

# Memories as Burdens in John Banville's The Sea

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**Abstract:** William John Banville is an Irish novelist, short story writer, adapter of dramas and screenwriter. Banville has published many novels, short stories, plays, non-fiction and book reviews. Banville is considered by critics as a master stylist of English, and his writing has been described as perfectly crafted, beautiful, dazzling. He is known for his dark humor, and sharp, wintery wit. *The Sea* is a poetic prose written performance by John Banville dealing with the life of an art historian Max Morden. *The Sea* is a novel published in 2005 and it has won the Man Booker Prize the same year. It is the fifteenth book but thirteenth novel of Banville. The story of the novel "The Sea" is about an Irishman named Max Morden, a sixty years old man. Max has just lost his wife Anna to cancer and decided to return to his native town, along with the seaside, where he has spent his childhood and youth. John Banville's intimacy with the sea is very much visible in this novel whenever he tries to describe the form and beauty of the sea and its shore. The series of photographic memories of his past dwell as a sweet and yet bitter burden in his wounded heart forever. John Banville's *The Sea* is an attempt to recapture the past. Morden is an example of an ailing man who has a blurred idea of his unpleasant past yet he has come to live amidst the rubbles of it because "the past beats inside him like a second heart". At the end of the novel, the narrator feels peace as he understands that waves are inevitable in the sea. The beauty of *The Sea* is its exquisite prose which looks like poetry. It is more suitable and has emerged out successful in this novel because it talks about love, loss and past. Max's desperation and anguish with his past, present and future are very well related in this novel.

**Keyword:** William John Banville, Irish novelist, Banville

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## I. INTRODUCTION

William John Banville is an Irish novelist, short story writer, adapter of dramas and screenwriter. John Banville was born on 8 December 1945 in Wexford in Ireland. He was educated at a Christian Brothers' school and St Peter's College in Wexford. Banville has won numerous awards and honours, including the 1976 James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the 2005 Booker Prize, the 2011 Franz Kafka Prize, the 2013 Austrian State Prize for European Literature and the 2014 Prince of Asturias Award for Literature. Banville has published novels, short stories, plays, non-fiction and book reviews.

His first piece of fiction, *Long Lankin* (1970), is a series of nine episodic short stories. This work was followed by two novels: *Nightspawn* (1971), an intentionally ambiguous narrative, and *Birchwood* (1973), the story of a decaying Irish family. *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), and *The Newton Letter: An Interlude* (1982) are fictional biographies based on the lives of noted scientists. These three works use scientific exploration as a metaphor to question perceptions of fiction and reality. *Mefisto* (1986) is written from the point of view of a character obsessed with numbers. *The Book of Evidence* (1989) is a murder mystery and the first of a trilogy centred on the character Freddie Montgomery. *The Sea* (2005), a novel that was awarded the Booker Prize, tells the story of a widowed art historian who revisits a childhood destination on the sea. In addition, he publishes crime novels as *Benjamin Black* - most of these feature the character of Quirke, an Irish pathologist based in Dublin. Banville is considered by critics as a master stylist of English, and his writing has been described as perfectly crafted, beautiful, dazzling. He is known for his dark humor, and sharp, wintery wit. He has been described as "the heir to Proust, via Nabokov". Banville is considered a contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The Sea is a poetic prose written performance by John Banville dealing with the life of an art historian Max Morden. Gerry Dukes, reviewing The Sea in the Irish Independent, hailed Banville as a "lord of language". The Sea is a novel published in 2005 and it has won the Man Booker Prize the same year. It is the fifteenth book but thirteenth novel of Banville. The story of the novel "The Sea" is about an Irishman named Max Morden, a sixty years old man. Max has just lost his wife Anna to cancer and decided to return to his native town, along with the seaside, where he has spent his childhood and youth. The novel comprises two chapters, each chapter having short entries that allow the novelist to shift from present to past and vice versa. We see the writer's illustration of the quick shift in emotions, thoughts, and experience.

When the novel begins, we see Max standing looking at the sea. The author introduces the readers to a family that will predominantly play an important role in his future. Max- the 1st person narrative of the play describes three settings of the play. The first setting is "Cedars" – a house that a wealthy middle class rented in his childhood. The second setting is of a month in which his wife Anna died. While the third setting is of the present "Cedars" house in which he is living now after the death of his wife. Max describes his final days with Anna as awkward as his wife was soon going to be dead and he does not know how to act. The scenes that Max describes on Anna's death are less actual details and more commentary. It is because of this commentary that we get know about Max Decision to return to his native town, his cottage "Cedars" that is filled with his childhood memories. He confirms the availability of room on his visit with his adult daughter, Claire. The narrator tells the readers about Miss Vavasour, the current housemaid of the cottage and a tenant who is a retired army colonel. At the start of Max's residence, we see that the colonel has a crush on Miss Vavasour. Max, moreover, suspects that Miss Vavasour might have been entertained Colonel's love before his arrival.

The present-day setting of the novel is Cedars house however, it is his childhood memories, a setting that has tied the novel. Max narrated the story in an unorganized, unreliable manner that it is through the repetition of various incidents that we come to know the names of Grace's family. The family includes a wild daughter named Chloe; a muted brother, Myles; a mother, Connie; Carlo, the father; and twins' nursemaid Rose. After some time, with brief encounters, Max falls in love at first sight with Connie Grace after seeing her relaxing at the beach. This made him get acquainted with Chloe and Myles, to that he can get entrance to Cedars; hence nearer to Mrs. Connie Grace. And finally, he succeeds in getting entrance to the house. Later, Max was invited by Grace's family at a picnic with them at summer. Max, over there, clasps his constant glances at Connie's pelvic area. The picnic day reaches its climax when, in a game of hiding and seek, Max was dragged to the ground, nuzzled nearly with Rose and Connie.

In the second part of the novel, Max illustrates his other half of the memories of that summer. In this part, Max story revolves around his uncomfortable relationship with Chloe, a girl having convulsive personality and blunt behavior. Max describes Chloe as the one with volatile character; for instance, she deliberately kissed Max in cinema, acting in a violent manner with her brother, Myles. Moreover, she is shown as hypersexual by Max in the early part of the novel, yet is conformed at the end of the novel. Rose, a nursemaid of Chloe and Myles, is young, however shy and fearful who is bullied by Chloe and Myles, who like to tease her. One day Max found her crying while climbing at the tree in the yard at Cedars house. Soon, Mrs. Grace appears and consoles Rose. He overhears their conversation

or the keywords of the conversation like “Mr. Grace” and “love him”, assuming that Mr. Grace and Rose has an affair; he goes and tells everything, he overhears, to Myles and Chloe. Max links the death scene of Chloe and Myles to that of Anna’s death. Chloe and Myles drown themselves in the sea, while Max and Rose watching them. When he was done with his childhood memories, he illustrates his own near-death memories when he was drunk. The colonel found him knocked by a rock, unconsciously and took him to the hospital. At the hospital, his daughter, who was told that he nearly killed himself, yell at him and take him to the home with her. It is then revealed that Miss Vavasour is actually Rose who was, in fact, love with Mrs. Rose. Max ends the novel, standing at the sea.

John Banville’s intimacy with the sea is very much visible in this novel whenever he tries to describe the form and beauty of the sea and its shore. A careful reader is bound to understand the communion between the characters, the writer, the story and the elegant presence of the sea as the backdrop of the novel. It is true that this novel could not have been written in any other setting except the sea. The experiences of Max with his wife Anna brings back his early experiences with Grace family members in the Cedars Inn in that seaside village- he calls them “Gods”. The series of photographic memories of his past dwell as a sweet and yet bitter burden in his wounded heart forever. He relives those experiences when he is unable to live his present which is deprived of both those beauties. John Banville’s *The Sea* is an attempt to recapture the past.

Max Morden’s curious relationship with the Graces was smooth in comparison to his present relationship with his daughter and his dying wife. Though we are acquainted with the Graces, Morden’s mourning and his sense of loss at the very first line of the novel, yet the unfolding of the past comes from a memory which appears to be confused, not very certain about the exact nature or number of things. Max Morden is “amazed, disappointed” that he would go so far to say appalled, “for reasons that are obscure to him”. His is an example of an ailing man who has a blurred idea of his unpleasant past yet he has come to live amidst the rubbles of it. He states:

“The past beats inside me like a second heart”.

Morden’s memory which initially appears very uncertain and unreliable gradually reveals all the events, telling all the small details of the company of the Graces. Thus, we learn how the Graces behaved on certain occasions, what they wore when they went together on picnic, and how and where they sat in their car. This is John Banville’s amazing achievement in the novel. He has imparted striking similarity between Morden’s memory and the narrative style of the novel. The narration is not linear, it goes dream-like, moving back and forth. Past, cold present and the colder future are brought together while Morden’s memories overlap without order in his mind. But putting the past with present is an entirely new thing for Banville’s readers. The fluid narration of the novel though makes the story complex, it brings Max Morden’s past alive before his present. This effect is achieved with three different times and settings of the novel all belonging to Max Morden’s life. The three settings and times are so jumbled together that a relatively careless reader is unable to comprehend the events of the novel as happening in three different times and spaces.

The old world dies and the old people are unable to accept the new world and it is a continuous trouble that man faces during all the time. Death looks like a great threat and in the terrific atmosphere created

by it, every one remains as shadow. Max's mother, his father, members of the Grace family and even Anna now remain as shadows in his consciousness and they are appearing and disappearing in a series of non-linear incidents within the world that is created by his mind. He states:

“We carry the dead with us only until we die too, and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on into the unimaginable generations”.

Memories of life with Anna and the early childhood memories with his own parents and the Grace family, narrated in a poetic and metaphorical language make the reader understand the attempt of Max in escaping from the empty life after the death of his wife Anna. Max was unable to enjoy the love of his mother and he is not able to live totally with Anna either. Whether he relives or it comes back itself, the past is both sweet and bitter at the same time. He is saved from that unfortunate attempt but he knows that his death is imminent. People go back to their past and long for the days of the past for different reasons. There is a reason behind Max Morden's nostalgic nature too. He expresses that ‘the past beats in him like second heart’. There is reason behind his realization when he sees himself in the mirror. He states:

“There was a time when I quite liked what I saw in the looking-glass, but not anymore. Now I am startled, and more than startled by the visage that so abruptly appears there, never and not at all the one that I expected. I have been elbowed aside by a parody of myself”.

At the end of the novel, the narrator feels peace as he understands that waves are inevitable in the sea. The presences of the waves are both disturbing and meaningful to the very existence of the sea. May be, there will be no one to watch a sea without waves. The beauty of *The Sea* is its exquisite prose which looks like poetry. It is more suitable and has emerged out successful in this novel because it talks about love, loss and past. The physical escape to the Cedars Inn and the psychological escape to the past try to have a combined effect on the psyche of Max. This tremendous work is definitely a deep meditation on the existential issues of modern man who battles with invisible challenges like the indifference of time. The novel builds up the tales of passion and possession to realize the power of the past: “There are moments when the past has a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it.” This helps Max to escape from the grip of the past to the present and future.

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