On Chesil Beach Study Guide

On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Knof, Alfred A. and McEwan, Ian. On Chesil Beach. Canada – Random House, 2007.

The novel is an intimate, detailed recounting of how two people struggle to reconcile very different expectations of their wedding night. Chapters set in the present alternate with chapters set in the past, which describe how Florence and Edward (the newlywed couple) came to be who, and where, they are.

The novel begins in the early evening, as Florence and Edward are sitting down to their poorly cooked wedding night dinner. Although the air is chilly, they sit outside on the patio of the hotel where they are staying, enjoying the view of the beach and the sound of the waves. As narration describes how they nervously play with their food and make uncomfortable small talk, it also describes their respective attitudes towards sex in general, and towards their impending first time in particular. Florence, an extremely focused and disciplined classical musician, is extremely apprehensive, feeling very uncomfortable at the thought of being penetrated. Edward, on the other hand, is both excited and nervous, desperate to love his new wife in both physical and emotional ways he has been looking forward to for months. Eventually, an unexpectedly awkward conversation leads Florence to impulsively suggest they go to the bedroom. Edward eagerly agrees.

As they move to the bedroom, narration shifts into the past, describing the awkward, solitary childhoods that Edward and Florence have in common. Florence's childhood is portrayed as being focused almost entirely on classical music, while Edward's is portrayed as being built around the awkward relationship between his strict schoolmaster father and his inattentive mother, psychologically damaged as a result of an accident.

Back in the present, Florence's reluctance to engage in sex begins to ease just a little as careful caresses from Edward begin to awaken, in her, the stirrings of physical desire. On Edward's part, he struggles with both his physical desire and his sensitivity to Florence's nervousness. Their mutual love for each other slowly builds, and Florence eventually finds herself able to start guiding Edward's penis into her vagina. But this, the first time she actually touches him there, is too stimulating for him, and he ejaculates all over her. Instinctively repulsed, Florence cries out, wipes herself off, and rushes out of the room.

The next chapter describes the circumstances of their meeting, how their relationship developed, and how they each met the other's family, with the result that both families seemed welcoming of their relationship. There are hints, in this chapter, of a sexually inappropriate relationship between Florence and her father, at the same time as there are hints that Florence and Edward are desperately, deeply, in love with each other.

In the final chapter, Edward pursues Florence out onto the beach, where they have a confrontation that causes both of them to say angry things that they almost immediately regret. Florence goes back to the hotel, and ultimately leaves both it and the marriage, which is soon annulled. Narration them sums up the next several decades of Edward's life, in which he settles into a multi-faceted career, a few failed relationships, and a decades-long resentment of the professionally successful Florence, who is glancingly portrayed as being occasionally regretful about what happened. The novel ends with a return to an image of the two on the beach, Edward watching Florence walk away.

Chapter 1

Summary

Recently married Edward and Florence sit on the outdoor terrace of the hotel where they are spending their honeymoon. As they eat their badly cooked dinner, they look out the beach and the ocean beyond, and at the profusion of heartily growing plants along the path down. Narration describes their mutual excitement and nervousness, the sense that they are at the beginning of something new, exciting, and freeing. “This was still the era … when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure” (6). There are also references to their specific hopes for the future – Edward’s business career, Florence’s musical career, what to do with a financial gift from her father. Narration then describes, in some detail, their respective apprehensions about their first sexual experience together. For Edward, the dominant emotions are eagerness, and anxiety that he will end up “arriving too soon” (7). For trained violinist Florence, whose apprehensions are dealt with in more detail, the dominant emotion is one of disgust at the thought of being penetrated, or even touched. Narration here includes a more detailed description of what the educated Florence loves about the more rustic Edward, and how she would like to have a baby with him, if only it didn’t involve having sex.

As the two servers of the honeymoon meal prepare to bring in the main course, Edward and Florence flirt a little, the former with increasing desire, the latter with increasing reluctance. Meanwhile, narration describes Edward’s background as a student of history, and how the success of his education was undermined, somewhat, by the contention in one of his papers that great power rarely brought great happiness to great people. Narration also describes his attracting to Florence, particularly her strength of character as witnessed by Edward as he watched her lead the string quartet with which she was involved, and her otherwise uncertain awkwardness, both physically and socially. There are references here to Florence’s domineering father, and how she got him to offer Edward a job.

After the main course arrives (and as narration now clearly sets this chapter’s setting in time as 1962), Edward is tempted to leave it alone and either run down to the beach or take Florence into the next room and make love to her, but chooses to do neither. Narration describes his instinct as impulsive and youthful, and “being childlike was not yet honorable, or in fashion” (18). Narration contemplates Edward’s practice of frequent masturbation in spite of finding it emotionally empty, and how he had abstained from masturbating in order to have the right sort of energy on his wedding night. Narration then describes the slow, steady progression of the physical relationship between him and Florence, revealing that his proposal of marriage came almost immediately after she touched his penis, through his trousers and with the back of her hand, for the first time. Narration also describes the disgusted effort that that gesture cost her, and his joy that their relationship had progressed that far at all.

As Florence and Edward play with their food on their plates without really eating it (narration having described how the lunch at their wedding had been so big that they were not really hungry), narration describes their growing awareness of the news being broadcast on the radio downstairs (mostly having to do with politics). There is also the additional awareness of the identity of the listeners: members of the older generation who, narration contends, were soon on their way out of power as a result of the influence of young people like them. Florence responds to Edward's pointed comment that they could go down and listen with guilt: she feels that he is angry with her for being distracted. She suggests that they go to bed instead. This leads the excited Edward to kiss her intently, which she finds so repulsive that first she fears that she will vomit; next, begins to hallucinate a violin-like sound; and finally, realizes she has to end by leading him to their bed, even though the thought of being physical with him still repulses her. It is, she thinks, her duty: what everything about their marriage to this point has led her to.

Analysis

This first chapter lays essential foundations for the narrative and thematic explorations that follow. First there are the central characters (Edward and Florence). Then there is the central situation (the sexual tension faced by these characters on their wedding night as they approach their first sexual encounter). Finally, there is the socio-cultural context within which it all unfolds. This latter is particularly significant, in that the narration in Chapter 1 clearly places the characters in a country (England) and a time (the early 1960's) before the so-called "Sexual Revolution" of the 60's and 70's. This was a period of history in the Western world in which sexual conservativism and traditionalism began to break down: male and female gender roles; generally Christian perspectives on morality; and, more particularly, repressive perspectives on sexuality all began to change in quite drastic ways, even in traditionally conservative England. At the time at which the novel is set, all those movements and changes are on the horizon: Edward and Florence imagine themselves participating, but as the novel progresses, the reader and the characters alike discover how unprepared for such changes, on the personal and cultural levels, Edward and Florence actually are.

Several elements referred to in this chapter can be seen as representing various elements of this tension between the personal and the cultural, the sexual and the political, the intimate and the public. For example: the traditional, and traditionally cooked dinner represents "old-fashioned" cultural perspectives that Edward and Florence are trying to escape. Their efforts, in turn, are represented by, among other things, their having no real appetite for the meal (i.e. those cultural perspectives). Those metaphorical efforts are given further context by references to how their attention is drawn to the radio broadcast that they can hear from downstairs. Because narration describes the usual listeners downstairs with the radio as elderly and conservative, the fact that Edward and Florence are initially distracted by that broadcast represents their initial attraction for, or attachment to, conservative perspectives themselves. The subsequent fact that they leave the meal virtually untouched to go have sex suggests that they are trying to leave that past behind for a new, sexual, sensual morality. Other representations of the tension between past and present include the ocean

(representing openness and possibility) contrasted with the beach (composed of hard-to-walk-on stones) and the path TO the beach (lined with difficult to pass-through plants). In other words, the path to transformation and possibility (personal, sexual, political, cultural) is a difficult one.

Other elements are similarly important, but not necessarily related to the book's explorations of sexuality, morality, and politics. Such references include the comments about Florence's father, which foreshadow further, and increasingly foreboding, references later in the narrative to his character and presence in the lives of the newlyweds. The reference to Florence's passion for music in this chapter is likewise significant, in that it references important aspects of both her character and her professional situation that play key roles in later events. This relates to a third noteworthy element: the narrative description of the violin-like sound Florence hears, the first of several references in the narrative to how she experiences sensation, situation, and emotion as music.

Meanwhile, thematic developments in this chapter are anchored in the book's overall thematic exploration of aspects of sexuality, consideration of which is thematically dominant here. At this point, it is important to note that the sexual tension, in this chapter as well as throughout the book as a whole, exists both within the individual characters (as they struggle with their personal perspectives on, and experiences of, sexual feeling) and between the characters (as they struggle with the physical, emotional, and cultural implications of "their wedding night"). Again, here and throughout the book, both sets of tensions manifest in other thematic ways: each of the characters has experiences of shame in relation to their sexuality (even though the term is virtually never used); and each of them feels the weight of their previous pasts; each is putting pressure on themselves. Most interestingly, they each feel the need to respect each other out of love. They both believe they love each other deeply, and they also believe that that love requires them to behave in certain ways. The pressure to do so builds throughout this chapter, and in the chapters to follow, until the final chapter reveals the degree of success they manage to achieve as they try to love each other well.

Discussion Question 1

How do the actions and circumstances of this chapter explore the book's thematic interest in the affect of the past on the present?

Discussion Question 2

There is a clear sense in the narrative that the concept of "the wedding night," has significant implications on a number of levels - emotionally, culturally, morally, sexually, and simply in terms of what a marriage means, and how it is supposed to work. What are the implications of the term "the wedding night" in contemporary society? How have those implications changed since the time of the novel? How have they remained the same?

Discussion Question 3

In Chapter 1 and throughout the narrative, Florence is portrayed as experiencing emotions, situations, and reactions in terms of experiences of music. At a key moment in this chapter, she experiences feelings, in the midst of being sexual with Edward, as a high note on a violin. What does this high note represent, in terms of Florence's feelings and perspectives?

Vocabulary

superficial, decorous, raucous, condescend, contradict, tentative, embellish, extravagant, profusion, encumbrance, irrelevance, pinnacle, pinnacle, mesmerize, formidable, visceral, palpable, pendulous, potency, composure, summation, pestilence, squalor, ineluctable, elation, solemnity, javelin, arpeggio, sinuous, haughty, certitude, rosin (v.), partita, excruciating, reticence, quotient, assertive, osmosis, luminous, incredulity, revere, reticence, pavane, protocol, diligent, enigma, glissando, tinnitus, blasphemous, exuberant, glamorous, privation, pretense, indistinct, intolerable, ferocity, ceremonious, jittery, reticence, assertive, sacristy, compliance, pinion

Chapter 2

Summary

Narration describes how Edward and Florence, as their relationship developed, sometimes discussed how they might have met when they were children – specifically, when Edward would leave his difficult home life and visit Oxford, where Florence lived. Narration further comments that there was no way they could have met in London, where they attended very different schools and had very different interests – history at school, pubs, and pop music for him; music, practicing, and classical music for her, including the formation of a string quartet and regular attendance at concerts at the renowned Wigmore Hall. Narration describes how the female members of the quartet, except for Florence, tended to leave to get married, while its one consistent male member (Charles) always stayed. After further reference to how distant their lives were, narration describes how "it was exciting for them to discover that they were in Trafalgar Square at the same moment in 1959, along with twenty thousand others, all resolving to ban the bomb" (43).

Narration then describes how Edward and Florence met after they had both graduated from their respective colleges and had returned home to parallel experiences of restlessness. For Edward, that restlessness came partly from being under the eye of a distracted mother, who played the piano constantly and badly and whose influence (and his own uncertainty about the future) he sought to escape on a trip that was intended to be to London, but instead (because of the presence, at the train station, of a different train) led him to Oxford. There, he found himself at a political meeting at which he was entranced by the beauty of Florence whose "finger, surely not by accident,[trailed] across the inside of his wrist" (48).

In Florence's case, she too was desperate to escape the influences of her family – her ambitious businessman father Geoffrey, her distracted philosopher mother Violet, her petulant and flighty sister Ruth. She engaged in intellectual and political discussions with them, discussions in which she defended the Soviet Union against her mother's American-influenced prejudices and Prime Minister Harold MacMillan against her father's conservative, anti-union values. She also inwardly debated the prospects for her career, including the question of whether she could, or should, continue the quartet if it meant associating with the gloomy, insistent Charles. The day she met Edward, narration reveals, Florence had gone for a walk to clear her head, and she ended up at the political meeting on impulse.

Narration then shifts to a time a few weeks later when, out in the country, Edward and Florence discussed the specifics of why they spoke to each other, narration describing how, in the background, there was "a familiar scene, a ramming battle between two overladen punts locked together at right angles … with the usual shrieks, piratical shouts, and splashing" (60). Florence finally confesses that the main reason she chose to speak with Edward was because she was "curious" about him (60), narration

revealing that in the moment of their connection, she realized how much she had lived her life in isolation – that, even in their first meeting, the difficulties in their relationship were already present.

Narration then describes, in some detail, Edward's childhood – how he and his younger twin sisters were essentially raised by their schoolmaster father Lionel, in a home life that was untidy and barely managed because of Lionel's full-time work and the lack of contribution of Edward's mother, easily distracted and completely disconnected from reality. In his early teens, narration reveals, Edward was told the truth about his mother's condition by his father – that on the way home from doing some Christmas shopping and pregnant with the twins, she was hit on the head when an eager-to-disembark passenger opened the door of his train carriage – and then immediately disappeared, ignoring the woman lying bleeding on the platform. Narration describes how, in the instant of acquiring that knowledge, Edward's sense of self began to develop, including his determination to get away and live his life on his own terms, including going to school in London instead of Oxford, where his father wanted him to go. The chapter concludes with references to how he continued to build his dreams for his life even while being a superficially devoted member of his family. "He was amiable enough with his sisters and parents, and he continued to dream of the day when he would leave … but in a sense, he already had" (75).

Analysis

The narrative of this chapter is primarily a flashback: that is, narration of scenes that move the action into the past of the main narrative line. In this book, that main narrative is the story of what happens between Edward and Florence on their wedding night: this chapter is a flashback to their earlier lives, telling the story of what happened their pasts to make them the persons they are in the present. In this sense, style (i.e. the flashback) reinforces substance: the past's influence on the present is one of the book's key themes.

That said, in this chapter and throughout the book, there is a clear connection between this and several other themes. For example, the exploration of the past / present relationship is also tied to the book's explorations of sexuality (note, in this context, how Edward sexualizes even Florence's merest, brushing touch) and the presence of self-pressure on the lives of the characters. This last is developed in a particularly intriguing way, as the narrative of Edward's and Florence's respective pasts clearly explain at least one key aspect of why they put so much pressure on themselves: they each have pasts they are desperate to transcend in one way or another.

Meanwhile, as the narrative of this chapter explores the main themes of the book as a whole, it also introduces several motifs, or repeated images. These include different characters: the distant mother (for both Edward and Florence); the controlling father (ditto); and the relatively unengaged younger siblings (ditto). Note how these motifs recur in the respective families of the two central characters, suggesting that on some level, and in that context, they have a great deal in common. There is clear and

significant contrast and / or relationship here with their differences: for example, their very different music, differences which, in their turn, echo and / or foreshadow their very different experiences of sex.

Other important elements in this section include the presence of the somewhat oppressive Charles (whose presence in Florence's life becomes something of an obsession for Edward, and whose appearance here foreshadows later appearances) and further references to Wigmore Hall. These likewise foreshadow references later in the story, including one in the novel's final pages that references, in turn, the poignancy of how the awkward situation between Edward and Florence resolves.

Finally, there are two particularly intriguing elements of this chapter that take the narrative and its themes in slightly different directions. The first is how this chapter explores the relationship, or tension, between fate and chance: more specifically, how both Edward and Florence seem to have somewhat ambivalent feelings about whether their meeting, because of the relationship that eventually developed, was one or the other. The second relates to how the narrative refers to how the respective childhoods of the two characters laid the foundations for the difficulties of the present. Aside from being another evocation of the book's thematic exploration of the past / present relationship, the explorations of childhood here give a clear indication of what their core difficulties are (i.e. their fundamental, defining experience of being isolated) as individuals and as a couple. As well, and in another piece of foreshadowing, these references indicate how their relationship is very likely going to resolve.

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in shame manifest in Chapter 2?

Discussion Question 2

Narration in this chapter refers to punts, which are small boats pushed along a river or stream by someone (usually a male) standing in its stern propelling it by pushing a pole into the soil at the bottom of the water. How does the description of the colliding punts, in this chapter, reflect the action and situation to this point in the narrative?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the question of fate vs. chance as raised in this chapter. Do you believe there is such a thing as fate? Do you believe there is such a thing as chance? Are things such as the meeting of Edward and Florence meant to be? Or are they, in fact, simply examples of valuable experiences emerging from random encounters and situations?

Vocabulary

squalid, titillate, precursor, fey, parental, ambiguity, explicit, boisterous, camaraderie, cupola, abstraction, revere, burnish, expertise, spacious, decipher, fanatical, medieval, doctorate, arduous, preferment, cloying, pretension, trilby, consolatory, rhetoric, rectitude, tranquil, inept, venomous, oppressive, repellent, dissent, tyranny, genocide, vindication, beneficial, fascism, contraption, grimace, predatory, foliage, plimsoll, vertiginous, impetuous, soporific, piratical, puerile, derangement, collude, elaborate (adj.), repertoire, blasphemous, calumny, invigorate, sufficient, constraint, yokel, fortify, amiable.

Chapter 3

Summary

Narration returns to the present as Florence leads Edward into the bedroom at their hotel. She takes off her shoes, narration referring to the tension she had felt with her mother when they had gone shopping for them. She starts to formulate the same sort of determination to make her perspective known that she uses when running the string quartet, but finds herself unable to do so when she sees Edward coming towards her. He tries to unzip her dress, but it is awkward and he fails. Florence uses this pause to suggest that she is nervous (which is nowhere near the truth of the depth of her feelings) but which releases the tension, as he agrees with her. As they sit, he lightly moves his hand up her thigh, becoming aware of a nervous twitch in her leg, and then his thumb playing lightly with one of her pubic hairs. Narration describes how, as she notes the quiet rushing of the waves and refuses to note the left-behind dinner, Florence begins to feel aroused, and while she is aware of the nearness of the inevitable, she wills for this moment to stay as it is, so she can lead up to it. “It is shaming sometimes,” narration comments, “how the body will not, or cannot, lie about emotions” (86).

Edward struggles with his increasing desire even as he recognizes the need to respect Florence’s reserve, recalling how, his urgent grasp at her (in a movie theatre while watching the film “A Taste of Honey”) resulted in a setback to their physical relationship that lasted for months. Narration shifts into the past, revealing how in his youth Edward had been a person of intense, active impulse, often released during fistfights that he sometimes initiated. There is a detailed description of a London encounter in which he defended a bullied friend (Harold Mather), but instead of being thanked, he was shunned: he realized that by responding to violence with violence, he had revealed himself to be something of a country bumpkin. “He was making one of the advances typical of early adulthood,” narration suggests, “the discovery that there were new values by which he preferred to be judged” (95). This, in turn, leads him to consider his next moves with Florence carefully. Eventually, as she passively assists him, he removes her underwear, but not her dress. He then climbs off the squeaky bed (which he imagines having been made squeaky by hundreds of other honeymoon couples) and then undresses, eventually rejoining Florence there. He has a moment of rushing confidence, but then restrains it: “the ghost of Harold Mather still troubled him” (98).

As Edward climbs onto the bed, Florence recalls being in the same room as her father when he undressed, when he took her over to the Continent. “She remembered the rustle of clothes, the clink of a belt unfastened or of keys or loose change. Her only task was to keep her eyes closed and to think of a tune she liked. "Or any tune” (99). She wills herself into focusing entirely on the present moment, and on her desire to pleasure the man she loves. Edward, meanwhile, kisses her lightly, caressing her leg and breasts, which Florence realizes she does not mind. This, she thinks, is an improvement on the revulsion that she thinks she once would have felt automatically. As Edward lifts her dress, Florence fights down a wave of nerves by asking him to say something to

her. He responds with what seems to be a familiar, rehearsed comment about how desirable she is. There is a clear sense that this is a game they have played before. With that, Florence feels calm enough to reach between her husband's legs, finding herself beginning to enjoy the feel of her husband's sexual organs. But then suddenly and explosively, he ejaculates what seems to be a huge amount of semen all over her. She reacts with instant, spontaneous revulsion, even though she is aware of how much she is hurting him. She frantically wipes herself off, grabs her shoes, realizes that she is behaving like a madwoman, hating "him for what he was witnessing now and would never forget" (106) and runs out the door, out of the hotel, and down to the beach.

Analysis

On one level, the narrative of this chapter is particularly noteworthy for the amount of detail it includes about the moment-by-moment progression of Edward and Florence's sexual encounter. There are several narrative and thematic values to this, including the fact that it brings the reader into close, immediate intimacy (the word that comes to mind is "breathless") with the characters. In other words, the reader is very much in the room with them, almost inside their skins. A related point is how that sense of detail is not limited to the narrative of the present; there is also a powerful sense of detail about the flashbacks into the past, tied intimately and immediately to the moment-by-moment experiences of the characters in the present. This, in turn, can be seen as further manifestations of two key themes (the novel's focus on experiences of sexuality, and its parallel focus on the relationship between past and present) and also, another manifestation of how themes intertwine.

The book's other major themes are also developed in this section. Both of the characters put desperate pressure on themselves, and both characters are struggling to behave consistently in loving, affectionate ways, both failing. Finally, and again without the word being used (with one exception, to be discussed shortly), the text is virtually soaked in the unspoken sense of shame experienced by the characters, shame that explodes for both of them in the aftermath of Edward's humiliating premature ejaculation. This, actually, can be seen as the above-referenced exception to the book's lack of specific reference to shame – the quote taken from page 86. As it talks about how "shaming" it is that the body is unable to lie about emotion, it is not just talking about Florence's slowly blooming experience of sexual desire: it is also talking about, and foreshadowing, the painfully embarrassing eruption of long-suppressed sexual desire experienced by both Edward and Florence at the chapter's conclusion.

While all this is going on, there are other important elements to consider. There are, for example, several references to previously established motifs, or repeated images: the sound of the ocean in the background (here, as throughout the book, representing the ever-present expanse of possibility in the lives and experiences of Edward and Florence); the congealed dinner (representing the congealed past they are trying to leave behind); and the reference to Florence experiencing emotions in terms of music.

This last is connected to what is arguably the most significant piece of information about Florence in the book, and as such, is simultaneously the most significant development of its thematic consideration of the relationship between past and present. This is the suggestion, referred to in the quote taken from p. 99, that there was at the very least something inappropriate in the relationship between Florence and her father, and at worst that there was a sexually intimate relationship. It is essential to note that the narrative never makes the point explicit, and that the issue is never referred to by Florence or her father anywhere else in the story. Nevertheless, there is a very clear, very strong sense that such an event took place, given that many survivors of sexual assault (particularly of the incestuous sort as referred to here) dissociate themselves from the reality of what is occurring in exactly the same way as Florence does here. In any case, if such an assault actually did take place, it would / could go a very long way towards explaining, at least in part, a great deal about Florence: her sexual and physical reluctance, her determination to have aspects of her life to control, her determination to love and be loved (as opposed to love and being used by her father).

Another important piece of information, not unrelated to the above referenced aspects of her relationship with her father, is what seems to be a reference to an intimate game played by her and Edward in which, when asked to “tell [her] something,” he lists a string of her positive, loved qualities. Takin in conjunction with the previous point, there is a sense here of him trying to be loving; of her needing to be assured of value that is not sexual; and, perhaps most poignantly, a sense of them both trying to reach for each other but ultimately failing.

In Edward’s case, the story of what happened with Harold Mather may not have the same visceral impact on the reader as the story of what (may have) happened between Florence and her father, but there is little doubt that for Edward, it was a fundamentally defining experience. There is the very clear sense, in the Mather story, that Edward discovered a truth about himself similar to the truth discovered by Florence in terms of music: specifically, they had both landed on defining aspects of themselves and their individual identities. The difference is that while Florence discovered that music was a positive way of defining herself, Edward discovers that physical violence is more of a negative. They both / each, as a result of their discoveries, changed the direction of their lives: Florence moving further towards the positive, Edward taking steps away from the negative.

Discussion Question 1

How do elements of Chapter 3 reflect the book's thematic interest in the power and experience of self-pressure?

Discussion Question 2

How does the incident of Harold Mather reflect, or develop, the book's thematic exploration of issues of shame? Why does the narrative suggest a connection between Edward's interaction with Mather and his interactions with Florence?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the comment about Edward that he was discovering, as he got older, that "there were new values by which he preferred to be judged" (95). What is your experience of that transition? As you get older, what new or revised values do you want to be judged, or evaluated, by?

Vocabulary

encumber, auditory, cohesion, agitation, abysmal, obstinate, penitent, succession, revulsion, treacherous, dissuade, decorum, tumult, consummate, palpate, follicle, minuscule, perineum, concentric, irrefutable, vertigo, momentous, sensory, perturbation, precursor, insubstantial, pugilist, talkative, hilarious, studious, entreaty, vulgarity, mortify, timidity, compliant, counterpane, zephyr, banality, philtrum, successive, reticent, nascent, tepid, viscous, jugular, rivulet.

Chapter 4

Summary

Once again, the focus of this chapter shifts into the past, recalling the many visits Edward paid to Florence in her home. The room in which he regularly slept, distant from Florence's, is described as being larger than any of the bedrooms in his home, and perhaps even bigger than the living room. He was regularly surprised, and at times intimidated, by the variety and expanse of food he was offered, and also by the highly competitive, driven nature of Florence's father who, Edward also noted, was physically affectionate with Florence's sister, but never with Florence herself. "He was a little frightened," narration adds, "that Geoffrey Ponting thought he was an intruder, an imposter, a thief intending an assault on his daughter's virginity, and then disappearing – only one part of which was true" (113). Eventually, narration reveals, Edward did take the job offered by Florence's father, as a sales representative for his company.

Meanwhile, Edward's relationship with Florence's intellectual mother Violet was not much easier, in that he felt like she was constantly testing his intellect and opinions, and finding him (and his views on history) not up to standard. The best times, it seems, were those when he watched Florence practice her violin, giving herself over to the music. His appreciation of her work and her art led him to fall even more in love with her, and also to want to watch her rehearse with her quartet. On the day he was able to do so, Florence first toured him through Wigmore Hall, vowing to perform there with the quartet. He vowed, in turn, to be present at their premiere performance there. In the rehearsal itself (which he in part wanted to attend out of a desire to get the measure of Charles, the cellist) he found himself deeply moved (as well as certain that there is no relationship, other than a musical one, between Florence and Charles). In his part, he tried to introduce Florence to rock and roll, but she just could not understand its appeal. Nevertheless, they continued to love each other. The whole while, Edward dreaded the inevitable occasion when she would meet his family, narration describing his concern when she showed up unexpectedly at a cricket match he was playing in his home town. Narration describes their happy reunion, and their very happy walk through the countryside towards the house. "They were innocently thrilled by her clever surprise," narration comments, "and their lives seemed hilarious and free, and the whole weekend lay before them" (130).

Back in the present, Edward forces himself to remember the happiness of that afternoon as he struggles to fight down the anger, resentment, and blame building in him. His recollections of how happy and relieved he was at how good Florence was with his family are, however, useless when it comes to keeping that anger under control. He convinces himself that his humiliation was Florence's fault; that the whole time she was lying to him about how much she cared for him and wanted him; that there was something wrong with her; and that she was marrying him for reasons other than her love for him. He rehearses his argument to himself, convincing himself ever more firmly of her dishonesty, then pulls on the rest of his clothes and goes out to find her.

Analysis

As the first part of this chapter continues to explore the histories of both Edward and Florence, and as layers of connection between past experience and present situation continue to emerge, there are some intriguing and noteworthy details. First, there are the references to how bountiful Florence's home seems to Edward, in terms of space and in terms of food. There is the clear sense here that in addition to his desire for Florence, Edward's attraction to her was influenced by his desire for the kind of life she lived. That said, there is a similarly clear sense that for Edward, the welcoming aspects of Florence's life were tempered, and contrasted, by the controlling competitiveness of her father and the judgmental coldness of her mother. It is significant that it is only at this point in the novel that the narrative reveals that Edward has accepted the job offered to him by Florence's father: this indicates that Edward has decided that the good things about being with Florence outweigh the negatives.

Those good things also include Florence's music which, narration here reveals, Edward comes to understand, accept, and enjoy. This is partly because his jealous fears about the importance of both the music and gloomy cellist Charles are laid to rest, the latter by his discovery that Florence cares absolutely nothing for Charles, except as a musician; and the former by his discovery of how intensely and beautifully she blossoms when connected with her music. A particular point to note here is the comment, in narration, about Edward's promise to attend Florence's premiere performance at Wigmore Hall. On one level, this is perhaps the ultimate act in his recognition, acceptance, and valuing of what is important to her. On another level, the reference foreshadows a particularly poignant comment in the novel's concluding moments, in which the full, lasting consequences of this honeymoon night disaster are explored.

Another important piece of foreshadowing, and a simultaneous, poignant evocation of the affection and connection experienced by Edward and Florence at their best comes late in the flashback section of this chapter – specifically, as Edward remembers Florence's visit to his home, their walk through the woods, and her visit to his family. All three of these elements - but particularly the walk in the woods - evoke the tenderness and openness that characterizes Florence's efforts to connect with Edward throughout the narrative, echoing her desire to love him and, more importantly, her desire to transform her sexual attitudes in order to be the kind of wife that both he and she want her to be. Meanwhile, the description of their time together on this occasion also foreshadows moments late in the narrative, again in the aftermath of the fight, in which Edward recalls (realizes?) just how much this walk in the country meant to him.

One more significant point to note about the flashback section of Chapter 4 has to do with the passing reference early in the chapter to how Edward noted that Florence's father was more physically affectionate with her sister than he was with her. The two noteworthy elements of this reference are intertwined. The first is that it reiterates, by implication, the earlier reference to the possibility of an inappropriate sexual relationship between Florence and her father: adult abusers of children often make efforts to physically distance themselves from those they abuse in order to avoid suspicion. The

second, and related point to note is that this implication emerges for the reader and not for Edward. In other words, Edward's observation has more meaning for the reader than it does for him. For Edward, the observation is a curiosity, but for the reader, it is perhaps a confirmation.

Then, as the focus of Chapter 4's narrative returns to the present, the reader is once again made aware of how Edward, in a thematically significant way, is transforming his shame into blame – how he is turning his own, inwardly-directed self-loathing and embarrassment outwards, redefining it as anger and directing it towards Florence.

Here, the novel also develops several other themes, including its central thematic focus on experiences of sexuality: for Edward, both shame and blame seem to emerge from misunderstandings, or mis-handlings, of both his and Florence's feelings of sexuality. Both the mis-handlings and the turnings-outward, in turn, can be seen as the result of the self-pressure that has been building within Edward throughout the narrative. Finally, the results of Edward's struggle evoke and develop the book's thematic interest in, and eventual emphasis on, the failure of love, a thematic consideration that reaches its climax in the novel's following, and final, chapter.

Discussion Question 1

How do specific events and circumstances of Chapter 4 explore the relationship between the past and the present?

Discussion Question 2

When narration comments that "only one part of which is true," what is being referred to - Geoffrey's beliefs about Edward, or Edward's reasons for desiring Florence?

Discussion Question 3

What might be the metaphorical parallels between how Edward and Florence react to each other's music and how they react to each other's sexuality?

Vocabulary

chaste, austere, mediocre, mutinous, affable, demarcation, annihilation, lurid, credulous, reprimand, deterrence, aversion, vanguard, culinary, monad, categorical, imperative, opulence, flagellant, precursor, repertoire, fixation, exquisite, exultant, penumbra, forensic, contortion

Chapter 5

Summary

Florence nestles in the crook of a driftwood tree, watching Edward approach her. Formulating a proposal, she imagines what he will say to her and what she might say to him. Berating herself for behaving badly, thinking badly of HIM for behaving badly, she tries to imagine how things might resolve, but fails. When he reaches her, their conversation erupts into immediate, sarcastic anger from both of them, which leads to biting comments about the money Florence's father left her and the job he offered Edward, both of which he now says he is going to reject. Florence moves through waves of feeling as Edward accuses her of trying to humiliate him, leading her to imagine a quick return, for her, to the work of the quartet. Edward speaks in the past tense of how he loved her, leading them both to acknowledge that they are in a mess. He approaches her and they talk for a moment, as they listen to the waves, about which bird is singing. Edward makes a self-deprecating joke, which makes her laugh and then feel free enough to make her proposal. She starts by acknowledging how much they love each other; admits to being terrible at sex; and then suggests that they live together, in love, but that if Edward wants, he can have sex with other women. He erupts angrily, accusing her of being a frigid fraud and of taking the first man she could in order to hide her own failure. He reminds her that she promised, in church, to worship him as her husband with her body. She apologizes, and then goes past him across the beach to the hotel.

Edward watches her go, then spends the next couple of hours on the beaching, walking up and down, berating himself, occasionally shouting angrily at the ocean. When he returns to the hotel, he discovers that Florence has left, saying that there has been a family emergency. The staff at the hotel is surprised he does not know. Edward eats the leftover food from the honeymoon dinner, packs up, and drives Violet's car back to the house, where he leaves it and the keys without saying anything to anyone. He then returns home, narration revealing that his father and Florence's mother arranged an annulment and that he made his twin sisters promise to never say Florence's name again.

Without a pause or break, narration then describes Edward's life over the next several years. There were occasional love affairs and three-year long marriage, and his eventual realization, over time and after the sexual revolution of the 1960's, that Florence's proposal was not that outrageous – that they could have loved each other. Meanwhile, narration says, Florence and the Quartet made their debut at Wigmore Hall, Florence looking briefly at where she imagined Edward might have sat. The quartet's career and reputation grew over time, narration describing how Edward repeatedly and consistently ignored the existence of their recordings, in spite of the fact that he owned a pair of record stores. Narration describes the deaths first of Edward's mother and then of his father; how, as he aged, he walked along the paths that he and Florence walked

the day she met his family and recalled the joy and possibility of that time; and how, in spite of occasional regrets and longings, he never got in touch with her.

The chapter, and the novel, conclude with a reference to how Florence, as she was leaving Edward that night on the beach, loved him more than ever, and more desperately, and would have turned back to him if he had only called to her. “Instead,” narration comments, “he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer’s dusk … the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light” (166). And there, the novel ends.

Analysis

The first part of Chapter 5, set again in the present, contains the novel’s true narrative climax, the point at which emotional and thematic tensions build to their point of peak intensity. As the pain, fear, and redirected shame in both Edward and Florence morph into outwardly directed anger and bitterness, their respective intentions and desires (for a happy wedding night leading to a fulfilling marriage) fall apart while, at the same time, their confrontation brings to the forefront one of the book’s most powerful, and poignant, themes: the failure of love. For both Edward and Florence, the love they profess to have for one another fails each of them utterly, as their shame and bitter pain overwhelm them. There are moments of hope, for both them and the reader: when Edward makes his little joke, and Florence makes her proposal. The latter can be seen as an offering of love, while the former can be seen as an offering of connection. Edward's offer is accepted, leading to the offer of love (i.e. Florence’s proposal). Florence's offer, on the other hand, is fully rejected by the all-or-nothing attitude at work in Edward. This, then, can be seen as the moment at which the narrative becomes a tragedy, in the classical sense: that is, a story in which an otherwise noble and well-meaning character is brought down by a single flaw … in this case, Edward’s (arguably male) ego.

In the aftermath of the confrontation on the beach, and before the narrative shifts into its consideration of the future, there are a couple of noteworthy points. The first has to do with Edward’s initial response to Florence’s departure, in which he is described as berating himself. There is, in this moment, a sense that Edward has finally gotten past his anger, at least to a degree, and is starting to connect with a sense of his own responsibility for what happened. Edward's shame is turning into self-blame, and starting to become self-awareness. A second noteworthy moment has to do with the reference to Edward eating the congealed dinner. As previously discussed, that dinner (in its traditional content and preparation) is evocative of the traditions and history of England, and specifically its attitudes towards sexuality, that Edward and Florence have tried to escape. The fact that Edward eats the meal, even though it has become as cold as the attitudes from which he and Florence were striving to escape, symbolically suggests that he is still connected to those attitudes which, in turn, can be seen as a further metaphoric representation of his having been locked in anger and resentment as a result of his humiliation in the bedroom.

Then the narrative slips smoothly and without any on-the-page separation in the text, a visual circumstance that suggests a clear and strong connection between the events of the honeymoon night and what the lives of Edward and Florence became. Important elements to note here include the poignant irony of Edward's eventual recognition that Florence's proposal might not have been all that bad an idea, and the revelation that subsequent to that recognition, he still refused to reconnect with her. Here again, the very strong sense is that Edward's male ego is getting in the way, but the point must be made that Florence also did not reach out again, in spite of her poignant, bleak moment of longing in the aftermath of her Wigmore Hall debut which, after all, Edward had promised to attend. There is, however, a key difference to note in these parallel refusals to reconcile. Florence has filled her life with music, and found a peace, a contentment, and a fuller sense of self than, it seems, she would ever have found in marriage. Edward, however, is portrayed as living the rest of his life as something of a drifter, searching for what the narrative implies is the kind of full completeness he would have found if he had just gotten over himself and called out for Florence that night on the beach. This is made quite clear, albeit through implication, by the narrative's reference to how Edward continued to recall, and relive, his happy, contented walk with Florence when she came to visit him and his family.

Finally, the novel's last moments again return to its thematic focus on the failure of love. Florence's longing for Edward to be the one to make the first gesture of reconciliation is, arguably, a rebuttal to what the narrative says about her love for him: if she truly loved him as much as the narrative says she does, then SHE would have been the one to make the first move. For Edward's part, the key point to note is the reference to how "he stood in cold and righteous silence" (166) a clear evocation of male ego, sexuality repressed by habit and tradition, and love that is not aware of its potential, perhaps because, as the reference to the pallid moonlight suggests, it was not all that strong, or real, to begin with.

Discussion Question 1

How does the final section of Chapter 5, which sums up what happens to Edward in the decades after his failed wedding night, develop the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between past and present?

Discussion Question 2

What are the merits of Florence's concluding proposal? What are its problems? Could you ever make such a proposal? Could you ever accept it?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the complex layerings of imagery in the novel's final quoted lines. Given that the ocean, throughout the narrative, has represented openness and possibility, what do you think are the symbolic / metaphoric value of the images, in the narration's final

moments, of the sound of the ocean in the background as Florence makes her way across the shingled beach, referred to as a road?

Vocabulary

congenital, enuresis, residual, antagonistic, timorous, flippancy, archaic, mawkish, impartial, delirium, arterial, precarious, incisive, magisterial, panoply, contrapuntal, consummate, precarious, eminent, pallid

Characters

Edward Mayhew

Edward is one of the book's two central characters. At the time the novel is primarily set (1962), Edward is 22 years old and is a historian. He is newly married to 22-year-old Florence, who is a musician. While Edward and Florence are both escaping unhappy home lives, Edward is desperate to consummate their marriage, while Florence is repulsed by the ideas of sex in general and of sex with Edward in particular. What makes the similarities and conflicts between these two characters particularly poignant is that Edward is as much in love with Florence as she is with him: he is awakened to more of himself, more of humanity, and more of the world as the result of his relationship with her, and his eventual relationship with her relatively well-off family. On some level, he realizes and is grateful for all the opportunities she brings into his life while. On another level, Edward is sensitive to, and accepting of, not only who Florence is and what she values, but also who she is not and what she is afraid of. In other words, he knows she is uncomfortable about the prospect of sex, and reins in his galloping desire because of his sensitivity to her and compelling determination to not hurt her. This determination, in turn, is rendered both more significant and more poignant by references, in the sections of the novel that explore Edward's past, to the fact that he both has a temper and has a taste for physical confrontation.

Edward's determination to cherish Florence disappears in the aftermath of what he sees as their humiliating first attempt at sexual intercourse, in which he experiences the humiliation of premature ejaculation and blames Florence. His shame and frustration erupt into bitterness and anger, a sort of verbal resorting to the kind of physical violence he tended towards when he was younger. As the novel concludes, it portrays Edward as being locked in a decades-long, self-imposed imprisonment of bitterness and resentment, forbidding himself from reconciling or even reconnecting with Florence as a result of his lingering determination to blame her for the failures of his life.

Florence Ponting

Florence is the second of the book's two central characters (the first is her newlywed husband, Edward). As the novel begins, Florence is deeply conflicted about what she sees as the inevitable first full sexual encounter between them, acknowledging the intensity and value of their love for one another while, at the same time, shudderingly acknowledging the even more intense distaste she feels for the act of physically expressed sexuality.

This aspect of Florence's character, and therefore of the story, has several facets. To begin, there is the sense that for the most part, she has redirected her passions from physical desire into artistic expression, specifically the playing of classical music. There is also the concurrent sense that for her, sexuality represents a loss of personal control.

The narrative never makes this point explicitly, or even hints at it, but implies it through the emphasis on the calm, certain, knowledgeable control Florence displays while in a leadership position of the string quartet she forms. In other words, and in the same way as a bully is often someone who is bullied in another situation (i.e. exercising power in one situation because of a lack of power in another situation), Florence can be perceived as exercising control in one situation (the quartet) while experiencing a lack of control in another (sex).

This theory is supported by one of the novel's most intriguing, affecting, and jarring pieces of writing. Deep in Chapter 3, as the narrative moves back and forth between the present day encounter between Florence and Edward and the past that has made that encounter what it is, there is a brief, but weighted, reference to a situation between Florence and her father. The language of the text in this section is extremely subtle and careful, but there is the inescapable implication that that situation, and their relationship in general, had at best sexual undercurrents and at worst a history of actual sexual abuse at its core. There are a couple of other hints at this aspect of Florence's character, and again the narrative never makes its point explicitly. But the reader could very well look at this combination of elements – Florence's unease around sex, the hints at sexual impropriety in her past, her power and control in the quartet – and come up with a very possible, almost likely portrait of a deeply troubled woman struggling to find some kind of safety and security, both of which are threatened, interestingly enough, by the power of love.

Geoffrey Ponting

Geoffrey is Florence's father, a corporate businessman. He is portrayed as domineering, competitive, and controlling (this last is perhaps the source of Florence's desire to control, both others - as manifest in her control of the quartet - and of herself). Geoffrey's sense of control and competitiveness extends to Edward, his future son-in-law, to whom he offers a job in his company and over whom he is determined to triumph in tennis. Perhaps the most significant way in which Geoffrey affects the lives of Florence and Edward is implied, rather than explicitly laid out. As noted above in relation to Florence, there are implications in the narrative of some kind of sexual relationship between father and daughter, that perhaps plays a role in Florence's struggles with sexuality and which would fit with the portrayal of Geoffrey as something of a controlling monster.

Violet Ponting

Violet Ponting is Florence's mother, a philosophy professor in Oxford. Violet is distant, cerebral, and emotionally cool, judgmental of both her daughter and her future son-in-law. There is a clear sense, in the narrative, that Florence's deep exploration of, and connection to, the passion and emotion of music is at least in part a response to the lack of emotion in her relationship with her mother.

Ruth Ponting

Ruth is Florence's younger sister. She appears only briefly, but references to her contain a particularly telling point: narration describes the relationship between her and her father as being friendly and physically affectionate, as opposed to his relationship with Florence, which is described as physically distant. This reference reinforces the above referenced hints at a sexual relationship between Geoffrey and Florence, the idea being that Geoffrey was distant from his daughter in public to avoid inadvertently revealing what their private relationship was.

Lionel Mayhew

Lionel is Edward's father, a schoolmaster in their small rural community. Because of the psychological disability experienced by Edward's mother, Lionel is forced to be in domestic charge of the family home, and he does a barely adequate job. Narration describes the home as being untidy and squalid. There is little or no sense that Lionel is at all resentful of the situation; he seems, rather, to be indifferent while, at the same time, stepping up to take what responsibility he has to for his children's well-being, nothing more and nothing less.

Marjorie Mayhew

Marjorie is Edward's mother, psychologically troubled and distant. Narration describes how her brain was injured as a result of an accident at a train station while she was pregnant with Edward's twin sisters, an injury that resulted in her being permanently dissociated from reality and unable to take care of her family. She is portrayed as a vague, drifting, pleasant presence in her son's life, one of which he is quietly ashamed while, at the same time, being as affectionate as he can.

Harriet and Anne

Harriet and Anne are Edward's younger twin sisters. They are referred to only briefly in the narrative, their principle function emerging in a reference made to events in the aftermath of Edward and Florence's breakup. Edward makes the twins swear to never say Florence's name again, an illustration of how bitterly he feels towards her.

Charles Rodway

Charles Rodway is the cellist in the string quartet founded and directed by Florence. He never appears in the narrative, but is referred to several times, coming across as being somewhat lacking in personality, devoted to Florence, and something of a trigger for Edward's jealousy. On his (Edward's) one visit to the quartet's rehearsals, fueled in part

by that jealousy, he discovers that Florence has no interest in Charles whatsoever, and feels more secure as a result.

Harold Mather

Harold Mather was a friend of Edward's while he was in college. Narration describes an incident in which Edward physically defended the bulled Mather, but instead of being thanked, Edward was subsequently shunned. This made Edward realize that not everyone saw his tendency towards violence, cultivated among his rambunctious male friends at home in his youth, as something to be admired. Mather and his relationship with Edward was, therefore, a catalyst in an aspect of Edward's maturation. As a result of Mather's attitude towards him, Edward strove to suppress his impulses towards fighting.

Harold MacMillan

Harold MacMillan was the real-world Prime Minister of England at the time in which the novel is set. MacMillan's leftist, labour-oriented politics and policies are the target of resentful rantings from Florence's father, and because both Edward and Florence both support MacMillan, a source of tension between them and Florence's family. On another level, MacMillan and his leftist political perspectives can be seen as metaphorically representing the kind of freer, less conservative values that Edward and Florence are, also metaphorically, striving to transcend by, among other things, enjoying sex in a way that traditional, conservative thought suggests they should not. In other words, MacMillan and conflict over him can be seen as symbolically representing sex and conflict over it.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Ocean

While referred to only glancingly in the narrative, and only on a couple of occasions, the ocean represents the rhythms of nature, as well as the ebb and flow of feeling. There are also references to the constancy of its sound, which can be seen as echoing the constancy of the feelings about sex and sexuality with which Edward and Florence both struggle. Finally, there is the implication that the ocean, in its vastness, represents the vastness and expanse of opportunity that awaits both Edward and Florence at this turning point in both their lives and the socio-political history of the country (England) in which they live.

The Beach

The fact that the beach is a shingle beach (one made up of small rocks and pebbles, as opposed to sand) lends to its role of metaphorically evoking the challenges associated with the journey towards understanding and mutual recognition that Edward and Florence are trying to take.

The Wedding Night Dinner

The dinner, which is described as traditionally British in both content and style of cooking, represents what might be described as the old ways of doing things that Edward and Florence are both trying to move beyond. These ways relate to issues around sex and sexuality (in that they are both trying to move beyond what the narrative suggests are traditional, conservative attitudes) and also around politics and society (in that they, like much of the rest of the country, are on the cusp of new socio-political attitudes and perspectives). In this context, it is interesting to note two things: that the dinner is left untouched once Florence decides to move to the sexual side of the evening; and that Edward returns to the congealed meal in the aftermath of the confrontation with Florence and Florence's departure.

The Counterpane on the Bed

In the first chapter, the narrative makes a clear but subtle point of showing the counterpane, or bedspread, on Edward and Florence's bed is white. This is clearly a symbolic reference to purity, or virginity - specifically Florence's, but also Edward's "virginity" at having sex with a woman he loves.

Sex

Throughout the narrative, sex and sexuality are not only at the literal core of the action, but they are also at the metaphorical core of the book's explorations of the book's various themes. Its exploration of shame, of the relationship between past and present, the failure of love, and the experience of self-pressure are all defined by the presence, to one degree or another, of sex in the lives of the characters. It is simultaneously a metaphorical path to walk (with difficulty, like the rocky, challenging walk to the beach), a way to transcend the boundaries of the past, and the means through which the characters discover how to be more of, or less of, themselves.

Music

For both the central characters, music represents important aspects of their identity. In Florence's case, music is much more of a core aspect of who she is, what she wants, and what she values: for much of the narrative, she is portrayed as being much more defined by music than any other aspect of identity, an element that, as the final chapter reveals, becomes even more pronounced after her marriage to Edward fails. For Edward, music is initially an expression of energy and rebellion: his taste runs much more to rock and roll than to Florence's preferred classical. Later, however, as his love for Florence deepens, he comes to have a greater care and/or appreciation for her tastes, suggesting that music becomes a means of expressing his feelings for her. Finally, at the novel's conclusion, narration clearly indicates that Edward has, for the most part, rejected the presence and influence of music in his life in the same way as he has rejected Florence.

The Ennismore Quartet

This classical string quartet, defined in the narrative as being founded and run by Florence, is a place where she feels she has power and control, and is also able to reveal and celebrate much more of who she is and what she wants to be. It is, in many ways, a substitute for a sexual and marital life, something that becomes even more apparent when, in the final chapter and in the aftermath of her failed marriage, she is revealed as devoting even more of her life to the life of the quartet.

Wigmore Hall

After Florence has ended her marriage and shifted focus to her career, she does get to performs at Wigmore Hall, a circumstance suggesting that for her, music has become far more fulfilling than her marriage could have ever been.

The real-world Wigmore Hall is renowned around the world as a prestigious concert hall: to perform in Wigmore Hall is to have arrived, in some way, at a place of

professional achievement as a musical artist. Florence takes classes and lessons at Wigmore Hall, and for her performing there becomes a powerful, driving goal.

"A Taste of Honey'

The directness and society-challenging perspectives of this film are metaphorically evocative of the cultural and political circumstances in which Edward and Florence are trying to define both their sexual and social rebelliousness.

"A Taste of Honey" is the film that Edward and Florence are watching when Edward touches Florence in a sexual way of which she does not approve, to the point that she runs out of the theater. The film was made and released in England in the early 1960's, and became somewhat infamous for several of its elements: its frank portrayal of a blue collar, working class relationship; its portrayal of the friendship between a straight woman and a gay man; and of a sexual relationship between that same straight (white) woman and a black man.

Gifts from Florence's Father

The financial gifts given to Florence and Edward for their marriage, as well as the job given to Edward represent a clear desire on the part of Florence's father to dominate and control his daughter's life. Later, when the narrative hints at some kind of sexual relationship between Florence and her father, this representation or evocation of control takes on an even darker meaning.

Settings

England

England is the primary broad-strokes setting for the narrative. It is a country long associated, in reputation and perhaps in fact, with emotional, physical, and sexual repression. This makes it a powerful and poignant setting for a story in which two people, on the cusp of fully understanding what it means to break through personal and cultural repressions, fail to do so.

Chesil Beach (Dorset)

The real-life Chesil Beach in Dorset, on the south-west coast of England, is one of the few shingle beaches in the UK (that is: a beach composed of rocks and pebbles, rather than of sand). Its combined view of the sea and rock-based composition are important metaphoric foundations of several narrative elements, in the present-time sections of the narrative, representing openness, in the case of the former; and the difficulty / slippery footing associated with reaching that openness, in the case of the latter.

Oxford

Much of the action of the sections of the novel set in the past takes place in Oxford, the city in which Florence grew up, and in which she and Edward experienced many of the early stages in their relationship. There is a sense in the narrative that Oxford, with its university-defined atmosphere (i.e. one infused with intellectualism and thought) is an ironic contrast to the more emotionally and/or physically oriented love story playing out in the story.

London

A significant amount of narrative, in the novel's past-oriented passages, is set in London, the capital city of the UK. Cosmopolitan, vibrant, and stimulating, there is a sense of liveliness and opportunity about this setting that is a clear contrast to the somewhat more restrained sensibilities of Oxford, at least as portrayed in the narrative. Both Florence and Edward seem to come closer to being their full selves in London than they do in any of the other settings in which the narrative plays out.

Turville Heath

Turville Heath is the rural part of England in which Edward and his family live. Its relatively unspoiled, rustic nature and character are an effective contrast to the intellect-defined atmosphere of Oxford, the activity-defined atmosphere of London, and the

tension-defined atmosphere of Chesil Beach. This is particularly noteworthy as the narrative portrays the time that Edward and Florence spend there together, on Florence's surprise visit, is portrayed as just about the happiest, freest, most connected time they have together.

The Mid-twentieth Century

The action of the play, both past and present, takes place within the two decades (plus a bit) of the mid-twentieth century. The main narrative line - that is, set in the novel's present - takes place in the early 1960's, when England (and arguably the rest of the world) was on the cusp of what history refers to as the sexual revolution. This is significant because the characters, on the one hand, feel that revolution coming: but, on the other, hand and in spite of their impulses, are unable to move into their own acts of sexual revolution because of their histories as individuals and as repressed Britishers. Meanwhile, the sections of the narrative set in the past cover a period of 20 years, from the births of Edward and Florence in 1940 (pre-World War II) and their eventual meeting and relationship, in the late 1950's and early 1960's. This 20 years was marked by significant experiences of repression and entrenchment of social / cultural attitudes towards, among other things, freer expressions of sexuality.

Themes and Motifs

Views of Sexuality

As the novel explores the sexual tension both within and between its two central characters, its portrayal of how Edward and Florence individually view sex and sexuality can seem to be simultaneously universal and individual in perspective.

On one level, the broad strokes portrayal of Edward's increasing desperation to sexualize his relationship with Florence, defined in part by its constant presence in his mind and perception, can be seen as stereotypically male – reductive, simplistic, and defined primarily by physical drives. What tempers this apparent attitude, and what makes Edward somewhat more empathy-worthy, is his struggle to rein in his feelings out of love, respect, and sensitivity. On the same level, the broad strokes portrayal of Florence's deep revulsion towards the idea of sexualizing her relationship with Edward, defined in part by her fundamental fear of being "penetrated," might be seen as stereotypically female – fearful of the violence and pain, however relatively mild, the concept of "penetration" carries with it. An additional layer to Florence's concern, also perhaps essentially female, is the fear that by surrendering herself more to the desires of her husband, she is losing her own identity. What tempers her response to both these sides of her fear is the hint, late in the novel, that she has been sexualized, at least to some degree, by her father. Thus both characters can be seen as, on a perhaps archetypal level, embodying attitudes commonly believed to be those of their gender while, at the same time, being individualized in terms of where their own versions of those experiences come from.

Here it is important to remember that the characters are also characters of their time. As the novel clearly points out in its opening paragraphs, Edward and Florence are experiencing their sexuality at a time in history, and in British history in particular, when sexuality was barely spoken of, and certainly not in public. It was not taught in schools in any depth; popular culture was not as saturated with overtly sexualized imagery as it has become; and, perhaps most significantly, their respective parents were of a generation in which sexuality, and discussions of it, were even more repressed. It is therefore appropriate to suggest that when it comes to how Edward and Florence are portrayed in terms of both their individual sexuality and about sexuality with each other, the novel mines, both thematically and narratively, the way in which their attitudes are defined as much by what society, culture, and generational influence have told them to feel as it is by what they actually feel.

Shame

While the novel tends to understate the point, there is a very clear sense that for both Edward and Florence, their attitudes towards sex (before, during, and after the act portrayed in the novel's action) are defined to a significant degree by shame. This

emerges primarily through the narrative's explorations of the histories of the characters. In Edward's case, the narrative clearly suggests that he is ashamed of both the overpowering intensity of his feelings and of the fact that he wants to take control of the woman he adores in a way that he feels is more animalistic than loving. In Florence's case, the narrative suggests just as clearly that Florence is ashamed of both her revulsion towards the act but also her lack of comfort in loving her husband the way he wants her to and the way she feels she is supposed to. Thus, their mutual desire to treat each other lovingly, and the way husbands and wives are supposed to treat each other, is undermined by the lingering, troubling feeling that they are less than the good people they see themselves as being; and less than the good spouses they are expected to be, by each other, by their families, and by society.

The most significant portrayals and manifestations of shame in the narrative emerge in the aftermath of Edward's premature orgasm. More specifically, Edward feels deep shame at what happened, while Florence feels deep shame at her reaction. Here it is important to note that in both cases, shame is connected to love – that is, the love they each feel for the other. It is also important to note, however, that their individual experiences of shame are also the fuel for their individual experiences of anger, blame, and hurtfulness: instead of being honest about what they are truly feeling, they instead become ashamed of their shame and lash out at each other, with consequences for their individual well-being and their relationship that end up separating them for what seems to be the rest of their lives.

All that said, it is essential to note that the presence of shame in the lives of Edward and Florence is not only the result of their struggles with sexuality, but with the presence and influence of their respective pasts. This leads to consideration of the novel's third major theme, which explores exactly that issue.

The Impact of the Past and the Present

As the novel explores the presence and power of shame in the lives of its central characters, and as it does so within the context of their respective experiences of sexuality, it ties both sets of explorations to parallel contemplations of how their respective pasts, and their feelings about those pasts, affect their respective presents. Again, the situations of the two characters are similar in generality, specific in detail.

Both Edward and Florence are portrayed as being ashamed, at least to some degree, by their family history – Edward by his psychologically absent mother and well-meaning but slovenly father, Florence by her father's business-oriented conservativism and her mother's austere, philosophy-oriented prioritizing of work. Edward is also defined by an aspect of his past that he seems determined to escape: his tendency to impulsively, randomly engage in physical violence. In addition, Florence is also defined by an aspect of her past that she in fact wants to make more a part of her present: her passionate, devoted attention to music, and to the string quartet she was instrumental in forming. Edward, by contrast, has little or no sense of having a powerful identification with a past career goal. In any case, all these aspects of their respective histories are explored in

considerable narrative detail, which suggests that while their present situation (i.e. attempting to consummate their relationship) is foremost on their minds, other issues that have defined their lives to that point are, in no small part, connected to the urgency they both feel that they get this aspect of their lives right.

Are they trying to redeem themselves for past mistakes, their own and those around them? Edward certainly seems to be. Are they trying to determine whether the paths they chose in the past are the correct ones, and whether they need to make different choices? This seems to be the case for Florence. In both cases, though, and because the narrative spends so much time exploring their pasts in considerable detail, there is the very clear sense that the past plays a key role in the present, perhaps too much so. This is perhaps even more true of Florence, given the glancing reference in Chapter 4 to the possible sexual relationship between her and her father which, if true, would offer a clear, defining reason as to why her perspectives on sex in general, and on Edward in particular, are as fearful as they are.

Self-Pressure

As Florence and Edward strive towards shaping a present that transcends their past, the pressure they put on themselves to get it right plays a key role in, ironically, their eventual getting it wrong. Edward consciously puts pressure on himself to be a good, sensitive husband even as his sexual desires sub-consciously impose pressure on him to be an effective male. The two pressures collide and form a toxic tension that erupts both physically and emotionally, on one level triggered by something purely physical (i.e. Florence's tentative touch on Edward's hyper-sensitive penis), but is on another level triggered by the psychological complexities of shame and history as discussed above. The explosive release of both these pressures results in a kind of self-destruction, in that everything positive that Edward had strived so hard to build in himself and in his relationship with Florence completely falls apart.

Florence's experience of self-pressure is perhaps even more extreme, and more multi-faceted. While the narrative portrays Edward's academic and professional lives as being relatively free of stakes or personal importance, it simultaneously portrays Florence's academic and professional lives as being entirely tied in with her sense of self, her definitions of identity. Where Edward's study of history is based on interest, Florence's study of music is based on talent, passion, and an experience of feeling artistically called, not to mention her sub-conscious valuing of it as a world in which it is possible to escape whatever it was that her father did to her in that hotel room. She puts immense pressure on herself in that part of her life, and puts similar pressure on herself in the relationship-oriented side of her life – that is, the side of her life that is oriented towards being a loving, sexually responsive partner to Edward.

This last point is particularly noteworthy, in that Florence is far from being alone in her desire to be a loving participant in the partnership she has with Edward. He too wants to be a good, sensitive, responsible and respectful husband: he and Florence are, in fact, quite alike in their determined desire to be good to, for, and with each other – in other

words, to lovingly respect each other's needs and perspectives. Consideration of this aspect of their relationship, and of this aspect of the novel, leads to consideration of the novel's final major theme – the failure of love.

The Failure of Love

Ultimately, the novel portrays both Edward and Florence as wanting to be good to each other, and good FOR each other, but failing. They lovingly try to understand each other's values, perspectives, and musical tastes, among other things: for the most part, they fail (Edward is moved and admiring of Florence's work, but does not understand it, or her devotion). They try to accommodate each other's sexual perspectives because they love each other, but they fail. They try to shape how they speak to each other in the shame-and-anger defined aftermath of the disastrous sexual encounter on their wedding night: there again they fail, instead resorting to blame and vicious attacks. In other words, they try so hard to ACT loving towards each other that they actually end up unable to BE loving towards each other. As a result, they each end up separated from the one person, and from the feeling, that could have made all the difference in the world to them as individuals, and as a couple.

The question then arises, perhaps inevitably, of whether Edward and Florence actually loved each other at all, or whether they were simply posturing. On one level, and because the narrative places so much emphasis on its setting in time and place (England in the early 1960's), it becomes possible to see their marriage as their attempt to fulfill their socio-cultural duty. This theory is supported by Florence's perception that as a wife, or even as an apparent beloved, she is expected to be sexual. It is important to note that this theory is quite possible in spite of the narrative's attempts to paint them as incipient anarchists: they talk a good, teenaged, "break the old people's rules" sort of game, but when sexual push comes to loving shove, they seem trapped (to some degree, and to some degree subconsciously) in convention. In this context, it becomes possible to see the love that the narrative suggests they think about so much might also be a convention, a pre-conception, an expectation. This idea, in turn, is supported by the utter failure of what they say is love at the moment it matters most: in the highly sensitive aftermath of the failed sexual encounter. Love, in this circumstance, fails to overcome shame and anger, and at least in Edward's case, fails to overcome deep, decades-lasting bitterness.

Ultimately, it could be argued that love, in this case, is connected to belief, and therefore fails because it does not really exist. Florence believes she loves Edward enough to make herself open to him sexually; Edward believes he loves Florence enough to behave tenderly and respectfully towards her. In both cases, love is only effective to a point, and virtually disappears in the aftermath of sexuality-defined humiliation. Given the other thematic elements at play in the narrative, then, it becomes possible to see that Edward and Florence have been mistaken - what they thought was love was, in fact, merely a desire to escape shame, the past, or a combination of both.

Styles

Point of View

The narrative unfolds from a pair of structurally balanced, intertwined points of view – those of the book's two protagonists, newlyweds Florence and Edward. The narrative spends close to equal time examining their separate pasts, shared present, and splintered future: although the book's chronicle of the latter is focused more on Edward, the book is, for the most part, relatively equal in terms of the amount of focus that each character receives. Here it is also important to note that while they are both protagonists, they are also both antagonists, each confronting, challenging, and triggering change in the other.

In terms of authorial point of view, the key point to note is that the author seems intent upon making both characters right and both characters wrong, making them complex and self-contradictory in the way that people in general tend to be, particularly (and more specifically) people who are trying to behave lovingly to teach other. This, in fact, seems to be a key component of the author's perspective – that love, and the love-defined desire to not be hurtful, can lead to unnecessary pain and complications, if that desire to not be hurtful is also defined by a reluctance to be completely honest. There is the clear sense, about the piece, that its tragedies could have been avoided if both Florence and/or Edward had just spoken truthfully and openly about their situations. But as the novel makes clear, it was not a time when those conversations could be had – and, as the novel implies in its setting (i.e. Britain, with its reputation for national and general reticence about revealing feeling), it was also not a place for those sorts of conversations.

Finally, the book's thematic point of view is clearly tied in with its authorial perspective, in that its exploration of how shame, the influence of the past, and the impotence of love to fully effect transformation all entwine in a complex, compassionate exploration of individual and cultural perspectives on sexuality.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the book's use of language is that for a book that is almost entirely about sex and sexuality, there is no crudity, no cursing, and very few references to sexual anatomy. There is definite clarity about what is being discussed, but for the most part, meaning emerges through implication, rather than through overt or over-assertive language. This is not to suggest that there is a lack of intensity – the moment in which Edward ejaculates prematurely, his semen ending up on Florence, is shocking, vivid, and powerfully visceral. The reader is drawn fully and effectively into the experiences of the characters, both physical and emotional / psychological.

Another point to note about the book's use of language is its integration of carefully shaped poetic phrasing and imagery, subtle inclusions of metaphor and, again, implication that add layers of glanced-at meaning. An early example has to do with the references, early in the narrative, to the cover on the bed being white, the color of virginity, of bridal gowns, and of purity. In this case, the reference is to the sexual innocence with which both characters are facing their wedding night, but the point is made to suggest the subtlety of this almost in-passing metaphor, and to comment on how this approach to metaphor and imagery is consistent throughout the book, particularly when it comes to the extremely subtle, but nevertheless clear, reference to the possibility of an incestuous, abusive, sexual relationship between Florence and her father.

The final point to note about the book's use of language relates to its clear evocation of a setting in time and in place – specifically, England in the early 1960's (that is: before the full impact of The Beatles, and before the Sexual Revolution). What is interesting here is how the references to this aspect of setting are embedded in narration's reflections on the characters, and not treated as formal, off-the-top exposition. In the first chapter, and in the same way as the similarly subtle references to the white coverlet evoke both sexual purity and sexual expectation, references to the political and cultural environment of the time are both evocative and clear without being too heavy handed. The occasional references to the politics of the time come close to being more obvious, but, for the most part, the novel's use of language tends towards the inferring rather than the explaining.

Structure

The book's first four chapters essentially follow a clear structural pattern: a chapter focusing on the present (i.e. the wedding night sexual encounter between Florence and Edward), followed by a chapter focusing on the past. In the case of Chapter 2, that past focuses on the separate childhoods and young adulthoods of the two central characters. In the case of Chapter 3, the focus is on the more recent past, on the stories of their meeting, becoming engaged to be married, and also to becoming engaged with one another's families. Chapter 5 reveals an exception to that pattern. While it begins with a focus on the narrative present (that is: on the remainder of the evening following Florence's and Edward's failed sexual encounter), about two thirds of the way through it shifts into consideration of what follows in the days, weeks, and years afterwards – into what might be described as the narrative future.

This structural choice (to have the novel's final pages cover a period of decades) has another interesting quality, particularly when considered next to the fact that the two chapters focusing on the past cover a period of years. Put these two facts next to the fact that the narrative of the present (the wedding night confrontation between Florence and Edward) covers a period of maybe an hour, and the book's structure seems to suggest that the present, as thoroughly and as intimately and as deeply as it can be experienced, is really the product of a long past and can result in a long future. The depth and intensity of the present moment has a long beginning and a long end but, as

the book's detailed richness suggests, a short but intensely complex time in the middle. In other words, a moment's misunderstanding emerges from, and resolves into, decades.

One last point to note about structure is that the book's exploration of the relationship between past and present is not defined solely in terms of chapters. There are several points in Chapters 1 and 3 in which narration refers to past incidents, the memories of which are awakened in the characters by present day experiences. This stylistic choice continues to reinforce the thematically significant idea that the present can be held back from realizing its full potential for joy by the weight of the past.

Quotes

They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. But it is never easy.
-- Narration (One)

Importance: This quote sketches in the essential circumstance of the two protagonists, adding a layer of meaning to their situation: the final line suggests a universality about their experience, the sense that for young people in whatever time and whatever place, conversations about sexuality and intimacy are not ever easy to have.

…[Edward] was so astonished by his own decisiveness, as well as mentally cramped by unresolved desire, that he could have had little idea of the contradiction she began to live with from that day on, the secret affair between disgust and joy."
-- Narration (One)

Importance: In this quote, there is a sense of a fundamental selfishness and self-absorption in Edward, at odds with his clearly felt (and clearly expressed) love for Florence throughout their relationship.

Edward and Florence's shared sense that one day soon the country would be transformed for the better, that youthful energies were pushing to escape, like steam under pressure, merged with the excitement of their own adventure together. The sixties was their first decade of adult life, and it surely belonged to them."
-- Narration (One)

Importance: This quote again takes the situation of Edward and Florence from the personal into the universal. There is a sense that, on some level, the two characters are intended to represent, or evoke, the experiences of an entire generation of young British people.

In the stone-floored echoing hall with the heavy low beams, [Florence's] problems with Edward were already present in those first few seconds, in their first exchange of looks."
-- Narration (Two)

Importance: A common thread throughout the narrative that begins to emerge in more detail with this quote is the sense that the tensions between Edward and Florence on their wedding night have deep roots in their past as individuals and as a couple. This is a development of the book's thematic interest in the effect of the past on the present.

A sudden space began to open out, not only between Edward and his mother, but also between himself and his immediate circumstances, and he felt his own being, the buried core of it he had never attended to before, come to sudden, hard-edged existence, a glowing pinpoint that he wanted no-one else to know about."
-- Narration (Two)

Importance: This quote functions on several levels. First, it suggests that a fundamental component of Edward's personality is the experience of, and need for, keeping a deep secret, an experience that, as narration later reveals, he might very well share with Florence. On another level, this quote evokes the book's thematic interest in shame, given that Edward clearly feels a degree of shame related to both the nature of the secret and the fact that he has to keep it.

The familiar phrase … consisted of four rising notes, which appeared to be posing a tentative question. Because the instrument was a cello rather than [Florence's] violin, the interrogator was not herself but a detached observer, mildly incredulous, but insistent too, for after a brief silence and a lingering, unconvincing reply from the other instruments, the cello put the question again, in different terms, on a different chord, and then again, and again, and each time received a doubtful answer…the enquiry was without content, as pure as a question mark."
-- Narration (Three)

Importance: This quote interestingly characterizes Florence's inner life - specifically, the voice of her conscience - in terms of the music that characterizes and defines her outer life. There is a sense, resulting from this quote, that there is more congruence, or connection, between these two sides of her life and identity than there is between these same two sides of Edward's life.

…here was a boundless sensual freedom, theirs for the taking, even blessed by the vicar … a dirty, joyous, bare-limed freedom, which rose in his imagination like a vast airy cathedral, ruined perhaps, roofless, fan-vaulted to the skies, where they would weightlessly drift upwards in a powerful embrace and have each other, drown in each other in waves of breathless, mindless ecstasy."
-- Narration (Three paragraph 96)

Importance: It is important to remember that this quote relates to the perspective (and desires) of Edward when it comes to the sexual relationship between him and Florence. It is his attempt to rationalize, or justify, the almost desperate intensity of his desire to consummate their relationship and have sex with her.

You have a lovely face and a beautiful nature, and sexy elbows and ankles, and a clavicle, a putamen and a vibrato all men must adore, but you belong entirely to me and I am very glad and proud.
-- Edward (to Florence) (Three)

Importance: Early in their lovemaking, and in an attempt to try and make herself more at ease, Florence asks Edward to "tell her something" (102). This quote is what he says in response. There is a very clear sense, in context, that this is something of a routine for the two of them: that Florence's request is one she makes often, perhaps in a variety of circumstances in which she feels uncomfortable or insecure; and that Edward's response is designed to reassure her how attractive, smart, and desirable she is. The putamen is an area of the brain that is primarily responsible for active learning.

By temperament, [Edward] was not introspective, and moving around [Florence's] house with a constant erection, or so it seemed, dulled or confined his thoughts somewhat."
-- Narration (Four)

Importance: This quote, taken from the section that describes Edward's multi-faceted reaction to being easily welcomed into the home life of Florence's family, suggests that on some level, he was sexually stimulated by both the welcome he received and what that implied in terms of improved prospects for finally being able to have sex with her.

The sound of waves collapsing onto the shore at regular intervals broke in on [Edward's] thoughts, as though suddenly switched on, and filled him with weariness; the relentless laws and processes of the physical world, of moon and tides, in which he generally took little interest, were not remotely altered by his situation."
-- Narration (Four)

Importance: In the shame-filled aftermath of his failed sexual encounter with Florence, Edward's shame deepens when he realizes that what feels, to him, as though it was desperately important is, in the greater scheme of the world's turning, not important at all.

… this cruelty was not [Florence] at all. This was merely the second violin answering the first, a rhetorical parry provoked by the suddenness, the precision of [Edward's] attack, the sneer she heard in all his repeated 'you's. How much accusation was she supposed to bear in one small speech?
-- Florence (Five)

Importance: Once again, narration expresses Florence's inner life and experience in musical terms - that is, in the terms of her outer life. There is a sense, as the cumulative result of comments like these and others in the book, that a life devoted to music (as opposed to defined by marriage) is really a better, truer situation for her.

… [Florence] saw herself as [Edward] might, as awkward and brittle like her mother, hard to know, making difficulties when they could be at ease in paradise. So she should make things simple. It was her duty, her marital duty."
-- Narration (Five)

Importance: As she makes her decision as to what she should do next, in the aftermath of her confrontation with Edward on the beach, Florence initially sees herself as following through on the marital example of her mother. It is interesting to compare the perspective of the narration here with the early perspective of narration on both Edward and Florence - specifically, the reference made in Quote 1 to them both having the experience of being at the beginning of change and transformation.