The Glass Lake Short Guide

The Glass Lake by Maeve Binchy

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

The major characters are used to drive the plot and delineate the themes and social concerns. The signature style of a Maeve Binchy novel, however, is a large cast of often eccentric players, and no character (however minor) is ever neglected. Binchy's particular talent is the ability to portray each of them with such vivid detail that readers feel they know each one as intimately as they do the members of their own family. Binchy's major character creations are drawn through careful description and the provision of detailed histories. But Binchy is often best when she reveals her more minor characters through other means.

Their actions and dialogue often tell more about them than their descriptions.

At the funeral for the body presumed to be Helen McMahon's, Binchy uses a camera eye to pan the assembled crowd, then zooms in on a family portrait which demonstrates that one tightly crafted word picture can reveal more than chapters full of exposition. "The Sullivans stood together," Binchy writes. "Kathleen and her two sons. Stevie was busy catching the eye of Deirdre Hanley from the drapery shop. Kathleen glared at him.

A church was not the place to make eyes at a girl. A funeral was not the time. Michael was kicking the front of his shoe trying to get some of the loose bits off.

She gave him a sharp jab to get him to stop."

The often stuffy Lilian Kelly reveals a more human and humorous side of herself in a very short passage of dialogue concerning the frustrations of raising a teenage daughter.

Maura was very reassuring to her sister Lilian Kelly.

They're all terrible between thirteen and sixteen. It's their glands . . .

it's to do with nature."

"Nobody has a nature like Clio. I'll swing for her before it's over. I really will."

"No, no. I see it everywhere. It's their bodies, you see. They're all ready to breed and raise families, but society won't let them, so it's a very confused time . . ."

"All we need is for them to be breeding all around us. That's the only thing she hasn't done yet."

Even characters who might remain stereotypes in the hands of other authors are injected with individuality by Binchy's pen. Mother Bernard, the staunch Mother Superior

of the local girls' school, and Brother Healy, the no-nonsense head of the school for boys, are humanized by their common love of gossip.

Social Concerns

The novel, The Glass Lake, is set in the small, mythical Irish town of Lough Glass in 1952, a time when both the town and the people in it are poised on the verge of social change. The story continues through the end of the decade and traces the rapid growth and change of the entire town. However, the plot focuses most tightly on the personal growth and change of Helen McMahon and her daughter Kit.

As the story opens, Kit McMahon is twelve and just beginning to view her parents and other adults with a critical eye. She is sensitive when her friend Clio Kelly (the daughter of the local doctor) asks why Kit's parents sleep in separate rooms and why her mother prefers solitary walks along the lake shore to the luncheons and social outings that occupy Mrs. Kelly. Kit is also becoming aware that although her mother performs domestic chores flawlessly, she has no real interest in the occupants of her home.

After dinner, Helen is solitary and apart from the family. Kit has often returned from school to find her mother alone and crying. The awareness that her mother is different makes the girl uncomfortable. Kit wishes that Helen would conform to society's idea of what a mother should be. In Lough Glass, that ideal is represented by Mrs. Kelly.

Kit herself is under great pressure to conform. At school, the nuns have fixed ideas about how a lady-in-the-making should behave. Beyond the nuns, there is the Irish educational system that issues each student a Leaving Certificate at the end of secondary schooling. This certificate determines an individual's future options by opening or closing the door to further educational opportunities.

Kit's dilemmas are paralleled by Helen McMahon, who feels the constrictions of the Irish status quo even more tightly than her daughter. Helen married Martin McMahon, the respectable chemist (pharmacist) of Lough Glass, after Louis Gray, the man she loved passionately, chose to marry a rich woman. Bound by society's definition of what a wife should be, Martin believes that Helen's social status would be demeaned by assisting him in the pharmacy or performing any work outside the home. When Helen has the opportunity for a second chance with Louis, she feels the constrictions of the Catholic Church (which did not redefine its position on annulment until the late 1960s) and the laws of the Irish Republic (which did not recognize divorce until the mid-1990s). Since she cannot easily divorce and remarry, escaping with Louis to England one stormy night seems to be the only alternative Helen has.

The note of explanation Helen leaves behind is burned unopened by Kit. Assuming that her mother's unhappiness led her to drown herself in Lough Glass, Kit fears the town's censure. Even more fearsome to the young girl is the Catholic Church's proscription that a suicide cannot be buried in consecrated ground. Her mother would be different in death as well as in life. So a month later, when a fish-nibbled female body is retrieved from the Lough, Helen's accidental death is the explanation that Martin McMahon and his son Emmet are ready to accept.

Both Kit and the townspeople, however, continue to ruminate on the probability that the misfit Helen took her own life.

This plot twist opens another set of social concerns. After fleeing to London with Louis and miscarrying his baby, Helen redefines herself by altering her self-concept. First she accepts the new identity given to her by Louis and easily tailors herself to his rechristening of her as "Lena." But as her romance with Louis fades, Helen/ Lena's self-confidence grows. She comes to realize that a woman has options other than marriage for self-definition and begins to construct a new identity by building a career in an employment agency.

As Kit grows and matures, her vision also broadens to opportunities beyond the confines of Lough Glass. Kit attends a hotel management school in Dublin and learns how to become an efficient businesswoman. In addition, she learns how to become her own person and develops a strong identity, refusing to measure her worth based solely on her appeal to the opposite sex. Kit consistently rejects the attentions of Philip O'Brien, who hopes she will marry him and return to Lough Glass to run the local hotel: her dream is to own and manage her own hotel. Kit also learns how to manipulate the law to her own advantage, and turns an outdated law regarding the impugnment of a woman's chastity to her financial advantage. Her short learning curve offers Kit an independence her mother lacked at the same age. Although Kit does finally commit to a relationship with Stevie Sullivan, a hometown male, that relationship (unlike the one between Helen and Louis) is established on Kit's terms rather than Stevie's.

As the focal characters grow and change, so does the country they inhabit.

The O'Brien hotel in Lough Glass serves as a metaphor for the beginnings of economic change in Ireland. When the townspeople support the idea to have a New Year's Eve ball at the hotel instead of at the local golf club, many characters come alive with enterprising ideas about how to accommodate and entertain a clientele they have never targeted before.

Kit and Philip's course of study in hotel management helps steer the event to its final success. The motifs of change, refurbishment and retailoring all indicate new beginnings. They serve as metaphors for the lives of the characters and the setting in which they are placed. These plot strands are braided to historical times during which Ireland as a nation matured and found its place in the world economy. The novel becomes a microcosm of the comedies and tragedies of rapid growth and social change.

Techniques

Binchy writes long chapters that are broken by numerous dissolves, telling her story in much the way a motion picture does. After the first two chapters, the story's third-person omniscient narrator focuses alternately on Helen's story and then on Kit's. Each chapter is composed of scenes that vary in length. This technique allows Binchy to constandy bring her minor characters back on stage, developing their own story lines, which often parallel the main story line. The techniques help contribute to the development of character, which is Binchy's forte. They also assist in creating the very realistic aura of life in a small town, where everyone knows everyone else's business and reacts to it. Readers find Binchy novels as addicting as television viewers find soap operas or prime- time serial dramas. While the pace of the story moves slowly, the lives of separate characters are often pulled together in compelling ways. The degrees of separation between them narrow, much the way they often do in serial dramas.

The structural technique of The Glass Lake complements its themes. The story begins in October, when the light shortens and humanity lives in increasing darkness. The last chapter occurs seven years later in the month of June, a time of lengthening light, symbolic of Kit's increasing vision. The characters thus experience a seasonal movement through darkness into a lengthening light.

Themes

Binchy orchestrates themes much the way a composer orchestrates a symphony. Within the first few pages of the novel, she tells the reader that Lough Glass translates as "the green lake," but people call it "the glass lake" because there are times when it resembles a mirror. Town folklore claims that those who look into the lake at sunset on St. Agnes' Eve will see the future. Realists claim that the lake reveals nothing "except reflections of themselves and each other."

This allusion to John Keats's poem "The Eve of St. Agnes" (1819) sets up the theme of ideal romance that the novel explores. Layered within and around the social concerns, this theme is examined in the lives of several characters. Each character creates a variation or repetition of the general theme.

Helen McMahon abandons a comfortable but loveless marriage to pursue a man who discarded her thirteen years earlier for the material comforts offered by marriage to a rich woman. As the passion of this romance fades, Helen is left with the guilt of abandoning a loving husband and two children. Eventually she finds a means other than marriage to define herself. Yet in a separate plot strand, Helen's London landlady, Ivy Brown, contracts a second marriage with the man she has always longed for, and she finds real happiness.

Binchy's explorations of romantic love undercut the notion that there is a single ideal. Kit rejects a loveless but safe relationship with Philip O'Brien. She finally commits to an intimate relationship with Stevie Sullivan, a hometown boy with a philandering reputation that mirrors Louis Gray's. Yet at the novel's end, the reader is led to believe that Kit's fate will not mirror her mother's. Kit initiates contact with Stevie to distract him from the beautiful Anna Kelly, the girl her brother Emmet fancies. The poetic Emmet turns out to be a more suitable match for Anna than the womanizing Stevie. The romantic choices of Emmet and Kit mirror the failed marriage of their parents, but with important differences.

Anna longs for the sexually suave Stevie, but settles for the more companionable Emmet. Kit rejects the safety and comfort Philip O'Brien offers, and finds a depth and loyalty in Stevie that belie his reputation. Simultaneously, Kit's relationship with her mother evolves from daughterly love into despicable hate, and then into a mature female friendship.

Louis Gray's marriage to the pregnant Mary Paula O'Connor, daughter of a major hotel tycoon, repeats two motifs that have characterized Gray's previous behavior. That this is Gray's third philandering is perhaps Binchy's way of suggesting that the behavior will not terminate—that it will keep mirroring itself.

Clio Kelly's hasty and necessary marriage represent yet another kind of marriage based on duty. Only Martin McMahon and his second wife Maura seem to have a romantic relationship that is nearly as flawless as the surface of Lough Glass and almost as

deep. They represent a mature friendship and devotion that transcends the other characters' follies. Theirs is a relationship clearly based on free and informed choice.

Helen and Sr. Madeleine are also depicted as mirror images of each other. Sr.

Madeleine joined a convent after a failed marriage. Unable to cope with the rules and demands of that life, she fled to a cottage on the shore of Lough Glass. Her hermit life and her attempts to shelter the wounded are mirror images of both Helen's rebellion and her ability to organize other's lives and heal all wounds but her own.

The metaphor of the mirror that threads its way in and out of the novel suggests a flaw in the human ability to distinguish appearance from reality. Not being able to distinguish the difference, or not acknowledging the difference once it is seen, determines the fate of the characters. The broad spectrum of humanity that Binchy brings on stage and the empathy for human frailty she exhibits are distinguishing features of her fiction.

Adaptations

Binchy reads The Glass Lake on four audio cassettes published by Bantam (1995).

Key Questions

While The Glass Lake soared to best seller lists shortiy after its release and remained there for several weeks, both critical and reader reactions were mixed.

Many felt that this was not Binchy's best novel. The story was faulted as repetitious, meandering, unbelievable, and hastily brought to a conclusion that left several loose ends. Yet most of the fault-finders were quick to admit that it was difficult for them to put the book down. Consider the concerns Binchy raises in this novel and her talents and weaknesses as a storyteller as you discuss the following: 1. Binchy constructs several romantic pairings in The Glass Lake that may or may not be permanent. How will the following couples celebrate their next Valentine's Day?

a.	Stevie and Kit
b.	Emmet and Anna
c.	Louis and Mary Paula
d.	Michael and Clio
e.	Ernest and Ivy
f.	Martin and Maura
g.	Peter and Lilian
h.	Mr. Millar and Jessie

2. Some readers may feel that Helen's transformation from unhappy housewife to successful and self-confident businesswoman lacks credibility. Discuss the ways you think Binchy prepares or fails to prepare the reader for Helen's metamorphosis.

3. Like waves on Lough Glass, many of the relationships in the novel are in a state of flux. What waves or stages do Kit and Clio go through in their friendship?

If there were a sequel, where do you think their friendship might stand?

4. Several readers objected to Helen's preoccupation with the ongoing life and development of Kit and her lack of concern for her son Emmet. Drawing upon what you know of the life experiences of women who have left their families, discuss the credibility of the strong motherdaughter bond and the weak mother-son bond the novel portrays.

5. Consider the curative power Sr. Madeleine has on Emmet, the transforming power Grace has on the clients of her hair salon and other touches of "the miraculous" that Binchy interjects into the story.

Do they interfere with the plot's credibility or are they part of its charm? What themes do these plot elements underscore?

6. Binchy's cinematic literary techniques are cause for both praise and criticism.

What is your reaction to her use of dissolves that allow multiple perspectives upon and reactions to the novel's events?

Discuss your reaction to her extensive use of minor characters.

7. Both critics and readers agree that Binchy's strongest suit is character rather than plot. There are times when Binchy suggests that a plot element will be important and then totally abandons its pursuit, as she does when Maura wears Helen's fur cape to the New Year's Eve party. What is your reaction to this instance of Binchy's apparent lack of plan for the plot of the novel? What other instances of plot neglect can you find? What loose ends does the resolution of the novel leave hanging?

How does this factor impact on your opinion of the novel?

8. Readers and critics alike agree that Binchy keenly paints the details of her setting. Board Failte (the Irish Tourist Board) has corroborated this by noting how many foreign visitors ask for directions to the mythical Irish villages inhabited by her characters. Test Binchy's descriptive power by sketching or creating a three-dimensional model of Lough Glass.

Literary Precedents

Maeve Binchy's fiction is comic in the most classic sense of the word. Her foibled and flawed characters persist in spite of themselves. And the resolutions of her novels tend to tinge the triumph of humanity with a bit of human error. In this respect, her vision resembles the worlds William Shakespeare created in his comedies. In plays such asA Midsummer Night's Dream (c. 1596) and Much Ado About Nothing (c. 1598) Shakespeare explored the human difficulty in distinguishing between appearance and reality. Their plots end happily, but ambiguously. Myth, mix-up, magic potions, and other forms of dens ex machina are often necessary to right the errors made by the characters.

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. While it would be premature and perhaps unfair to add Binchy to the all-male list Mercier examines, she does deserve 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.

Related Titles

Other Binchy novels that use a young girl as a focal character and maturation and the building of relationships as themes include Light a Penny Candle (1982), Echoes (1987), and Circle of Friends (1990; see separate entry). Each of these novels traces a female focal character from her late childhood years into early womanhood, when romance becomes an intriguing though often frustrating part of her maturation process. Heroines are sometimes left with dubious partners, or none at all.

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