The Other Side Short Guide

The Other Side by Mary Gordon

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

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Characters

While the narrative portrays fragmentary incidents from the lives of a number of characters, the central interest is in the history of the marriage of Ellen and Vincent MacNamara. Ellen, married for sixty-six years to Vincent, has lived sixty-three of them in this house in Queens, and is facing her death after a series of strokes. Her experience of family life in Ireland has made her a passionate hater. Her mother, having suffered a series of stillbirths and miscarriages, went insane and was put away by her father in a country house in the care of another woman. Ellen, witnessing the bloody evidence of her mother's miscarriages, blames her father's selfishness. Ellen's emigration is both an escape and a form of revenge against her father, who wished her to carry on the business after his death. In America Ellen marries, works, and becomes a political activist in liberal causes.

Consumed by hatred for her father and her devotion to political causes, Ellen blights the psychological growth of her young daughters, Theresa and Magdalene, through neglect. She pours her love into her only son, John. After his death, she devotes her energy to two grandchildren: Camille, the daughter of Magdalene; and Dan, the son of the dead John.

Vincent MacNamara, the most fullydeveloped and sympathetic of Gordon's male figures, is a man of honor.

Because of lack of economic opportunity, he left Ireland, performed the gruelling physical labor of the immigrant, and found a use for his mechanical skills in the New World. He is a sober man, one who meets his obligations, including his promise to his wife that he will be with her when she dies in her own bed. To accomplish this goal, he must give up the new life he discovered in an experimental nursing home, where he has found companionship and release from Ellen's hatred. It is a source of grief to Vincent that families "weren't what they were meant to be, what they could almost be so easily." However, he performs the central act of compassion in the story: At Ellen's request, he goes to Ireland to bring back Ellen's old mother, allowing her to die with dignity in America.

Camille, the granddaughter nurtured by Ellen, is a successful divorce lawyer who devotes herself to her women clients. Having married an Irish Catholic schoolmate, she has been the victim of an insensitive doctor who misdiagnosed the sexual dysfunction caused by endometriosis. Camille's marriage has failed, but she continues to live with her husband in the home of her mother. She has found emotional and sexual fulfillment with Ira, a Jewish man. At the novel's conclusion, Camille seems ready to take the steps that will free her from her mother and her unsatisfactory marriage and allow her to seek her own happiness.

Magdalene, Camille's mother, is alcoholic and agoraphobic and manipulates the family by alternately agreeing and refusing to attend the deathwatch.

Having recovered from a cancer operation years ago, she still considers herself an invalid.

Theresa, the other unloved daughter, is one of Gordon's Catholic fanatics, a charismatic whose life consists of religious services and Bible study. She is an unloving woman with a cold nature whose children, too, have been dam aged by her excesses of religious devotion.

The other fully-developed male character is Dan, the son of John, taken from his natural mother by Ellen after John's death. Like Ellen, Dan is a successful lawyer. His marriage also having failed, he has lived for many years with Sharon, but they will never marry. Dan has two teen-age daughters, Darci and Staci. By the novel's end, Darci, a loving young woman, plans to leave her mother and live with her father. Staci, however, is yet another victim of failed love — she is selfish and manipulative and deliberately sets out to hurt others' feelings.

Minor characters include a realistic priest who encourages Vincent's emigration, and a group of contemporary nuns who, with hope and optimism, gather together in an unconventional haven the elderly, the neglected young, and the abused women — all examples of those whom society has failed.

Social Concerns

The ideas in The Other Side are relevant to the ongoing debate about the contribution of immigrants to American life. The four generations of Irish-Americans that Gordon portrays exemplify the survival skills that have enabled them to prosper in this country. These immigrants did the hard labor that built the infrastructure and the industry of the nation. Vincent MacNamara, the patriarch of this family, dug the New York City subway and later worked as an engineer for the transit authority. Ellen, his wife, took a degrading job as a maid, then worked as a seamstress in the garment industry, becoming a union activist.

However, Vincent and Ellen cannot escape the consequences of their family heritage. As in her other fiction, Gordon develops the theme of love and its failure — its power to shape human lives for good or ill. She follows this influence through the generations of the MacNamara family, whose failure to treat each other with compassion and generosity stunts their lives and blasts the original hope with which Vincent and Ellen left the old country to begin a new life. The immigrant experience may be universal — but Gordon's characters are inescapably Irish-American, and their story reflects the specifics of this history. As Ellen MacNamara (admittedly a warped observer) says of the Irish: "What could you expect of them, a rosary in one hand, a pistol in the other, a flask of poteen in the pocket just in case their other remedies should fail them."

Gordon shatters the romantic mythology of the Irish-American experience, and with it the nostalgic belief that the solution to today's problems lies in a return to a benign past. Vincent and Ellen MacNamara, patriarch and matriarch of one of the most dysfunctional families in contemporary fiction, embody not the American dream, but its nightmare.

Although the action of the narrative takes place within one day, Gordon uses flashback to trace the unfolding of the conflicts of four generations of MacNamaras. She has assembled a large cast of characters and provided a much-needed genealogical chart for reference. Several critics have found the number of characters and the fragmentary plot to be a weakness of this novel.

Techniques

The narrative has five parts and is written in the present tense, with flashbacks. The framing action takes place in one day: August 14, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven. The intent is ironic; Ellen has exhibited none of the saving graces of love and generosity attributed to the mother of Jesus.

Parts I, II, and IV are a series of interior monologues and narrations revealing the lives of the major characters. Parts II and IV present the stories of Ellen and Vincent. The fully-rounded portraits of these two characters give the reader a secure location from which to observe the terrain of the narrative. Other characters — even Dan and Camille, whom Gordon seems to care most about — appear in episodic glimpses. This technique is perhaps intended to suggest the fragmentation of their lives; but it often is an obstacle to the reader.

Reading the novel is akin to leafing through a photograph album, stopping at intervals when an image attracts the eye. The narrative, characteristic of Gordon's conclusions, does not resolve the problems raised in the story.

Themes

If Gordon's immediate social concern is the family, her questions are those raised in all her fiction, those of individual moral responsibility. Tragedy here is not on a cosmic scale, an impersonal force in the universe or the will of God. The misery of human lives is caused by those who should love us, but are either too weak to behave honorably, or wilfully stubborn and selfish in following their own passions.

Whether by sins of commission or omission, they blight the lives of those they should have been able to love.

Although this novel has few direct references to the Catholic Church, the characters feel its influence. Ellen, as a result of events in her childhood in the old country, directs her venom toward the Church she has abandoned. The power of the Church, both destructive and salvific, underpins the actions of the characters. Gordon portrays the Irish Catholic Church as puritanical in its rules about sexuality and resistant to social and economic change. She uses the symbol of the invasion of a colony of bees that takes over a church in Ireland in several ways, but most strongly as an example of the typical Irish acceptance of, and unwillingness to deal with, events that influence their lives.

The narrative takes place in one day and centers on the return of eightyeight-year-old Vincent MacNamara from the nursing home where he has spent the past eight months recovering from a broken hip. His wife Ellen, ninety years old and the victim of a stroke, has caused his injury by pushing him away from her bedside. Ellen is dying, and Vincent had promised her early in their marriage that she will die at home with him at her side. The family has gathered for an occasion that is emblematic and double-edged: to celebrate the homecoming of Vincent and await Ellen's death. In fiction, as in life, such momentous occasions call forth the best and worst in people.

The plot has little action; Gordon seems more interested in examining under her cruelly-revealing microscope the psychological pattern of family failure. A series of interior monologues reveals the memories and emotions of the major characters, if not always a clear motivation for their behavior.

Gordon paints a strong portrait of the economic and social conditions in the old country early in the century that force the sons and daughters of Ireland to emigrate. Her vivid description of the harsh physical labor and humiliating discrimination faced by the immigrants suggests that in surviving these hardships they developed in themselves an emotional hardness.

Strong physical passion, a dangerous force in the eyes of the Church, is a motif in this narrative. The fierce sexual relationship of young Ellen and Vincent brings the family into being; yet it is this very attachment that stunts the love of the mother for her daughters.

The distorted mother-child relationship is central to the story. Ellen MacNamara, devoured by her need for revenge, cannot love her daughters, Magdalene and Theresa. She has poured her considerable emotional investment into her favorite child, John, who is killed in World War II.

Vincent, one of Gordon's most successfully portrayed male characters, represents the masculine ideal of honor. He has found peace in the nursing home and shelter offered by the nuns; but, although he is incapable of loving the person Ellen has become in her final days, he knows he must return home to keep his promise.

Adaptations

The Other Side is available as a books on tape cassette from AmAudio Prose.

Key Questions

Gordon's portrayal of family conflicts, religious issues, and immigration raises several provocative issues. Her characters are judgmental — they constantly criticize each other and express their dissatisfactions with life. Sons and daughters are especially harsh in judging their parents. The reader wonders if these complaints are realistic, given the history of the family.

This novel invites comparison with films about immigrants. For instance, the 1992 movie directed by Ron Howard, Far and Away, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, while covering similar events, presents a far different view of family life than does Gordon's novel. Gordon has also been criticized for her stereotyped portraits of minor characters, However, film treatments of the Irishman, particularly the priest, have been themselves stereotypes.

1. Is the portrait of Ellen in old age unnecessarily cruel? Does Gordon focus unfairly on her physical appearance and vengeful behavior?

2. Does Ellen's behavior throughout the story seem sufficiently motivated?

Does her childhood experience justify her lifelong rage?

3. Does Vincent seem at times too saintly? Is the sacrifice of his own happiness at Maryhurst in order to keep his promise sufficiently motivated?

4. Does the fragmentary structure of the narrative serve Gordon's purpose in revealing the lives of the various characters?

5. Is Camille's affair with Ira justified and her decision at the conclusion a sign of moral strength or weakness?

6. Does the portrayal of Darci and Staci as representative of the next generation of the family and the direction they will take in life offer an optimistic or a pessimistic view?

7. The novel is full of examples of the failure of love. Are there also examples of generous and redeeming love that offer a hopeful outlook for the future of this family?

8. Does the idea of Maryhurst seem to be a workable solution to contemporary social problems, or is it an ideal that could not be realized?

9. Gordon calls herself a feminist.

Does she present her female characters as positive examples of women's capabilities? Do these women act as they do because they are oppressed by society?

Literary Precedents

Other stories of Irish-American immigrants include Marcia Davenport's The Valley of Decision (1942), James T. Farrell's The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan (1934), and Edwin O'Connor's The Last Hurrah (1956).

Related Titles

As in Final Payments (1978), Gordon explores the Irish-American experience.

Like Isabel, Cam resolves to extricate herself from others' expectations and begin to lead her own life. Like Margaret Casey in Final Payments, and Laura in Men and Angels (1985), Theresa is an example of the religious impulse carried to disastrous extremes.

As in her previous works, Gordon explores the theme of parental-child relationships, the unfulfilled need for love, and the power of human beings to damage each other because they are incapable of love.

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