laddy is intellectually disadvantaged, he can hope for no better job than that of hotel porter. Because he is scrupulously honest, he returns lost money to a rich Italian guest one day. His reward is a modest tip and an offhand invitation to come to Italy and visit sometime. So Laddy naively registers for the evening class.

Unlike the other characters, Fiona represents no important social concern.



Nor is she a member of the evening class.

She is the only character whose identity is never completed with a surname. Binchy humorously draws her as a person with "no opinions, no views" who is unable to make even the simplest decision. Fiona's function is to bring various characters and plot strands together so that Binchy can resolve them in the novel's final section, the voyage to Italy. There, relationships begin, end or are cemented, and characters create futures for themselves.



Techniques

Evening Class is divided into nine sections. The first eight, "Aidan," "Signora," "Bill," "Kathy," "Lou," "Connie," "Laddy," and "Fiona" each focus on the background of one character and what leads the person to join the "Viaggio" to Italy, which is the tide of the novel's final section. Binchy breaks each section into a series of short scenes, letting her third-person omniscient narrator tell the story in a string of dissolves, much the way a motion picture does. Each segment also introduces other characters who become intertwined with the focal characters, so that the story incrementally builds a community of people who all have some relationship to the evening class and to each other.

For example, in the first section, the reader learns that Grania Dunne covers the nights she spends with Tony O'Brien by telling her parents that she is staying with Fiona. It is not until section eight, however, that Fiona becomes more than a mere name. Barry (who is introduced in section four as one of Fran's co-workers and makes a cameo appearance in section five as one of Lou's friends) is a background character until he meets Fiona in the hospital coffee shop where she works. Barry and Fiona eventually double date with Lou and Suzi. And as Fiona befriends Barry's mother during her recovery from a suicide attempt, she discovers the cause of the woman's despair: Barry's father is having an affair with Aidan's wife. It is Fiona's connection to the Dunne family that finally closes the circle that Binchy has been drawing since the story's beginning.

In "Viaggio," the plot's loose ends are resolved. Lou and Suzi's wedding has already taken place, Tony and Grania and Bill and Lizzie begin to make plans, Barry and Fiona take a step toward intimacy, romance looms likely for Fran, and Aidan demands a divorce from Nell. Since not all Binchy novels end happily or tightly, the threat Siobhan Casey poses to Connie still hangs like a loose thread on the novel's hem. But this lack of fine finishing is a minor flaw in its total fabric.

Readers find Binchy's techniques as addicting as television viewers find soap operas or prime-time serial dramas. While the pace of *Evening Class* moves slowly and sometimes repetitiously (especially when plot details the reader already knows affect a new character), Binchy pulls lives together in compelling ways.

The degrees of separation between the characters narrow, much the way they often do in serial dramas. As Barry tells Fiona toward the end of the novel, "It's a small world all right."

Themes

Binchy assembles a cast of characters who have been dealt bad hands, made bad discards, foolishly upped antes, and bluffed or have otherwise lost in life's poker game. Each character has a dream of how life can be better. But, as Aidan states it, the goalposts are always moving.

It is images of the ordinary and repeated images of the familiar that often frustrate any new plays on the field. For example, as Connie drops off Fran and Kathy after class one night, Fran sees "her mother putting out the dustbin, a cigarette still in her mouth despite the rain that would fall on it and make it soggy, the same scuffed slippers and sloppy housecoat that she wore all the time." Seeing this familiar picture of her mother as she sits in Connie's fine car makes Fran feel ashamed, and then "ashamed of herself for feeling ashamed of her mother."

When Fran and the others join Signora's evening class, they are christened with Italianized names. This metaphoric baptism gives them new identities and the opportunity for a new life. While Binchy's themes touch on the religious, her characters' epiphanies (such as Fran's) are always clothed in images of the ordinary world.

As the characters role-play ordering food in an Italian restaurant or explaining to an Italian doctor which parts of their bodies hurt, they begin to see the familiar in a new light. Thinking in a new language produces new insights. Aidan and Connie experience epiphanies about their spouses and opt for divorce; Bill begins to see Olive less as a burden and more as an extension of the protective love he feels for Suzi; Lou redefines success as failure; Kathy eases the burden on her mother by searching for her real father; Fiona becomes decisive and alters more lives than just her own; Laddy blurs distinctions between fantasy and reality.

All create new ways of defining and naming their worlds and make brave moves to change. The themes of renewal and human evolution are linked to the human capacity to dream. This is expressed very simply by Brigid when she says: "If more people had the guts to go after what they want, the world would be a better place."

Adaptations

Kate Binchy narrates the novel on the Bantam audio cassette version (1996).

Key Questions

Binchy's reviewers often refer to her books as "fairy tales" or "melodramas."

While these terms can have negative connotations (implying simplistic plots and stereotyped characters), the same reviewers often credit Binchy with holding a mirror up to human nature. Try to resolve this apparent contradiction between the belittled genres from which Binchy borrows and her best-selling status as you discuss *Evening Class*.

1. In an interview with *Hibernia* magazine, Binchy dismissed the fairytale nature of her stories by saying: "I don't have ugly ducklings turning into swans in my stories. I have ugly ducklings turning into confident ducks." How does she use the following characters to illustrate her principle? Are there other characters whose development follows this pattern?

- | | |
|----|-------------|
| a. | Signora |
| b. | Lou |
| c. | Fiona |
| d. | Kathy |
| e. | Fran |
| f. | Brigid |
| g. | Bill |
| h. | Tony |
| i. | Paul Malone |

1. What do all the focal characters have in common, despite their diverse lives?

What comment does Binchy make about human nature by suggesting these similarities?

2. Some of the conflict reviewers argue is melodrama happens when "confident ducks" turn "ugly." How do the following characters illustrate this aspect of Binchy's philosophy? Are there other characters who fit this pattern?

a. Nell Dunne b. Stephen Casey c. Harry Kane d. Shay Neil e. Dan Healy f. "Robin" 4. Aidan, Signora and Connie have built their lives around false ideas of fulfillment. What commentary do these characters make about decisions fashioned during youth?

5. Like a Shakespearian comedy, Binchy novels generally unite several couples in marriage or betrothal and offer as role-models (to either emulate or ignore) the established marriages of several others. Like Shakespeare's pairings, some of Binchy's may be ill-fated. Speculate about how the following couples might spend their next Valentine's Day:



- a. Aidan and Signora
- b. Tony and Grania
- c. Bill and Lizzie
- d. Lou and Suzi
- e. Barry and Fiona
- f. Ken and Fran
- g. Dan and Nessa
- h. Jacko and Connie
- i. Harry and Siobhan
- j. Paul and Marianne Hayes Malone

6. Binchy creates several dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships in the novel. What is the barrier that prevents the mother from fully loving or caring for her daughter in each of the following relationships? How does the daughter deal with that barrier? a. Nell Dunne and Grania, Brigid b. Mrs. O'Donoghue and Signora c. Mrs. Sullivan and Suzi d. Mrs. Duffy and Lizzie e. Fran and Kathy f. Mrs. Clarke and Fran g. Mrs. O'Connor and Connie h. Fiona's mother and Fiona

7. Binchy calls herself a "collapsed Catholic." She maintains that the gospel of her fiction is: "If you make your own happiness, you will be happy." How does Binchy's gospel differ from institutionalized religion? Are there ways in which it is the same? Can *Evening Class* be regarded as a religious novel?

8. Read one of Binchy's novels set in a more restricted Irish society (*Circle of Friends*, *Echoes*, *The Glass Lake*). What similarities and differences in social conventions, characters and themes exist between that novel and *Evening Class*?

Literary Precedents

Binchy's fiction is comic in the most classic sense of the word. Her foibled and flawed characters persist in spite of themselves. In this respect, her vision resembles the worlds William Shakespeare created in his comedies. Plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1596) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (c. 1598) end with the celebration of multiple pairings.

Plots complicated by mistaken identities and mix-ups end happily, but ambiguously. Myths, magic potions and other forms of *deus ex machina* are often necessary to resolve the plot. Both Shakespeare and Binchy leave the audience feeling that the ending is simply the beginning of another comedy of errors, and that comedy can become tragedy when no merciful deity descends to iron out plot difficulties.

In *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962), literary scholar Vivian Mercier traces what he calls "the prevalence of the comic spirit in Anglo-Irish literature of the twentieth century." Mercier begins with Irish Gaelic mythology and proceeds to trace the varieties of the comic spirit through many mainstream Irish writers. The best-selling Binchy also deserves her place as a descendant on the Irish family tree of comic tradition. Perhaps the most accurate branch on which to perch her is that which stems from the *seanachai* [SHAN-akey], the ancient storytellers renowned for their capacity to tell tall tales, spin yarns, and keep an audience entertained in mesmerizing style. Binchy effectively translates this Irish tradition of oral storytelling into the written word.

Related Titles

Evening Class stands alone as the only Binchy novel set in contemporary Ireland. The division of the story into segments that each deal with one focal character and then culminate in a concluding chapter is similar to the storytelling technique she uses in *The Copper Beech* (1993; see separate entry), a series of separate short stories that are connected by common characters and cumulatively form a novel.

The theme of change in human lives and growth in human personalities pervades many of Binchy's works. It is particularly prevalent in four novels that focus on a female protagonist in late childhood, and then follow her maturation process through early womanhood.

Light A Penny Candle (1982), *Echoes* (1987), *Circle of Friends* (1990; see separate entry), and *The Glass Lake* (1995; see separate entry) all deal with the process of unfolding and blooming. This evolutionary theme also pervades every story in the collection *This Year It Will Be Different* (1996; see separate entry). Not growing, refusing to change, or constantly looking backwards signals extinction in the world of Binchy's fiction. And while characters who make the choice to develop often experience severe growing pains, stretch marks or even scars, the power of dreams and hope to transform ordinary lives is a distinguishing feature of Binchy's fiction.

That for some characters, dreams are elusive or a prelude to frustration is what unites readers and critics in their judgment that her fiction has the aura of reality.

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