Very Old Bones Short Guide

Very Old Bones by William Kennedy

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Characters

As narrator of the family saga fleshed out in Very Old Bones, Orson Purcell functions as both the focus of the narrative action and as the fictional recreator of the family history. Orson's relationships to his parents, particularly his father, his family (the Phelans), his wife, and his writing comprise about half the narrative and parallel similar relationships and behavior seen in other characters. As a particularly pertinent example, Orson's sexual drive and his premarital and later marital relations with the promiscuous Giselle result in two alcoholically driven nervous breakdowns and counterpoint the drunken, hallucinatory, sexually driven behavior of Malachi. That Orson is the grandnephew of Malachi and threatens the self-destruction through libido that grandmother Kathryn saw in her brother and feared in her own offspring points us directly to the central concerns of the novel.

Orson begins the "memoir" which is the novel after his second breakdown and through that process of analysis and synthesis he saves himself.

Orson recuperates through the caring nursing of his Aunt Molly, is legally and spiritually united to the family through the concluding actions of his father Peter, is "to reinvent marriage with an ambiguous wife" at the conclusion, and finds in the story of his family material for effective writing which will contrast with his previously "joyless" novel. Through the character of Orson, Kennedy weaves together the major thematic concerns of family, sexuality, and creation in Very Old Bones.

Peter is the second of the Phelan sons (after Francis) to be driven from the home by the mother and sister Sarah. The immediate cause is their excoriation of his neighbor and friend Edward Daugherty for writing and staging a play which "dissected" the paradoxically "idyllic marriage and blatant infidelities" of he and his wife Katrina after she dies in a fire. We see in the Daughertys also the recurrence of those thematic issues of complex sexuality and catharsis through art. To characterize a marriage lacking in fidelity as idyllic requires imaginative sensitivity the rigorously dogmatic Kathryn and Sarah lack. Peter's mother and sister see only "a family of filth ... an evil man ... a low woman ... a vile slut ... a corrupter of innocents" in the Daughertys, who are to Peter "a splendid woman . . . and a genuine artist" respectively. At the conclusion of the novel, Peter will emerge as savior of the family in his financial bequests to his kin, in his explanation to them of their mother's trauma, and in his substantial recognition of his previously unacknowledged son.

By connecting his own unpleasant separation from the household to an argument over Katrina and Edward Daugherty, Peter connects his story to Francis's whose separation is also linked to Katrina. Orson reflects on "the itinerant Francis walking abroad in a malevolent world, never knowing what lay beneath the exile his mother and sister had forced upon him." Francis will never have known the explanation for his mother's behavior that might have redeemed his life.

Katrina's seduction of Francis is divulged by sister Sarah who with Peter witnesses the act from the branches of an apple tree in the adjoining yard. In that same scene, sister Sarah, at age fifteen, becomes the symbolic matriarch, "Little Mother" alongside Kathryn, fulfilling the deathbed request of father Michael. She is, perversely, the "mother incarnate" despite her ensuing spinsterhood and virginity.

When she was younger she wanted to call herself Sate, and Kennedy himself noted in a 1993 interview that in an earlier version of the story "I called her Sate and I think that was short for Satan" in a clear indication of her diabolical effect on the family.

Sarah's role as "Little Mother" further develops the theme of matriarchal influence in this family. She symbolically occupies the dead father's seat at table. Sarah's control of the home after the death of the mother will include unfortunate domination of the two remaining brothers (the mentally handicapped Tommy and the "failed priest" Charles) as well as the widowed and unfulfilled sister Molly. Her corrosive influence is best seen in her treatment of the mentally handicapped brother Tommy, called the "holy moron" by Orson. That he is called a "holy moron" suggests his guileless innocence, and his giving gifts of lingerie and gloves to women can be understood as the inchoate and harmless yearnings of a perpetual prepubescent. At age sixtythree Tommy is brought home by the police who tell Sarah he has, with his walking cane, lifted Letty Buckley's skirt up to her hips. "He tipped his hat to her and kind of twirled his cane, and then he walked away," the smiling policeman tells Sarah. The comic innocence of this precocious act, Tommy's imitation of a scene from a Charlie Chaplin movie in fact, is met by Sarah with a severe spanking on Tommy's "naked buttocks" which cripples Tommy. The excessive brutality of this disciplinary action appears as a perverse expression of Sarah's own rigidity and perhaps even a perverse expression of her own frustrated sexuality.

Social Concerns/Themes

Very Old Bones continues the saga of the Irish-American Phelan and Quinn families that runs through Ironweed (1983), Billy Phelan's Greatest Game (1978), and Quinn's Book (1988).

Unlike those earlier novels, Very Old Bones de-emphasizes Albany as spiritual and historical place and focusses instead on the genetic, psychological, and family forces that shape character and thus fate in three generations of these families. "We are never without the overcoats, however lice-ridden, of our ancestors" ruefully muses the narrator and central character Orson Purcell as he alludes to the ofttimes contaminated family inheritance we inevitably come to possess.

The title Very Old Bones suggests the metaphoric skeletons within the Phelan family history that drove away the older brothers Francis and Peter, and reduced those remaining in the home on Colonie Street to unfulfilled, unhappy lives. Orson will characterize the family situation as "wreckage . . .

left behind in the wake of the behavior of the males in the family ... a pattern of abdication, or flight, or exile, with the women left behind to pick up the pieces of fractured life." Where Ironweed shows us an alienated and deeply troubled Francis Phelan struggling tragically but heroically with the selfinflicted disasters of his adult life, Very Old Bones shows us in greater detail those earlier tensions within the family that make it impossible for him to live with his mother and sister Sarah after his seduction at age eighteen by Katrina Daugherty. The argument that ensues when Sarah divulges the liaison to their mother drives him from the home and deepens our sense of his emotional alienation in both novels. In this regard, Very Old Bones is both a prequel to the Phelan saga which appears in the earlier novels and a selfcontained work of its own, albeit one enriched by familiarity with those earlier works.

The devastation within this IrishAmerican family is attributed to an unfortunate cultural stereotype: the frigid matriarch (in this case, Kathryn Phelan) who creates and presides over a sexually repressed family. That sexual denial is most strongly instilled in her eldest daughter Sarah, and their hostile and sometimes violent reactions to sexual development in other members of the family and community drive the family apart. The ensuing diaspora is both physical (with Francis and Peter) and emotional (with Sarah, Molly, Charles, and Tommy, who remain within the home). The Phelans come to be, as Orson will conclude, that "family . . . collective of the thwarted spirit, of the communal psyche that so desperately wants not to be plural."

Kathryn's frigidity and its consequences stem directly from her witnessing her brother's brutal murder of his wife, that act becoming the "collective evil to which so many members of this family have been heir, heiress, and victim." She and her brother Malachi emigrate to America in 1870. Malachi marries Lizzie Cronin but the marriage

remains childless despite Malachi's prodigious efforts. After a night of drunken lovemaking, Malachi awakens "bereft of his privates" and, after consultation with his syphilitic friend Crip Devlin, determines his wife Lizzie has been possessed by a succubus and must be exorcised. She is tortured, severely burned, and dies. Malachi's surrealistic emasculation resembles an hallucination informed by his manic sexual excess and the frustration of childlessness. The scene and the entire Malachi episode take on mythic proportions in accounting for the "curse" on the Phelans and frigidity in the "mothers" of the family. This event specifically identifies the instigating trauma in the Phelan history but its haunted surrealistic details and symbolic associations make it a broader statement about the Catholic Celtic Irish.

Malachi's friend Crip, a failed priest infected with syphilis by his own wife, cites the authority of the Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches), a fifteenth-century theological analysis of witchcraft whose "divinely inspired misogyny conformed to Crip's own outlook," to justify their torture of the innocent, benign Lizzie. These New World Irish males possess a sexually driven misogyny which is theologically justified and thus creates a decadent, toxic combination: "the dregs of putrefied religion, the fetid remains of a psychotic social order." This event conveys the destructive power of a superstitious and violent Old World culture (another type of Very Old Bones) on these immigrants by associating misogyny with both a "putrefied" Catholicism and frustrated sexuality.

Lizzie's murder represents several degrees of violence against women. On the most basic level it represents the physical helplessness of an innocent female against the blood lust of an insane husband. On another level, the hallucinatory emasculation of Malachi is the symbolic representation of his childlessness which drives him to an insane act of frustrated revenge against his barren wife. At still another level, the support of the Malleus Maleficarum represents the endorsement of violent misogyny by the Church. All three levels coalesce in showing Kathryn the vulnerability of women to sexually inspired violence in a male dominated world. Her defense is to deny her own sexual desire and to encourage that same denial in her eldest daughter in order to circumvent what she has seen to be the inevitably disastrous consequences of sexuality. The repression of sexuality in her sons would prevent the excesses seen in Malachi. Neither of these are essentially moral concerns to her but matters of self-preservation.

The episode thus links the complex concerns of Irish sexuality, misogyny, and Catholicism as shaping forces in Irish-American life.

Lizzie's murder results from and dramatically influences another set of concerns: the degree to which human sexuality drives behavior and character. In witnessing Lizzie's murder, Kathryn learned "how not to live under the mad inheritance that had destroyed Malachi and Lizzie." Her own subsequent sexual frigidity and role in making the eldest daughter Sarah "deny and destroy her own life rather than admit sensual pleasure" lead to "two generations worth of trouble and anguish." Younger sister Molly reflects "We all would've been happier if Sarah wasn't a virgin . . . Virgins think about heaven . . . They don't care what goes on down here." What begins as an attempt on Kathryn's part to impose a rigorous moral will on her family to protect them becomes instead a powerfully

destructive force which will be seen as the unnatural repression of the most basic of human impulses. Molly will later express that horrible irony: "So many evil things the result of love."

Frustrated or unfulfilled sexuality as destructive force is significantly counterpointed throughout the novel. Sexual fulfillment in the lives of Margaret Quinn and, temporarily and in retrospect at least, in the life of Molly Phelan, is seen as healthy and redemptive.

Even the youngest brother Tommy, "the holy moron . . . the whole and pure spirit," possesses an incipient libido that manifests itself in the giving of lingerie to the local ladies. The narrator and last descendant of the Phelans, Orson Purcell, recounts his own sexual life with his wife Giselle and the degree to which sexual union or separation contribute to his sanity. He, like his unacknowledged father Peter, is tormented by the thought that his wife might be unfaithful. That fear makes Peter at first doubt his fathering of Orson and leaves Orson alienated from father, wife, and family. Orson seeks union throughout this novel and the most immediate union is to be found in a stable marriage with his sexually promiscuous wife. That is promised at the conclusion of the novel in which the themes of psychic and family unity achieved through sexual fidelity and the understanding of the family curse are realized. Peter demands that Orson, in order to gain his inheritance, remarry and take the Phelan name, symbols of two reconciliations Orson needs for his own mental and spiritual stability. Orson says in the concluding scene, "I am one with the universe, we Phelans say, but I am one," thus articulating that unified redemptive state they have all sought and through his father have achieved.

Another concern developing directly from the issues of family and sexuality is that of family regeneration. Orson is the last of this branch of the Phelans and one of Peter's demands in that climactic scene is that Orson take the family name and thus "insure at least the possibility of the Phelan name continuing." This is seen in melancholy contrast to his brother Francis's truncated line. The accident that drives Francis from his own home killed his newborn son Gerald. His older son Billy marries very late and then after a seventeen year courtship marked by his lover's refusal to have unprotected intercourse for fear of pregnancy and his refusal to have intercourse otherwise. The family genealogy that fills the inside covers of the book shows the deaths or absence of issue in these Phelan males. Sister Molly conceived a child shortly before her tragically abbreviated marriage to Walter Mangan but the premature child is stillborn and secretly buried by her in the basement of the homeplace on Colonie Street to be resurrected later: more Very Old Bones. The regenerative cycle of life and family appear in the conclusion as the antidote to alienation and tragedy and point again to the murderous frustration of the childless Malachi.

Another integral concern is that of artistic inspiration and the degree to which it is the consequence of genetic and environmentally induced "madness." Both Orson and his father are artists: Orson a failing writer, Peter a recognized painter. Peter's reputation stems from two series of paintings inspired by family events: Francis's self-imposed exile from the family (the Itinerant series) and Malachi McIlhenny's murderous exorcism of Lizzie (the Malachi Suite). Peter says his talent "has been a consequence of my

knowledge of this family." His neighbors go out of their way "to watch crazy old Peter . . . forever dabbing paint onto his great canvases." Peter's "madness" does not manifest itself in the breakdowns that plague his son but in his consuming obsession to bring order and harmony through art to a life lived at "the edge of disaster, madness, and betrayal" caused by his angry separation from mother and sister and his own inherited personality.

The issue of artistic temperament receives greater focus in Orson who early on says that negative capability allows him to simultaneously distract himself from destructive self-contemplation and to understand and create for the reader the nuances of individual family characters he could not have known from experience, to produce fiction artistically "true" to its subject.

To both Peter and Orson the family saga recreated through art provides catharsis both individually for them and for the informed family. Orson says "art is a way of gaining some measure of control over life." At the concluding family gathering, Peter not only announces his bequest to the family but also reveals the significance the Malachi murder has had on them.

Catharsis is achieved through an understanding of their mother's frigidity and its effect on them. His art, and Orson's narrative, "would surely provide an enduring antidote to the poison Malachi had injected into the world [and] stand also as a corrective to the long-held image of Kathryn in the family's communal mind."

Techniques

Very Old Bones takes place during the morning and afternoon of July 26, 1958 but recalls incidents in the lives of the characters as far back as Malachi and Lizzie's arrival in the United States in 1870. That compression of past time within the novel takes place through the conventionally realistic techniques of dialogue, narration, and flashback but also involves a complex use of point of view.

Orson Purcell's first-person narration involves both omniscient and editorially omniscient points of view, as well as stream of consciousness.

That technique allows effective shifts in time and focus that economically recreate the complex history of both Orson and this family and his is the dominant point of view through the greater part of the novel. But the stream of consciousness point of view changes from Orson to Francis when Francis leaves his mother's wake. Later in the novel the first person point of view will be that of Orson's Aunt Molly in an important "Colloquy" with his wife Giselle. This has the added effect of presenting significant individual events and characters within the family saga through the unambiguously personal point of view of that character. The reader thus realizes that character more directly than is possible through the voice of a narrator. Communicating the sense of individual dignity and personality behind an otherwise failed history is one of Kennedy's great strengths as a writer and this shift in points of view an effective means of achieving it.

The past is not recalled in chronological sequence but in fragmented segments from 1870, 1887, 1913, 1918, 1934, and 1954 that foreshadow greater development later or illuminate action described earlier in the novel. Verb tenses within short dramatic sequences shift from past to present. Orson narrates the events leading up to his first breakdown as a sexually frenetic, drunken hallucination and in so doing foreshadows the technique used in the thematically parallel concluding experiences of Malachi. Orson writes an interview with a corpse. Through this ebb and flow of realistic and surrealistic episodic narrative and changing point of view, Kennedy through Orson produces the illusion of what he elsewhere calls the "always-shifting past" that "under scrutiny . . . turns so magically from then into now."

A second major technique is Kennedy's use of irony to demonstrate the fine line that separates degrees of human fulfillment. Each significant force in the novel is seen in its ironic potential for producing opposed effects on character. Thus, human sexuality produces union through love (in Molly, Orson, Katrina and Edward Daugherty) or devastation through lust (in Malachi, Crip Devlin, Orson's mother Claire Purcell, and as threatened in Orson).

Madness, with its many complicated causes, is either disabling, disorienting, fragmenting, destructive (as in Orson's breakdowns and Malachi's behavior) or a liberating, numinous inspiration responsible for the complex catharsis produced by the resulting art (as in the cases of Orson and Peter and Edward Daugherty).

As he prepares to begin his narrative account of where the "strangeness" in his life began, Orson says, "anything can develop out of anything, chaos out of conjugality, madness out of magic . . ." That insight offers an explanation of the psychological consequences of perceiving an ironic universe. What will fulfill the Phelans is denied them by maternal influence. Their ensuing psychological and spiritual conflict results from having to choose between self-fulfillment through a rejection of the mother's values and alienation from her, or maintaining family loyalty but suffering personally the emotional consequences of repressed sexuality.

Sarah's role as surrogate mother results from her obedience to her dying father's request and is referred to as "Michael's mindless martyring" of her by Orson. All choice to the Phelans is the wrong choice.

The most significant example of Kennedy's irony is in his treatment of attempts to control human sexuality. In its benevolent form, as Kathryn intends it initially, it is a moral force that prevents libidinous self-destruction. Kennedy himself said her beliefs "were rigorously moral and comprehensible" only inflexible and therefore destructive. There is a terribly narrow range of tolerable control, and in Sarah we witness how easily destructive intolerance can result. Repressed sexuality is a defense against lustful violence but it in turn creates another sort of violence to the spirit.

It is here that Kennedy's position as an ironist is demonstrated. The novel is neither misogynist nor anti-Catholic; it is not polemic. The ironies of the novel illustrate the enormously difficult choices these characters face and the subtle balances that must exist among genetic inheritance, family history, individual human instinct, and internally or externally exerted control for man to achieve that harmony Orson invokes at the end of the novel for him and his family.

Adaptations

Kennedy's one act play Dinner at the Phelans appeared in the Winter 1993 Weber Studies and treats Francis's return in 1934 for his mother's wake.

Key Questions

There are numerous significant contemporary social and literary issues raised in this novel. Human sexuality and women as sexual beings are becoming increasingly prominent subjects of public discourse. The degree to which Kennedy treats this topic from both male and female points of view is provocative.

1. How clearly is the distinction made between love and lust in Very Old Bones? Consider especially section two of Book Four in which Molly and Giselle discuss their perceptions.

2. Kennedy has been criticized for his depiction of women. Does Very Old Bones present a very favorable picture of males? Consider Orson especially.

While discussions of ethnicity are somewhat problematic in a politically sensitive climate, Kennedy's Very Old Bones demands that attention.

3. In spite of the significance of the Malleus Maleficarum in the murder of Lizzie, does Kennedy in this novel blame Catholicism for the failures of the Phelan family? It would be instructive to read the Tom Smith interview in Weber Studies in discussing this question (10, no. 1 [Winter 1993]: 21-44).

4. A reading of Dubliners might offer many interesting parallels to the sexually induced problems in male-female relationships in Irish families.

Kennedy's treatment of women in this novel is more complex than elsewhere in his fiction.

5. How sympathetic is this novel to the individual women it portrays?

6. Is Giselle an unprincipled hedonist or does her artistry (she is an accomplished photographer) present a character who needs to be evaluated in the same way Peter and Orson are?

7. Discuss the poignancy of the aging beauty Molly. Is she perhaps the most victimized of the Phelan household by Kathryn's influence?

8. Kennedy's irony is particularly effective in Very Old Bones. How does that irony temper his depiction of relationships?

9. Find and discuss ironies in the novel. For example, Walter Mangan proposes to Molly by asking her "How'd you like to be buried with my people?" Does the use of irony create a particularly effective tone in the novel?

Literary Precedents

In Kennedy's attention in Very Old Bones to the Irish ethnicity of the Phelans and Quinns, in his treatment of sexuality within that culture, especially that of the Phelan females, in his experimentation with narrative technique and the compression of time, in his allusions to and quotations from Finnegan's Wake (1939), in his study of the influence of family on artistic temperament and psychological development, in his documented admiration in the novel and elsewhere for James Joyce, it is impossible not to see the broader influence of Joyce's work as a whole and more specifically the thematic and social concerns of Dubliners (1914) and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). Certainly Kennedy's Phelans with Albany as their spiritual place are more reminiscent of Joyce's urban, ethnic Dublin than of rural American regional fiction, even that which deals with family. The concerns for the Irish American family in American Literature can be found in the drama of Eugene O'Neil and the fiction of James T. Farrell. Kennedy himself noted having been "tantalized" by the interlocking family narratives of Faulkner and J. D. Salinger.

Thematically, the vulnerable sensitivity of a young writer haunted by family and place is most reminiscent of Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant and his Asheville family in his "cycle" which includes Look Homeward Angel (1929), Of Time and the River (1935), The Web and the Rock (1939), You Can't Go Home Again (1940), although Kennedy is in far greater control of his material than Wolfe and does not bear the same autobiographical identity with Orson that Wolfe does with Gant.

Related Titles

The significant presence of Francis and son Billy Phelan in Very Old Bones tie it to both Ironweed and Billy Phelan's Greatest Game. The three of these Phelan family novels constitute a natural trilogy within the larger Albany "cycle."

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