Old Filth Study Guide

Old Filth by Jane Gardam

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Gardam, Jane. Old Filth. Abacus, 2004. Print.

Old Filth begins with a short ‘scene,’ in which four Benchers discuss an absent character by the name Old Filth (we later learn his name is actually Edward Feathers). We learn the Filth is an acronym—Failed In London Try Hong Kong—which describes this character’s career. The Benchers feel that Filth is an impressive man, but scoff at the idea of him being mysterious.

The next chapter shows us Filth himself, as an old man living in Dorset. He had a long and successful career as a lawyer in Hong Kong, but retired to Dorset with his wife Betty. His wife had died some years ago when Filth gained a new neighbor: his arch-nemesis from his days in Hong Kong, Terry Veneering. The two managed to ignore each other for two years before Filth got locked out of his house in the snow and was forced to pay him a visit. The two men had a surprisingly cordial visit before Veneering gave him an old key to Filth’s house that had been left behind, and so Filth was able to go home.

The novel then begins to alternate time periods, covering Filth’s childhood in some chapters (where he is largely referred to as “Eddie”) and Filth’s later life in Dorset (where he is referred to largely as “Filth”). The next chapter returns to the time of Filth’s birth in Kotakinakulu province in British-ruled Malaya (now Malaysia). A baby was born to Mrs. Feathers, the wife of Kotakinakulu’s British district officer. She named the baby Edward before she died. Auntie May, a Baptist missionary, delivered the baby back home to his father from the Port hospital at which he had been born. Alistair Feathers, the baby’s father, would not see his son, however, and so Eddie was raised by his wet-nurse’s then 12-year-old daughter Ada. After a very happy childhood amongst the Malayans, however, Eddie was ripped away from his home and sent to Wales for schooling. Filth recalls the boat ride over, where he got his first glimpse of British culture. The narrative picks up years later in Wales, when Eddie was taken away from his foster home where he had lived with his two cousins and brought to prep school.

The narrative returns once more to Dorset many years later, while Filth’s wife Betty was still alive. She had received a phone call from Terry Veneering, and we learn that the two had had an affair. Veneering was calling to say that his son had died, and the news affected Betty very deeply. Filth and Betty had had no children.

Back in Filth’s childhood, we visit the time after Eddie’s departure from Wales. Eddie went to prep school where he met his best friend, Pat Ingoldby, and Eddie subsequently became a close part of Pat’s family. It was an idyllic time for Eddie, but the onset of WWII casts an ominous tone upon his future. Years down the line, Betty thought of her past with Filth while planting her tulip bulbs. She hid the pearls Veneering gave her in the garden, thinking she would never get any closer to her husband now.

The onset of WWII brought much difficulty. Pat's older brother Jack was first to die, and it was due to this family tragedy that Eddie realized that he was still an outsider, not completely part of the family. Eddie took his Oxford entrance exams, and secured himself a place there after the war. On the way back from Oxford, Eddie learned from a newspaper that Pat had also died in the war.

Betty had died while planting her tulips. After her death, Filth was thrown into a kind of frenzy. Determined to find something of his wife, Filth went to visit Babs, his cousin who he had been with in Wales and who had known Betty. He found Babs in a state of half-madness, however, and quickly left. He then visited Claire, another cousin from Wales who had known Betty, and found her in much better shape. He stayed with her for a few days. Claire's son, Oliver, was set to make a trip to see his mother, but his partner Vanessa ended up coming at the last minute. Oliver took his mother to Cambridge, and Filth chatted with Vanessa, who was also a lawyer. Vanessa did not realize who Filth was, professionally, until after they had parted; Claire gave her some of Betty's old jewelry, which Filth had given to Claire. Vanessa and Oliver got married and named their first child after Filth.

Book II opens with another 'Scene,' in which Benchers once again discuss Filth. He is present, though hidden from them, this time. Once again, they discuss the idea that Filth's life had been very easy and boring.

Eddie's father, who had fought in WWI, had decided to evacuate Eddie from Britain during WWII even though Eddie was close to fighting age. Eddie unwillingly boarded a boat to Singapore, where he met a character called Albert Ross, a half-Chinese dwarf who was younger - yet seemingly wiser - than Eddie and very cunning. Eddie got sick on bananas in Africa, but made it alright until the boat had to turn around in Singapore due to the Japanese occupation there. Albert Ross got off the boat in Singapore.

In his advanced age, Filth took a trip to Malmesbury, where he had served in the war, and revisiting the physical location brought back memories of that time in his life. As a young man, Eddie had been very sick on the way back from Singapore, and had to be quarantined for a long time upon his return. Once he had gotten better, he joined the army and was placed in Queen Mary's guards in Malmesbury, where he became a favorite of the Queen and did very little fighting. When Filth returned as an old man, he sprained his ankle, though a kind girl and her grandmother gave him a nice tour of the place. Later, in his hotel, Filth believed himself to be having a heart attack, though it turned out to be only indigestion.

After the war, Eddie went to Oxford and passed the bar but found himself very disillusioned, working in a dingy office on cases that did not interest him or utilize his full potential. Albert Ross, however, soon came to the rescue and offered him a job in Hong Kong, thus beginning Filth's long and successful career.

Filth's 'heart attack' scared him, and so he decided he must confess the crime that had been haunting him his whole life. Babs and Claire's priest come to visit him, and Filth and Babs together tell the story of Wales, how they were abused for four years and then

murdered their abuser. Though they have been haunted by their actions, neither Babs nor Filth repent. With this, Filth felt himself freer, and planned one last journey back to Malaysia to revisit his roots. Stepping off the plane, Filth felt himself to be finally "Home." The next chapter is another 'scene,' wherein we learn that Filth died soon after stepping off the plane; his reputation amongst his colleagues is already diminishing, and his amazing story has died with him.

Book I: Scene: Inner Temple – The Donheads

Summary

The novel begins with a conversation between four court members—The Queen's Remembrancer, a Junior Judge, a Senior Judge, and The Common Sergeant—in the "Benchers' luncheon-room of the Inner Temple" (3). This first mini-chapter is titled "Scene: Inner Temple," and takes the form of a play dialogue introducing a missing fifth character, referred to variously as "Filth," "Old Filth," "Feathers." From this dialogue, the reader begins to form a picture of Filth: his wealth made practicing law in the East, his great looks, an interesting yet apparently straightforward past—"Child of the Raj, public school, Oxford, the Bar" (4). We learn that "Filth" is an acronym —"Failed In London Try Hong Kong"— which, we are told, was made up by this absent character.

In "The Donheads," the author introduces the man himself. The novel's third person narrator begins by describing Filth's appearance in great detail: Filth was meticulous, elegant, and entirely old-fashioned. The description continues, but never delves deeper than what is part of public perception. The narrator tells us, for instance that "his colleagues at the Bar called him Filth, "he was considered to be the source of the old joke," "it was said that he had fled the London Bar," and that "they said" he was "a modest man" (5). The third paragraph begins with "Filth in fact" (5), and proceeds to contest a great many of the ideas posited thus far about Filth's character. He was not modest, no great maker of jokes, did not go in for whims.

Filth had had incredible success as an advocate in Hong Kong but now, nearly 80 years old, he lived a quiet life in Dorset. His wife, Betty, had died, and he lived with only a couple of servants for company. Though people thought Filth and Betty would be ideally suited to retire in Hong Kong, the couple felt the city was no longer as welcoming to the British as it once was, and left.

A couple years after Betty's death, Filth was living alone at the Donheads. Filth often found himself talking to Betty, though she was gone; he had a feeling he was not alone in his house. Filth had spent a lifetime of willful forgetting: "'Otherwise,' he said, 'how could I function?' Facts, memories, the pain of life – of lives in chaos – have to be forgotten" (9). However, after his wife died, he began "to flick open shutters on the past that he had, as a sensible man with sensible and learned friends (he was a QC and had been a Judge), kept clamped down" (6).

One day, Filth learned from his cleaning lady that he had a new neighbor, another lawyer from Hong Kong. In the village shop, Filth learned that this colleague was Terry Veneering, "the only man in [Filth's] professional life, or come to that his private life, that Old Filth had ever detested" (10), and who Filth associated with some of the worst parts

of colonialism. The dislike had been mutual. At this point the novel's point of view, while still in third person, gains greater access to Filth's inner life.

Filth and Veneering managed to stay out of each other's way for two years after becoming neighbors. However, on the evening of Christmas Day, Filth found himself locked out of his home after going out to investigate a noise, wearing only slippers and a light sweater. Filth was forced to seek shelter from the heavy snow by paying Veneering a visit. Veneering, to Filth's surprise, was also alone.

The two men caught up over a tumbler of whiskey. Their conversation was polite; condolences were passed around, for Betty, for Veneering's wife Elsie, and Veneering's son who had died in the army. Filth would not tell Veneering that he had locked himself out of his house, choosing instead to pretend he had merely called on him to say hello. Veneering did not call him on it, but provided Filth with an old key to Filth's house, left by the previous tenants. To his surprise, Filth found himself inviting Veneering over for lunch the next day. Filth went home, but kept hearing voices in his empty house. He had a bath and went to bed.

Analysis

In "Scene: Inner Temple," Gardam introduces her main character indirectly by having her readers 'listen in' on a conversation about him. This builds suspense and intrigue for when readers meet Filth in the next chapter. Moreover, the character of Filth is built from the outside in: we must see how others perceive Filth before we are given access to the man himself.

The Senior Judge of "Scene: Inner Temple" scoffs at the idea of Filth being mysterious. By the first page of "The Donheads," however, Gardam has taught the reader to regard Filth's reputation with suspicion. The shift from Filth as he is perceived to "Filth in fact" in the third paragraph marks a tension that the author will continue to build throughout the novel. Gardam describes life as a lawyer as "an actor's life" (10), which may explain some of this discrepancy. The truth of the character of Filth becomes a puzzle the reader must solve.

In "The Donheads," Gardam also introduces the theme of memory. Filth, alone in his house, hears voices; it is as though he is surrounded by ghosts, his past merging forcefully with his present. The shutters on his past are beginning to flick open, and memories come spilling out. This gives us the premise for our story: Filth, now an old man, begins to remember his life, and the reader gets to come along for the ride. In a sense, Filth is also given the task of solving the puzzle of himself and his life.

The novel begins to suggest that Filth does not belong fully in Britain or the East; he is tied to the idea of colonialism, and occupies its liminal identity space. First of all, Filth's childhood and working years were spent in the East. In "Scene: Inner Temple" we are told that Filth was a Child of the Raj. "Raj" in this context refers to the British imperialist empire. Filth grew up in Malaya and worked in Hong Kong, a city he was quite fond of;

he feels “a feeling of nearness to the Oriental mind” (6), keeps a life-long “regard for Chinese values” (6), and married a Scottish woman who was also born in the East. Filth seems very much at home amongst Eastern cultures. However, Filth and Betty leave Hong Kong when they recognize decreased hospitality toward the British as Hong Kong nears its 1997 independence from British rule. Despite his alignment with “the Oriental mind,” Filth is still too British to stay.

The last few sentences of “The Donheads” return to ideas of memory, reiterating the tension between Filth’s life and his reputation, like an invitation to enter the “true” story.

“‘We dealt with all that,’ he said, ‘in what they call my long, untroubled and uneventful life.’

‘Sleep, Filth,’ said a voice. ‘Nobody knew you like I did.’

Which one of them said that? he wondered.” (19)

Here, Filth calls attention once again to what is said about him: they call his life long, untroubled and uneventful. Gardam has already taught the reader to be suspicious about their opinions; it is unlikely that his life was truly as uneventful as they say. Yet there is a disembodied voice here that claims to have known Filth better than everybody else. Who was allowed to see Filth as he really was? Even he himself cannot remember.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Gardam chose to use a script dialogue format for her introductory chapter? How does this affect the meaning of what is said?

Discussion Question 2

The novel's point-of-view is in a third person limited voice; however, midway through "The Donheads," the focus of its limited perspective shifts, turning away from the ideas of others and into something that follows Filth's inner voice much more closely. What is the effect of this shift?

Discussion Question 3

What does Filth’s visit to Veneering reveal about his character? Why do you think Gardam chose to begin her narrative with this episode?

Vocabulary

coelacanth, conkers, parvenu, magnanimity

Book I: Kotakinakulu – Inner Temple

Summary

The chapter begins with Auntie May of the Baptist Mission striding up the gangplank, set to deliver a one-week-old baby home to his father. A week earlier, Mrs. Feathers had left from the same dock with a Malaysian wet-nurse to go have her baby in the hospital at the Port town. Though the mother-to-be had been serene throughout the journey, she contracted puerperal fever after giving birth and died shortly after meeting her baby son, whom she named Edward.

Edward's father is Alistair Feathers, a shell-shocked Scottish veteran of WWI and District Officer of Kotakinakulu province in Malaya. When the boat docked, Edward was handed off to the only person awaiting their arrival: Ada, the wet-nurse's 12-year-old daughter. Before she left again, Auntie May paid Ada to wait with the baby on his father's porch every day, but Alistair refused to raise or even meet his son. Instead, Edward stayed with Ada, growing up amongst Malayans and learning only the Malayan language and culture.

Auntie May returned to the compound when Edward was four and a half. Edward was to be taken to the Port for six months to learn English before travelling to Wales and then England to be raised and schooled. Alistair lived in a very British manner, in stark contrast to the world outside his house: "outside, the madhouse noises of the jungle. Inside, the servant padding about, taking plates, setting down others, offering fruit" (26). Alistair Feathers still dressed "in dinner jacket and black tie" for dinner, as if he were going to the Ritz (27). However, Alistair expressed doubt about the necessity of Edward's removal, because his son seemed happy in Malaya. Alistair himself had been born abroad and schooled in Britain. Though she also had her doubts, Auntie May felt that it was her duty, on behalf the boy's dead mother, to uphold custom and send the boy away. Auntie May called Edward in to his father's dining room, where he met his father for the first time. Edward told his father that he did not want to be sent away and that he did not believe that Alistair was his father. When asked why, he told his father, "because you've been here all the time without me" (30).

As the boat carrying Edward and Auntie May from the compound to the Port left the dock, Edward began to scream for Ada and fight Auntie May and the sailors. Auntie May told him he was going Home (to Britain), but Edward thought he had just left Home (Ada and the compound). During this episode, Edward started to have difficulty speaking: his words came out "jerky and odd: Ek, ek, ek –'" (31). Auntie May drugged him, but railed against the system in her mind. The narrative then jumps six months ahead. Edward had developed a stutter, but had learned English at the Port school. He and Auntie May set sail for Wales; his cousins, whom he would stay with in Wales, travelled first class while Edward and Auntie May travelled steerage. To prevent jealousy, Auntie May kept the children separate. However, the narrator warns that "whatever web the children

were to make between themselves, it would always be too tight-knit for jealousy or taunts" (33).

"Inner Temple" returns to Edward/Eddie Feathers, or Old Filth, as an old man. The heat of autumn, the flowers of the inner temple, and the glittering of the Thames had thrown him into a daydream of his youth; he recalled the ship's passage to Wales and seeing English finery and customs for the first time, incomprehensible to him then and forever after. In the hall, he heard two of his peers discussing him: "Pretty easy life. Nothing ever seems to have happened to him" (35).

Analysis

"Kotakinakulu" begins at the very beginning of Filth's life, our first look at Filth's history to solve the riddle of his character. Old Filth's narrative framework had already set us up to suspect that there was more to Filth than his professional reputation, and this brief glimpse into the first few years of his life confirms that suspicion. Filth's "long, untroubled and uneventful life" (19) begins with a dead mother, being ripped away from the only home and family he has ever known, and a significant level of culture shock. Gardam also introduces some major themes in this chapter, including colonialism and loss.

Gardam's portrait of British Imperialism really begins with this chapter. Hong Kong was perhaps the last major British colony to achieve its independence in 1997, and thus its return to Chinese sovereignty in many ways signaled the official end to the waning British empire; Betty and Filth left Hong Kong due to growing anti-colonial sentiment leading up to that year. However, colonialism is still in full swing when Edward Feathers is born to the son of Kotakinakulu province's British District Officer.

Auntie May, the Baptist missionary, and Alistair Feathers, the District Officer, together represent some of the more important pillars of British colonialism. Together, they paint a picture of an unbending system carried out by conflicted people. The difference between the interior of Alistair Feathers' house and what lies outside of it belies a telling lack of integration with the local community; the need to remain British, even when that includes something as unnecessary and potentially uncomfortable as dressing in a suit and tie for dinner while living in the jungle, speaks to the sense of superiority that led the British to colonize and 'civilize' other nations.

However, Auntie May and Alistair have doubts about the system; both seem to see that Edward is happy in Malaysia, and are reluctant to send him away when they know that some Raj orphans suffer when they are sent away from their families. Auntie May defers to custom despite her inner conflict, however, continuing her mission even as she holds a screaming Edward in her arms in the boat ride away from the compound. Despite the fact that both of these characters know what they are doing is most likely wrong, they lack the courage or conviction to act upon their own beliefs, instead deferring to custom.

For a young Edward, being brought inside his own father's house induces a kind of culture shock. However, the loyalty to British culture that keeps Alistair Feathers dressing "in dinner jacket and black tie" (27) every night is still thrust onto Edward. Edward tells Alistair that he could not be his father, "because you've been here all the time without me" (30); Edward's ties to his father are as abstract as his ties to Britain, a place he has never been and of which he knows nothing. Regardless, it is these distant forces that have power over Edward's life.

Edward's stutter is particularly interesting, as it suggests that the event that triggered it has somehow significantly hindered Edward's capacity for self-expression. Edward develops a stutter during his extremely traumatic departure from the compound and Ada. We know from previous chapters that Filth overcomes this stutter; as a lawyer and Judge, he must have been able to express himself quite articulately. We also know that very few people, if any, know Filth well, and that his public performance of himself does not seem to match up with his inner self. It is not hard to imagine that a painful event, like being torn away from one's family at four years old, would leave some kind of psychological scar, but the way that it manifests seems telling. His stutter keeps his words in; even as an adult, Filth seems to have difficulty showing others what is inside himself.

"Inner Temple" returns to two major ideas from the first two chapters. The transition between Eddie's childhood and Filth as an old man is portrayed as though "Kotakinakulu" is a memory that has been triggered by environmental factors. Even though "Kotakinakulu" contained more than Filth's memory could—for example, Auntie May delivering him to his father as a one-week-old baby—we get the sense that this could be a "shutter on the past" that has been opened. Moreover, when Filth overhears his colleagues discussing him, we have the vast difference between his public perception and his life story reiterated: we know for sure, now, that Filth did not have a "pretty easy life" (35).

Discussion Question 1

Despite the fact that this novel is preoccupied with colonialism, we do not hear much about the effect of colonialism on the Malayans living under British rule. What do you make of this? What point is Gardam trying to make with her depiction of the British colonial system?

Discussion Question 2

Instead of presenting her story chronologically, Gardam skips back and forth in the timeline of Filth's life. What is the effect of this for the reader?

Discussion Question 3

If the third person narrative voice aligns itself with any particular character in "Kotakinakulu," it is Auntie May that it sticks most closely to. Why would Gardam choose Auntie May, rather than giving the reader more access to, for example, Alistair Feathers or Ada? How does Auntie May's particular perspective aid Gardam in making her point?

Vocabulary

gawped, languidly, lurid, dun, pedantically, celibate, stolid, swathe, ordinance, lugubrious, capers

Book I: Wales – The Donheads (II)

Summary

“Wales” begins with a scene setting: a farmhouse and three children, including a now eight-year-old Edward (Eddie) and his two cousins, Babs and Claire. The description of the farmhouse feels like notes for a set builder and the character description like actor’s notes, complete with stage directions. For instance, the text here reads, “Babs, dark and unsmiling, stood picking at her fingernails, stage left. Pink little Claire sat on the wall, wagging her feet, down stage right” (37).

The children were “spaced out well away from each other” (36). Auntie May, packing up the house, though it odd, when “you would expect them to draw together” (37). Auntie May referred internally to some kind tragedy, though it is never named or described. A motor car arrived at the house, carrying someone named only Sir, who we understand is the headmaster of Eddie’s public school. Sir was talkative and jolly, though strict, and abhorrent of corporal punishment; he insisted, on multiple occasions, that he did not teach and “[knew] nothing of girls” (39). Sir had come to bring Eddie to his school. Claire cried and hugged Eddie goodbye, the first hug they had ever shared; Babs cried only when Eddie had driven away.

In his conversation with Sir, Eddie revealed details of the past four years. His school had an abusive environment, and Eddie had learned neither to read nor write competently; none of this dampened Sir’s optimism. Sir explained some of the many things Eddie could expect to learn at school, beginning Eddie’s education while still in the car. Upon arrival at the school, boys ran out to greet the car. Amongst them was a boy called Ingoldby, whom Sir puts in charge of Edward—thereby “shaping the future” (43).

“The Donheads” begins “seventy years on in Dorset”—chronologically before the first chapter named “The Donheads”—as “Teddy Feathers, Sir Edward, Old Filth” (44) prepared to go to London with Betty to make their wills. As Filth got ready, Betty waited downstairs on an ornate chair, which she remembered buying in Bangladesh. She wished she could plant her tulip bulbs that day, rather than going to London, and noted that the tulip bulbs felt “very like a man’s balls” (45). A man phoned—unnamed, though known by Betty. He asked if he could see her, and asked her to touch her pearls—“are they mine? Or his?” (46). He then told her that his wife Elsie was lying down, and that his son, Harry, had died. When Filth asked Betty about the phone call, she lied and told him the call was cut off. They then took the train to London.

Betty and Filth separated when they got to London, despite Filth’s invitation for Betty to join him. Filth went to the Inner Temple, where we might guess the action of “Scene: Inner Temple” and “Inner Temple” took place. Betty told Filth that she was off to the University Women’s Club, but she instead ate lunch on her own and watched buskers perform. We learn that Harry was Terry’s son—meaning that the man on the phone was

Terry Veneering. She thought about his son, and how she and Filth lived on, despite how different the world had become: “keeping the old flag flying for a country I no longer recognise or love” (50). Betty then made her way to the courthouse, and had a little trouble with her heart on the way; she arrived just as Filth pulled up in a taxi. Both noted that they did not see anyone they knew at their respective lunches.

Analysis

The narrator may describe life at the Bar as an “actor’s life” (10), but the play seems to have far preceded Filth’s professional life. Gardam began the novel with “Scene: Inner Temple,” presented as a script dialogue; in “Wales” once again we have action that has the feel of a script. In “The Donheads,” Gardam’s protagonist is reintroduced to the reader as “Teddy Feathers, Sir Edward, Old Filth” (44)—a roster of names like a roster of roles, different characters that the same man has played throughout his lifetime. If part of the reader’s task is to investigate “Filth in fact,” the true self that stands in opposition to the false reputation Gardam begins the novel with, here this roster of names exaggerates the slipperiness of that true self.

“Kotakinakulu” ended with Eddie at four years old, on the boat to Wales; “Wales” begins with yet another departure, exaggerating the displacement of Filth’s childhood. The action of the intervening years is skipped over, though the theatrical language and reference to “tragedy” create an ominous tone—whatever has happened, it was not good. If these episodes from Filth’s childhood are framed as memories retrieved as he “[flicks] open shutters on the past” (6), here is one shutter that stubbornly remains closed; the reader gets the sense that something important happened here that is being denied and withheld by the author but perhaps also in Filth’s own mind.

“The Donheads” (II) begins to flesh out the character of Betty. Whereas Filth finds the very idea of sharing a bed “Bourgeois” (19), here Betty compares the feel of a tulip bulb to a man’s balls: the matter-of-fact way she approaches what her husband might view as vulgarity shows an interesting disparity in their worldviews. Moreover, the conversation she has with Veneering implies that they have had an affair; she declines her husband’s invitation to lunch, and lies to him about her plans. Betty, it would seem, is rather secretive, or perhaps simply independent and protective of her inner life. It is interesting, however, that Betty’s lunch is concurrent with “Scene: Inner Temple” and “Inner Temple,” as both of those chapters highlighted the distance between Filth’s reputation and his reality: Betty and Filth are in some ways very alike in their secrecy.

The span of Betty and Filth’s 80 or so years of life was a time of unprecedented levels of change. “The Donheads” (II) explores what it might be like to grow old in a world that is remaking itself so quickly, and that seems so eager to let go of its past. On her walk through London, Betty notices how different everything has become—and she, “in her Agatha-Christie country clothes and pearls and polished shoes” (50), does not seem to fit into it anywhere. Betty appears to the people on the street “like someone out of a play” (50), and Filth too has become more of a figure of myth or legend to the people who now frequent his old haunts. Yet Terry’s son is dead, and Betty is not; she and Filth

keep going, though they no longer recognize or love the world they are in, and no longer really have a place in it. There is a feeling of a lack of, or a denial of, continuity between their lives and the present: as Betty thinks, “My world’s over. Like Terry’s” (51).

Discussion Question 1

Old Filth’s narrative voice usually either aligns closely with one or two characters or narrates from an objective viewpoint. What do Gardam’s stage references say about narrative point-of-view in “Wales”? Is there an underlying commentary being made about the action described, and if so, whose perspective does it reflect?

Discussion Question 2

Betty, like Filth, is a Child of the Raj. How do you see Gardam portraying the effects of this kind of upbringing, through her characterization of these two characters?

Discussion Question 3

Does the knowledge of Veneering and Betty's affair change our perception of Veneering and Filth's meeting in "The Donheads" (I)? If so, how?

Vocabulary

redoubtable, dickie, salvo, parquet, louche, sardonic

Book I: The Outfit – Tulips

Summary

“The Outfit” continues where “Wales” left off. After Sir introduced them, Pat Ingoldby and Eddie became inseparable. “Ingoldby’s wit and logic expunged the nightmares of Eddie’s past” (52); his stutter healed. Pat’s parents, Colonel and Mrs. Ingoldby, invited Eddie to stay with them during school holidays. The Ingoldbys owned a large house, called High House, and a carpet factory down the hill. Soon Eddie became an honorary member of the family.

“Mrs. Ingoldby was Eddie’s first English love” (53); he found her loving and uncomplicated. However, Mrs. Ingoldby told Eddie that she was also a Raj orphan, with a difficult childhood of her own. Eddie asked Pat about his mother—why she was not bitter when everyone had been so awful to her. Pat told Eddie that her temperament was an act, a part of her upbringing, and proceeded to rant about Empire. He then told Eddie that he awaits the “dazzling finale” of the end of empire (56). Both boys agreed, however, that they would fight in the upcoming war, Pat in the RAF and Eddie with the army.

The news that Hitler had invaded Poland came shortly thereafter. After the family heard the news on the wireless that evening—Mrs. Ingoldby had heard earlier, but wanted the Colonel to be able to eat—Pat noticed that the cat had been acting oddly. The Colonel said he had thrown it and his eiderdown out the window after the cat had peed on it. Later that night, Eddie heard the Colonel instructing the maid to leave the eiderdown outside overnight; Eddie notes “the square shape of desecrated satin lying up against the house like a forlorn white flag” (59).

“Tulips” begins directly after “The Donheads” (II), the day after Filth and Betty made their trip to London. The London solicitor had not been able to keep her appointment for a reason Filth could not remember (we learn from Betty that the solicitor’s child had been sick with the measles.) Filth sat down to compose a Letter of Wishes to accompany his will, and remembered the wet eiderdown back at High House. Filth and Betty had no children to inherit from them; Filth felt that Betty “had always seemed […] to have no views on their barrenness” (61). Meanwhile, Betty planted her tulips, thinking once again about Terry’s boy, and wondered if Filth would have been able to love their children or grandchildren, if they had had any.

Betty realized she was still wearing her pearls from yesterday—her “guilty pearls,” Veneering’s pearls—and thought, “I am becoming a slut” (62). She decided to bury the pearls in the garden. She then began the long process of getting herself up off her knees, and looked up at Filth, thinking how impossible he had been since the day before. She remembered their life in Hong Kong, their morning’s conversation (when Filth thought to himself that his wish is for Betty to never leave him); she imagined Filth

looked a bit like Christ, but with a gin in his hand. She thought, “I won’t get any nearer to him now” (65), and decided to wait another day to plant the tulip bulbs.

Analysis

The majority of “The Outfit” depicts Eddie’s “last peacetime summer with the Ingoldbys” (56). Throughout the chapter, there is the feeling of savoring a last moment of sun before the storm: everything is painted as all the more idyllic for the knowledge that it will soon be over, or at least have changed drastically. Yet when the news that Hitler has invaded Poland strikes, we get this funny episode with the cat and the eiderdown. The symbolism of it lying, “like a forlorn white flag,” is self-explanatory: the white flag of peace and surrender, lying desecrated on the ground, as Hitler makes the move that will ensure war. However, this episode also has a cartoonish element to it, with the cat peeing on the bed and getting tossed out the window, and the Colonel absolutely incensed. We can interpret the juxtaposition of these two events in a number of ways: the continuance of daily life in the face of overwhelming bad news, or perhaps the lack of control we ultimately have over cats and foreign dictators alike. Whatever the case may be, the way Gardam fuses these two ideas together is absolutely intentional.

“The Outfit” also returns to the idea of Empire. As another example of a Raj orphan, the figure of Mrs. Ingoldby provides an interesting parallel to Filth’s story. She too experienced a great deal of displacement, and she too spent much of her childhood feeling unloved and unwanted. The discussion of Mrs. Ingoldby gives Pat an opportunity to expound on his ideas about Empire. He talks, with typical teenage assuredness, of the “thousands round the world thinking they own it” (56); “wherever you went you wore the Crown, and wherever you went you could find your own kind” (56). Moreover, the trappings of Empire have become a show of one’s worth, a superficial show of superiority bought in trinkets and tiger skins—which Pat believes was not true of his grandfather’s generation. In Pat’s view, it appears that wearing the Crown has become so tied to (particularly upper class) British identity that the two seem inextricable. And yet Pat predicts that “the empire is on the wane” (56), and with it, we must wonder what will happen to that identity.

“Tulips” continues to develop Betty’s character, and to a picture of her and Filth’s marriage. Betty thinks that something seemed to block Filth from really feeling love. When she thinks, “I won’t get any nearer to him now,” it seems as though she means that it is too late to really get to know him. And Betty too hides some of herself away—burying her ‘guilty pearls’ in the garden. The disconnect between the married couple is reiterated when Filth thinks to himself that Betty seemed to have any views on their barrenness. At the time, Betty is imagining what their grandchildren would be like. Yet this disconnect does not seem to translate into hostility or malevolence. Their life together seems peaceful; if Betty feels that Filth is incapable of loving her, she certainly receives his unswerving devotion.

If Mrs. Ingoldby is “self-protective” (58), as Pat described her, then we can see some of that quality in Betty and Filth as well. Both are guarded, intentionally or not, even

against each other. One might also argue that Betty's assessment of Filth's inability to love correlates with Pat's statement that "most of them"—Raj Orphans, most likely—"learned never to like anyone, ever, their whole lives" (56). Together, all of these characters begin to paint us a picture of the psyche of a generation of British citizens—the British casualties of Empire, Raj orphans and their parents, those to whom Gardam dedicates her novel.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Gardam agrees with Pat's assessment of the British empire?

Discussion Question 2

How do you interpret Gardam's juxtaposition of the cat and the invasion of Poland?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think it is significant that Filth remembers the eiderdown at the particular time that he does in "The Donheads" (III)? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

expunged, dell, barmy, eiderdown, gainly, jacarandas, ferment, catafalque

Book I: The Ferment – The Donheads (III)

Summary

Sometime after Betty's funeral, Filth opened a letter from Isobel Ingoldby. Before we can learn the contents of the letter, the narrative goes back in time to when Pat Ingoldby had been in Public school and Eddie, a year younger, was just leaving Sir's outfit. Upon his departure, Sir told Eddie that he would make a wonderful lawyer. He also told Eddie to steer clear of Wales, and to keep off girls.

When Eddie arrived at High House the summer of 1936—three years before Hitler invaded Poland, and so chronologically before "The Outfit"—Pat informed him that there was a girl in the house: his cousin, Isobel Ingoldby. Isobel seemed "peculiar" to the Ingoldbys (70); she spent most of her time outdoors and refused to eat at the table. The first time a 14-year-old Eddie spoke to Isobel, he "felt something happening to his anatomy and though he had no idea what it was he began to blush" (70). Pat immediately sensed Eddie's attraction and began to tease Eddie about it. Eddie told Pat that he could not stand Isobel. The narrator hints that the time of Eddie and Pat's close friendship might soon be over.

One night at High House, Eddie saw or dreamt that Isobel came into his bedroom. He thought, "she's old and she's evil and she only wants to hurt" (74). Eddie resolved to be as brave as someone named Cumberledge. He "would finish her, as once already in his life he had finished a woman," and told Isobel that she was "a bad woman" and to "get out" (74). Isobel and Mrs. Ingoldby left the next morning, but the memory, or dream, never left Filth. He did not understand, had denied it to himself, felt shamed and saddened—and yet also felt regret.

"The Donheads" (III) returns to Filth and Isobel Ingoldby's letter. The letter began with condolences for Betty's passing—it turned out Betty and Isobel had gone to school together. She mentioned working at Bletchley Park with other schoolgirls as a codebreaker during the war, and referenced something between her and Filth that had taken place on Peel street. She told him she had loved him at High House; that Betty had seemed very untouchable, yet implied knowledge of Betty and Veneering's affair; and that she knew Betty had wanted children, and was sorry to hear there had been none. She disclosed that she was gay. She ended her letter: "I am one of those who know that you were not really cold" (76).

Filth immediately disposed of the letter and composed an incredibly terse and formal response. After mailing it, he replied to a few more condolence letters, including one from Billy Cumberledge in Cambridge. He then poured himself a glass of milk and had a nap. Upon waking up, Eddie wondered at the milk, as he had not drunk milk since Ma Didds' in Wales. He thought back to Isobel's letter, and thought her to be cruel. He poured out the milk and looked outside, remembering the cat in 1939 and Isobel three years before that.

Analysis

“The Ferment” is the first instance in the novel where the narrative takes a temporal shift mid-chapter. Rather than meandering through Filth’s life, we have a direct correlation here between ‘present’ action, Filth seeing the letter from Isobel, and past action, when he first met her. In Isobel’s letter she hints at another shared moment of their lives that we do not yet have access to, yet this is the moment we are called to witness, the one Filth seems to have been forcibly brought back to.

It is not a particularly pleasant memory: although it begins innocuously enough, with Eddie’s first experience of sexual attraction and some light-hearted ribbing from his friend, the episode quickly grows more sinister. We cannot know for sure that Isobel ever did come into Eddie’s room, as it is named a “memory or dream” (73). We do not know what Isobel’s intention was if she did, in fact, come into his room. We do know that this triggered something unpleasant for Eddie, who seems to be reacting to a past situation as much as he is to a present one. He evokes Cumberledge, a name the reader is not yet familiar with; “she’s old and she’s evil and she only wants to hurt” (74) could refer only to Isobel, or could also refer to the unnamed other woman who he had ‘finished’ in his life. Once again, the reader is left with the idea that there is some trauma in Filth’s past that he still cannot approach directly.

Near the end of “Tulips,” Filth told Betty that he wanted “to get on with the Will whilst [he was] still in ferment” (64) about the solicitor. The chapter entitled “The Ferment,” however, begins after Betty’s death, suggesting that this state of agitation has been extended—that we have perhaps reached the “time of mental breakdown” (10) after Betty’s death that was alluded to in “The Donheads” (I). The glass of milk is an interesting detail: in pouring himself a glass of milk, Filth seems to have reverted to habits he had not had since he was eight years old and under the care of Ma Didds in Wales. Like when Eddie thought he saw Isobel enter his room, Filth and his milk is not mere memory. This is the past breaking into and imposing itself on the present.

Filth’s “ferment,” then, appears to be a stirring-up of unpleasant memories denied. “Ferment” is an interesting word choice; it refers to a state of agitation, but usually one leading up to some kind of major change, and usually a violent or dramatic change at that. Whether it is emotional distress or the loss of Betty’s tethering force, we see that Filth is being set loose upon himself—willful forgetting, it seems, will no longer keep him together. But moreover, the idea of a “ferment” implies that the worst is yet to come, and that something is going to have to change for Filth.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Gardam chooses to make Isobel gay? How might this impact our reading of their time together, and Isobel’s admission that she had loved Filth at High House?

Discussion Question 2

How should we interpret Filth's reaction to Isobel's letter? Do you think his reaction is justified?

Discussion Question 3

Up until now, Gardam has kept her 'flashback' chapters relatively chronological, with "Kotakinakulu," "Wales," and "The Outfit" all moving temporally forward through Eddie's childhood. The past action of "The Ferment," however, takes place before the end of "The Outfit." Why would Gardam choose to put this piece of Filth's history in "The Ferment," and how does it contribute to the build of the narrative as a whole?

Vocabulary

ferment, condolence, succinct, houri, Quink, inexorably

Book I: School

Summary

“School” begins in 1936, when Eddie started at Chilham School. His close relationship with Pat raised eyebrows, by students and teachers alike; after being satisfied that there was “no physicality” about their relationship (81), however, it was decided that the boys would be treated as brothers. Pat sat his entrance exams, and was accepted to attend Cambridge after he had served in the war.

One night the school’s alarm bells woke all the boys up. They were ordered to dress, handed rifles, and told that the invasion was upon them. They learned later it had been a false alarm; Pat contracted pneumonia due to being outside all night, however, and was placed in San to recuperate. Eddie was not allowed to see him at first, as his Housemaster, Oils, disapproved of their closeness. However, Eddie appealed the decision on the grounds of “slander and antediluvianism” (86) and went to the Headmaster. While there, the Headmaster told Eddie that his father wanted him evacuated to Singapore to avoid the war. Eddie was only a year under volunteering age, and was very offended by the notion that he should be evacuated like a woman or child. A lady came in to deliver tea, and made a comment about Jack Ingoldby, “God rest him” (88), and so Eddie learned that Pat’s brother’s plane had been reported missing.

Eddie immediately tried to phone High House, but could not get through; he then wrote a letter to Mrs Ingoldby, but was struck suddenly by his position as an outsider in the family:

I’m still the foreigner. To them. And to myself, here. I’ve no background. I’ve been peeled off my background. I’ve been attached to another background like a cut-out. I’m only someone they’ve been kind to for eight years because Pat was a loner till I came along. I’m socially a bit dubious, because they know my father went barmy. And because of living in the heart of darkness and something funny going on in Wales. And the stammer. (89)

He went to see Pat, who had heard the news. Pat told Eddie there was nothing he could do, and that it was “family stuff" (90). He sent Eddie on his way, but not before telling him not to join the RAF or the Navy, as Eddie would not be able to handle it. He told Eddie he still planned to join the RAF despite his brother’s disappearance, as his parents “don’t really feel much” (90). By the time the news hit that Jack Ingoldby had definitely died, Pat had left for High House and Eddie still had not spoken with the rest of the family.

At half-term, Eddie called High House to see if he should come as usual. Isobel answered and told him not to. Eddie went to see his aunts in Bolton instead, for the second time in his life. His aunts Hilda and Muriel were much more interested in golfing than in Eddie, so he spent most of his time alone, studying. One day he saw a picture of

his father as a young man in 1914 on the mantelpiece and was inspired to write to his Father. In the letter, Eddie expressed his regret at not having a better relationship, but also expressed his anger at his father's general absence in his life and the unfairness of him interfering to evacuate Eddie when he knew nothing about him. Eddie recalled the only time he had seen his father since he left Malaysia, an awkward meeting at his prep school. He remembered staring at his father's hands, his watch that was too big for his wrist—the same watch from the picture. His father asked a question, revealing his stutter, and Eddie did not want to answer and reveal his own, afraid his father would think he was mocking him. And so he said nothing, and then ran away. Eddie added a Post-Script to his letter, stating that his father's wish for Eddie to survive the war, though he did not seem to like Eddie very much, was "a miracle of unexpected kindness" (97).

Eddie took the train, filled with soldiers off to war, up to Oxford to sit for his entrance exams. He arrived at midnight and had no idea where to go. Thankfully, a young man exiting the church, who Eddie felt he knew somehow, found him and walked him to the right college. Eddie passed his exams and left the next day. In his anxiety about protocol, Eddie had left the college without breakfast and so ducked into a tea shop where he ran into a woman he soon realized was his cousin Babs. The two caught up, and Eddie learned that Claire was now married; the three of them—Babs, Claire, and Eddie—had apparently been purposefully separated. Eddie confided that he was not sure how to proceed, in his life, without anyone to give him the answers. Babs told him he should be a lawyer, and that he had been decisive once and braver than the rest of them at eight years old. Eddie replied that he had not made a decision since. Babs then asked Eddie to come home with her and "go to bed. We have before" (106). Eddie fled the coffee shop, mumbling excuses. As he went, Babs told him that she, Claire, Eddie and Cumberledge would never forget each other.

On the train out of Oxford, Eddie was struck by a picture of a happy English family above his cabin's propaganda posters. He dozed off and thought of banana leaves and "a brown face, […] gloriously loving eyes" (106). When he woke up, the man in his cabin handed him a newspaper, and Eddie read Pat Ingoldby's name in the Times' list of soldiers killed.

Analysis

"School" tracks, amongst other things, the disillusion of Eddie's attempt at being part of a family. From the moment that Eddie steps foot in Chilham school, his relationship with Pat is looked at with suspicion and confusion because they are not brothers, although they seem to be as close as brothers might be. Eddie cannot see Pat in San, because they are not brothers. When Pat tells Eddie that Jack going missing is "family stuff," it is the final nail in the coffin - they are not brothers, and it is made clear that Eddie is not really part of Pat's family.

And Eddie has his suspicions about this: Eddie is "socially dubious" (89). There is his "barmy" father, his stutter, 'tragedy' in Wales that goes untold, but moreover he has "[lived] in the heart of darkness" (89). This is a reference to Joseph Conrad's Heart of

Darkness, a novel about a trip downriver in the Congo and a British subject, Mr. Kurtz, who has set himself up as a god amongst the African natives. While the novel resists any final interpretation, what can be taken away from Conrad's Mr. Kurtz is that there is some danger for British subjects living in the colonies; there is potential, there, for the mind to become untethered, or for one's most unsavory traits to break free and reign. This is not the picture of life in Malaysia that we have been given, but Eddie's laundry list of socially dubious traits—his father, his birthplace, Wales—reveals a fear we have not seen made so explicit. Eddie feels that his past sets him apart, makes him somewhat unsavory, and most of all keeps him from belonging fully to the family he had chosen for himself.

As if to prove his fear, Eddie sees Babs at Oxford. Eddie's aunts prove themselves unfit to be an alternative family for Eddie—he is at best tolerated and ignored in their household. Eddie's letter to his father is another attempt to find somewhere or someone to belong to but his moment of identification with his father, his moment of pride, quickly dissipates: here there is too much anger, and too much history. Oxford becomes another opportunity to belong somewhere, and to make something of himself. Just as it looks like Eddie has succeeded in obtaining a new place, he runs into Babs; at first it is a happy moment, but then she mentions Wales, and suddenly Eddie has to run away. Her last words to Eddie—that she, Claire, Eddie and Cumberledge will never forget each other—becomes a kind of threat: he can never escape what happened.

When Alistair Feathers came to visit Eddie at prep school, it was only the second time he had ever met his son. They know little about each other, are very uninvolved in each other's lives, yet this brief passage about their meeting exposes an interesting commonality - both Alistair and his son stutter. We know that Eddie developed his stutter as a result of being taken away from his home at the age of four and a half; we do not know the origin of Alistair's stutter, but we do know that he was also a Raj orphan, and that he developed shellshock after serving in WWI. What they have in common, in other words, is trauma, and for both this turns into a lack of ability to communicate, and with each other most of all.

Beyond his tragic past and unfulfilled longing to belong, however, we learn about other aspects of Eddie's character in this chapter as well; namely, he is incredibly intelligent, and maybe even funny. He "appeals" his Housemaster's decision not to let him see Pat; we can absolutely see Eddie as a lawyer in the making here, and the examiners at Oxford seem to agree. But Eddie's line about "slander and antediluvianism" (86) also speaks to Eddie's wit. Sir once told Eddie that he thought he would make a good lawyer, in part because Eddie was unimaginative; Sir's judgement is perhaps as untrue as much else that is said about Filth in his later life.

Discussion Question 1

Though the narrative often jumps its focus from the limited perspective of one character to that of another; this chapter's point of view, however, limits itself pretty strictly to

Eddie's perspective. Why might Gardam choose to limit our view to Eddie's perspective for this particular series of events?

Discussion Question 2

On the train back from Oxford, Eddie sees a picture of a happy English family. He then dozes off and dreams of Malaysia. What might this suggest about Eddie's longing for a home? How might this be connected to the Ingoldbys?

Discussion Question 3

How might you characterize Eddie's personality as a young man? How might you compare this characterization to that of Filth, his older self?

Vocabulary

puttees, antediluvianism, sanguine, carmine, penumbrous, hauteur, barbola, volition, autocratic, lank, mullioned, lugubrious, harmonium

Book I: The Time of Frenzy

Summary

“The Time of Frenzy” begins with a description of Filth’s reaction when Betty died while planting the tulips. He felt his soul leave him, looking down at Betty’s body and his own, “gazing emptied of all its meaning now” (108). “It has happened,” he said to himself. “It has occurred...Dead. Gone. Happened. Lost. Over” (108).

Betty’s funeral was small, mostly because Filth did not let anyone know. The church ladies attended, as Betty had been on the flower rota. Betty had always been serious about her flowers; “it was the tulips, [Filth] thought, that got her in the end” (109). Filth felt himself to be somehow inadequate without Betty. After a reception at the church, Filth was brought home by a woman named Chloe, who inspired Filth with a surprising lust. He sent her away.

The next morning, Filth called Claire and Babs; only Babs picked up, and the similarity of her voice to Betty’s made Filth stay on the phone with her. He surprised himself with another feeling of lust; “sex had never been a great success” between Filth and Betty, who had always had separate bedrooms. He wondered if he ever truly desired her and thought that he did, perhaps not sexually but because she made him feel “safe and confident” (112). Despite their lack of passion, they had been close, however. Filth recalled going to her room in Hong Kong after condemning a man to die; recalled Betty’s lack of pity, and her straightforward response before she fell asleep “peacefully against his shoulder, unconcerned, proud of him” (113).

Filth phoned Babs again the next day, needing to hear ‘Betty’s’ voice again—as Veneering had once said, “like Desdemona’s” (113)—and asked to come visit. His housekeeper discouraged him from leaving because it was too soon after Betty’s death, and he had not driven in a while. The housekeeper and Garbutt, the odd-jobs man, both disapproved, but Garbutt reminded her there was no stopping Filth. And so, on a Friday morning, Filth packed himself up and drove away.

On the road, Filth wavered between tension and excitement at being on the busy roads. He noted the foreign drivers with some distaste, and thought of Singapore and Hong Kong—the Empire “Lost. Over. Finished. Dead. Happened” (118). He imagined what Betty’s commentary would be if she were riding with him. He noted the ways the North of England had been developed—“Gone, gone. Finished. Dead” (120). He reached a town he once knew, and noted the Old Judges’ Lodging had been turned into a hotel —“Finished. Gone. Dead. Hotel now, eh?” (120).

Filth reached Babs’s house in Herringfleet, which appeared somewhat rundown, with “a sense of retreat and defeat”; he thought of the “laughing, streetwise, positive Babs” in Oxford (121), and regretted coming. Then the door opened and a boy ran out, almost knocking Filth over. He walked in through the open door, uneasily. He found Babs in the

dark; her voice still seemed like Betty's, but she appeared "crazed" (122). Filth was disgusted, by her and the state of the room. Babs had apparently been living alone since Wales, with the exception of her mother whom she had cared for. She offered Filth tea Billy Cumberledge had sent her. She told Filth that Billy had been her lover, and referred to an unnamed woman who was unable to fully break him or taint his soul. She then told Filth that the boy who had almost knocked Filth over—a music student of hers, 14, and a "genius"—was her present lover. She had apparently told the boy of her affections that night. Something in the hall knocks over some flowers—the dog, Babs said, though Filth did not think she had one. Filth left in a hurry.

Filth then went back to the old Judges' Lodging that had been turned into a hotel. The rooms now were decorated with copious teddy-bears, the bathroom with plastic ducks. He saw an old colleague, Fiscal-Smith, in the dining room, who joined him for dinner. Fiscal-Smith had drunk too much to drive and suggested he stay with Filth, a notion Filth rejected. The next morning, he came down to the dining-room and Fiscal-Smith ignored him. The fact of Betty's death caught up to Filth, finally triggering his tears. He then saw Betty's obituary in the Daily Telegraph and he sat for a long time at his table, weeping for her now and again. As he checked out of his hotel, he learned that Fiscal-Smith had paid for his dinner the night before. On the ride home, he realized that the hotel's teddy bears and ducks had all been an attempt to rid the place of the "sombre judicial atmosphere of the place's past" (131).

Back on the road, Filth realized he had been going the wrong way. He stopped at a church and went inside; it had a curious marble memorial in it, which was thought to have been designed by Gibbons. Filth slapped one of the marble cherub's bottoms. A vicar appeared and asked if Filth was wanting to confess. Without waiting for an answer, he disappeared into the booth. Filth followed, not wanting to be discourteous. He explained that Betty had died. The vicar asked if there had been any children. When Filth said there were none, the vicar implied that the way Filth touched the marble cherub was somehow connected. Filth got in his car and left. He was soon pulled over for erratic driving, although the police let him go without charges. Before leaving, Filth showed them Claire's address; the policemen told him it was very close. As Filth drove away, they noted that Filth was "like out of some Channel Four play" (136).

Analysis

"The Time of Frenzy" begins by revealing that Betty had died while planting the tulips; in fact, the last words of "Tulips" may represent some of her very last moments alive. This adds particular significance to some of her actions from that chapter. One of the last things she did was bury her pearls, hiding a piece of herself away. Moreover, one of her last thoughts was that she would not get any closer to Filth now. They had run out of time to reveal any more of themselves to each other.

At Betty's funeral, Filth realized that there was something "unresolved" in him, that he was actually "inadequate and weak," and that he had pulled off some sort of coup in "presenting to the world the full man, the completed and successful being" (109) for so

many years. Without her, he feels that his body has been emptied of his meaning; Betty had given Filth his shape, his meaning, his direction. It is the realization that Betty could not—as she had done with other difficult situations in Filth's life—'get him through' her death that finally triggers Filth's tears. This also explains the way that Filth periodically 'sees' or 'hears' Betty after his death, continuing to direct him. It appears that part of Betty's role in Filth's life was to hold him together, and hide his perceived deficiencies. Without her, Filth begins to unravel, and he immediately reaches out for another woman to fill the void: Babs, whose voice reminds Filth forcibly of Betty's.

A reason for the similarity is offered: "Betty and Babs had been at St. Paul's Girls School and had the Paulina voice" (111). Paulina Voices is the name of a chamber choir at St. Paul's Girls School. It is possible that, having undergone the same vocal training, there is a distinct similarity between the two women's voices. However, the comparison also seems to be making a comment about the interchangeability of women in Filth's life. There is a void that Filth needs filled or covered up, and the differences between the women who step in to do this work seem to melt away. When Filth sees Babs, however, there is a stark contrast between her and his late wife, and Filth leaves quickly.

We know from previous chapters that after Betty's death, Filth began a process of 'opening shutters on the past'; this makes sense if part of Betty's role in Filth's life was to keep him going, to aid him in his necessary forgetting, keeping past unpleasantness in the past so it could not impede his progress. In "The Time of Frenzy" there is a hectic melding of past and present, and Gardam's language mirrors Filth's unravelling. For the most part the chapter sticks closely to Filth's perspective, staying in third person but presenting pieces of information as if it were one of Filth's thoughts—and his thoughts are all over the place. Seeing the hotel prompts memories of his time as a Judge: "no wives allowed. Too much port. Boring each other silly" (120). The sea also sparks memories: "Sea. How they had hated the sea in Wales" (120). And Babs' street: "new sprouts would shoot like hairs from a mole. Revolting treatment. What would Sir say?" (121).

There is a collapse in Filth's careful divide of his past and present, with his every thought jumping from one to the other. Gardam's sentences become choppy and abrupt. There is a lack of flow, a lack of logical forward progression that Filth also seems to feel in his life after Betty is no longer there to hold him together. Like he once told Babs, he does not seem to know how to proceed—and instead he has gone back, back to Babs.

Throughout the chapter, Gardam also repeats variations on the phrase "Dead. Gone. Happened. Lost. Over" (108). The first time this happens, Filth is in a state of shock after realizing Betty has died right in front of him; it happens again referring to changing landscapes and landmarks, and once in relation to the fact that Filth has never been into a coal mine. The last time Gardam used a similar device was in "The Donheads" (II), when Betty had just heard that Terry's boy Harry had died, and variations on that phrase repeat in her head throughout the rest of the day. The repetition of these phrases speaks to a kind of mindless state of shock as well as to the intrusive and

relentless nature of the ideas they represent, as they unleash themselves on the mind over and over again.

Looking around London, Betty decides that her wold is “over. Like Terry’s” (51), and Filth seems to be engaged in a similar type of activity. Going farther out than he has in a long time, he finds that the world is no longer quite the one that he remembered—his world, as it was, is lost. Yet unlike Betty, Filth seems to experience a subtle change of heart in at least one of his judgements. He understands, as he drives away, that the hotel he was in had filled its rooms with silly objects and “matey” staff “in an attempt to dispel the sombre judicial atmosphere of the place’s past” (131)—the “crime, wickedness, evil, folly and pain” that had been “tossed about […] over far too much port” (131). The Judges’ Lodgings is one thing that does, indeed, belong to Filth’s past—happened, over—but there is almost an element of hopefulness that that brings, as Filth realizes that in this one instance, what was there might not have been worth preserving.

Discussion Question 1

Fiscal-Smith appears only in this chapter. What is his significance in the novel? Why do you think Gardam saw fit to include him during this particular episode of Filth’s life?

Discussion Question 2

How would you explain Filth’s unexplained and sudden bouts of lust?

Discussion Question 3

The comparison Veneering draws between Betty’s voice and Desdemona’s is an odd one. Desdemona has been voiced by thousands of actresses and, therefore, her voice does not have any particular aural quality; therefore, there must be some other point being made. What do you make of this comparison? Is it significant that Veneering is the one who made this comparison?

Vocabulary

ubiquitous, untenanted, macabre, bourgeoisie, drudgery, ganglia, histrionic, sycophantic, jocose, hermetically, languor

Book I: A Light House – Wandsworth

Summary

Claire found out about Betty's death by reading Betty's obituary in the Daily Telegraph. She received a phone call—"Beware. The Ice Man Cometh" (137). Claire had a weak heart, and she felt it beating fast. Babs revealed herself as the caller. Claire had mistaken her for Betty. They chatted about Filth's state and Betty, whom they had both known when they were younger. Claire had also known Isobel, who used to say that "it was Betty who made [Filth]" (139). Betty had also been at Bletchley Park. Claire saw Filth's Mercedes coming down the drive, and Filth getting out of the car. She hung up on Babs.

The narrative then returns to Filth's perspective as he arrived at the house. He surveyed Claire, remembering what Betty had told him about her—the way that she "ruled her children by a mysterious silence," how her children felt they did not deserve her, that her husband had taken up drinking (141). Filth decided to stay with her for a while. He commented that Babs seemed to exist "in perpetual darkness and [Claire] in perpetual light" (142). He told Claire that he had brought her things of Betty's that she had wanted her to have. They discussed Betty's funeral; "Claire thought how Betty had underestimated [Filth]. And fooled him" (143).

Claire warned Filth that he was still in shock about Betty, but their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the Vicar—one of Claire's many regular visitors. Filth hurried away, and when the Vicar saw Filth's car, he turned around and left again. Claire started to prepare dinner, though she thought, "Teddy never noticed what he ate. 'Or anything else,' she said, sadly, and mistakenly" (144).

"Wandsworth" introduces us to a new character: Claire's younger son Oliver, preparing to go visit his mother for the weekend. He was excited because he was going alone, without his partner Vanessa. Oliver had somewhat conflicted views on his mother, finding her undemonstrative, perhaps cynical but also perhaps selfless. However, "he adored her" (145).

Vanessa "was a Barrister in Shipping Chambers, a prestigious area and rare for a woman" (146). She was meticulous, brisk, ambitious, and extremely career-focussed. She had had plans to see her own parents that weekend, but her parents were busy elsewhere. Oliver knew then that he would have to invite her to his mother's, meaning that he would not be able to relax to the same degree. Vanessa did not want to go at first—"all that silence as [Claire] sits and smiles" (147)—but then stopped their fight in its tracks, agreeing to go. Oliver phoned his mother to let her know. They had already planned to book a hotel room, but Oliver learned it would have been necessary anyhow, as Filth was still visiting. The news of this second visitor—a "family solicitor or something" (148)—almost made Vanessa rethink her decision, afraid he would be "all

over [her]" (148). However, Oliver gave her an ultimatum, saying he would leave her if she did not come with him, and Vanessa finally agreed.

Analysis

While Filth is just now attempting to integrate the different pieces of his life, Isobel, Betty, Claire and Babs had already integrated themselves. Betty, Isobel, Babs and Claire each came into a Filth's life at a different stage—Wales or High House or Hong Kong—yet they all have a shared past. The conversation between Babs and Claire that opens "A Light House" reiterates this fact; they all went to school together, and later at least some of these women seem to have served together as codebreakers at Bletchley Park during WWII.

Moreover, these women have all discussed Filth with each other, and seem to feel that they have formed a comprehensive image of who he is. We return to the question from the beginning of the novel: "'Nobody knew you like I did.' Which one of them said that? he wondered" (19).

And these women do feel they know Filth—evidenced by Isobel's letter, and the way that Babs knew to phone Claire to warn her of Filth's arrival, though he had not had the notion to visit her until after he had left Babs. Yet, their knowledge is less complete than they seem to believe. Claire thinks that "Betty had underestimated [Filth]. And fooled him" (143); she seems to feel that neither Betty nor Filth saw each other fully, or accurately. Later, Claire thought, "mistakenly," how little Filth noticed. Rarely do we get direct judgements like this from the novel's omniscient narrator, so this fact must be particularly important. Filth seems to reject Isobel's letter in part because he resents the implication that she knew him so well. These women all feel that they know Filth intimately, yet are mistaken; his true self eludes even them.

Filth makes the comment that Babs seems to exist in perpetual dark and Claire in perpetual light. The dichotomy here is not new; even in their introduction in "Wales," Claire as described as "pink" while Babs is said to have "leaned darkly against an outhouse" (36). Babs exists in a literal and metaphorical darkness, one whose origins have not yet been fully explained, though all signs point to Wales. If this is tied to Wales, however, Claire carries no such darkness with her. The chapter is entitled "A Light House"; in part this refers to Claire's light-filled bungalow, but it also seems to suggest a greater symbolic significance. Filth has certainly been lost, meandering around England in search of something, and his time with Claire might be the lighthouse, the guiding beacon that brings him back to shore.

"Wandsworth" introduces two new characters. While the narrative point-of-view of Old Filth has shifted to limit itself to different characters before, this is the first time that the novel has diverged from its focus on Filth to limit itself to characters that are not actively or obviously involved in Filth's life. One reason Gardam may have chosen to do this is to balance Filth's perspective. Oliver and Vanessa are younger, the next generation.

While Betty and Filth seem to feel that their world is over, Oliver and Vanessa inhabit the world that comes after.

The character of Vanessa introduces a new model of femininity. Gardam's older female characters, if they share any traits, are characterized as both knowing and secretive. The older women do not lack strength, but there is a certain degree to which they become emotionally obligated to men such as Filth. They take care of him while keeping their inner lives private and separate. Vanessa, however, is introduced "snarling and snapping incisively into the sitting-room phone" (145). There is a hardness to her, and a defensiveness. Her portrayal is somewhat jarring, and it is difficult to know what judgement is being made of the younger generation through her characterization. However, she certainly represents a new generation of independent women who seem determined not to be obligated to anybody.

While Betty and Filth never had children, Oliver is the son of a Raj orphan in the era post-Empire; his character adds another layer to Gardam's depiction of Raj orphans and their legacy. The way that Oliver describes his mother is not unlike Pat's description of Mrs. Ingoldby: she's "vague and undemonstrative" (145), and underneath that layer of mystery, she's left up to interpretation. Filth compares Claire to an angel (141), while Babs tells her she has a "nauseating" level of perfection (139), and Vanessa talks about the "silence as she sits and smiles" (147). Some part of Oliver thinks of his mother alternatively as selfless and a torturer (145); in the end, he is simply left with his adoration of her. Oliver's conflicted understanding of his mother is perhaps evidence of the same kind of self-protective behavior that other Raj orphans—Filth, Betty, Mrs. Ingoldby—exhibit.

Discussion Question 1

What do you make of the fact that Claire also finds Babs' voice similar to Betty's?

Discussion Question 2

If Vanessa is a new model of femininity, what do you make of Oliver? How does the novel portray gender dynamics in the younger generation?

Discussion Question 3

The novel's narrator tells us that Claire is mistaken when she thinks that Filth does not notice anything. How have we seen Filth be more perceptive than people give him credit for?

Vocabulary

astringent, stodgy, courtesan, canny, squalid, incisively

Book I: A Light House (II) – Book II: Scene: Inner Temple (II)

Summary

Filth woke up in Claire's guest bedroom, and he was almost immediately thrown into a flashback triggered by her hatboxes, which reminded him of Wales. He remembered being beaten for wetting the bed; "she got Cumberledge almost every morning" (149). But soon Claire came in with tea, dispelling the memory. She explained that Oliver was coming with Vanessa. Filth had to be told who Oliver was, never having asked about nor met him in the 40 years since he had been born.

That afternoon, Oliver took Claire out, despite her protests about her weak heart. He took her to Cambridge, where she wondered at the fashion choices of the young people. They had tea at Oliver's old college, where a "huge, gentle old man" who knew Oliver greeted them, "looked affectionately" at the hat Claire had worn as a disguise in case her heart doctor saw her out and about (154), and told Claire how fond he was of Oliver. Claire was delighted by him, and sure that "he was an actor who does E. M. Forster parts" (155). Oliver assured Claire he was the Dean.

Back at Claire's house, Filth and Vanessa were drinking tea on the lawn, Filth in a hammock. Vanessa chatted 'magnanimously' with Filth about what she supposed was his career as a family solicitor in Dorset (155). She was intrigued by Filth, liking him in a way that confused her. Vanessa asked if Filth wanted a swing on the rope, and Filth compared her to Mr. Pierrepoint, a British executioner in the early 1900s. They discuss Pierrepoint's last case, where he executed a woman, Ruth Ellis, who had killed her lover just after losing her baby.

'I think,' [Vanessa] said, […] we have to forgive history a very great deal.'

'I think', [Filth] said, 'that we should forgive history almost nothing.' (157)

He told Vanessa he had met Hong Kong's government English hangman—"not at all sadistic. Just unimaginative and conformist" (157). Vanessa brought up the fact that Mr. Pierrepoint had been divorced by two wives, and had resigned after the Ellis case.

Vanessa told Filth that marriage and relationships had changed—now, there was "time for three or four professions or partnerships" (158). Filth told Vanessa that he and Betty had had no children, that it had been deliberate due to their upbringing as Raj orphans: "If you've not been loved as a child, you don't know how to love a child" (159). For example, "Who would want a parent like you?" (159), Filth asked Vanessa. She was furious, and told him she had been loved, had money and could have a child when she was 50 if she liked. Filth told her that he hated children, and that Betty had known they "must not have a child because of the child I was myself" (159).

Vanessa and Oliver left soon after, stopping at the church on the way so Oliver could visit his dad's grave. Vanessa went inside to see the famous statue, and had an experience with the Vicar very similar to Filth's. When they went back to Claire's the next day, Filth was gone. Claire gave Oliver the package of Betty's things Filth had brought. When Vanessa and Oliver opened the package, they realized that it was Betty's jewelery, not recipe books as Claire had supposed. Vanessa saw a piece of Filth's letterhead and realized that 'Eddie the family solicitor' was in fact Sir Edward Feathers, Old Filth, the legend, and was mortified. Oliver asked her to marry him and she agreed, though she was still preoccupied with her embarrassment over her conversation with Filth. They got married six months later—Filth was invited, but had already forgotten them—and soon after their baby was born. Vanessa and Oliver named the baby Edward George, after Filth. "Thus is the world peopled" (166).

Book II begins with a second "Scene: Inner Temple," another present-tense one act play. In an almost deserted smoking room, Filth is hidden in a wingchair facing a portrait of Mr. Attlee, half asleep. This time, it is a conversation between the Queen's Remembrancer (QR) and the Purveyor of Seals and Ordinances (PS&O) that have a discussion about Filth, presented as a script. They begin again with the idea that nothing much ever went wrong for Filth. They mention that Filth didn't fight in the war—had a crack-up perhaps, and his posting had something to do with the Royal Family. The PS&O quotes Kipling: "What should they know of England/Who only England know" (170). Kipling was also a Raj orphan, and had a crack-up. They both leave, thinking they have missed Filth. Filth asks Mr. Attlee if he has the courage to write his memoirs. Mr. Attlee replies that he better keep his secrets.

Analysis

As time goes on, the 'locked' shutter keeping the tragedy in Wales hidden becomes more and more difficult for Filth to keep shut. "A Light House" (II) begins with a traumatic flashback triggered by Claire's hatboxes. Filth is not merely remembering - he becomes ensconced in the feelings of the memory that arises, believing momentarily that he is back in Wales and at the mercy of Ma Didds. The memory seems to be insisting that it be dealt with. Soon, it seems, Filth will reach a breaking point.

Vanessa is drawn to Filth in a way that surprises her; her offer to swing Filth in the hammock seems somewhat uncharacteristic. Here we see how someone—a woman—gets drawn into the role of Filth's caretaker. Yet, what we have instead is a conversation about Mr. Pierrepoint, the executioner. The case that they discuss is one where the final decision seems unusually cruel and unjust; it seems to serve as a reminder of the dark side of Britain's character in the not-so-distant past. Bringing the point home is the discussion of the executioner in Hong Kong who is not sadistic, just a conformist.

The executioner was simply a conformist: one might say he was 'just following orders,' and it is under that banner that atrocities are committed. With this one sentence, Gardam offers up an explanation for some of the worst elements of the British Imperialist system. How was it that Filth was allowed to be torn away from Ada, the only

mother he ever knew, when everyone involved knew that he would suffer needlessly and perhaps never recover? It was not the law—but “it is the custom” (26), as Auntie May said.

That custom leaves real psychological scars on the citizens it governs. Those scars are perpetuated, emotional neglect passing from one generation to the next like a disease. Filth points out that a dearth of love during childhood can be passed on when that child becomes an epidemic, until the cycle becomes endless. Yet there are some who refuse to conform. Filth’s decision not to have children was a deliberate move to discontinue a malicious cycle. And Vanessa points out some interesting facts in regard to Mr. Pierrepoint - he resigned after Ruth Ellis, and he had two wives leave him. It is small, but it perhaps speaks to some token sign of individual agency nonetheless—that some still retained the ability to disapprove of and reject what their country required of them. Filth says that “we should forgive history almost nothing” (157). It is this kind of accountability, perhaps, that keeps the cruelties of the past from repeating themselves.

The beginning of Book II begins with yet another “Scene,” yet this time Filth is present to listen to the conversation being had about him. Once again, we get the misconception of Filth’s long and uneventful life reiterated; now that we know this was not true, we also know that the existence of this misconception is a testament to Filth’s acting skills—his success in “presenting to the world the full man, the completed and successful being” (109). The conversation about Filth’s wartime activities also provides a bit of foreshadowing, letting us know where the novel will take us in its next chapters.

The line “What should they know of England/ Who only England know” is uttered rather casually by the PS&O, as a way of referencing the QR and PS&O’s lack of concrete knowledge of Filth’s life. However, the line rings louder than the situation it is uttered in. The line is part of a poem called “The English Flag” by Rudyard Kipling. The poem calls on British citizens to “go forth” and find the English flag where it hangs all over the world (Kipling Society UK); moreover, it asks them to remember the hardship that had gone into obtaining that empire, and what work was still required of its citizens for its upkeep.The idea that those who have not explored the British Empire do not know England has interesting implications for Filth’s liminal identity. Those that understand what England is beyond its ancestral borders—like Filth—understand their country best. While it appears that he struggles to belong fully to either an Eastern or British cultural identity, Kipling’s poem suggests that to belong to more than one place is actually integral to a true British identity.

This is not the first time that the text has referenced Kipling. He is amongst the authors Eddie and Pat are said to have studied; Eddie even once makes the comparison between Kipling’s childhood and his own. Gardam notes her debt to Kipling’s Autobiography in the Acknowledgements at the end of the novel. Yet while in “Scene: Inner Temple” (II) the QR states that Kipling “Hated the Empire” at seven (170)—notably, at the time he was first sent away from his family home in India, much the way Filth was sent to Wales—Kipling was a famous supporter of colonial power and British rule in his later life. He felt that it was the white man’s duty to show ‘less civilized’ nations the right way to live, a sentiment evidenced by poems such as “White Man’s

Burden." Betty certainly had the feeling that Hong Kong was a “place to be responsible for” (63), but this does not seem to be Filth’s view. His comments about conformity, the long-term effect of being ripped away from one’s family at a young age, and the way we should forgive history almost nothing all suggest that he disagrees with Mr. Kipling to some degree. We are told that Claire is “mistaken” when she assumes that Filth notices nothing (144); perhaps this is the insightfulness the narrator meant to assert.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the line, “thus is the world is peopled?” Why would Gardam choose to end Book I like this?

Discussion Question 2

Is the novel making a judgement about the younger generation through the portrayal of Vanessa and Oliver? If so, what do you think that is?

Discussion Question 3

Though Filth is a fictional character, this novel is very much a pretty thorough telling of his life story. What do you make of the portrait of Mr. Attlee telling Filth to keep his secrets?

Vocabulary

marquetry, magnanimous, gymkhana, sadistic, interminable, post-prandial, conchie

Book II: The Watch – To Colombo

Summary

“The Watch” begins chronologically just after “School,” after Eddie saw Pat’s name amongst the soldiers killed while on the train back from Oxford. He got off the train and switched for one that would take him close to High House. He travelled in a kind of fugue, at one point in a newspaper van, until he reached “what he felt to be his home” (171). The landscape surrounding High House was filled with army vehicles and army huts, but the house was deserted. He returned to his aunts’ house. His aunts had news: they were each getting married. They had apparently put off their plans until they had gotten Eddie “off [their]” hands (173), and Eddie’s father had been paying them well for taking care of Eddie all these years. Eddie’s aunts knew about Pat’s death as well—Isobel had phoned the house, but left no return number. As a parting gift, before being sent to Singapore as an evacuee, Eddie was given his father’s old watch.

“To Colombo” continues where “The Watch” left off. Eddie spent a joyless Christmas with his aunts, and then one day Aunt Muriel drove Eddie to the harbor. Eddie asked Muriel for some money, in case of emergencies. Aunt Muriel reluctantly gave him the seven pounds in her purse. Eddie took a ferry and a train, but when he got to the port his boat to Singapore was supposed to leave from, he was told it would not be ready to leave for another three weeks.

Eddie passed the three weeks billeted at a farm, working and walking, writing letters to both of his old schools. The maidservant there, who had given him a glass of buttermilk on his first day, tried to get into his bed one night. Terrified, he threw her out. The next time she came, he let her. He lost his virginity to her, and spent the next night with her as well. The third night she spent with him he enjoyed less, and she asked what he was going to pay her. He had nothing to give. She asked for his watch, but he refused.

The next day his ship was ready, and so he left for the harbor and boarded the Breath o’Dunoon. There was only one other evacuee, who Eddie met below decks. He was Oriental, appeared to be 10 but in a body of a child of six. He was doing card tricks. He introduced himself as Albert Loss. It was actually Albert Ross, from his Scottish side, but “being also Hakka Chinese” he could not pronounce his Rs and thus went by Loss (180). Others at school had called him Albert Ross—Albat Ross, with the English accent—and Coleridge, after the albatross from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner. He was apparently a regular boat passenger, and well-versed on their 12-week trip to Singapore, via Sierra Leone. When asked, he told Eddie that he was actually 14. Over the course of their trip to Freetown, Loss told Eddie that he spoke Malay, Hindi, and Chinese, and could cook, but “only French cuisine” (182). He was supposed to have gone to Eton.

Freetown was filled with heat and a sense of inertia, peopled by native Africans and RAF personnel. “The smell of Africa was like chloroform” (182). “Eddie, exalted to be

free, warm, deflowered and full of bananas, lay on the sand" (183); he had eaten 36 bananas. Loss told him he was surprised at Eddie's intemperance. However, Eddie soon began to yell about the futility of the war, predicting the swift end of the country. He was carted off the beach by a Red Cross worker and put to bed. He continued to rave about the war and "dead pilots" (186) for three days. Loss, who had followed Eddie, told the medic that Eddie would "be OK. He needed to blow up" (186).

A fortnight later, a mostly-recovered Eddie was able to board the boat to Singapore with Loss. When Eddie was well enough he began to wander above deck. He felt "hollow […] but safe at last," thinking he could be okay if he could stay forever "on the circle of the sea" (187). Loss, having listened to Eddie's ravings while he was sick, encouraged Eddie to tell him about Ma Didds—"You'll have to tell somebody, some day" (187). Eddie froze. This conversation seemed to be a turning point, however, as Eddie began to relax afterward.

When the boat neared Colombo, Eddie and Loss noted smoke in the sky. Loss told Eddie that Singapore had fallen to the Japanese. This was confirmed when the boat got close enough to Colombo and Eddie and Loss saw the Japanese flags in every window. The harbor at Colombo was filled with British refugees, and they could see Japanese fighter planes dropping bombs in the distance. Sure that Colombo would be taken next, it was decided that the boat should refuel and turn around, taking refugees back to England. Loss decided to stay, despite Eddie's protests. Loss left Eddie his deck of cards—"An Albat Ross feather. A feather to Feathers" (190-191)—and asked for Eddie's father's watch. Eddie gave it to him.

Loss told Eddie he would be safe. "'Just look – ' and he pointed up behind up behind Eddie at the mast-head '– an albatross'" (191). Eddie looked but saw nothing, and by the time he looked back Loss was gone.

Analysis

This chapter is entitled "The Watch," yet the watch does not make an appearance until the end of the chapter. Instead we have another meditation on 'home,' as we see Eddie once more without anywhere or anyone to belong to. The place Eddie "felt to be his home" (171) is completely deserted; his aunts reveal that they have been pocketing his father's money in return for taking care of him for years, yet they have never really cared about Eddie. Eddie is done with public school, guaranteed a place at Oxford but not quite yet, and unable to sign up for the army the way he wants to. Never has he ever been quite so unmoored, and it is only once all of his other ties have been thoroughly severed that Eddie's father's watch makes its appearance.

The watch has a history; as an heirloom that has been passed on it represents Eddie's father and the family he could have had in him. In "School," Eddie saw that watch on his father's wrist in a photograph of him from 1914 and wondered if it had been an "amulet" (96), a protective charm that kept him safe throughout the war. Eddie takes the watch before he makes his own harrowing journey; in fact, without family or money, the watch

is Eddie's only real possession. He keeps it close to him for much of his journey, refusing to give it to the buttermilk girl, but once he reaches Colombo he decides to give it up. At this point Eddie knows that his father is probably dead or will die soon, with the Japanese having taken over Singapore. Yet he willingly gives up this, his last tie to his father. If Eddie thought the watch to truly be an "amulet," he does not value its protective power for himself. Moreover, it appears that by giving over the watch, Eddie is making a statement about the value of his ties to his father, giving up on the idea of ever belonging to him.

Albert Ross, the Chinese-Scottish dwarf of almost-mythical intelligence and ability, is perhaps one of the most heavy-handed symbols of the novel. His name explicitly alludes to the albatross from The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, a poem by Samuel Coleridge. In the poem, the albatross represents a kind of psychological burden or curse. The play on Albert Ross's name makes it clear that Eddie's curse is Loss. Everyone he has ever loved has either died, been separated from him, or abandoned him. Eddie meets Albert when he has just found out that his best friend Pat had died in the war, and Albert follows him through these first stages of his grief, and his ravings in Freetown.

While Eddie is at his most unmoored in this chapter, there is also a feeling of freedom that takes hold of him. He sleeps with a woman, drinks beer, eats far too many bananas; in the end, all these things make him sick, but he has the experience of letting go. On the ship, he feels "hollow […] but safe at last," and wished that he could stay at sea forever (187). This appears to be the path taken by Albert Ross, who enjoys a life of complete freedom and no emotional ties. Yet when Albert Ross asks Eddie if he would like to come with him, Eddie says no, and with that answer he also seems to reject Albert's kind of freedom.

The fall of Singapore to the Japanese was part of the Axis powers' takeover of Malaya. Though he never lands, Eddie is there to see his homeland be taken out of the hands of the British. In some ways, Eddie's loss of his father's watch could also symbolize the end of his Father's time, the time of British colonial power, especially in Malaya. Though Malaya was reclaimed by the British after the Japanese surrender in 1945, wide-scale decolonization became a priority after 1945 and Malaysia eventually was able to declare independence from Britain. But moreover, Eddie's trip to Singapore and back reminds us that WWII was not just fought in Europe. Both the British colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone, as well as Singapore and Malaysia at large, become implicated in Europe's wars, just like many others did due to their ties to different colonial powers.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Albert Ross being a dwarf?

Discussion Question 2

What is it about the sea that makes Eddie feel "safe at last"? What is it that he feels he needed to be saved from?

Discussion Question 3

Albert Ross gives Eddie his cards before he goes—"A feathers to Feathers" (191). What is the significance of this act? What do you think it symbolises?

Vocabulary

ricked, intemperate, noisome, davits, chuntered, impregnable, regatta

Book II: The Donheads (IV)

Summary

“The Donheads” (IV) takes place sometime after “The Donheads” (I); Veneering had died, and Filth found himself missing the man. Their accidental evening together had turned into twice-weekly chess meetings and occasional meals together. “He’d told Veneering more than he’d ever told Betty – though never about Ma Didds” (194). Filth told Veneering a little about his return journey from Colombo; we learn that Filth’s father died in Singapore. Veneering at one point asked Filth if he had written about his life. Filth replied that he had not—“Old Barrister’s memoirs are all deadly” (193). Veneering agreed, but said that Filth story might have surprised those who knew him. Filth attempted it one day, yet found that while his memories seemed endless, they would not come out on paper; that only God could see him fully, and that it would be “blasphemous” to try (195). “Such a magnitude of impressions, such a magnitude of emotion. Where was truth to be found?” (195). He remembered a conversation with Veneering about why Filth had wanted to become an advocate: he had had an interest in Justice. He and Veneering agreed that “justice is not the truth,” though law is nevertheless “a good instinct” (195).

One day, in a fit of impulsiveness, Filth decided that he wanted to take a trip to Malmesbury, where he had been stationed during the war. His housekeeper reminded him that there would be stairs he did not know, and to be careful. The next time she came in to see him, Filth told her that he would not be requiring her or Garbutt’s services any longer. He still felt pleased by this decision when he had arrived in Malmesbury, as though he had reclaimed some of his autonomy by showing his employees that he was his own master. He stumbled on the stairs down to dinner, and had a swollen ankle by the next morning.

Upon learning of the wait at the local hospital, Filth called the hotel to have his bags and a taxi sent to take him back home. In the taxi, however, Filth mentioned that he had actually wanted to see the nearby town of Badminton, where he had actually been stationed, and the taxi driver took him to a nice hotel there. There, they sent for a doctor. Filth sat with his lunch, humiliated and a little frightened, and then “very cautiously, a snip at a time, allowed himself the past” (199).

The narrative then returns to Eddie’s boat as it makes its return journey, chronologically sometime after “To Colombo.” Filth had told Veneering that there had been many casualties on the boat ride, and here we see a dying woman, Mrs. Robinson, trying to get Eddie to contact people for her if he should get ‘Home.’ The next day there was a stain where she had been. Eddie heard someone say that she had died of gangrene, and that “The boy”—Eddie—“don’t look much better. He’s filth all through” (199).

The passengers finally spot land. Eddie, incredibly ill, realized that he had not seen his address book for a while. He guessed that Loss had stolen it, simply because he was a

“natural crook” (201). He himself had taken Mrs. Robertson’s bag when she was taken away. He found a string of pearls in her bag and was glad Loss was not there to steal them. He was brought onto land on a stretcher. Oils, his Housemaster from prep school, and Isobel Ingoldby were there to meet him.

The narrative then returns to Filth in his hotel in Badminton. He woke up and thought the girl serving his tea was the buttermilk girl for a moment. The girl asked Filth if he had been a soldier in town; her grandmother had lived there during the war, and had told her granddaughter stories about that time, which the girl proceeds to tell Filth. Queen Mary had been hidden there during the war to keep her safe, and she had apparently had a soft spot for soldiers with a stammer, as they reminded her of her son, the King. The next day, the girl invited Filth to meet her grandmother. She told another story, this time about a young junior Platoon Commander with a stammer that Queen Mary had taken a liking to, who was always in the library studying Law books. Filth said he had better not meet her gran.

The narrative once again returns to a younger Eddie, waking up in a hospital after his long journey back to England. He spent a while drifting in and out of consciousness; a few times he woke up to Oils, dressed in an antiseptic suit as Eddie was contagious. Oils told Eddie, when he had recovered some, that they had known to come meet him due to a signal sent from Colombo that was received at Bletchley Park, where Isobel was. It would have had to have been sent by someone who knew all of their addresses.

Eddie was then sent to another isolation ward in Plymouth. Isobel came to visit, briefly. Eddie had begun to stammer intermittently. He begged Isobel to get him near to Isobel, “Somehow. For ever” (208). “‘Child,’ she said, and was gone” (208). Six months later Eddie was released, and he decided to join the Army rather than going to Oxford. The recruitment officer in Gloucestershire—the regiment that, we learned in “School,” Eddie’s father had served in—assigned Eddie to Queen Mary’s protective forces. Eddie was disappointed, as it wasn’t ‘real’ soldiering. The officer then told Eddie that he had suffered from three different types of parasitic worm—and venereal disease.

Filth as an old man returned to Badminton House in a wheelchair (due to his ankle), accompanied by the girl and her grandmother. The narrative then returns to his experience as a soldier there. He had not seen Queen Mary for the first month, but after he did, he was invited to tea with her the next week. He became a favorite of hers, holding her wool and keeping her company, albeit somewhat unwillingly. When she learned that he had never been to London she becomes determined to take him there, and so the royal coach was re-attached to the train for the journey. Upon arrival Queen Mary gave him a list of places he ought to visit, but Eddie instead went to visit Isobel.

At first he was disappointed with her, thinking her rather ordinary, but then she opened her dressing gown and they spent the rest of the day having sex. Eddie barely roused himself in time to catch the train back. Isobel told him she was in love with him, but Eddie was too busy pulling on his scattered clothes. He overpaid a taxi driver to get him to the station in time. On the train back, there was a delay due to an unexploded bomb

on the line. Queen Mary sent for him. Eddie told her he had spent the day in a taxi driving around. He realized that she was afraid, though she did not show it.

Back in the ‘present,’ Filth finished his lovely day with the girl and her grandmother by purchasing some postcards; he wrote messages to Garbutt, his neighbor Chloe, and Claire. By the early hours of the next morning Filth realized he was ill. He began to read the Gideon’s Bible, as he had during sleepless nights in hotels during his legal career. He thought how Christ would have made an excellent lawyer. He told Christ that the law could “always do with a going over,” and that “execution should be entirely out” (225). He read the Sermon on the Mount, and thought how he would “like to be on another Bench listening to Christ going for the defence in a Case to do with, say, a land-reclamation” (225). He then felt a pain in his chest. “It’s the Hand of God, he thought” (225).

Garbutt was helping Filth’s neighbor Chloe with her garden when her phone rang. It was the hotel, calling to say that Filth had had a heart attack. She told them she and Filth were not that close, and hung up. Garbutt immediately raced in and called back. Next we know, he had found Filth in a public ward in the hospital near where he had been.

Filth, in the hospital, could not entirely recall where and with whom he had been the afternoon before.

"My memory has always been so reliable. Perhaps too reliable. It has never spared me. Memory and desire, he thought. Who said that? Without memory and desire life is pointless? I long ago lost any sort of desire. Now memory" (226).

Filth realized then that “he had lost desire” (226), though he did not mean sexual desire. He thought how repellent he found young people who seemed “all like rabbits” (227), and homosexuals and divorce. There were colored people around his bed. “These are not the black people of the Empire, he thought, and then realized that that was exactly what most of them were” (227). He asked if there were any Malays amongst them, talked about Loss who he thought he must have been bombed by the Japanese, and then apologized when he realized one of the doctors was Japanese. Filth had not realized, due to the man’s “West Country accent” (227).

Filth slept; he once he thought he saw Garbutt. He asked for a priest. He thought that he had been through worse times, yet Filth knew there would not be many more times to be had. "Life ends. You’re tired of it anyway. No memory. No desire. Yet you don’t want it to be over. Not quite yet (227)." Filth asked again for a priest, but upon his arrival the next day, Filth was feeling better. Moreover, the priest wore “jeans and a T-shirt and Filth did not believe in him” (228).

After six months, the young Eddie was posted away from Badminton, and the war ended soon after. He went to Oxford, took a first in Law (meaning that he graduated with first-class honors), and after two years and was called to the Bar. He then set about trying to find a seat in somebody’s Chambers.

The chapter ends with a new line, given without context: “Memory and desire, he thought” (228).

Analysis

Though Filth could not bring himself to talk about Ma Didds, the friendship that Filth strikes up with Veneering is notable in that here, at the end of his life, Filth is letting someone know him. We know that public perception of Filth is not accurate. Veneering is correct when he says that Filth’s Memoirs would have surprised everyone. But Filth is finally learning how to drop his act and let someone in. Moreover, Filth is getting to know someone else; he and Veneering hated each other, but now Filth finds him interesting, and a good companion.

In her story about Filth’s life, Gardam has Filth question how he would write his own story, and the question of Filth’s memoirs brings questions about Gardam’s own task to bear. Filth, in the end, cannot bring himself to actually write his memories down, though he takes his time thinking through all of them. He finds that, despite all of the Opinions and Judgements he wrote as a lawyer and judge, he cannot find the “truth” of his own life amongst the magnitude of his impressions and emotions. In some ways, Gardam paints the author as a God-like figure; she is the one who sees Filth fully, as she created him. Yet at the same time Gardam seems to be reminding us that human lives will always defy complete expression. They can be turned into narrative, but no life could be adequately summarized in such a form. But this does not mean that narrative is not meaningful and important. Justice is not truth, Veneering and Filth agree. Just like narrative, justice is imposed meaning upon a set of facts. Yet “law is an important instinct” (195); so too, perhaps, is narrative.

Once again, this chapter does not stick to a particular timeline; in fact, the narrative alternates timelines at an unprecedented frequency. This seems in part to do with the way that Filth has begun to allow himself to think about his history more frequently. First he begins to open up to Veneering, and then, after Veneering’s death, he makes a trip to Malmesbury in a conscious attempt to revisit his past. Rather than merely ‘opening shutters’ on the past, however, now it appears as though Filth views these memories as a kind of indulgence. Sitting in his hotel after he had rolled his ankle, he “very cautiously, a snip at a time, allowed himself the past” (199).

Though Albert Ross is gone, Filth’s passage back from Singapore once again echoes of Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. In the poem, the Ancient Mariner accosts a guest at a wedding, and forces the guest to listen to his story. In Coleridge’s poem, the albatross is a good omen, leading the ship in the right direction before it is senselessly shot by the Mariner. This places a kind of curse upon the ship, which becomes trapped on a calm sea with no wind; the crew is dying of thirst, hence the famous line, “water, water, everywhere, nor a drop to drink” (Coleridge 121-2). The albatross is hung around the Mariner’s neck as a reminder of his crime. Life-in-Death and Death, aboard a ghostly ship, gamble for the lives of the crew. Life-in-Death wins the Mariner’s life, but the rest of the sailors die. It is only when the Mariner realizes that all God’s creatures

are worthy of reverence and regains the ability to pray that the albatross drops from his neck. Part of the Mariner's penance is that he must continue to tell his story in order for others to learn from his experience.

There are many links that can be made between Filth and the Mariner, and the Mariner's final penance may give us clues as to what is in store for Filth. Like the Mariner, Eddie watches many people die around him on his boat ride. While Eddie's physical albatross has left him, his curse, to continue to lose those that he loves, also remains with him. But most importantly, the Mariner is compelled to tell his tale forever after:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,

That agony returns:

And till my ghastly tale is told,

This heart within me burns. (Coleridge 583-586)

Mr. Attlee, the portrait from "Scene: Inner Temple" (II) bid Filth keep his secrets, and we know Filth could not find it within himself to write his Memoirs. Yet, Albert Ross once told Eddie that he would have to talk about Ma Didds one day, and the novel seems to be setting us up for that reveal as Filth's memories struggle more and more to come to the fore.

In this chapter we also see another side to Eddie being fleshed out. Filth, very ill in the hospital, thinks that it is memory and desire that keeps life going: the knowledge of what has come before, and an unfulfilled need for something yet to come. He thinks that desire is now missing in his life. But the younger Eddie does still have desire—for Isobel and the home he feels she could represent, enough so that he lies to the Queen about seeing her; desire for a position that brings him honor, more so than guarding an already heavily guarded Queen; and desire for success, as he dutifully studies his law books through the war and, once at Oxford, took a first in law after only two years. Though others may have accused him of being unimaginative, Eddie does still have the ability to desire something of his future.

Discussion Question 1

In "Tulips," Betty compares Filth to Christ; in this chapter, Filth thinks that Christ would make an excellent lawyer. What do you think Gardam is trying to say with these comparisons?

Discussion Question 2

Book II: The Donheads (IV) ends with the phrase "Memory and Desire"; the line floats on its own at the end of the chapter, without further contextual clues to tell us which

narrative it belongs to, implying that it somehow refers to both. How does this phrase resonate particularly with the two pieces of Filth's story that are shared in this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

How does Gardam's portrait of Queen Mary contribute to the novel's themes?

Vocabulary

sibilant, tumbril, furtive

Book II: Chambers – Last Rites

Summary

“Chambers” begins in January, 1947. Eddie worked in “a small set of undistinguished Chambers” (229). He still had not received his inheritance and was living cheaply, doing a job he was not all that inspired by. One day, however, the Junior Clerk ran into Eddie’s office to tell him excitedly that he had a client, likely to bring him to Hong Kong. The case had been brought to him by a Chinese dwarf who had turned up in a Rolls Royce. Eddie ran out of the room, leaving the Clerk to scold him for his lack of gravitas. Eddie found Albert Loss in the Clerk’s room. Loss had a case for him. Eddie agreed, and asked after his old watch, which Ross replied had been “sacrificed in the avuncular search” (233). Loss asked if Eddie was met when his boat docked at Liverpool. It was Loss who had sent the signal to Bletchley Park, after he had taken Eddie’s address book.

“Last Rites” begins sometime after the later action of “The Donheads” (IV), with the hotel phoning Claire to tell her of Filth’s hospital stay. Apparently, he had merely had indigestion, which had given him all the symptoms of a heart attack. Filth, back at the hotel, ‘tottered’ into the bar and asked for a priest. “The nice girl” rang Claire for him (235). He told Claire that he had unfinished business—“You and I and Babs […] And Cumberledge” (235). He asked for Claire’s priest (Father Tansy), the man who Filth had met and disliked so thoroughly at the church near her house.

The next day Filth received a letter from Claire. In it, she told Filth to forget “the matter of [their] rotten childhood,” saying that she had never let it trouble her (236). She told him that she had seen Cumberledge just a few years ago; he had been a Dean at Cambridge, and had been there when Oliver took her up for tea. She referred then to “our murder” (237). "We three – not Cumberledge – were absorbed in the process of handing over responsibility to the powers of darkness whom we had met as children, and who had met us. […] We were of the jungle (237)"

Claire explained that Babs, whom Ma Didds was the cruelest to, was probably the best of them, and that is why she had gone mad. Claire wrote that Filth was not really a child then, that he was more of a child now. He and Betty had saved each other, she thought, “But no one ever loved you like I did, Teddy” (238). Claire herself was the coldest, “the harshest,” “the actress,” “the one who suggested the murder” (238). Cumberledge was “utterly passive,” yet “something deep in him remained untouched by her” (238). Filth, on the other hand, had been “horribly touched by her," and he “became no good at love” (238). Claire herself could not love; instead, she was “all charm” (238). She finished her letter by saying that she was glad she thought of the murder, and that she enjoyed it. “It was you who struck the blow, dear Teddy, but they can’t hang you now” (239). She signed her letter off, “Love from Claire” (239).

Filth tore the letter up. He despised himself for wanting a priest, yet thought that he "must tell someone that when [he] was eight years old [he] killed a woman in cold blood" (239). As he fell asleep that night, he saw Veneering's face, but told him to go away, as he was not ready to talk yet. A few days later, Father Tansy arrived with Babs in tow. He told Father Tansy that he wanted to know why he lost or been left by all those whom he loved or who loved him. He wondered if it had been some kind of penance, "because of what I did when I was eight years old, living with Babs and Claire in Wales, fostered by a woman called Ma Didds" (241-242).

Babs explained that Ma Didds had been sent children from all over the Empire, and that by the time the three of them had arrived, she had begun to hate children. She hated Cumberledge the most. Filth explained that Cumberledge was there when they arrived. Ma Didds had never hurt Claire, who was younger and pretty, but it was Claire who decided they should kill Ma Didds. One day when Ma Didds was out, Claire, Babs and Eddie beheaded a hen and burned the head with some of Ma Didds's hair from her hairbrush, the way they had seen done in the Eastern communities they had grown up in. Ma Didds came home and saw the henhouse open, and came furiously for Cumberledge. At the top of the stairs, however, Eddie grabbed the wrist of the hand holding her cane, the other clutching her stomach, as she used to do ("as if she had a baby inside her" (243)). Eddie let go suddenly, and she fell back down the stairs. Babs said that she had not died then, but had been taken to the hospital where they discovered that she had stomach cancer. She died during an emergency operation for her cancer, but she would have died in a few days anyway. Filth had not known that.

Father Tansy asked if he and Babs had come asking for absolution. "Eddie Feathers, Old Filth, the Judge, Fevvers, a Master of the Inner Temple, Teddy – pillar of justice, arbitrator of truth – said nothing" (246), but at last replied that no, he did not repent. Neither did Babs, and they knew Claire did not either. Tansy asked what became of Cumberledge. Filth told him he had seen him the first time he had been at Oxford, that he had led him to his college in the middle of the night, but that Filth had not recognized him then. "[Cumberledge] had a calmness and a kindness. […] His essence was unharmed" (246).

Filth told Tansy that he merely wanted to express his pity for Ma Didds. "I cannot bear to think about the cruelty at the core of the world. Or the vengeance dormant even in children. All there, ready, waiting for use. Without love. Cumberledge was given Grace. That's all I can say. We were not (246)" Tansy led them in the General Confession, asking the Lord to heal them.

Analysis

"Chambers" gives us the definitive moment of "Failed In London Try Hong Kong"—and surprisingly, it was Albert Ross who gave Eddie his first big opportunity. Once again the albatross has turned into a good omen, leading Eddie in the right direction. Moreover, though, he represents Eddie's long and troubled history of loss, yet here we learn that

he was the one that contacted Isobel and Eddie's headmaster so that he would have someone there to welcome him at his landing.

The Last Rites are a Catholic ritual performed for those near death, and the ritual includes being given absolution for one's sins. Albert Ross warned Eddie that he would "have to tell somebody [about Ma Didds], some day" (187). Even though Filth is not a Catholic and does not feel himself to be so near his death, he exploits the Catholic ritual as his chance to tell the story that has haunted him for his entire life.

Claire, Babs, and Eddie attempted to kill Ma Didds, and although they were ultimately unsuccessful, the attempt showed them all that they were capable of great darkness. Claire identifies their childhood and the influence of the societies they were born into—the Jungle—as the source of their cruelty. However, the happy portrait of Filth's childhood in Malaya does not seem to support this hypothesis entirely. The children do imitate an Eastern ritual in order to try to kill Ma Didds, but this does not really feel like the origin of that darkness. Instead, Filth identifies something else: "I cannot bear to think about the cruelty at the core of the world. Or the vengeance dormant even in children. All there, ready, waiting for use. Without love (246)." Filth does not believe that it was their 'uncivilized' and un-British upbringing that opened up the darkness inside them that allowed them to try to carry out a murder. Instead, he feels that this impulse was already there, inside all people, lying in wait.

When Filth says that the cruelty at the core of the world is "without love," he could be simply saying that the place inside all people that harbors this cruelty is a space without love. However, he could also be suggesting that this cruelty flourishes when we are not loved. He told Vanessa once that he was not loved after the age of four and a half, and therefore could never be a parent. Claire thought that Ma Didds' abuse made Filth "no good at love" (238). What is clear from both of these statements is that in this novel, a lack of love begets a lack of love.

In her Acknowledgements, Gardam notes that she was inspired by Rudyard Kipling's Baa Baa Black Sheep, a semi-autobiographical short story about two young children, Punch and Judy, who were sent away from their parents in India to be fostered by their Aunt in Britain. Punch suffered the brunt of the abuse while Judy, much like Claire, managed to keep herself safe by becoming her Aunt's favorite. Punch becomes a "Black Sheep," becoming his own alter-ego as he begins to believe the abuse that his Aunt throws at him. Punch becomes both suicidal and murderous. Eventually, the children's loving parents come back to save them, but at the end of the story, when Punch says that he and his sister "are just as much Mother's as if she had never gone," the narrator refutes that statement:

"Not altogether, O Punch, for when young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Suspicion, and Despair, all the Love in the world will not wholly take away that knowledge; though it may turn darkened eyes for a while to the light, and teach Faith where no Faith was (Kipling)."

Filth became aware of a darkness in his core and in the core of the world on the day that he conspired to kill his foster mother, and the love he is offered by other characters—Betty, Isobel, Claire—cannot fully wipe away that knowledge. In the end, Filth must confront the episode in which he came to this awareness in order to move past it. However, Filth does not repent of his actions - there is no taking it back. Instead, he wishes only to express pity for Ma Didds, who in some ways was a victim of the same darkness, born out of lack of love, that Filth himself was. In this way, Filth subverts his own 'dormant vengeance,' and chooses another path.

The exception to all of this is Billy Cumberledge. His name has appeared here and there throughout the text, without ever being properly introduced. Once his story is told, however, one might be surprised at what we find. Billy Cumberledge was never particularly heroic—in fact, Filth describes him as quite passive—yet he is the almost mythical figure in this text, the one invoked in dire situations. A frightened Eddie speaks his name to ward off Isobel when she came into his bedroom that night at high house. Billy is the character that happily and helpfully shows Eddie to his college and talks about how wonderful Oliver is to Claire at Cambridge.

Billy remains both innocent and unbroken, a feat that no other character is able to achieve, and by doing so perhaps counters Filth’s statement about the cruelty at the core of all beings. One man, at least, was given “Grace” (246).

Discussion Question 1

All of Old Filth has been building up to the reveal of what happened in Wales; however, when we finally hear the story for the first time, it is not from Filth himself but through a letter from Claire. What is the effect of this delivery?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Filth chooses Father Tansy to hear his final confession?

Discussion Question 3

Despite the surety with which Filth felt himself to be dying, he was, in fact, merely suffering from severe indigestion. Is this merely a dash of humor to lighten up the chapter of Filth's dark confession, or is there some significance to this?

Vocabulary

uxorial, gravitas, avuncular, anathema, maudlin, dotage, pragmatism, asters

Book II: The Revelation – Scene: Inner Temple Garden

Summary

“The Revelation” begins with Filth back home from his trip to Gloucestershire. Kate, his housekeeper, had come back to him. Filth told Kate and Garbutt that he was making another trip, this time to Malaysia to return to the place of his birth. Kate and Garbutt were once again concerned. Kate felt that flying was especially unsafe at that time, as it was soon after 9/11. Filth was nevertheless determined to go, so Garbutt unearthed his old suitcase—a brand named “Revelation,” with “Islam” written on it for the name of its previous owner—from the attic. After he had gotten back home, Filth had started to talk to Betty again; he felt he had been neglecting her memory. “Memory and desire – I must keep track of them. Mustn’t lose hold” (251).

Filth attended church on Christmas Day, and prayed for Father Tansy, Babs, Claire, Ma Didds, Sir, Oils, Miss Robertson, Auntie May, Loss, Jack and Pat Ingoldby, Isobel, the nice girl and her grandmother, Garbutt and Kate, his father and mother, Ada, Cumberledge, Veneering, for Vanessa (though he could not remember her name)—but not for Betty, as “he knew she didn’t need it” (252). When he went home, he added Kate to his will, leaving her the amethysts that had been found in his suitcase, and wrote a large cheque for Garbutt.

Filth left for Malaysia on New Years’ Day. On the flight, he saw “something he had never seen in his life before. Two suns stood side by side in the sky. A parhelion. A formidable and ancient omen of something or other, he forgot what” (253). Then the plane was surrounded by whiteness, and Filth felt that they were traveling “into dissolution,” “beyond speed […] traveling towards what he understood astronomers call ‘The Singularity’” (254). The plane stopped to refuel at Singapore. On the next flight, Filth saw that the man beside him working on court documents, and so he began a conversation with the man about being a lawyer. The man recognized Filth, knew him by reputation. Filth asked the man if he was married—he was—and said, “I used to take mine along” (255). The man told Filth that his wife was in banking, and that she might not describe herself as "his."

On the way out of the plane, Filth felt “a black misery” (255) descend upon him and wondered if he had not really hoped for the plane to be hijacked, if he had really been hoping for death. “Lived long enough. Get the thing over” (255). He wondered what was left for him at the Donheads, and thought there might “still be hope for obliteration on the return journey” (255). However, “from the top of the gangway, the East hit him full in the face," and he felt the “glorious heat” envelop him (255). He imagined Betty beside him. Someone asked him if something was wrong. He replied that nothing was wrong —“The kind arms stretched”—“For he was Home” (256).

“Scene: Inner Temple Garden” returns one last time to Gardam’s script format. This time, the conversation is between The Queen’s Remembrancer (QR) and A Lord of Appeal (L of A), standing beside a monument inscribed “Lawyers, I suppose, were children once” (257)—the same phrase that Gardam places on the first page of her novel. The bell of the Temple is tolling, “one for every year of a dead Bencher’s life” (257). Just short of 90 tolls, for Filth. The L of A mentions that Filth’s obituary had been short. “So difficult to say exactly what he’d done. When it came to it” (257). The QR reveals that Filth had died stepping off the plane; the L of A thought “that might have been the most imaginative thing [Filth] ever did” (257). The L of A asked if Filth had been traveling alone. The QR replied, “Oh yes. Travelling alone. Quite alone” (257).

Analysis

Filth’s trip to Malaysia is the third trip he makes after Betty’s death. The first was to find Babs, and then Claire, and the second to Malmesbury; each trip, Filth has meant to revisit some part of his past, to regain something he had lost. Now that he has exorcised his memories of Wales, his trip preparations look different. Filth is very clearly wrapping up his loose ends at the beginning of “The Revelation,” praying for everyone he knows and writing his housekeeper into his will. This time, Filth is going all the way back, and he does not expect to return.

On the plane to Malaysia, Filth chats to the young male lawyer seated next to him; the differences between the two men once again emphasizes the fact that the world has changed. There are many points of similarity that Filth can relate to—taking the flight, working on the plane—but at the same time, many things have changed. For one, this young lawyer is married but would not bring his wife along as Filth would Betty, because his wife has her own career.

“The kind arms stretched” could refer to the helpful person who had asked if Filth was alright. We know from “Scene: Inner Temple Garden” that Filth died shortly after he got off the plane; it could be that a stranger had their arms outstretched, seeing that Filth looked unsteady, ready to catch him if he fell. However, there could also be some other meaning to be found here as well. Filth had once had a dream, on the train home from Oxford, of being “tossed up high in someone’s arms,” someone with a “brown face” and “gloriously loving eyes” (107); the kind arms could very well be Ada’s. Filth imagines Betty beside him, and the arms could be hers. What seems certain is that these arms are welcoming Filth. He has spent his life feeling alone, yet here there are kind arms reaching out to him—welcoming him Home.

The word “Home” has special significance in the novel. In “Kotakinakulu,” Auntie May and Alistair refer to Britain as “Home” while they are abroad, with the capital H; Eddie, by contrast, felt “he had just left Home” (31) when he left Ada. The rest of Filth’s life becomes a search for home. During his school years, High House and the Ingoldbys were “what he felt to be his home” (171), but he was left behind in the end. Hong Kong may have become a suitable home for Filth, and yet even there he eventually becomes unwelcome as the native Chinese people take back their land from British rule. And

England has never quite been Home either, its customs always foreign to Filth even as he becomes adept at acting the British gentleman. But upon stepping out of the plane in Malaysia, Filth finally feels Home, the same way he referred to it as a four-year-old boy. It is as though Filth, finally able to move past his trauma in Wales, is now able to reconnect himself with the boy who came before, who was loved and felt love, who was not alone, who had a Home.

Instead of ending the novel here, however, with Filth at peace, Gardam chooses to once again return to the Inner Temple. Filth is already fading from memory. His obituary had been short, and opinion is changing, Filth's achievements underplayed. He has died with no Memoir to contest the public perception of "his long and uneventful life" (257). But the statue in the Inner Temple Garden urges us to remember that lawyers, too, were children once; everyone has a past, and a story, and got to where they are through a perfectly unique series of life events. The novel seems to urge us to be careful in our judgements of others; some of the best stories, perhaps, exist behind covers we were quick to write off as uninteresting reads.

Discussion Question 1

At the beginning of the novel, a voice tells Filth, "Nobody knew you like I did" (19). Filth does not know who says that. Are we able to guess whose voice it is, by the end of the novel? What is the significance of that voice and its statement?

Discussion Question 2

Filth dies on New Years Day, 2002, just after the events of September 11, 2001. What is the significance of 9/11 for this novel's themes?

Discussion Question 3

How would you interpret the parhelion that Filth sees on his flight?

Vocabulary

peregrination, codicil, parhelion, garrulous, prostrated

Characters

Filth

Old Filth is essentially dedicated to the portrait of one character. It introduces him by way of his colleagues, and we quickly learn that most people's perception of Filth does not quite match Filth as he is. Much of Filth has been kept secret from public life, and thus Gardam draws the reader in: who is Filth, really?

Filth goes by many names in the novel. He is named Edward (Feathers) by his mother before she dies, and is variously referred to as "Teddy," "Eddie," and "Fevvers" throughout his boyhood. In later years, he becomes "Sir Edward Feathers," "Filth" (Failed In London Try Hong Kong) and "Old Filth." The multiplicity of names points to the many iterations of his life and self he has had, trying always to belong though his life never remains stable until he meets his wife, Betty, in Hong Kong.

The first version of Eddie lives in Malaysia with his caretaker, Ada. We see very little of this young boy, but he loves Ada fiercely and is certainly strong in his opinions and unafraid when he confronts his father about the decision to send Eddie to Wales. The Eddie or Teddy who lives in Wales—and murdered a woman—suffers years of abuse but is strong and decisive, much admired by his female cousins. The Eddie, Teddy, or 'Fevvers' that comes later is not so decisive. He latches on to Pat Ingoldby, who helps 'expunge' his nightmares. Eddie excels in school and makes his way with wit and intelligence, despite the traumas of his past. This is a pattern that continues in his life. Filth as an adult manages to procure great wealth and reputation in his career as a lawyer, and manages to hide his storied past from all who know him. He charms and delights those he meets, and leaves them with the impression that he is a wonderful fellow with an entirely boring life.

Through Filth, Gardam paints an intimate portrait of the Raj Orphan, and the psychological scars such an upbringing can leave—the murder in Wales notwithstanding. Even with all of his British schooling, Filth never quite understands British culture in the way that he does Eastern cultures—intuitively, naturally. There is a suggestion that Filth feels like an actor in his own life at times, performing what is expected of him perhaps. But most of all, Eddie's early separation from his found family amongst the Malayans profoundly affects his ability to love. In many ways, what he seeks throughout his life is someone who will not abandon him, who will stay with him forever. He asks that of Isobel, who cannot give him what he needs. He finds it in Betty, but she dies before him, and so forces him to face himself.

Betty

Betty has a "healthy, outdoor face and […] eyes that had never caught her out" (64). She was born to Scottish parents living in China, and is "dumpy and tweedy with broad

Lanarkshire shoulders and square hands" (6)—a solid, dependable kind of woman, who keeps Filth safe and moving forward through his life. It is only with Betty's help that Filth has been successful in "presenting to the world the full man, the completed and successful being" (109). Of their move to Dorset, the narrator explains that "Betty was the sort of woman who had plotted that the end of her life would work and Filth, having Betty, had no fears of failure" (9); it appears that this, Filth's confidence in Betty's ability to stave off failure, applied to more than just the end of their lives.

However, Betty also has "eyes that had never caught her out" (64)—implying that often, there is something to catch her out on. As the narrative rolls on we see more and more that Betty had her secrets: an affair with her husband's nemesis, and perhaps also a wish to have children that Filth never fully heard or understood. In the safety of her mind she has a kind of playfulness that would seem almost vulgar in comparison to Filth, as she calls herself a "slut" (62) for forgetting to take her necklace off and compares the feeling of tulip bulbs to that of a man's testicles. Though she is always there when Filth needed her, she has a vibrant inner life that she keeps heavily guarded. When her obituary appears in various newspapers, we also learn that she was a very impressive woman in her own right, who accomplished a great many things throughout the course of her lifetime.

Albert Ross

Albert Ross has many names: Albert Ross, from his Scottish side, but "being also Hakka Chinese" he could not pronounce his Rs and so went by Loss (180). Thus he is someone, like Filth, with a dual identity. Unlike Filth, however, Albert seems to embrace the fact that he does not belong fully to anywhere or any culture. He was quite the traveller from a young age and is able to speak multiple languages. He uses his wit and cunning to make his own path in the world.

At school, Albert's peers called him Albert Ross—Albat Ross, with the English accent—and Coleridge, after the albatross from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The albatross from Coleridge's poem represents both a good omen and a curse; it is apt that for Eddie he acts both as a kind of guardian angel, as well as symbolizing his lifelong curse. He takes care of Eddie during their shared boat ride, and lifts him out of poverty in London with a job offer from Hong Kong. However, his name also references Loss, which seems to follow Eddie wherever he goes.

Captain Alistair Feathers

Alistair Feathers is Eddie's father, the District Officer of Kotakinakulu province and veteran of WWI. While he is Eddie's biological father, his presence in the novel is very much defined by his absence. Alistair and Eddie meet only twice: once before Eddie leaves for Wales at four and a half, when Eddie states that Alistair could not be his father; and the second time while Eddie is in Sir's school, wherein Eddie is too afraid to speak and reveal his stutter. Otherwise Alistair largely stays out of his son's life, other

than to send money and enforce certain moves in Eddie's life, such as sending him to Wales for school and evacuating him from England during the war.

Alistair has a drinking problem and a stutter; his wife was said to have "born his mad rages" (21), though he is only ever passive within the narrative. During the war he suffered a damaged ankle and shell-shock, an early name for what we now call P.T.S.D, which might explain these attributes. The trauma he suffered may also perhaps play a part in Alistair's inability to be emotionally close with his son. Moreover, we can infer from his discussion with Auntie May that Alistair was also a Raj Orphan; from what we know of other Raj Orphans in this novel, we know that his childhood may have left its own scars. Emotional attachment appears to be difficult for Raj Orphans, with their history of displacement, and it appears that this gets passed on through the generations.

Claire

Claire is the cousin of Babs and Eddie, and was also under Ma Didds's care. During her childhood, she had been "pink little Claire" (37). During their chance meeting in an Oxford tea-shop, Babs told Filth that Claire "was very passive always" (104). She got married straight out of school, and possessed what Babs called a "nauseating" level of perfection (139). Later in her life, most men seem to be somewhat infatuated with her, including her doctor, the Vicar, and her son who feels that he did not deserve her. She lives a sensible life in a light-filled bungalow; Filth remarks that she seemed to exist "in perpetual light" (142), and even compares her to an angel.

However, Claire explains that she was actually cold, unable to love (238). She calls herself an "actress" (238); she was able to escape the abuse of Ma Didds by becoming her favorite, yet it was she that suggested the murder. Claire may appear angelic, but she is only able to do so because she remains unbothered by the sins of her past.

Babs

Babs is a cousin of Eddie, and was with him, Claire, and Billy Cumberledge in Wales. She is closer in age to Eddie than Claire, but older, and did not escape Ma Didds' abuse. At first her life seems to have been going well: she went to Saint Paul's Girl's school with Betty, sang in the Paulina Voices there, and worked at Bletchley Park during the war. At the time Eddie met her at an Oxford tea-shop she had been 'dazzling' (104), but the trauma of her past eventually takes its toll. She lives her life alone except for her ailing mother and a string of lovers, and by the time Filth sees her after Betty's death, she has begun a slow descent into madness.

Babs is presented as the flipside to Claire. She "exists in perpetual darkness" (142), but where Claire is actually cold and unable to love, Claire suggests that Babs was probably the best of any of them (237). Babs' conscience tortures her until she becomes an ugly thing, whereas Claire remains unbothered by her sins, and so shines.

Billy Cumberledge

Billy Cumberledge inhabits Old Filth like a kind of benevolent ghost, omnipresent although never directly introduced. His name is scattered throughout the novel before his character is properly explained—as a kind of prayer said by a young Eddie to ward off Isobel, as the sender of one of Filth's condolence letters. He goes unrecognized, yet has a positive effect on different characters in the novel. He guides a young Eddie to his college at Oxford when he arrives in the middle of the night, though Eddie does not realize who it is until much later in life; when Christopher brings Claire to Cambridge they see him there, where he is a Dean. Claire, though she does not know who he was, is delighted with him.

Billy was one of the children kept under Ma Didds's care in Wales. He was utterly passive there, and Ma Didds directed much of her abuse at him, yet he is the one that the others think was never truly broken by Ma Didds' cruelty. He becomes a kind of shining totem for Babs, Claire and Eddie, who feel that they were all changed forever whereas he simply was not.

Auntie May

As a missionary, Auntie May represents one of the major forces of British imperialism. The guilt and self-hatred she carries is an interesting portrayal of these forces; we see the way her conscience fails to override her perception of her duty, which humanizes her while never absolving her of responsibility.

Auntie May—referred to also as Miss Neal—is the Welsh Baptist missionary who brought a newborn Eddie home to his Father's house in Malaysia. She enters the story by "striding up the gangplank" with a "yes, yes, yes" (20), and retains that kind of outward strength and certainty throughout the novel. "Auntie May never wept" (22); "big and strong, off the boat and over the landing stage to the compound" (25). After the 'tragedy' in Wales, Auntie May is set to marry another missionary and move to the Belgian Congo, but she comes back for Eddie and his cousins because she "never [deserts]" (36). She remains in the margins of Eddie's life afterward, as Eddie sends her letters during his school years at the insistence of Sir, and occasionally receives a postcard in return.

Despite this apparent strength the author reveals that inwardly, Auntie May feels very conflicted about her duties. While in Kotakinakulu, she struggles with her longing for human touch. She pushes Captain Feathers to send Eddie to England because she feels it is her duty, yet to herself Auntie May agrees that this might be more damaging to Eddie in the long run. She feels a great deal of self-hatred, after the decision is made: she tells God, "I'm lugubrious, unattractive, bossy and a failure" (30). As she takes Eddie to the Port, "she [seethes] against the father, the system, the Empire which she had begun to think was not God's ordinance" (31). Instead she decides that "love and duty" "to all people" is what matters (31). She carries on her work as a missionary,

however, and despite the fact that she appears “softer” (36) in Wales we never learn whether or not her internal conflict results in changed behaviour.

Mrs. Ingoldby

Mrs. Ingoldby is Pat’s mother and “Eddie’s first English love” (53). He finds her uncomplicated, loving, embodying a warm and motherly kind of old-fashioned hospitality. However, she has a very complicated past: she is yet another example of a Child of the Raj, with parents in the Indian Army who could not wait to get rid of her. Eddie finds Mrs. Ingoldby’s happiness in the face her past admirable and astonishing. Mrs. Ingoldby’s son, Pat, has a different opinion. He believes that his mother’s kindness is not entirely authentic—“most of them [Children of the Raj] learned never to like anyone, ever, their whole lives” (56). Her manners are merely a “modus vivendi” or “old fashioned manners” (57), the way she was brought up (56). Eddie sees her as “innocent,” whereas Pat sees her as “self-protective” (58). The tension between these two views, and the way they relate to Mrs. Ingoldby’s troubled history of displacement and abandonment, mirrors Filth’s own story.

Isobel Ingoldby

Isobel Ingoldby is Pat’s cousin. Eddie meets Isobel at High House, when he is 14, and the sight of her causes a kind of sexual awakening, though he remains terrified of her. Years later she meets Eddie’s boat, returning from Singapore. When he is well enough to do so, Eddie clings to her, asking not to be left. He visits her during the war, and they have sex; before Eddie leaves, Isobel tells him she loves him. After Betty’s death Isobel sends Filth a letter, in which she tells him she is a lesbian.

Pat Ingoldby

Pat Ingoldby is the first person that Eddie met at Sir’s Outfit. “Ingoldby that day became not only Eddie Feathers’s first friend but a part of him” (52); his “wit and logic expunged the nightmares of Eddie’s past” (52). When we see him as an older boy, upwards of 15, we see some of this wit turn cynical in the way he views his mother and the way he views Empire. His mother mentions his “black moods” (54). He and Eddie were like brothers, but eventually he, too, abandons Eddie, shutting him out when his brother dies with the phrase, “it’s family stuff” (90). Pat dies during the war as well, and so Eddie is never given the chance to find out why he was thus rejected.

Terry Veneering

Terry Veneering was a colleague of Filth's in Hong Kong. The two men disliked each other when they knew each other in Hong Kong, and Veneering was having an affair with Betty, Filth's wife. The two men eventually develop a friendship when Veneering becomes Filth's neighbor after Betty's death, and Filth opens up to him more than he

had done even with Betty. Sadly Veneering dies as well, leaving Filth alone with his past once more.

Vanessa

Vanessa is the partner of Oliver, Claire's daughter, and represents a new generation of working women. She is a highly successful lawyer and proud of her career. She grows strangely fond of Filth over their shared weekend at Claire's. She becomes defensive when Filth doubts her ever getting married or having children; she marries Oliver, and seems to learn soon after that she is pregnant. Vanessa is only able to attach Filth to his reputation—he is a legend to her, in her field—after they have parted, and is mortified. She and Oliver name their baby Edward, after Filth.

Ada

Ada is the Malaysian wet-nurse's 12-year-old daughter. She is the only person waiting for the baby and her mother's return from the hospital, and Auntie May hands Eddie off to her as soon as the boat docks. Eddie stays with Ada, whom he grows to love; in return he receives Ada's "intense, unswerving, obsessive adoration" (25). Eddie gives Ada his mother's silver pin box before he leaves, an heirloom his father bid him take during their first meeting, perhaps symbolically acknowledging Ada as the only mother he had ever known. The author never returns to Ada's story after Eddie is taken away, so the reader, like Eddie himself, never gets to know how she copes with their separation.

Symbols and Symbolism

Albert Loss

The play on Albert's name, which references both loss and Coleridge's albatross, tells us that the figurative albatross around Filth's neck is loss. The albatross from Coleridge's poem has become shorthand for a psychological burden, something unpleasant that must be carried through life, and loss and loneliness plagues Filth throughout his life.

Tulip Bulbs

Tulips commonly symbolize love, but Betty (and her death) are associated only with tulip bulbs, suggesting that Betty's love is hidden or unable to bloom fully. She dies amongst her tulip bulbs, thinking that she would never now get any closer to Filth, her husband of many years; she dies without children, having just hidden the pearls Veneering gave her, the evidence of her affair, in the garden. She never gets to watch her tulips bloom, just as perhaps she has never had the chance to fully allow her love to bloom in a full, open and reciprocal relationship. Filth thinks that "it was the tulips [...] that got her in the end" (109), suggesting that the they contributed to her death in some way.

The Eiderdown

Colonel Ingoldby's white eiderdown symbolizes peace, and the desecration of that eiderdown when the cat pees on it symbolizes the destruction of peace. A white flag is a symbol of peace and surrender; on the day that Hitler invaded Poland the eiderdown, like the white flag, lay dirtied on the ground.

Ma Didds' Stomach Cancer

Ma Didds' stomach cancer symbolizes her sick and corrupted motherhood. Babs said that the children used to see Ma Didds rocking back and forth with her hands on her stomach, "as if she had a baby inside her" (243). Instead of a baby, however, what she had inside her stomach was sickness. Likewise, the way that she mothers the foster children in her care is abusive and sick.

Claire's Weak Heart

Claire's weak heart is a symbol of her inability to love. Claire tells Eddie in her letter to him that she is all charm, and unable to love: her heart - her love - is weak. Claire's weak heart also keeps her careful, unable to fully participate in life. Her inability to love would most likely affect her similarly.

The Parhelion

The parhelion that Filth sees out the window of his plane symbolizes the final cohesion of his dual identity. The parhelion appears like two suns in the sky, but in fact, this is only an illusion: there is only one sun. Likewise, Filth's identity has always been a cohesive whole, even when it appeared to straddle two apparently irreconcilable cultures.

The Watch

The watch is an heirloom passed down to Eddie from his father, and as such represents his relationship with his father. Eddie symbolically gives up the watch to Albert Loss around the same time that his father dies in Singapore, willingly giving over his last tie to his father.

Filth's Suitcase

Filth's suitcase is by a brand called "Revelation," and thus suggests that revelation and travel are connected. In it, he places his socks from Harrods, light-weight suits from Hong Kong, and Pat Ingoldbys' clothes-brush amongst other things, symbolically placing items from throughout his life in the baggage that he will carry with him to reach his final destination: Home, and death.

Albert Ross's cards

Albert Ross's cards symbolize the randomness of death and loss. The cards are once referred to as 'Albat Ross Feathers' (190); the albatross that hangs around Eddie's neck is loss. In The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Death and Life-in-Death gamble for the lives of the Mariner and his crew; the idea that Eddie's albatross is feathered in cards suggests that his loss is unpredictable or random, or a result of some kind of cruel cosmic game.

Mrs Feather's silver box

Before a four-year-old Eddie leaves Kotakinakulu, his father gives him a silver box that used to belong to his mother. Eddie gives this to Ada, symbolically giving the title of motherhood over to her and choosing her as the mother that he recognizes.

Settings

The Donheads, England, late 1990s and early 2000s

Due to the rise of anti-British sentiment in Hong Kong leading up to their 1997 independence, Filth and Betty decided to move to a house in the Donheads. The Donheads refers to a collection of villages on the Dorset-Wiltshire border—"no place in the world is less like Hong Kong or the Far East" (8). It represents an ideal of British country living, a place of quaint villages and green hills. Betty and Filth's house is an "old low stone house that could not be seen from its gate," on a plateau overlooking "every sort and colour of English tree" (8). While it sounds like a lovely place to retire, Betty and Filth's decision to move to the Donheads is curious. Both had spent most of their lives in the East, had felt that the East felt more like Home than Britain. In that sense, Betty and Filth's move reflects their nation at large: with the demise of colonialism, both are tasked with finding a new identity, one that resides solely within the borders of Britain.

Kotakinakulu Province, Malaya (now Malaysia), 1920s

Kotakinakulu is the province in Malaysia, under British rule, where Eddie was born and spent the first four years of his life. Due in part to Eddie's youth, the place is imbued with a dreamy quality—the impression of "brown skins, brown eyes, scraps of coloured cloth," the abundant plant and wildlife, the "roar of river and rain" (24). In some ways the physical setting of Kotakinakulu is a reflection of Eddie's emotional attachment to it: Kotakinakulu is the first (and perhaps only) place where Eddie experienced unconditional love, and Malaysia's warmth and wildness is enveloping in much the same way. By contrast Eddie's father's house, the house of the District Officer of the province, is very British: full of wealth and formalities, and comparably as unwelcoming as Alistair's distant attitude toward his son.

British Imperialist Hong Kong, the second half of the 20th century

Though none of the action of Old Filth actually takes place in Hong Kong, the city nonetheless has a strong influence on the novel. Filth moved to Hong Kong when he received a job offer from Albert Ross—hence the acronym, "Failed In London Try Hong Kong." Filth and Betty (and Terry Veneering) spent most of their adult, working lives there, during Filth's tenure as a lawyer and then as a Judge.

Until 1997, Hong Kong was under British rule, and it is in this context that the novel's characters knew it. Filth and Betty lived in a place called The Peak, populated by the British elite; "in Hong Kong the Judges lived in an enclave of palaces but behind steel gates guarded night and day" (9). Despite the perceived need for security, however,

Betty expresses a distinct feeling of ownership over the city, of a responsibility that has been handed down to her generation: “the sense of a place to be proud of. We made it. We saw how to do it. A place to have been responsible for. British” (63).

High House, England, pre-WWII

High House is the Ingoldbys’ estate— a “large house on a Lancashire hilltop where the Colonel kept bees and Mrs. Ingoldby wandered vaguely and happily about, smiling at people” (53). It represents a kind of pre-war Eden, with its lushness and sparkling river. The carpet factory in the dell below, owned by the Ingoldbys, is a depiction of happy pre-war industry: worn paved paths through the woods, trod by generations of factory workers making their way home after five o’clock (57). Moreover, it represents a kind of Eden for Eddie, as it is where he finally finds himself part of a family. After the war begins, however, the family shuts its doors to Eddie, just as High House is boarded up, and the carpet factory begins making tents for soldiers.

Freetown, Africa, WWII

Eddie and Albert Ross change boats at Freetown on their way to Singapore. “The smell of Africa was like chloroform” (182) and the heat was oppressive; however, this is the place where Eddie finds a kind of crazed freedom, laying on the sand and throwing himself into the waves. Eventually, Eddie becomes sick on bananas and beer and has to be taken for medical treatment. The medical officer told Albert that Eddie had remarkable immunity to the local diseases to escape with only the sickness he did.

Themes and Motifs

The Death Penalty

Even though Filth cannot confront the memory of Wales fully until late in his life, the attempted murder of his foster mother in Wales both shapes Filth's life and becomes a lens through which he sees the world. Gardam uses both this event and the experiences of Filth's professional life to argue that there is darkness and need for vengeance inherent in human nature; however, she also argues that we can and must subvert this at both a personal and societal level.

Filth worked as both a lawyer and a Judge. We know that often his job was to make difficult decisions about the lives of others, and that he had to employ a certain level of willful forgetting in order continue on with his life and his job. Yet Filth, "pillar of justice, arbitrator of truth" (246), also tried to kill a woman when he was eight years old, and that event haunts him for the rest of his life. The woman he tried to kill was abusive—one could argue that she deserved some kind of consequence for her actions—and in the end, Filth does not repent his decision to kill Ma Didds. He does, however, come to disagree with systems of justice that include the death penalty. This opinion develops out of his career, but must certainly also reflect upon his own action.

Filth is often characterized as an unimaginative person, someone who followed direction rather than making his own choices. He once told Babs that killing Ma Didds had been his "one decisive moment" (105). It would be easy to say that Eddie's decision to pursue Law was entirely guided by others. After all, many people told him he would make a good lawyer—Sir, Babs, Loss. But when Veneering asked Filth why he had gone into Law, Filth had a ready answer: he told him that he had an interest in Justice. His statement belies an agency to Filth that others do not always readily ascribe to him. Filth's decision to become a lawyer was not mere following of advice. A question of Justice presented itself to Eddie in Wales: could the abuse that he received justify the vengeance it awakened? Filth chose his career, perhaps, to pursue the answer to this question.

When Filth tells Vanessa that the government hangman of Hong Kong was merely a conformist, this is on the one hand a powerful statement on the power of conformity, but on the other is also a statement about the dark side of human nature. Filth thinks that the ability to kill does not require any particular kind of sadism, merely one that is already inherent in all beings. He does not have the most optimistic view of human nature: he "cannot bear to think about the cruelty at the core of the world. Or the vengeance dormant even in children. All there, ready, waiting for use. Without love" (246). To be the executioner one need only to tap into that dormant need for vengeance that exists, Filth believes, even in children. A society that imposes a death penalty does this at a societal level.

Filth thinks that “Execution should be entirely out. Execution leads only to victory for the corpse” (225). Execution leaves the person killed beyond reach, while the executioner has exposed and acted on the darkest parts of himself: his dormant vengeance, the cruelty at his core, the place where he is without love. This is what Filth feels he had exposed in himself when he killed Ma Didds. In the end, what Filth needed to express was his “pity” for his victim, to extend a small amount of compassion to her (246); before he dies, he even prays for her. In some sense, this seems to be what allows him to move on, as if this small act of defiance to his inner darkness has some healing power. He has agency in the ability to choose what side of himself rules him.

Filth

Despite the fact that Filth's nickname is innocuously explained early on, an idea embedded more deeply throughout the novel is that Eddie fears that his essence, which was revealed to him by the attempted murder in Wales, is ‘filth.’ Filth’s nickname is explained in the very first chapter: the Common Sergeant says that Filth himself was “said to have invented FILTH – Failed In London Try Hong Kong. He tried Hong Kong” (3). Yet the name evokes much more than the snappy acronym, and ‘Filth’ certainly does not have positive connotations.

Before Edward ever comes up with his acronym—indeed, before he even tries in London, let alone Hong Kong—he is described as ‘filth.’ On the boat back from Singapore, Eddie overhears a sailor say that Eddie looks like he’s “filth all through” (199). it is the first time, chronologically, that we hear the word associated with Eddie, and on the surface the sailor’s comment applies to Eddie’s ill health. However, while we aren’t given access to Eddie’s inner life here, it appears that the word makes an impression on Eddie. The word sticks; it is as though the sailor had stumbled upon the most apt description of Eddie’s true self, and Eddie incorporates it into his life forever after.

From a young age, Filth holds a deep-seated belief that his past has left a stain on him —that what he holds inside of himself, his true self, is ‘filth.’ When he is deserted by the Ingoldbys, Eddie rationalizes that they must have found him “socially a bit dubious […] because of living in the heart of darkness and something funny going on in Wales” (89). He immediately jumps to the conclusion that he is to somehow blame for the loss of his adoptive family; moreover, he assumes that it is his past that he is to blame for, and not something that he actively did. By the end of his life, Filth’s makes this link even clearer: “I have begun to wonder whether my life of loneliness […] is because of what I did when I was eight years old, living with Babs and Claire in Wales, fostered by a woman called Ma Didds” (241-242). He has been left and has suffered loss because those he loves have seen the darkness in him, or have been taken away from him as a kind of cosmic punishment.

The idea of ‘filth’ is linked to Filth’s past, but it is also more generally associated with death and judgement. After Filth condemns a man to death in one of his Hong Kong cases, he comes home to Betty and thinks, “I want you to make me resign because I

disgust myself. I feel, truly, filth" (113). This suggests that it is not merely one act that coats his soul in 'filth'; there is a continual process by which he rediscovers the part of himself which he sees as stained. Once again, we return to what Filth sees as the "cruelty at the core of the world," which continues to exert itself when humans act upon their "dormant vengeance" (246).

After the short introductory script of "Scene: Inner Temple," the first words of the novel are, "He was spectacularly clean. You might say ostentatiously clean" (5). But in this novel, we are taught to believe that one's insides very rarely match one's outsides. Paradoxically, the only time Filth is really physically dirty is in his greatest state of innocence. Eddie is the "ivory child in [the Malayans'] warm dun dust" (25), "His feet and hands as pale with the mud of the compound as the other children's" (25). There is a certain sense in which the novel suggests that you can wear your filth on the inside or the outside; Eddie learns to hide his 'filth' early on. What brings Filth peace, however, is airing his 'filth' by telling his story. He then prays for all the people he has known in his life, including those that he had not really liked or had not been kind to him, countering the 'cruelty' and 'vengeance' that make up his inner 'filth.' It is only once these things are done that Filth is finally able to return to the place of his childhood and his innocence.

The Singularity

Through the character of Filth, and also somewhat of Betty, Gardam demonstrates how the elderly people in today's society are overwhelmed and feel forgotten by the rapid pace of technological and ideological change.

On the plane to Malaysia, Filth felt that the plane was accelerating "into dissolution," "beyond speed […] travelling towards what he understood astronomers call 'The Singularity'" (254). Vernor Vinge popularized the concept at Nasa's Vision-21 conference in 1993, in a presentation entitled "The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era," preserved in NASA Conference Publication 10129. Vinge describes Singularity as "a point where our old models must be discarded and a new reality rules" (Vinge 12); this 'new reality' inevitably leaves previous generations behind, who cannot comprehend the changes. Though Filth has lived through and adapted to momentous cultural change, by the end of his life it appears as though the world has continued to change past his capacity to adapt.

Filth and Betty both feel that their world has passed, and that the present world they find themselves in is incomprehensible and foreign. However, it appears that for Filth and Betty, the Singularity is not technological as much as it is ideological. In the span of his lifetime—the early 1920s to New Year's Day 2002, or thereabouts—Filth has literally seen an Empire fall. The world that has replaced the one Filth knew is somewhat distasteful to him. When he wakes up from his 'heart attack,' he admits to himself that he hates homosexuals, divorce, and sexually promiscuous young people (Gardam 227).

And the people of this new world do not recognize those of Filth's generation either, are ready to admit he does not belong. The "slovenly riff-raff" about London looked at Betty

“as if she was someone out of a play” (50); after his speeding ticket, a policeman comments that Filth is “like out of some Channel Four play” (136). It is as though Filth and Betty have dissolved into myth, a part of the past so distant it is only recognizable from fiction. Filth and Betty embody a past that, in a time of rapid change, it appears as though everyone is eager to be done with.

In hospital, Filth realizes that he had “long ago lost any sort of desire,” and that “was what had been the matter with him for years” (226). This precedes his thoughts about how distasteful he finds much of modern culture; it is as though Filth has lost the desire to live in the world as it is now. The day before she dies, Betty thinks that she and Filth are going to live forever, but “pointlessly,” “keeping the old flag flying for a country I no longer recognize or love” (50). Betty thinks, “My world’s over” (51), and she has no desire to continue to exist in the world that followed hers—and then she dies the next day. Filth feels that his plane to Malaysia is travelling toward “The Singularity,” and it is when that plane lands that Filth himself dies, embraced by the warm winds of his past. By the time the bell tolls for Filth in the Inner Temple, his reputation is already beginning to be effaced.

However, the novel also teaches us that the past’s legacy cannot be so easily brushed away—that the way we are treated as children shapes the way we treat our own children. After one short conversation with him, Vanessa names her child after Filth, as if she hopes that her son will hold some of the qualities of his namesake. “Thus is the world peopled” (166), and the past handed inescapably into the present.

The Empire and Raj Orphans

Jane Gardam dedicates Old Filth “To Raj Orphans and their parents,” and much of her novel is dedicated to fleshing out a psychological portrait of these people. As we become more and more aware, societally, of the impact of colonialism, Gardam’s novel asks us to remember that the British were often also victims of their own regime.

As one might expect, one of the symptoms of a Raj Orphan’s upbringing is a destabilized sense of ‘home.’ Custom dictates that British children cannot fully belong in the ‘foreign’ societies they are born into, as their own culture is supposedly superior. However, these children were often raised by locals while their parents were busy with other responsibilities, and thus in some ways more familiar with other cultures than their own. The result is that these children, and the adults they grow into, end up occupying a kind of liminal identity that is not quite at home in either culture. Auntie May outlines some possible futures for Raj Orphans in the first chapter, stating that “Some forgot their parents, clung to their adoptive families who later often forgot them. […] There were children who worked hard at growing stolid and boring, and made marriages only in order to have roots of their own at last” (27). The search for a solid concept of home, of a place to belong to fully, becomes a high priority.

This need is emphasized in Eddie’s case. Because he was entirely neglected by his father and yet is sent away from Malaysia anyway, Eddie becomes ruled by a culture he

was never fully inducted into. The first time he sees the British adults ‘capering’ about in their fancy clothes on the boat to Wales, he doesn’t understand what he is seeing, and “never, ever after, [understands] it” (34). Instead he attempts to find a home in other liminal spaces. He almost finds what he was looking for in British-ruled Hong Kong, but when Hong Kong declares its independence, one half of his identity is no longer welcomed; he also finds a home in Betty, another Raj Orphan, but when she dies he is left untethered once more.

Gardam never absolves the British for their colonial crimes: Filth tells Vanessa “that we should forgive history almost nothing” (157), and this certainly seems to apply to the novel’s depiction of colonialism. Pat Ingoldby explains Empire as “A club” where you can “wear the crown” wherever you go; colonial powers are explained as the “thousands round the world thinking they own it” (56). Filth’s original dislike of Veneering is partly based on the way that he finds Veneering a distasteful representative of imperialist thinking due to his arrogance and sense of superiority.

Gardam attempts to flesh out and humanize her depiction of the people within the colonial system, however, though she never fully absolves them of responsibility. Auntie May, for example, knows from experience that Eddie might suffer from being taken away from Malaysia. Though she takes Eddie away from the compound anyhow, she goes so far as to admit to herself that she thought that the Empire “was not God’s ordinance at after all” (31). She decides that “love and duty” to all people is what is truly important (31)—and yet still does not prevent what happens to Eddie in Wales. Auntie May remains ruled by custom, the kind of conformity that Filth tells us can turn a man into an executioner. Moreover, the scars left on previous Raj Orphans become a barrier to their intervention in the system. Filth tells Vanessa that “If you’ve not been loved as a child, you don’t know how to love a child. You need prior knowledge” (159). He is talking about himself, but he could very well also be talking about his father. We know that Alistair Feathers is a war veteran and a Raj orphan himself, with shellshock and a stutter. Traumatized by his past, Alistair cannot find it within himself to be present in his son’s life, and so deserts him to be traumatized in his own right. Thus the system is perpetuated.

Acting

Old Filth contains numerous references to acting. These references often call the reader’s attention to the dichotomy between life as it is lived and the performance of one’s life for public consumption; Gardam uses the metaphor of the play to call attention to stories and storytelling, reminding us that the actor may tell a story while their own story remains untold.

Old Filth includes three ‘scenes’ that employ a classic script format, including formal script language (e.g. “Exeunt” (170)). All of these ‘scenes’ consist of conversations about an absent Filth, who has either just left the building, is napping unseen in a chair, or has recently died. The script format emphasizes dialogue, with description stripped to the minimum to set the scene and the occasional stage direction thrown in. Therefore,

the format of these chapters emphasizes the fact that we are learning through the speech of others; everything we hear is colored by others' perspective. We have only people's words with which to form opinions, no way to see directly into the action the way we would with an objective narrator's description. These scenes are built to show us how different public perception and inner life can be, as what is said directly contrasts to what we are shown when the narrator dives closer in to Filth's thoughts.

The narrator tells us that the Bar is "an actor's life" (10), and yet this does not fully explain the number of acting references that are included in the novel. Stage directions leak out of Gardam's 'scenes' into the narrator's description of Wales; moreover, characters in Gardam's novel are at times perceived to be actors. The "slovenly riff-raff" about London looked at Betty "as if she was someone out of a play" (50); after his speeding ticket, a policeman comments that Filth is "like out of some Channel Four play" (136). Claire says of Billy Cumberledge, when she meets him at Cambridge without realizing who he is, that "He was an actor who does E. M. Forster parts" (155). Gardam's characters—specifically, her older characters—appear like escaped characters from a play, living beyond the confines of the stage where they belong.

Though Old Filth is a novel, and not a play, these references cannot help but call the reader's attention to the fictional nature of the work they are consuming. This is somewhat jarring, given that the novel can at times feel like a memoir, recounting a life that seems most of the time to have been quite possible. Yet Gardam seems to be making a point by referring especially to her older characters as actors. They are perceived by younger generations as belonging to a past that is now accessible only through story; in some ways, the line between fiction and history must always be blurred, as we cannot have direct access to that which we have not experienced for ourselves. Beyond 'truth' and 'fiction,' the past is always a story that is handed down to us, a form of hearsay no matter how reliable.

Moreover, the novel urges us to remember that "Lawyers […] were children once"—that everyone has a history, a story, regardless of how complete and finished they may appear in front of us. In a play, we fully expect a character arc, for a life story to be revealed to us with all of its inevitable ups and downs, obstacles and achievements. We don't, however, always consider the identity of the actor whose character we meet in our daily lives—we have limited access to the life-stories of others, and can perhaps sometimes forget that they exist. In much the same way, Filth's colleagues have no understanding of the actor who has been playing the role of Filth, the man who had a childhood before becoming a lawyer. In showing us the dichotomy between what exists and what is perceived, Gardam reminds her readers that there is often more to those around us than we see.

Styles

Point of View

The novel’s point of view remains in third person throughout the novel. For the most part, this third person perspective is limited to a particular character. Often this character is Filth, but it also aligns itself with Auntie May, Betty, Claire, Vanessa, and Oliver. Though the ‘flashback’ chapters are sometimes painted as Filth’s memories, the narrator’s description of events still retains an authoritative tone that dispels worries about an unreliable narrator. However, because Gardam’s novel is very much about human experience and interested in the psychology of the effect of those experiences, it is important that the story be colored by human subjectivity.

The only notable exception to the narrative’s third-person perspective are the three “Scene”s that are written like a formal play script. In a novel that can sometimes feel like historical fiction or a memoir, these ‘scenes’ call attention to the fictional nature of the story; they allow for expression that is more dramatic and more evocative. At the same time, they also call attention to the performativity inherent in daily life.

Language and Meaning

In Old Filth, Gardam employs at times an elevated tone and style. Her descriptions can be long and flowery; for example, she describes the ocean outside Babs' house: "Long, long waves curving round a great bay, and behind their swirling frills, spread into the total dark, was the heaving black skin and muscle of the ocean" (120). Filth’s intelligence allows her to work in witticisms and somewhat obscure language ("slander [...] and antediluvianism" (86)) and have it still feel true to her character.

At other times, however, Gardam attempts to portray something like a natural thought pattern with her language, which can involve shorter phrases, simpler language, and repetition. For example, after his run-in with Veneering at Christmas, he takes a bath and thinks, "getting more difficult. Must get a shower. Won't have one of those bloody mats with suction pads, though. Won't have what they call the Social Services" (19). After Betty learns about Veneering's boy's death, variations on the phrase "Terry's boy gone" (62) are littered throughout the chapter, mirroring the feeling of a repetitive and intrusive thought. Filth has a similar reaction after Betty's death, when variations on "Los. Over. Finished. Dead. Happened" (118) are repeated throughout the chapter.

Structure

Old Filth is broken into two books, with the first book being much longer than the second. Each book is broken into chapters of varying lengths. These chapters are sometimes named after their location, and so their names repeat (for example, there are four chapters entitled “The Donheads”). At other times, chapters are titled after

particular mental states, such as “The Ferment” or “The Time of Frenzy.” The narrative follows two periods of Filth’s life, the first of Eddie’s childhood and the second from around the time of Betty’s death to Filth’s own death a few years later. For the most part, chapters cover either a time period from Eddie's childhood or from his older years. Only two chapters, “The Ferment” and “The Donheads” (IV), switch time periods within the chapter.

Quotes

She keeps anything horrid inside, for her own safety."
-- Pat Ingoldby (The Outfit)

Importance: This line, spoken by Pat Ingoldby about his mother, illustrates another quality of Raj orphans and another similiarity between Mrs Ingoldby and Filth. What is curious about this line is that Pat implies that Mrs Ingoldby's tendency to try to keep things pleasant for her guests is not about others' safety or well-being, but is in fact part of her "self-protective" behaviour (58). There is an idea there that the deeper one buries one's bad memories, the better one's life will be. Filth, too, has attempted to keep his horrid things inside himself, for his own safety. However, this constant repression turns one into an actor, as one moves forward attempting to pretend that everything is and always has been alright. By the end of his life, Filth learns that keeping those "horrid" things inside does not always ensure one's mental safety: sometimes, the horrid things come to light despite one's best efforts to keep them hidden.

And so the baby's first years were in the Long House among brown skins, brown eyes, scraps of coloured clothes, the Malay language; often sleeping, sometimes making musical singing, dreamily passing the time against the roar of the river and the rain.
-- Narrator (Kotakinakulu)

Importance: This description of the compound in Kotakinakulu both describes and embodies the dreamy lyricism of Eddie's childhood in Malaysia. Malaysia is Eddie's Home, the place where he feels loved and at peace , and the physical setting mirrors his emotional state.

If you’ve not been loved as a child, you don’t know how to love a child. You need prior knowledge. You can inflict pain through ignorance. I was not loved after the age of four and a half. Think of being a parent like that.
-- Filth (A Light House (II))

Importance: With this statement, Filth explains the effect of the British colonial system on its British citizens. It is not just trauma and outright abuse that leaves scars. More than simply perpetuating a system, sending one's children away because it is custom, Filth exposes the way that emotional neglect is also passed down, and largely through ignorance. The result is a community of people who were not loved and cannot really love because of it.

Hitler's invaded Poland. Don't tell your father yet, Pat. He can do nothing about it and there's his favourite supper. Oxtail stew.
-- Mrs. Ingoldby (The Outfit)

Importance: This line shows us Mrs. Ingoldby's impulse to keep unpleasantness buried, a trait that she shares with Filth in his later life and that most of the novel's Raj orphans appear to have in common. But with Mrs. Ingoldby's line, Gardam is also placing WWII

in context. The juxtaposition of the commonplaces of daily family life and the event that ensured Britain going to war emphasizes both the foreign and invasive nature of that news, as well as the way that daily life continues in spite of major world events.

Lawyers, I suppose, were children once.
-- Narration (Scene: Inner Temple Garden)

Importance: Jane Gardam begins and ends Old Filth with this phrase, which is inscribed on a statue. We see how people have taken Filth at face value, seeing him only as a rich and successful man, likable but quite boring. This phrase reminds us that like Filth, all people have a story, all people have collected their own scars, and all people were innocent once.

For he was Home.
-- Narrator (The Revelation)

Importance: This line may not end the novel, but it ends Filth's narrative. Home, with the capitalization, is usually how Britain is referred to by British subjects; by calling Malaysia his Home, Filth chooses his loyalty once and for all. He has been seeking a home since he left Ada all his many years ago, and his journey can finally end once he finds himself there. However, there may also be another meaning to the word Home here, as we know that this line could very well represent his last living thought. Though the novel shies away from most religious affiliation, there is the suggestion that the Home Filth has been searching for is found not in Malaysia, but as he stretches towards death and perhaps some kind of afterlife.

We three – not Cumberledge – were absorbed in the process of handing over responsibility to the powers of darkness whom we had met as children, and who had met us. […] We were of the jungle."
-- Claire (Last Rites)

Importance: Claire writes this line in her letter to Filth, which reveals the murder of Ma Didds to the reader. The imagery in these lines is particularly strong; darkness becomes personified, a force that is capable of meeting and being met, and one can almost see some kind of black shadowy hand reaching out and settling itself inside of the children. The line also seems to be a reference to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness; it is unclear, however, whether these "powers of darkness" refer to the Eastern cultures and religions that the children grew up amongst, or if some other darkness was exposed when the British colonized other nations.

I think,' he said, 'that we should forgive history almost nothing.'"
-- Filth (A Light House (II))

Importance: In a novel that covers so much of the twentieth century's major events, this statement certainly resonates beyond its immediate context. It is as though Filth is directing his statement at the reader; the narrative almost asks that we hold history accountable for its sins, and stay vigilant in our responsibility to do this.

They are calling on their god,' said Alistair. 'There is no God but God. I'm nearer to their gods than yours ever was to me in 1914. Can the child not go on as he is?
-- Alistair Feathers (Kotakinakulu)

Importance: Because Alistair is defined by his absence more than anything in this novel, we don't necessarily get a strong sense of his personality. This statement tells us a great deal about him, however. His service in WWI had a great impact on him. Though he does not feel able to actively participate in Eddie's life, he sees his son's happiness, and asks if Eddie cannot just go on as he is rather than going to Wales. While we do not know for sure if he identifies more with Malaysian culture than he does with British, his statement about gods shows he has certainly has reached a place of indifference. Though he is a District Officer, this is not a man who rules on the assumption of British cultural superiority; this is a man who has had his faith destroyed by war.

Amazed, as she never ceased to be, about how such a multitude of ideas and images exist alongside one another and how the brain can cope with them, layered like filo pastry in the mind, invisible as data behind the screen, Betty was again in Orange Tree Road [...].
-- Betty (Tulips)

Importance: Betty's thoughts reveal her to be somewhat playful, with an imaginative and intelligent mind. This image in particular, however, exemplifies something that the novel seems to be interested in a bigger way. Betty's thought talks about the way one thought transitions to another, memories bleeding into the present with strange and seemingly random triggers. The that Gardam manipulates time in her novel seems to emulate this kind of thought process, showing how past and present are layered in the brain and can be travelled in more ways than just chronologically beginning to end.

Darkness and rain settled over the North's infant infantry who did not trouble the landscape or the night, which passed with very few prayers and still fewer orgasms or unexpected desire. Little poetry was engendered.
-- Narrator (School)

Importance: Gardam's treatment of her wartime scenes is very careful not to romanticize war. War is wound inescapably into the characters' lives, and does affect them in very powerful ways—Eddie's disastrous trip to Singapore, the friends he lost. However, war is never quite the novel's focus, and is certainly never a cause for noble or heroic behavior and powerful realizations. This quote from the novel refers to the night of the false alarm at Eddie and Pat's public school, but it is characteristic of Gardam's treatment of the war at large: it was survived, and little poetry was engendered.

Slander, sir. And antediluvianism.
-- Filth (School)

Importance: Eddie speaks this line when his Housemaster, Mr. Oilseed (Oils) tells Eddie he will not allow him to see Pat Ingoldby in the San because he feels that Eddie

and Pat's "unnatural closeness" must be terminated (85). Eddie 'appeals' his decision—to the Headmaster, but then, he threatens, to the Board of Governors and finally to the correspondence columns of The Times —on the grounds of his appeal are "slander and antediluvianism." This is one of the few times that we see Eddie really stand on his own, questioning authority and pursuing his own course of action with passion. Moreover, he does it with bravado, intelligence and wit. The novel has a tendency to focus on Eddie's losses, but this line shows us his brilliance, and hints at the successful career in law that he must have had.