

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **ECLIPSE** (1982)

John Banville

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

*Eclipse* is Banville's twelfth novel. It is also the first in a trilogy of novels about the character Alexander Cleave. The other novels in the trilogy are *Shroud* and *Ancient Light*. The novel received positive reviews with one reviewer noting how it reads like a prose poem and another describing it as, unlike many contemporary novels, "a work of art".

The novel makes many references to other famous works of art. The play Alexander Cleave is performing in when he experiences his own "eclipse" and forgets his lines is Euripides' *Heracles*.

The title 'eclipse' describes a solar or lunar eclipse the characters witness in the novel, but it also has great metaphorical power. It describes Cleave's desire to have himself essentially wiped out so he can learn how to live all over again.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Alexander Cleave	The narrator and main protagonist is a 50-year-old actor who is experiencing something like a mid-life crisis or mental breakdown.
Lydia Cleave	Lydia is Alexander Cleave's wife. She travels to stay with husband in his childhood home in order to persuade him to come back to her.
Cass Leave Quirke	Cass is the troubled daughter of Lydia and Alex.. Quirke is the caretaker of Alex's childhood home.
Lily	Lily is the 15-year-old daughter of Quirke.

### SYNOPSIS

The novel tells the story of a middle-aged actor, Alexander Cleave, who is having something of a mid-life crisis. He has recently caused his theatre group a huge embarrassment by walking off stage after having blanked on his lines during a performance. He then leaves his wife, Lydia, and his estranged daughter Cass behind and returns to his childhood home in order to get away from everything and find some personal space. He says he wants to experience the feeling of "being alive without living".

However, when he returns to what he expects to be an empty house – his mother and father having passed away – he finds it occupied by a mysterious man named Quirke, who is acting as a kind of caretaker. The novel details the emotional ups and downs Cleave experiences as he reflects on being back in his childhood home. There are many flashbacks in the novel and also lengthy periods of philosophical reflection. Cleave's wife will eventually come to the house to try and persuade Cleave to come back to their family home. However, just when we think they are about to come to some kind of resolution, they receive some startling news that will change their lives forever. There are also many sightings of ghosts in the novel.

### PLOT

[Note: While the novel is told largely through flashbacks and lengthy reflections, the following is a chronological summary of the main events]

*Trepidation* The novel opens with Alexander Cleave returning to his childhood home. He believes it to be empty and possibly abandoned. As he approaches it from a long way off, he sees the figure of a woman standing at an upstairs window staring at him. He believes it is his wife but he is mistaken. When he arrives at the house, the figure is gone. He asks his wife if it was her and she looks at him confused. He realises that it was some kind of optical illusion. He even questions whether he is seeing things.

*Conflict* Alexander is trying to share a dream with his wife. He tells her he had a dream about returning to the old house. She tells him that he never really left the place. We can tell from their first conversation that Alex and Lydia spend much of the time either criticising each other or not listening to each other. Then they have a disagreement over whether his dream is about the past or the future.

*Pride* The novel then cuts to a section in which Alex gives a sardonic self-introduction. It sounds like a half-serious promotional blurb for a literary biography. He sounds off about his unique acting talent, telling us that he is especially renowned as an actor for being able to convey the qualities of menace and stillness.

*Flashback to childhood* Alex describes how acting was inevitable for him because even as a young boy he felt he had to play many parts and keep up appearances. He tells us that life for him was a “perpetual state of being watched”. He traces his conviction that he had to be an actor back to a childhood memory when he encountered an old lady on the road. She mumbled something to him and showed him a basket of mushrooms she had picked. He was unable to reply. A myriad of voices cancelled each other out in his head. He realised then that his mission was to let these voices speak; to be the “voiceless ones”.

*A man possessed* Alex believes he is possessed by some kind of presence. He believes this changeless presence inhabiting him has no past and no future, and lives in an eternal present. This is another method he employs to try to make himself forget his own past.

*Lydia leaves the house* Alex and Lydia find it hard to live together in his childhood home. They are constantly bickering with each other. When Lydia mentions that she has heard from their daughter Cass and that she is planning to come home, they have another argument about whose side Cass will take when she returns. In the end, Lydia decides to leave her husband in the house on his own.

*Quirke makes an appearance* Alex is in his parents’ old bedroom looking out at the view and trying to work out who the woman was he had seen staring at him out of this window. Then he hears a noise downstairs. He goes to investigate and discovers Quirke. Quirke is a man who works in the local solicitor’s office. Alex had requested that he look after the house, but Quirke seems to have taken up residence there.

*History of the house* We learn that Quirke has researched the history of the house before Alex’s parents moved in.

*Youthful devotion* Alex has a flashback to a moment from his childhood when he made a shrine to the Virgin Mary. He made the shrine in a lane beside the house. A group of older boys came across the shrine and broke the Virgin Mary statue.

*Vision of the self* Another flashback returns us to the first moment, when Alex tells us that he discovered he was a separate, individual person. He was a young boy walking down the main street of his hometown. He watched the women shopping and talking in the streets and he felt a profound happiness inside. He imagines life as a fragile vessel he has to protect and carry around with him.

*He feels empty inside* Alex then recalls his first forays into acting. He discovers that he never really knew what part he was aiming for. Instead, he feels instead that he only ever had a feeling of permanent potential. He discovers inside a vacancy instead of a self. He finds that most of the partners he has met in his life have only ever tried to fill this vacancy.

*Alex recalls the birth of Cass* Lydia calls on the phone and she asks him when he is returning to their house. She tells him that their daughter Cass called and that she has a surprise for him. Lydia says that it would best for them if he returned to their house for when Cass returns. He then experiences another flashback where he recalls being in the hospital when Cass was born.

*Alex has another vision of a ghost* While on the phone to Lydia, Alex sees a vision of a woman in the kitchen. The woman is handing something to a small child. He walks into the kitchen while still

on the phone and finds that it is completely empty. He tells Lydia on the phone that the house is haunted. She replies: "You are your own ghost".

*Alex recalls a vision of his dead father* In another flashback, Alex recalls being in the attic of the house as a child and seeing a vision of his recently dead father at the door of the attic. His father was dressed in the pyjamas he wore before he died. He did not look straight at Alex but seemed to be looking for something. He then disappeared out the door.

*His ghosts are real* Alex becomes obsessed by the visions of his mother and father in the house. He starts to believe that the sounds he hears throughout the house are the sounds of real occupants who are spying on him. He begins to sleep with a poker beside his bed for safety.

*He is seeing himself as a ghost* Alex begins to realise that there is a trio of ghosts in the house. He sees a "phantom woman", a small child and now a male ghost as a vision of himself.

*Is he seeing the future and not the past?* Alex remembers how his mother had slapped him for the first time on the day his father died. He then recalls how his mother had a stroke a short time later and went to a convalescence home. When she regained consciousness, she was sent home and Alex had to care for her. Thinking back on all these memories, Alex begins to see a distance between his memories and his visions in the house. He asks himself if he is not, in fact, seeing visions of the future and not the past.

*Alex discovers an old hut near the beach* On one of his walks, Alex comes across an abandoned hut near the beach. He asks himself whether he is meant to give up all his possessions and relationships and move to such a hut.

*Alex remembers the first attack of Cass's illness* Alex remembers the first time his daughter Cass had one of her seizures but cannot recall the name for the condition. She hears voices when she was an isolated child and teenager. Alex has a vision of her all alone standing against the wind on some isolated cliff. He also then has a memory of her falling and cutting her lip one day when they went hiking together.

*Quirke introduces Alex to his daughter Lily* Quirke, who we learn is something of a legal secretary, shows Alex all the work he has done on the history of the house. He then introduces Alex to his 15-year-old daughter Lily who he suggests could help Alex around the house.

*Alex discovers that Quirke is living in his house* One day Alex is on a public payphone in the town speaking to Lydia when he sees Quirke passing in the street. He decides to follow him. Quirke takes him all the way back to his house and he realises that Quirke is living in the house with his daughter and that she is sleeping in his mother's room. Alex realises that the visions he has been seeing in the house might simply be Quirke and his daughter.

*The solar eclipse* Alex learns that there is going to be a solar eclipse. The eclipse becomes a metaphor for how in life we sometimes can move easily from a focus on the living to a focus on the lives of those who have passed and who now live in darkness.

*Quirke tells Alex a story about a mother and child who died in the house* Quirke asks Alex if he has ever seen a ghost in the house. When Alex asks why, he tells him that there were rumours that a young mother and her child, who had been lodging in the house when Alex's mother was taking in lodgers, had died in the house.

*Lydia comes to stay* Lydia comes to stay at the house. She has received a letter from their daughter Cass and says she wants to come home to them, but she can't at the moment. Lydia tries to persuade Alex to come back to their family home.

*Lydia and Alex have an argument* Alex decides that he would like to adopt Lily. The idea drives Lydia crazy since they both already have a daughter who she feels Alex has neglected. She accuses Alex of always being on a stage and as treating her like a member of the audience. She asks, "What

has happened to you?" Alex replies that he feels something terrible has happened but hasn't take sufficient notice of it because he is not sure what it is.

*Lily tells Alex how her mother died* Lily tells Alex the story of how her mother, Kitty, had died. It seems she had died in childbirth and that the child may also have died. On the night of the labour, Quirke had phoned the doctor, but the doctor went to the address of another woman who was also having a child. Lily's mother could not be saved by her sister Dora who was a midwife. Alex wonders if these are the ghosts he has been seeing the house.

*Alex and Lily visit a circus and Lily is hypnotised* Alex takes Lily to a circus that has visited the town. The hypnotist, named Goodfellow, asks the audience for a volunteer and Lily rushes up on stage. She is hypnotised by Goodfellow and he asks the audience, "What shall we do with her?" Alex then jumps up on stage beside her, takes her hand, and announces to the audience that she is his daughter. Lily wakes up and begins to weep.

*Lydia and Alex receive devastating news* One day Lydia appears in the hall of Alex's house with a ghastly expression. She rushes up to Alex and starts pounding her fists on his chest shouting "You knew!". She has just learned that their daughter Cass has been killed on the continent in a terrible accident.

*Scene of death* Lydia and Alex visit the scene of Cass's death, an incredibly scenic spot near the coast in an unnamed Italian town. They learn that Cass had been three months pregnant when she died. They must go and identify the body at the local police station. The body is disfigured beyond recognition from the impact of the fall onto the rocks. They identify her by a ring and a little scar on her left ankle. They discover that she most likely had flung herself onto the rocks from a small bower near a church from which newlywed brides fling their bouquets.

*Conclusion* After Alex and Lydia return to their home, Alex discovers that Quirke's wife did not die in childbirth and that she ran off with another man. Alex leaves the old family home to Lily on one condition; she must not sell it. Alex has one last vision of Cass and a child in the old house. She looks happy, he thinks. He tries to reach out and touch her but then she is gone.

## THEMES

*The Living and the Dead* One of the main questions the novel asks is whether the dead can be seen by the living. Alex, the main character, spends a great deal of time having visions and then trying to work out what those visions mean to him. When he returns to the old house he grew up in, he first has visions of his father in the attic and visions of a woman, who he believes to be his mother, in one of the bedrooms. However, as the story progresses, he comes to wonder whether the visions are not visions of himself and his wife, Lydia. When he then comes to have visions of a mother and a child, he can't work out who they are. He speculates on whether they are visions of the woman and child who reputedly died as lodgers in the house a long time ago. Then he wonders if they are visions of the mother of Lily, who may have died in childbirth. However, later it is suggested that the visions may, in fact, be pointing to the future and to the tragic event that will come at the end when Lydia and Alex learn of the death of their daughter who is three months pregnant. The novel then asks us whether sightings or visions we might have in our life are necessarily from the past. Could it be that such visions are telling us something important about the future?

*Fatherhood* Alex appears to be experiencing something of a mid-life crisis. He is a middle-aged actor who has just had an embarrassing experience on stage during a performance when he went "dry" and forgot his lines. In the end, he had to walk off stage to jeers. Alex seems to connect this with his role as a father. He feels guilt for how he has treated his daughter and his wife, and he can't cope with the flood of emotions. In the end, he decides to run away from everything and to disappear back to his former family home, which he believes to be unoccupied. However, when he gets there, he finds that the caretaker, Quirke, and his daughter, Lily, are living there. He becomes so concerned for Lily that he wants to adopt her despite the fact that he has an estranged daughter of his own about whom he feels much guilt. The novel then keeps making Alex confront his role as a father. It is only when it is too late that he discovers that he could have done more as a father.

**Memory** Memory is another central theme of the novel. Alex is completely obsessed by memories of his past. He can't seem to escape his memories no matter how hard he tries to become a recluse or an exile from them. When he moves into his old family home to get away from his own family and the emotions they bring out in him, he is flooded by memories of his childhood. He remembers important moments with his father and his mother. He remembers how they died and how he looked after his mother when she had a stroke. Over time, these memories give way to memories of his life with Lydia and of his relationship with his daughter Cass. The more he tries to escape into his own past, the more the memories of his wife and daughter return to haunt him. In the end, the author seems to have learned that he has focused too much on the past when, instead, he should have looked more to the future. If he had recognised the important connections between the present and the future, he may have been a better husband and father.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Alex** Alex comes across as somewhat self-obsessed. He is a middle-aged actor who, for some unexplained reason, is unable to deliver his lines in a production of a play. He tells us that he did not forget the lines on stage but that he was overcome by some realisation about the uncertainty of existence and that this prevented him from being able to speak his lines. From this moment on, Alex retreats into himself. He cuts off all contact with his wife and daughter and goes to live in an old, abandoned house where he grew up. Alex is someone who is stressed and overwhelmed.

**Overwhelmed** Perhaps the key moment when Alex is overwhelmed is the night he is unable to deliver his lines in an important production of a play he is starring in. It seems that all his problems—with his family, the philosophical questions he has over the uncertainty of existence, the unresolved conflicts he has about how he has treated his daughter—have all come to a head. He experiences something of a mental collapse on stage and when he later goes to a psychotherapist or counsellor to discuss the problem, the counsellor tells him that he is overwhelmed.

**Irresponsible** It seems that Lydia has been telling Alex for years that he is too obsessed with being an actor. She also seems to be unhappy about how she has been made to act like his mother. He is often unsure of what to do in life and he looks to her for guidance. She is also unhappy that Alex has not been a better father to Cass. However, we learn that Alex continues on regardless with his acting career. He comes across as stubborn. He is unwilling to accept that his daughter Cass needs more attention and that his wife is also eager to work with him to make things better for their daughter. It is only when he meets Lily and bonds with her that he recognises for the first time that he could have been a better father. He tries to adopt Lily so that he can somehow do a better job of being a father to a daughter. However, Lydia is upset when she hears this, feeling once again that he is neglecting their own daughter.

**Lydia** Lydia comes across as a concerned mother and wife. She makes every effort to patch up their marriage. She is still willing to accept Alex back into her life even though he was walked out on her to go and live on his own in the old family home.

**Caring** Lydia is not prepared to give up on Alex. Despite the fact that he has walked out on her and has been negligent toward their daughter Cass, she keeps calling him and asking him to return to live with her. When Alex cuts the phone line, she even travels all the way out to the house to live with him. She persists in her efforts to try and patch up their marriage. Even when she sees Alex living contentedly with the caretaker, Quirke, and his daughter Lily, she stays on in the house trying to make life easier for Alex and reminding him of his duties to her and to their daughter Cass. She is a caring person who is not afraid to speak the truth.

**Candid** Alex keeps trying to distract himself from the pressing issues of the day. Lydia has received a call from their daughter Cass telling her that she has a surprise for them. But Alex is too preoccupied with his own problems and he tells Lydia that he does not have the energy to care for anyone else but himself. Hearing this selfish talk, Lydia reminds of his commitments to their daughter. She tells Alex that he has never stopped acting. She tells him that he treats them all like audience-members. She also says that the only ghost he is seeing is the ghost of himself. When she receives a letter from Cass telling them that she would like to return to them but not at the moment, Lydia is desperate for them to reach out to their daughter before it is too late. She moves in with Alex

and she spends every moment she can trying to bring Alex around so that he will begin to focus on the people he *can* help rather than on those who have passed away.

**Quirke** Quirke comes across as a secretive and well-intentioned character. Even though he has moved into the house that he is supposed to be acting as caretaker for, he ends up being a great source of solace for Alex. He also plays a part in bringing Alex and Lydia back together.

*Secretive* We do not learn until well into the novel that Quirke is actually living in the house where he is a caretaker. Alex finds him in the house one day by chance and he believes that he is simply paying him a visit. Quirke never lets on that he is living in the house. It is only when Alex follows him home one day after work that he discovers that Quirke is living in one of the attic rooms in his old family house and that his daughter Lily is sleeping in Alex's mother's room. Quirke is also very secretive about his past. He never lets on what has happened to Lily's mother. It is only at the end of the novel that Quirke learns that Lily's mother ran away with another man.

*Well-intentioned* Quirke stubbornly refuses to leave the house, but he does some good by staying. We learn that he has been researching the history of the house for years and has amassed a great deal of notes and files on the history of the house. This history helps Alex to understand better his family and the time his family spent in the house. Also, when Lydia and Alex receive the tragic news that their daughter has been killed, Quirke brings Mrs. Kettle into the house to look after the couple and to assist them in dealing with their bereavement. He also offers them support at this time of need and looks after the running of the house as they grieve together. Quirke also welcomes the fact that Alex has left the house to his daughter Lily. This offers Alex some closure as a father who has recently lost his own daughter.