



The Immoralist

André Gide , Alan Sheridan (Introduction) , David Watson (Translation)

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In **The Immoralist** , André Gide presents the confessional account of a man seeking the truth of his own nature. The story's protagonist, Michel, knows nothing about love when he marries the gentle Marceline out of duty to his father. On the couple's honeymoon to Tunisia, Michel becomes very ill, and during his recovery he meets a young Arab boy whose radiant health and beauty captivate him. An awakening for him both sexually and morally, Michel discovers a new freedom in seeking to live according to his own desires. But, as he also discovers, freedom can be a burden. A frank defense of homosexuality and a challenge to prevailing ethical concepts, **The Immoralist** is a literary landmark, marked by Gide's masterful, pure, simple style.

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The Immoralist Details

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From Reader Review The Immoralist for online ebook

Rakhi Dalal says

What conjures up in the mind at the mere mention of the word ‘morality’ is a question that our evolutionary advanced mankind hasn’t been able to find an appropriate response to. For all the ethics and moral codes defining the very basis of societal structure, morality still remains a vague ideal. Vague not because there is a dearth of reasons associated with the necessity or goodness of moral values required for a harmonious existence of humans in the society but because the certainty of actions needed to achieve these morals is debatable. For action, on the part of an individual, being solely a subjective decision, results from something not instantaneous but from underlying ideals which have accumulated in the consciousness through experiences of one’s lifetime. So the defining line between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ seems blurred in the sense that what a person may hold ‘right’ another person may not.

Gide’s *The Immoralist*, appearing to be a simple tale distinguishing the right and wrong, is an intricate delineation of this distinction between ‘thoughts’ and ‘emotions’. Michel, who once suffered from tuberculosis, after being tended by his wife and with his strong will to attain good health, becomes healthy again. Once recovered, he realizes the importance of being alive.

There is nothing more tragic for a man who has been expecting to die than a long convalescence. After that touch from the wing of Death, what seemed important is so no longer; other things become so which had at first seemed unimportant, or which one did not even know existed. The miscellaneous mass of acquired knowledge of every kind that has overlain the mind gets peeled off in places like a mask of paint, exposing the bare skin—the very flesh of the authentic creature that had lain hidden beneath it.

Enamored with his new found love for life, Michel indulges in such pleasures deemed as wrong. His thoughts, reeking ‘immorality’, are stripped deftly before the reader by Gide. But Gide’s skill lies in the excellent rendition of such a state of mind, calling forth deliberation by reader on the blurred line subsisting between right and wrong.

For the time being, therefore, my relationship with Marceline remained the same, though it was every day getting more intense by reason of my growing love. My dissimulation (if that expression can be applied to the need I felt of protecting my thoughts from her judgment), my very dissimulation increased that love. I mean that it kept me incessantly occupied with Marceline. At first, perhaps, this necessity for falsehood cost me a little effort; but I soon came to understand that the things that are reputed worst (lying, to mention only one) are only difficult to do as long as one has never done them; but that they become—and very quickly too—easy, pleasant and agreeable to do over again, and soon even natural. So then, as is always the case when one overcomes an initial disgust, I ended by taking pleasure in my dissimulation itself, by protracting it, as if it afforded opportunity for the play of my undiscovered faculties. And every day my life grew richer and fuller, as I advanced towards a riper, more delicious happiness.

To Michel, this dissimulation is ‘right’ since it brings him happiness he was once deprived of. How can one’s happiness be termed as ‘morally wrong’ when the worse it can do is to harmlessly fake affection? Does a care shown with indifference stand the same trial as immorality?

Gide goes further and adds twists that still make it hard to confer a judgment. After the unfortunate event of abortion of Marceline, Michel takes care of her.

Then phlebitis declared itself; and when that got better, a clot of blood suddenly set her hovering between life and death. It was night time; I remember leaning over her, feeling my heart stop and go on again with hers. How many nights I watched by her bedside, my eyes obstinately fixed on her, hoping by the strength of my love to instil some of my own life into hers. I no longer thought much about happiness; my single melancholy pleasure was sometimes seeing Marceline smile.

But the recovery of Marceline again prompts Michel towards self indulgence. Even when his wife is on the verge of dying, Michel makes her travel with him. Marceline's death is a result of long travels and insufficient care resulting from sybaritic actions on part of Michel. His demeanor goes through an alteration from the start to the end with mutation of his thoughts. Perhaps it is this instability of Michel's thoughts, of his changed emotions as per his convenience that he is an immoralist. Perhaps he is an immoralist because he knows perfectly well that he has changed but instead of expressing regret or accepting his guilt he still prefers to follow unrestrained pleasures.

The work by Gide traverses through murky and obscure alleys of the mind, sometimes revealing those thoughts which lay concealed but which can readily surface without alarm if unrestrained, thereby posing a peril to the widely accepted or personal notions of morality.

Joan Didion quotes Lionel Trilling in her essay "On Morality":

"We must be aware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes, Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion."

Rowena says

My second Gide book and I quite enjoyed it. It's a story about a young man, Michel, narrating his life, how he learned more about himself through introspection while getting married and witnessing tragedies. Travelling around Europe and North Africa, rootless. It's essentially a tale of self-discovery.

In tone this book really reminded me of Camus. I was expecting something a little more shocking as I heard this book was considered scandalous at the turn of the last century. There were homosexual undertones and hints of possible pedophilia, or was the antagonist simply admiring the health of children after having recovered from a serious illness? So many uncertainties.

I found Michel to be a very interesting character, a bit weird in that he got married just to make his dying father happy. The parts where the protagonist recovered from illness and began to see things in a different way, to appreciate the health and beauty that he has lost were the most interesting to me. It made me think a lot, surely we're not the same person after having experienced something so serious and life-changing? We must gain a new awareness:

"After my brush with the wing of death, the things that seemed important before no longer mattered; other things had taken their place, things which had never seemed important before, which I didn't even know existed. The accreted layers of acquired learning flaked away like greasepaint, offering

glimpses of bare flesh, the real person hidden underneath.”

Initially Michel is academic, a genius of sorts who simply wants to write books but gives lectures but his illness makes him change his view to the point that he doesn't feel comfortable in society:

“As an academic, I felt foolish; as a man- did I know myself?”

What I liked most about the book were the complex themes, philosophical in their approach, possibly because I have obsessed over them myself in the past, especially authenticity and happiness. It was hard to ignore the exoticism in here, the labelling of the North African Muslim boys as the “other,” but overall I quite enjoyed this book.

Nikos Tsentemeidis says

Ολ?κληρο το βιβλ?ο αποτελε? ?να μον?λογο, μια εξομολ?ηση του πρωταγωνιστ? στους καλ?τερο? του φ?λους, για ?τι η ζω? του ?χει επιφυλ?ξει, απ? το γ?μο του και ?πειτα. Τα δι?φορα προβλ?ματα της καθημεριν?τητας συντελο?ν, ?στε να παρεκκλ?νει απ? τη συν?πεια προς τις υποχρε?σεις του. Υπ?ρχει ?να β?ρος που του δημιουργο?ν η περιουσ?α που κληρον?μησε, οι συνειρμο? περ? θαν?του που συναντ? στη δουλει? του (αρχαιολ?γος) μετ? απ? τα σοβαρ? προβλ?ματα υγε?ας που ?χει περ?σει κτλ. Τα προβλ?ματα αυτ? τον οδηγο?ν συνεχ?ς στην διαφυγ?, κ?νοντας μεγ?λα ταξ?δια αναζητ?ντας κ?θε φορ? το καλ?τερο κλ?μα για την υγε?α του. Κ?που εκε? ?μως αρχ?ζει να απομακρ?νεται απ? τη γυναικα του, παλε?οντας με το «εγ?» του και πειραματιζ?μενος με τη σεξουαλικ?τητ? του. Αυτ? που τον συγκλον?ζει και με αγων?α περιμ?νει την αντ?δραση των φ?λων του ε?ναι η αποκατ?σταση της ηθικ?ς του.

Ο ?ρωας σαφ?ς ?χει στοιχε?α του ?διου του συγγραφ?α, που ως γνωστ?ν ?ταν ομοφυλ?φιλος. Ο Gide γρ?φει καταπληκτικ?. Χρησιμοποιε? παν?μορφο λεξιλ?γιο και με τον τρ?πο του μεταφ?ρει την αγων?α στον αναγ?στη. Μετ? τους Κιβδηλοποιο?ς και τον Ανηθικολ?γο, θεωρ? πως πρ?κειται για ?να πολ? σπουδα?ο συγγραφ?α.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

778. L'immoraliste = The Immoralist, André Gide

The Immoralist (French: L'Immoraliste) is a novel by André Gide, published in France in 1902.

The Immoralist is a recollection of events that Michel narrates to his three visiting friends. One of those friends solicits job search assistance for Michel by including in a letter to Monsieur D. R., Président du Conseil, a transcript of Michel's first-person account.

Important points of Michel's story are his recovery from tuberculosis; his attraction to a series of Arab boys and to his estate caretaker's son; and the evolution of a new perspective on life and society. Through his journey, Michel finds a kindred spirit in the rebellious Ménalque.

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The Casbah, 1895 ~ Roaming from bar to bar in Algiers, Oscar Wilde and Gide (1869-1951) find themselves amid Zouaves and sailors, as Gide records elsewhere. "Do you want the little musician?" asks OW, whose own lips seemed "as if soft with milk and ready to suck again," says the symbolist Marcel Schwob.

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Kalliope says

I wish I had read *L'Immoraliste* around the year 1904. That would have been about two years after it was published and about two years before Picasso started distorting eyes and mouths and jaws and limbs in his painted prostitutes.

I am trying to picture myself dressed in yards and yards of bombazine, chiffon and lace, shapely cut to follow my already markedly thin waist, thanks to those bone stays that have cinched it into a harness, sorry, a corset. I need to feel the effort of breathing in, languidly, and the relief of breathing out before I can breathe in again and hopefully catch the oxygen I did not quite get the previous time.

I would also need to feel the weight of my long hair pinned up around my head and pulled by combs that have scratched my scalp, and may be also of a wide-brimmed hat with feathers and ribbons, sitting on top of that mass of hair. And because of all that accoutrement I would have to stay well perked up rather than lean comfortably against the back of the velvety sofa.

If I want to digest this book properly, to imagine all that conscription seems more pressing than brushing up my Nietzsche.

Or, if I wanted to feel a *frisson* in any way related to the way Michel falls under the spell of young men in Bikra, rather than dismiss it as irrelevant or accept it in a politically correct fashion; I may have to look for some kind of additional aid. Jean-Léon Gérôme, who died in the year of my hypothetical reading --1904, has a handy proposal for blending sexuality and exotic aesthetics.

I would need all of the above, and other things too, to be able to appreciate the exhilaration that Michel, the claimed immoral-man, is having when in Tunisia, by the sea, he decides to take off his clothes and feel the bright sun that warms his skin and limbs and *illuminates* him into embracing a new life. Otherwise the idea of a scantily clad man on a beach might now evoke images of overweight tourists cooking themselves into red lobsters under a charring sun.

And similarly goes for getting the conceptual implications of the contrast between classical and gothic architecture. Or for feeling deeply disturbed by the possible implications of Michel's pursued and revealed individualism, instead of just feeling irritated by this obnoxious and egotistical jerk who is being such an ass to his poor wife.

Because, sadly, many of the signs that in this book herald freedom have now lost their power, because, happily, now they are commonplace. If they did succeed in breaking conventions their effect was short-lived. If Gide's novel can taste insipid now, and Picasso's tortured figures have become cute magnets for the refrigerator, may be we have to look elsewhere for the liberating effect sought by modernity.

What about **Coco Chanel's** dispensing with the corset?

Or may be not even that has changed us?

Nickolas the Kid says

Δυνατ? βιβλιο.. Ο Ζιντ ?χει μια ικαν?τητα να αναμοχλ?ει και να αναδεικν?ει ?λες τις ενδ?μυχες σκ?ψεις του αναγν?στη...

Φανερ? επηρεασμ?νος απ? την φιλ?α του με τον ?σκαρ Γου?ιλντ και απ? τις ιδια?τερες σεξουαλικ?ς του προτιμ?σεις ο Ζιντ, μ?σα απ? ?ναν σχεδ?ν βιωματικ? μον?λογο, μας παρουσι?ζει τον Μισ?λ και την ιστορ?α του...

Ο Μισ?λ γρ?φει στους 3 καλ?τερους του φ?λους για την ιστορ?α του, την ασθ?νεια του, τον γ?μο του και την εξ?λιξη του μετ? την θεραπεια του...

Με κεντρικ? θ?μα την καταπιεσμ?νη σεξουαλικ?τητα του πρωταγωνιστ? ο συγγραφε?ας εξερευν? θ?ματα ?πως ο θ?νατος, η ζω?, η ευχαρ?στηση και η καταπ?εση του ε?ναι...

5/5

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Well written, but ultimately unsatisfying. I'm certain that I would have a stronger feeling about this book if I lived during a time when homosexuals were made to repress their true selves, imperialism was the word of the day, monotony was taking over the workforce, Arabs were looked down upon by much of western culture, tourists paid meager rates to third-world children for labor services and sexual favors, a huge percentage of visual artists and intellectuals were snobby and pretentious, too many innocent people died in pools of blood in foreign countries, and all of this was immensely frustrating to me. Oh, wait...

Jaidee says

5 "satanic, provocative, deceptive" stars.

5th Favorite Read of 2016

This book mesmerized and shocked me in equal measure.

Beautiful in its writing, quiet in its execution, seductive in its message and destructive in its implications.

The book begins with a suppressed young dutiful intellectual and ends with a despairing debauched and self-deluded libertine. In between is some of the most exquisite writing and the transformation of a young man from upstanding citizen to a malignant narcissist.

The book utilizes the vicissitudes of landscape, weather and nuances of emotions to seduce the reader into rooting for this most hateful of villains and his attempts at self-transformation. We are in North Africa, France, Switzerland and Italy. We are in the heat, windstorms, alpine winters and sensuous springtimes. We are seduced by beauty, attempts at love, philosophical arguments, works of great art and intimate conversation.

We are initially excited by his sexual awakening and burgeoning awareness of his own sensual beauty. We are smitten to the periodic devotions to his wife, his superficial helpfulness to those in need, his appreciation of the underdogs of society and his rejection of snobbery and elitism. Then delusion sets in....he mistakes his desires for needs and the most subtle of evils begins to occur. His appreciation for youths turns to taboo encounters of the most predatory kind. He facilitates the underprivileged to turn against each other through the use of trickery and guile so that he can watch like the most selfish of voyeurs. Most cruelly of all he turns on his wife and watches her die while at the same time sucking in all of her beauty, loyalty and kindness to enforce his own life force. In the end he calls on his friends so that he can confess and likely seduce them into offering in their spirits to him like a soul-thirsty incubus.

I found this book haunting, sublime and wicked.

This book is dangerous in the wrong hands.

A disturbing but important experience and a chance to reflect on the self and where one fits on the continuum.

Amira Mahmoud says

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Manny says

The companion volume to *La Porte Etroite* . In the first book, Gide looks at what happens when someone allows themselves to become obsessed with the idea of God, to the exclusion of all normal human feelings. In this one, he shows what happens when you go to the other extreme and abandon moral values altogether. Taken as a pair, which is what he intended, I thought they were very good.

Samra Yusuf says

When we are growing children, we have so many fantasies of countless things, we have our own interpretations of the phenomena of nature, Imagination of a bearded old man dwelling in sky as God, Rain from sky as tears of angels, angry trees shedding leaves, fairies visiting only good children at night, and so many and many....

They all sound sweet to ears, even stupid but sweet..

But what if a grown adult of five and twenty, fantasizes those children a source of his “melancholic pleasure” what if he gawks at those children with eyes laden with unspeakable desires and mind full of unsaid robust thoughts, what if he gapes at their nimble healthy statures with envy and lust at the same?

What is wrong in doing so?

What if his whole being depends on those stolen caresses and marked touches?

What harm can his sheer individual thoughts do to society?

Isn't it the highly celebrated Nietzschean Theory that preaches there is nothing named “morality” in the world, albeit he justified the cause quite intellectually, as there is no meaning of one's existence, as there is nothing called reality, that no kinds of action are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in themselves, whoever does them.

But this is not the whole lot of the problem here, our protagonist Michel and writer Gide are entwined together so much and deep that it is not possible to ignore the autobiographical acclaim of the story.

Story, on the surface is very simple one, Michel marrying Marceline near the deathbed of his father, to console his soon-to-fly soul, Marceline proving a matchless, caring wife, Tuberculosis engulfing Michel with every breath, Marceline takes good care of him and pulls her back to life, at length, the same malady wraps her and she dies of tuberculosis.....

But this is not what Gide intended us to cherish, there is more to it.

Freedom is perhaps the heaviest of the burdens to carry through our lives. For to be free means to get rid of all references, all dogmas, but how could one get rid of those; for all the ethics and moral codes, we have developed over ages though evolution, define our societal structures. And to maintain order in our society we need these structures or least that is how we know it. How terrifying to find that freedom alone, how frightening to realize that there needn't to be a moral point and purpose to our actions, and that the moral constructs humans create are so transient as to be non-existent. The existential thought is the basis of Existentialist literature as Sartre used to maintain- man defines his life himself and must take responsibility to live his life accordingly. Morality speaks of a system of behavior in regards to standards of right or wrong

behavior. The word carries the concepts of: (1) moral standards, with regard to behavior; (2) moral responsibility, referring to our conscience; and (3) a moral identity, or one who is capable of. Morality has become a complicated issue in the multi-cultural world we live in today. There is always a conflict between our social obligations and our actions as individuals. For one's actions are governed by one's upbringing- the ideas, the references which may have accumulated over the years in one's life and that's why what may look 'right' to someone may not be for others. The question of morality is not the simple conflict between 'right' and 'wrong' at consciousness of individual level; rather it is the great conflict between what we, human beings, as a 'society' may feel 'morally' accepted or not. And how do we measure what is morally accepted or not, we use age old concept of majority, so the question of morality involves the ever existed tussle between our individual consciousness and our consciousness as a society. We may feel robbed of our individual 'voice' due to these societal standards but we accepted them for harmonious existence of human beings. Moreover, we always need references to move forward in life, for we, humans, are not strong enough to live our life without any references or purposes as we may call them. And perhaps that is the basis of all our morality, ethics, belief systems etc. That's how we have been progressing- we get rid of our dogmas only to develop the new ones, as it is perhaps the quintessential necessity of our nature.

For if my call seemed an urgent one, if I made you travel so far to find me, it was purely so that I might see you, and that you might listen to me. That is all I require: the chance to speak to you. For I have reached a point in my life where I can't go on. It is not a question of weariness- I no longer understand anything. I need... I need to talk, as I say. Knowing how to free oneself is nothing; the difficult thing is knowing how to live with that freedom.

"Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people we personally dislike."
-Oscar Wilde

The Immoralist examines the case of a man with his wife and child, means and career, a man caught up therefore in a complicated network of overlapping relations and responsibilities, who comes to see his whole life as a hypocritical sham and, in pursuit of his true, authentic, homosexual self, abandons everything. It presents the classic universal problem of individual freedom, identity, and what constitutes "life". Michel, the novel's main character is awakened from his life-long "lethargy" with a fierce desire to change his mask, or rather to find his real self hidden behind the layers of adopted morality, education, and social obligations. He used to be a strict young scholar interested only in "ruins and books". Now he wants to be free of all obligation and inhibition to fully experience the pleasure and sensuality brought about by his late homosexual awakening. To do so, he sacrifices wife, career, and wealth. Yet when he began to understand himself his desires better, he grew stronger and healthier. Yet with this change, Michel did not seem to develop his own sense of morality; rather he sometimes acted in accordance with generally accepted morality and sometimes against it. At that point, Michel was happy; he still had a framework of morality through which to understand and direct his life. What appears to be a simple tale distinguishing the right and wrong is an intricate delineation of this distinction between 'thoughts' and 'emotions'. The book is a like fruit filled with bitter ash, like those colocynths which sprout in the most arid deserts: rather than quench your thirst, they scorch your mouth even more, yet against their backdrop of golden sand they are not without a certain beauty.

'After all, what is there to live for? I have worked hard to the end, done my duty with passion and dedication. Apart for that....oh, what else is there?' I thought, admiring my own stoicism. What was really painful was the ugliness of my surroundings.

There is nothing more tragic, for someone who has faced death, than a long convalescence. After my brush with the wing of death, the things that seemed important before no longer mattered; other things had taken their place, things which had never seemed important before, which I didn't even know existed. The accreted layers of acquired learning flaked away like greasepaint, offering glimpses of bare flesh, the real person hidden underneath.

"So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after."

-Ernest Hemingway

Fear is the mother of immorality.

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Michel is an 'immoralist' because he has adopted Nietzsche's view that morality is weapon of the weak, of a slave mentality. To become fully human, men must have courage to kill the God that has infected the freedom of their will. There was, of course, a great deal more to Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and its effect on Western civilization than could be encapsulated in the much misunderstood notion of the *Übermensch*, the Superman. Michel takes Nietzsche simplistically, abandoning Culture for Nature, letting the weak go to wall, and in the end losing everything. Gide knew what to leave as well as what to take of Nietzsche- and when to keep Nietzsche within bounds of his books. While pursuing his natural inclinations, Gide cherished and retained his wife, his independent means and his professional position. In working out a *modus Vivendi* that could accommodate both his marriage and his homosexual adventures, he called on the un-Nietzschean but very Gidean quality of compromise.

"Am I a good person? Deep down, do I even really want to be a good person, or do I only want to seem like a good person so that people (including myself) will approve of me? Is there a difference? How do I ever actually know whether I'm bullshitting myself, morally speaking?"

-David Foster Wallace

As like with all works of art, *The Immoralist* preserves its fluid outlines and remains un-susceptible to formulas; it may yield therefore to the most divergent interpretations. What Michel seeks is not pleasure, of this or that kind, but the free play of instinct. The whole drama springs from a 'profound antimony': acquired instinct is no longer instinct; it becomes a negative force, the negation of culture. When he abandons all that he has acquired in life, when he believes that he has found his true self, he is left with nothing. At once critique and apologia, *The Immoralist* confronts 'the fundamental, eternal problem of the moral conditions of our existence' the gap between what we were and what we have become.

It was great experience to read this book by Gide; as usual with Gide, he had been able to create heart-

wrenching tale with simple words- his ability, to conjure up profound effect through his prose with simple seemingly innocuous words, is second to none. However, the problem of morality, of inauthentic existence, the book portrays so well and convincingly; the solution to it may come across a compromising one. Nevertheless, it is a great read for someone who wants to dig in to the great tussle of morality human beings have been facing since the very outbreak of civilization.

4/5

K.D. Absolutely says

If you are a bisexual, will you marry?

Andre Gide (1869-1951) was a French author and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947. So, this book, despite its theme on homosexuality, should not be brand or worse, mock, as another gay lit book.

The story revolves around a bisexual man, **Michel**, who has devoted his early years to his studies so he becomes a scholar. Then, to please his dying father, he gets himself a wife, **Marceline** and the young couple goes to North Africa for their honeymoon. Along the way, Michel falls ill because he gets tuberculosis, that at the time has no cure yet. While in his sick bed, he meets a young handsome Arab boy and he begins to realize that he is a bisexual man. He gets well, after his wife regularly brings young good-looking boys to their house to play with Michel.

Reading this book is like reading a gay-version of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. It shocked me yet the beautiful simple prose of Gide is just hard to dismiss. First published in 1902 in France the language is a joy to read because it is short, direct to the point (not pretentious) and it is very brave. Gide did not give any qualms in tackling the subject that could be a taboo during that time when the world was not as open-minded as it is now.

The message of the book is that all of us have, whether as personal as homosexuality or not, some secrets or maybe just something that we are not very proud of. First, we hid them to our loved ones or even to ourselves by not facing them heads on. However, if we continue hiding, those secrets will find their way out in the open. Sooner or later, we have to face them. So, what Gide says: accept who we are. Marry if you feel that's the right thing to do but please tell your girlfriend everything. Don't hide just for her to agree in marrying you. She has the right to know. Otherwise, you will be leading a sorry sad life hiding in the cloak of duplicity.

That, for me is the lesson this book purports: **truth**. It's the *only* way for us not to destroy ourselves.

knig says

Absolutely stunning portrayal of a French Catholic repressive confronting his (homo) sexuality at the turn of last century. I deliberately write 'confronting' rather than 'journey of discovery', 'development' or any other word which might imply a process of evolvement leading to clarity or even acceptance, for this is singularly missing. What unravels instead, is a sublime subconscious, torturous confrontation, an unwanted, unspoken clash of instinct and reason. And this is what makes the fibre so compelling: the very fact that this turbulent

vortex of personal cataclysm simmers hidden in the subconscious strata, with the subtlest of surface manifestations: a bit like watching soporific bubbles crenulate the surface of a hot spring: we know its a harbinger of molten ferment which will erupt in volcanic spew, science classes posit that at this exact moment tectonic grinding is churning beneath, but for a few moments, before a supernova of lava excretes from the mouth of the epicentre, we have only these little ruptures to go by. This is the feel of this novel: a suggestion of immense reconfiguration as elicited by the the minutest, most fractional, ephemeral of manifestations.

I seriously do not believe anyone else could have written a more plausible, eloquent and lyrical account of sexual awakening. In this roman a clef, protagonist Michel commences asexual, evolved in his studies and if not exactly religious, than combobulated of religion.

I don't think, apostate, secular and produced via the 'religious studies' modules of modern education as we are in Europe now, we can appreciate just how this religious combobulation might have worked in 1902. The only analogy I can think of even remotely to hint at the 'tribal affiliation and upbringing' of Michel is the old Irish joke about somebody in Northern Ireland who responded to a survey question about religious affiliation by declaring himself an atheist. 'Would that be a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?' came the insistent reply. Can there be any atheist raised in a Christian country that does not understand this? The fact that renunciation of faith is almost a futile endeavour when the rest of the fabric: tradition, culture, norms and conditioning, remain. The combobulation, hence, at your service. You can run, but you can't hide.

Michel marries a woman, and due to ill health does not consummate the marriage for a long time : (much like Gide, who married his cousin and stayed in an unconsummated marriage for 27 years). During a honeymoon convalescence in Biskra, his wife befriends some of the local children. And this is where the subtle suspirro of innuendo begins. Michel starts to notice the outlines, fleshy composition and grace of these teen boys. This slow, understated cognisance is so delicate and protracted that its hard to pinpoint the exact moment when casual inflection rearranges into a purposefully orchestrated pattern of involuntary but prescient mis en scenes of allusion. It is painfully, breathtakingly beautiful to observe this accretion of subsensual imagery, a layering of sense-data which eventually overwhelms not just Michel, but me as well. Talk about an excruciating build up. For those of us, mind you, who like our thrills in the realm of unrealised potentiality.

So why is this not a journey of self discovery? Which it is not. Even at the end, Michel, sleeping with a woman, (not his wife who dies) covets her little brother (yes, I'm a little concerned about paedophilia). We leave Michel as convoluted as ever. But why?

Clearly, no one knows why. I can only transpose my own interpretation on this cauldron of mess up. Fear of sexuality. Not religious fervored, morally attributed fear, but intellectual. For those for whom this is a resolved issue in its essence, regardless of sexual preference, Michel's quandary will seem alien, and the whole book a mismanagement. But for some, where easy doesn't come into it: ease of it, I mean, then this confrontation will ring true. This subconscious tension of a voracious instinctual yearning forever tempered and extinguished by a resolute, no irresolute, conscious inability to progress...this thing. Being sexuality, whatever it means to each and everyone of us.

Parthiban Sekar says

Immorality is often, from time immemorial, attributed more to one's sexual orientation, as if immorality is born out of it. Long, not very long, ago there was this Man-Made Immorality Act, upon which I won't expound, which makes me think that all we, somehow, describe as Immoral are defined by us. And at times, we seem confounded by our own definitions. The very idea of Morality seems "extrinsic", as opposed to the wide-spread belief that we are born as moral beings and any deviation would not be tolerated. Immortality I don't understand. Immorality I don't judge.

"The capacity to get free is nothing; the capacity to be free is the task."

This is not just about the wanton adventures which one might enjoy in his or her new-found freedom, but also understanding *the gap between what we were and what we have become* and the burden of freedom. Driven by *inexplicable curiosity*, Michel, on recovering from his strange sickness, finds himself attracted to the vivacious health and effervescent beauty of a young Arab boy. But he is not the one who ill-treats his wife, even after finding his new ways of joy. He has been good (*may be not in contemporary or moral sense*) all his life but what happens to him after his recovery is something questionable, may be only in a *moral* sense. Perhaps his "Old Adam" might have come out. After all, aren't we all prone to Immorality?

"A man thinks he owns things, and it is he who is owned"

Do we require Morality to make us humane? What Michel tries to say is that Morality is a weapon of the weak and it is of a slave mentality; and what he wants is *open disobedience*. This is again arguable, unless one is opinionated. Another "Problem" this story puts forth is what happens to our instincts when we constantly make our senses numb with *Mores*. Would you still call it as "*instinct*" if you are not allowed to think in the way you want to?

It is not the idea of getting *the freedom* which terrifies us, but the fear of having freedom with unmoored feelings and unbridled desires, for which some of us constantly need to be reminded how to behave and reprimanded when there is a deviation in behavior or manners are missing. When Michel's wife confronts him, she mutely accepts that this freedom can be dangerous for the Weak. And Michel is on loose again. One's being forms itself according to the power it possesses. Should the wildness be always tamed?

"To know how to free oneself is nothing; the arduous thing is to know what to do with one's freedom"

This being a story which treads along the dangerous border of morality and immorality, there will be lot of us who would condemn this very story. It is not an accusation or an apology which Gide gives hint of, but an indescribable picture of what it is... *the inexplicable curiosity*. There is no any predispositions or presupposed solutions; but a strong neutral drama... And the ever-ongoing battle between Morality and Immorality...

"You have to let other people be right' was his answer to their insults. 'It consoles them for not being anything else."

Declan says

I've never felt that it is in any way important to like or admire the main character in a novel. It seems to me far more important that language and structure should be used to support a narrative that convinces us about the authenticity of everything that happens within the novel. So it is with 'The Immoralist'

I dislike Michel, the narrator and central character of the book, but I am persuaded that everything he does in the book is, for him, unavoidable. With every advance in his thinking, as he convinces himself about the logic of his subjective reasoning, we are in danger of being seduced. If, for a moment, we step out of the book, everything about Michel is appalling. He is a paedophile; he subjects his wife to endless travelling as she moves closer to death; he cares nothing for the tenants of the land he inherited from his father. He belittles those who work for him with his oily pretense that he can mix with them and be their friend; an odious example of how he can use his privilege to play at poverty while it amuses him. The same privilege he uses when Arab boys begin to take his fancy. His reality matters so much more than theirs. As Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism* regarding an incident in which Michel sees a boy called Moktir steal his wife's scissors: "Moktir, the African boy, gives a surreptitious thrill to Michel, his employer, which in turn is a step along the way to his self-knowledge...What Moktir thinks or feels (which seems congenitally, if not racially, mischievous) is far less important than what Michel and Ménalque make of the experience".

Ménalque is a Nietzschean character, at first a vague acquaintance, but then a guiding influence on the direction of Michel's life. It is he who delivers the key sentence of the book when he says that: "The things one feels are different about oneself are the things that are rare, that give each person his value - and those are the things they try to repress. They imitate, and they make out that they love life!" With this we are back within the logic of the book and Nietzsche's viewpoint that to be moral is to be bound to convention. Now Michel is caught in a cleft between the turmoil of his responsibilities and the calm of risk. The self-justifying world that Michel now inhabits centres on the ruthless search for 'authenticity', which means that all the elements of his previous life - his wife included - must be cast aside. Marceline, that long, long-suffering wife senses perfectly the nature of his new mindset: "I understand your doctrine...but it leaves out the weak". "And so it should" Michel replies. Only he can survive.

'The Immoralist' is a superbly well written book and the David Watson translation I read serves the novel magnificently.

karen says

i feel a little dirty reading this sandwiched between all my children's books for class. kids, take three giant steps back from gide... i think i loved this book, but i think i may want to read another translation. who knows from translations?? i have the richard howard one here, and i know he's like a star in the french/english translation world but i didn't like his introduction to this so much, and was wondering if there might be another recommended translation? i liked this book a lot, despite some perceived smugness from that intro. what an appalling character to fall in love with! so many layers of unpleasantness! ingratitude, sexual deviancy, racial audacity. and the second french book i've read this summer with men embracing plants. what is with my people? ahhhh les arbres...
