

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Birchwood* (1973)**

John Banville

OVERVIEW

The novel is narrated by Gabriel Godkin, who tells the story of his coming of age in a big house called Birchwood during the years of the Irish Famine (1845-1852). The Godkins are an Anglo-Irish family and they live amongst a peasant people who are dependent on the potato crop and are intent on gaining independence. The family are struggling to make ends meet and the house is in a state of disrepair. The story describes the fragmentation of the family and their steady decline into madness and bankruptcy.

In the second and third parts of the novel Gabriel runs away from home to join a circus. As the circus moves around the country putting on performances, the troupe realises that the country has been hit by potato blight. It is a disease that kills all the potato crops, the crop the Irish people depend on for sustenance. Hundreds of thousands of people die of starvation. Gabriel's circus group manages to stay alive living high in the mountains. At the end of the novel, Gabriel returns to Birchwood, where he makes a series of traumatic discoveries.

STRUCTURE AND NARRATION

The novel is in three parts and it is told in the first person. The first part tells the story of the slow decline of the Godkin family in Birchwood. The second part details the travels of Gabriel and the circus as they put on shows all around Ireland. The third part of the novel tells the story of Gabriel when he leaves the circus and eventually returns to Birchwood.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Birchwood is Banville's second novel and his only novel set in nineteenth-century Ireland. It is a historical novel that deals with the most traumatic of times in Irish history. During the Great Famine, over a million people died of starvation, and between 1845 and 1855, more than two million people left Ireland. Many people blamed the British Government for its handling of the crisis. The Anglo-Irish community – who were families from England who had moved to Ireland many generations before – also suffered during the famine as the local people turned against them.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Gabriel Godkin	The protagonist and narrator of the novel
Joseph Godkin	Gabriel's father
Beatrice Lawless	Gabriel's mother
Aunt Martha	As the sister of Joseph, Martha Godkin is called Aunt Martha in the novel but we learn late in the novel that she is, in fact, Gabriel's mother.
Granda Godkin	Gabriel's grandfather
Granny Godkin	Gabriel's grandmother
Michael	Gabriel's twin brother
Rosie	Gabriel's first love
Silas	The leader of the circus troupe
Magnus	Another member of the circus
Sophie	Silas's partner in the circus

PLOT

Part I: The Book of the Dead

At the end of the story, Gabriel writes about his life Gabriel has returned to Birchwood, which is now in ruins, and has begun to write out the story of his family, of Birchwood, and of his own life. He reflects on how different his memories of Birchwood are from the reality that now confronts him.

Gabriel destroys a photograph of a girl that was special for him and that he thought was a photograph of his twin sister Gabriel realises that his memories of the house do not correspond to the reality of the house as he now finds it. He returns to the attic and to a photograph that had long held a special power for him in his travels. It was a photograph of a young girl. His mother had told him it was a photo of her as a girl, but Gabriel had felt it was of someone else, most likely a long-lost sister. Having returned to the house, he now knows that there is no lost sister, so he destroys the photograph.

Gabriel recalls his first love, Rosie Gabriel compares the surprise he feels on returning to the house with the surprise he felt when he first got to know a young woman called Rosie. He is shocked by the realisation that the house is so different from what he had imagined and he also recalls the shock he felt when he realised that being with a young woman was so different to how he imagined it would be.

Gabriel relates the history of Birchwood before he was born We learn that the original owners of Birchwood were a family called the Lawless family. The last Lawless owner of the house was Joseph Lawless, who died mysteriously. Gabriel Godkin – the great-great-grandfather of the narrator – then married the daughter of Joseph Lawless and became master of the house. There was a long battle for the house between the two families, with the Godkins eventually winning out. The narrator's father, Joseph Godkin, then married the double-great-grandniece of Joseph Lawless, Beatrice Lawless.

Gabriel imagines the day of his birth Gabriel's mother sees two people – Silas and Angel – approaching the house. It turns out they are travelling circus performers – once known in Ireland as "tinkers". They are coming to ask for permission to stay with their caravans and horses on the land of Birchwood. Gabriel's mother allows them to stay, but Granny Godkin is incensed and shoots at them with a shotgun dislocating her shoulder. The police get involved and the skull of one is broken by a walking stick. It is on this day that Gabriel and another child are born at Birchwood.

Gabriel remembers his love of Birchwood and how this changed when he found his parents making love Gabriel recalls how much he loved spending his summers in the woods, fields and hills of the lands of the Birchwood estate. However, one summer day, when he was a young boy, he was wandering blissfully around the estate and came across his parents making love in Cotter's place. This was an old farmer's cottage owned by a man named Cotter whom Gabriel's father had evicted. Gabriel feels that his sense of the place was altered irrevocably from that day.

Gabriel learns that he is to inherit Birchwood Gabriel learns that he is to inherit Birchwood but also that the house is badly in debt. Aunt Martha, the sister of his father, also arrives with her son, Michael. She is now to stay at Birchwood and tutor Gabriel. We learn that about 15 years ago, Aunt Martha had become pregnant as a young woman. No one knew who the father was. She was made to stay on the grounds of Birchwood for the pregnancy and then was sent away. It seems that her son, Michael, was born on the same day as Gabriel.

Gabriel is tutored by Aunt Martha Aunt Martha acts as Gabriel's tutor, teaching him in an old, dusty room at the top of the house where there are a number of desks. She chooses a book called *The Something Twins* to read to Gabriel. Gabriel does not know at this point that Aunt Martha is actually his biological mother and that Michael is his lost twin. Aunt Martha pretends to read a story about two twins named Gabriel and Rose. In the story, set in a big house, Rose has to leave the house. Aunt Martha uses the story to reveal some of the truth to Gabriel. She feels she can't say straight out that she is his mother and that Michael is his lost twin so she Godkind hopes the story will alert Gabriel to the truth. However, Gabriel becomes obsessed with the idea that he has a lost twin, a girl named Rose. He even finds a photo in the attic of Birchwood that he believes is an early photograph of this lost twin. Gabriel becomes distracted and possibly feels upset for some unknown reason by the story. He leaves the classroom and Aunt Martha calls after him. He then discovers the photograph of the girl with the flower, which he believes to be a photograph of his lost twin.

Local tenants poach food from the Birchwood grounds and Granda Godkin is attacked by a local man The family begin to notice that local peasants are starting to poach animals from the estate. Joseph Godkin takes to carrying a rifle around so he can fire at the peasants when he sees them. One day, a local man appears with a dead pheasant in front of the house. Joseph Godkin fires at him through a window of the house and misses. The old man gets up and hits Granda Godkin across the face with the pheasant.

Michael and Gabriel start to see trespassers and wonder if they are ghosts Michael and Gabriel used to spend their days exploring the estate. The narrator writes about their time together from the perspective of someone who knows they are the twin boys of Aunt Martha, although Gabriel did not know it at the time. Gabriel tells us that Michael had never learned to live inside. One day, when they are both in the basement in Cotter's place, they hear people upstairs. It is quite audible to Gabriel, but for some reason Michael pretends he does not hear anyone.

Granda Godkin dies Gabriel remembers the time Granda Godkin died. He had never fully recovered from the altercation with the local peasant. He also became more immobile. However, in the dead of night, Gabriel sees the figure of someone slipping down the stairs and going out the front door into the forest. It turns out it was Granda Godkin, who was found dead the next day in the birch wood "curled like a stillborn infant in the grass". His false teeth were sunk to the gums into the bark of a tree.

Joseph Godkin inherits Birchwood On the death of Granda Godkin, Joseph – the narrator's father – inherits the estate. He immediately sells off 50 acres to a local landowner to try to get some cash towards paying off the debt. Granny Godkin is in a rage and so is Aunt Martha. Joseph reacts violently and flings a half-full wine bottle at Martha. We learn that he has a drink problem.

Gabriel meets his first love Rosie during the fruit-picking Gabriel and Rosie become lovers (though they remain virgins when they eventually separate) during the harvesting of the fruit crop. Gabriel is too shy to profess his love for Rosie and it is only on the last day of their harvesting job that they meet in Cotter's place. They would then meet there often to spend time together. Gabriel tries to share with Rosie his love of mathematics but she is not interested.

The relationship between Gabriel and Rosie is doomed – Gabriel's father tries to shoot her Gabriel is unable to bring Rosie into the house as he would face the wrath of his grandmother. He is not allowed to mix with the local Irish tenants. Gabriel realises that class differences mean their relationship is doomed: "class sat silent and immovable between us like a large, black bird". One day, after an afternoon together in the summerhouse, Rosie leaves when Michael arrives. Michael and Gabriel then hear a deafening explosion only to discover Rosie crouched in the grass and Gabriel's father standing there, having fired at her with his rifle. He had thought she was one of the local poachers.

Granny Godkin spontaneously combusts in the summerhouse! One summer day, Gabriel's father and mother and Aunt Martha (his biological mother) suddenly rush out of the house towards the summerhouse. Gabriel and Michael never learn what happened until they later creep into the summerhouse together only to find Granny Godkin's scorched feet and boots, a purplish mass in her chair, and ashes on the wall. The specialist called in can only suggest it was spontaneous combustion.

Gabriel contracts pneumonia and breaks off with Rosie After Gabriel contracts pneumonia, Rosie and he drift apart. They end their relationship less than amicably. Gabriel is upset and during his fever he becomes convinced that he has a long-lost female twin.

Gabriel's mother descends into madness We are told that Gabriel's mother has descended into a kind of madness. She spends the day raging and screaming at the top of her voice throughout the house. We later learn that a big reason for this is the fact that she has had to pretend to Gabriel that she was his biological mother, when, in fact, Gabriel and Michael are the sons of the Godkin brother and sister, Martha and Joseph.

Gabriel goes to a boarding school and his mother goes to an asylum Gabriel's father tells him that he has to be sent away to school. He also learns that his mother is being sent to an asylum. His father tries to give him some advice, but he keeps losing track of what he is saying: "Keep a grip boy, just keep going and you'll be alright".

Aunt Martha walks into a burning shed in search of her son and is killed. One morning, Gabriel is awakened by cries and the ringing of a bell. Aunt Martha bursts into the house asking where her son, Michael, is. Gabriel's mother tells her that Michael is in the shed. The shed is engulfed in flames. As Aunt Martha leaves for the shed, Gabriel catches sight of Michael down near the forest. Michael cups his hands around his mouth and hisses to Gabriel, "They have your sister". Michael is teasing Gabriel, misleading him into believing that his lost twin is in fact a missing sister and not Michael himself. Meanwhile Aunt Martha approaches the burning shed, walks straight in and is burned alive.

Gabriel leaves Birchwood Gabriel leaves Birchwood the following day. He sees his father wandering drunk in the ruins of the smoking shed. He is left with many questions. He asks himself if it was Rosie who had set fire to the shed because he had left her. He also wonders where Michael has gone and why Aunt Martha had to die.

Part 2 Air and Angels

Gabriel joins the circus Gabriel arrives in an unknown town and he sees a poster for Prospero's Circus. He walks down to the fields behind the town where the circus caravans are parked. He sees a man in a chair and approaches him. It is Silas, the circus leader, who came to Birchwood on the day of his birth with his circus troupe. 14 years later he does not recognise Gabriel but when Gabriel says his name Silas seems interested. He introduces him to his circus family.

Gabriel makes his first appearance on stage In their next performance, Gabriel is brought on stage from the audience as a foreign boy. He pretends to fall under the influence of Silas's hypnosis and is made to dance, sing and act like various animals on stage. The narrator tells us that he never before felt such freedom.

Two policemen arrive at the camp and threaten the circus A man dressed as a woman arrives at the circus camp and asks for food. He snatches a bowl of food out of the hands of Ida, one of the circus performers. Two policemen then appear on the road and he makes his escape. The two policemen threaten the circus folk. They claim that one of the troupe had split a policeman's skull. This likely dates back to the altercation at Birchwood many years before.

The potato blight hits Ireland Gabriel has been travelling with the circus for a year when they are camped in the mountains near a village. After another altercation with some local officials, the local troops are called to remove them from the land. As they are departing, they descend into the more populous regions of the country, where they can smell rot in the air and see signs of starvation. The potato blight has hit Ireland.

Mario, one of the circus performers, realises his baby daughter is missing As the troupe continues their race against time to flee the approaching troops, Mario discovers that his baby daughter, supposedly with Ada, is missing. He decides to travel back to find her. The troupe continues to travel high into the mountains and eventually stop performing altogether. As the blight ravishes the people, they survive on a diet of the odd rabbit, nettle soup, sloe wine and bread. Eventually Mario returns, beaten and shaken, and he tells the others there was no sign of his baby daughter.

Ida is killed by soldiers Ida and Gabriel go searching for fruit and berries in the lower hills. Gabriel falls asleep and then he hears a scream from below. He sees Ida being carried away by three soldiers. Gabriel follows them for the day and finally he sees a soldier dragging Ida along the road by one arm and beating her with the butt of his rifle. When he sees Gabriel, he finally lets her go. Gabriel carries her back to the camp but she dies later that day.

The circus troupe is attacked; one of their caravans explodes; Gabriel escapes The circus troupe makes its way back to the town near Birchwood where Gabriel met them when he had first fled the big house. One of their caravans ends up blocking a ghastly funeral parade. All of a sudden, the caravan explodes and people scatter everywhere. The police then give the circus troupe chase, but they manage to escape to a neighbouring town and public house. The faces of the revellers are gaunt and Gabriel thinks to himself that it is not the blight that is killing everyone but the famine itself and its "black smoke". One of the remaining caravans catches fire, when Magnus goes to save whoever is inside, Gabriel sees a soldier shoot him in the head. Gabriel mounts one of the horses and makes quick his escape.

Part 3: Mercury

Gabriel back at Birchwood face to face with old Cotter After many months or years (Gabriel is not sure) travelling with a group of tinkers, Gabriel finds himself in an old abandoned shed where he sees an old man and asks him for some food. The old man turns out to be old Cotter, who is eating monkey stew made from the old circus monkey, named Albert. Cotter reveals that the old house has fallen again into the hands of the Lawless family and that Joseph Godkin is living in an outhouse. Gabriel escapes Cotter's shed before he can catch him.

Gabriel finds the circus troupe and climbs unobserved aboard a caravan as they reach Birchwood Gabriel comes across the remains of the circus troupe. They are racing against time to the big house to try and save another one of the circus performers named Angel who has been shot. When they pass through the gates, Gabriel sees the name 'Lawless House' on the sign beside the gate. He is still hiding unobserved in the caravan with the dying Angel when she swells to fill the entire space of the caravan. When she finally coughs, splutters and dies the spell is over and she returns to her human shape in a bit of supernatural realism. Gabriel slips into the house unseen.

Gabriel finds Silas and Cotter in the old house killing the last of the inhabitants Gabriel stumbles into the ruined old house. He meets Silas, who tries to explain that they had no alternative but to take part in killing the inhabitants with the Molly Maguires, a local band of nationalist fighters who dress up as women. Gabriel sees them drag one of the last Lawless inhabitants of the old house into the yard and shoot him. Silas then approaches Gabriel in one of the rooms in Birchwood and he asks him to remain with the circus troupe. However, Gabriel says he wants to stay behind in Birchwood. As they leave Silas and Cotter shoot the three Molly Maguires.

Gabriel discovers the body of his father in the summerhouse Gabriel finds Michael in the big house. The narrator reveals to us that it is Michael who is his lost twin. They were the twin sons of Martha and Joseph Godkin. Martha was banished from Birchwood for 15 years after giving birth to the boys. Gabriel was brought up as the son of Beatrice and Joseph, but Michael was to inherit the house. Gabriel wanders over to the summerhouse and finds the body of his father there. He has been strangled, presumably by old Cotter. Gabriel threatens to kill Michael but Michael runs away. Gabriel has finally reclaimed Birchwood.

Gabriel tells us that he is back in Birchwood writing this story Gabriel mends what he can in the house. He says through writing he feels he has discovered a form to "contain and order all my losses". However, in the end, he realises that writing cannot order things the way he wishes and that he is left with "only echoes and coincidences".

THEMES

Memory Memory is an important theme in this novel, as in several of Banville's books. Gabriel is trying to come to terms with all that has happened to him and his family through writing out the details of the story. However, in the end, he realises that writing down the memories of the events only offers him "echoes and coincidences". This is also a meta-textual moment in the novel; in the same way that Gabriel discovers that no form of writing can capture the horrors of his experiences, no literature can capture fully the horrors of the Irish Great Famine. Memory simply becomes a form of documentation and even of bearing witness to tragedy and trauma. The kind of memory being described in the novel is a kind of commemorative memory that can be used to support different political readings of the time. Even after almost two hundred years, the events of the Great Famine and how they are recalled can depend on a person's political persuasions. Gabriel's story and the history of the Lawless and Godkin families at the centre of the land tended by the Irish peasantry can be retold in many different ways to support different political views.

Politics: conflict The Great Famine (1845-1852) was the worst tragedy to visit the land of Ireland. Many writers have tried to write stories and novels about this time in Irish history and not all have been successful. Banville is aware of this, so he decides to tell the story from the perspective of an individual who has a rather unique upbringing. Any oversights or inconsistencies can be put down to the fact that his upbringing is so unusual that he is simply telling one kind of Famine story. Gabriel also has a history of madness in his immediate family. He is therefore an unreliable narrator simply because we are unsure how trauma and tragedy have affected his recall of the events of this time in Ireland.

On another level, the novel is a highly effective imaginative rendition of the Famine period in Irish history. Banville did a great deal of research into the period and such elements as the reference to the statue of Strongbow (Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, Earl of Pembroke) in an unnamed town (most likely Waterford) give us a sense of the different loyalties at the time.

Class The novel also supplies important insights into the desperate enmities that existed between the different groups in Ireland at the time. The landed gentry, known as the Anglo-Irish communities, were typically found in the old "Big Houses" that were built all over Ireland. However, during the Famine and especially during the War of Independence, these houses and their families came under continuous attacks from those seeking Irish independence. About 250 of these houses were completely destroyed during this war. Banville's novel details how the inmates of these houses lived under a sense of threat that produced a state of paranoia. Over time, the Anglo-Irish families that remained became very conscious of preserving their traditions and customs. This meant they preserved their accents and their ways of life in the midst of a population with very different economic and cultural traits. Both communities were slow to mix and this resulted in a lack of understanding between the two communities. The lack of understanding resulted in the local population associating the accents of the Anglo-Irish people in Ireland with upper class families in England even when these Anglo-Irish families in Ireland may have been struggling to remain solvent financially.

Quest Quest is also an important theme in the novel. Gabriel has to go on a number of personal quests before he discovers the truth about his own identity. His first quest might be his solitary journeys around the grounds of Birchwood as a young boy where he discovers abandoned buildings, such as Cotter's place, and where he also encounters his first love, Rosie. The second quest he embarks on is the journey across Ireland with the travelling circus. We are never entirely sure where Gabriel discovers the truth about his own background but we get the sense that parts of his own family history are revealed to him over the course of his travels with the circus. Another example of this quest as a form of self-discovery occurs towards the end of the story when he comes across a shed that turns out to be Cotter's place on the grounds of Birchwood. It is only during a meal and conversation with Old Cotter (who has no idea he is talking to a Godkin) that Gabriel learns about the sad demise of his family members who had continued to live on at Birchwood during his travels. The quest motif brings out this connection between travel and self-discovery.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Gabriel

Gabriel is a character who is on a quest throughout the novel to discover the secrets behind his own identity. He knows that there is something unusual about his background but he can't put his finger on it. Ever since Michael shouted up to him from the garden that he had a lost twin who was a girl, he has tried to find her. He is also completely unaware of the plot to rob him of his inheritance and why this plot has been hatched.

Determined Gabriel is determined to get to the bottom of the questions he has about his identity. He does everything he can to follow the clues that are placed before him even when they lead to him almost losing his life. Rather implausibly, he has a strong memory of the day of his birth, the day the circus troupe arrived on the Birchwood estate. Because of this memory, he decides to run away from home at the age of 14 to join the circus. He is convinced that he will discover something through them. In the end, after a year with them and another year with a band of tinkers, he finally returns to Birchwood where he can discover the truth. In fact, we are never told precisely how Gabriel discovers the truth, but it is only when he returns to Birchwood that the narrator is able to reveal the truth to us.

Brave Gabriel also shows bravery when he refuses to give up on Birchwood once he has returned. He knows that it was once supposed to be his inheritance. He decides to stay on all alone in an abandoned house that is the target of the nationalists and even though Michael may be willing to kill him to gain what he feels is his rightful inheritance. Gabriel perseveres and at the end of the novel he finds his first moment of peace when he can write down the story of his life.

Joseph Godkin

Joseph, Gabriel's father, is in many ways a victim of circumstances beyond his control. He inherits a house and lands in disarray with huge debt. As the father of the house, he is expected to make all the decisions even though it is impossible for him to restore the house to its former glory. He also has to try and placate a bitter mother, a banished aunt, a wife who is battling depression and paranoia, plus a father who is possibly suffering from dementia.

Unhappy Joseph is trying to make the most of an impossible situation. He is also an alcoholic and deals with the difficult situation by turning to drink. In bearing two children with his sister after discovering that his wife cannot have children, he also places an unbearable burden on the next generation. In trying to keep the house in the Godkin family line – knowing that his wife is half a Lawless – he demonstrates clearly how the pressures to keep the land in the family have ruined his own chances of happiness with his own immediate family. The story is a harrowing account of the political realities of the time that tore families apart. Since Joseph is the head of this household, Banville has no alternative other than presenting him as a deeply unhappy character.

Michael

Michael is the twin of Gabriel and also the son of brother and sister, Joseph and Martha. He is presented as an unruly character who has never learned to live indoors. There is a suggestion that he had also been part of Silas's circus for some time.

Unrefined It is somewhat ironic that the twin who is destined to inherit the "big house" is a character who is described in the novel as never having learned to live indoors. He is given very few words in the novel and we get no sense whatsoever of his sense of being. However, his unrefined state is symbolic, revealing reveals to us how the family plan to set him up as the true inheritor of Birchwood has backfired. How can someone who can only live outdoors ever go on to manage the house and its interior? Michael also ends the novel by being threatened by Gabriel. Gabriel brandishes a knife as they look down on the dead body of their father in the summerhouse, at the moment he flees the house. We are left wondering whether Michael might return one day to reclaim what he believes is rightfully his.