

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE BLUE GUITAR (2015)

John Banville

OVERVIEW

This novel tells the story of Oliver Orme, a middle-aged, retired painter and petty thief who is reflecting on his life and loves as he is sitting down writing up the story of the novel. He tells us at the beginning of his narrative that he “used to paint”. He finds himself completely alone after having had an affair with his friend’s wife Polly. Oliver spends much of the novel deliberating on his childhood, on children in general, on women, and on art as he reflects on how the events of his life have led to him finding himself where he is. He returns to his childhood home after his affair. We learn that his family rented a gate-lodge to a big house.

STRUCTURE AND NARRATION

The novel is in three parts but does not follow any regular chronological pattern. Pieces of information about the plot are revealed to us incrementally as we read. The main action of the novel covers the week-long period during which Oliver has run away from his home and his wife. There are three main reasons for why it is sometimes difficult to piece together what has actually happened in the story. Firstly, the author employs an unreliable narrator, who frequently admits to being uncertain about whether things he has experienced really happened. Secondly, the book is inspired in some way by the poem by Wallace Stevens, “The man with the blue guitar”, which also asks the reader to question how things are represented. Finally, the author makes it difficult for us to work out what has happened because the protagonist of the novel, Oliver Orme, has given up painting because he has serious questions about the nature of representation and about what the artist can actually do with art.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The novel has an epigraph from a Wallace Stevens poem (“The man with the blue guitar”) that reads: “Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar”. The poem has been regarded as influenced by the work of Picasso, in particular his painting *The Old Guitarist*. Picasso was a cubist, whose work made viewers question the nature of representation. Wallace Stevens, too, runs with this theme in his long poem. As a late modernist writer, his work is constantly raising questions about how representation and whether it is possible to intentionally represent something as you see it. For example, when Stevens writes “I cannot bring a world quite round,/ Although I patch it as I can”, we are reminded of the artistic struggles of Oliver Orme in *The Blue Guitar*. At one stage for example, Oliver thinks that he is constantly running his eyes over things “working to transform, transfigure, the flesh made form”. In the end, he feels it has all been in vain and that the world and women remained what they were. This is taken as one of the reasons why Oliver has given up painting in the novel.

If we also want to extend this consideration to a biographical reading of the novel in terms of the life of its author – something Banville always seems to suggest is a blind alley – we might read this passage in terms of Banville’s own experiences with representation in the novel form. It must be remembered this is a late Banville novel so we might be excused on occasion for confusing the voice of Oliver with an autobiographical voice. On this note, it is probably not coincidental that Oliver’s surname is Orme (‘or me’).

MAIN CHARACTERS

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| Oliver Orme | The protagonist and narrator of the novel. A middle-aged man who is both a painter and petty thief. |
| Polly Plomer | Polly is the wife of Marcus and the object of Oliver's attention throughout the novel. He is smitten by her and they have a 9-month long affair. |
| Gloria Orme | Oliver's wife. She is a loyal companion even though she also has an affair with Polly's husband, Marcus. |
| Marcus Plomer | Polly's husband and the father of Little Pip. He is a watchmaker. |
| Little Pip | The baby daughter of Marcus and Polly |
| Olivia | The daughter of Oliver and Gloria, who died tragically aged 3 |
| Freddie Hyland | Also known as 'The Prince' in the novel, his family, the Regensburger family, moved into a big house 100 years earlier. |
| Mr. Plomer | Polly's father, who suffers from dementia. |
| Mrs. Plomer | Polly's mother, who is described as "batty" |

PLOT

Part 1

Oliver flees his home when his affair is revealed Oliver Orme goes back to his childhood home for a few days, then to the home of Polly's parents and finally to his studio. This first part sees the main character reminisce on his time growing up in his childhood home. He also reminisces on his affair with Polly Plomer and how it began. It leads to him remembering other important aspects of his life.

Oliver recalls how his affair with Polly started He recalls how he met Polly and her husband Marcus at a place called Clockers. He had been their guest with his wife Gloria. One thing leads to another and pretty soon the narrator – Orme – is also reflecting on his time as a petty thief. He remembers the first thing he stole which was a tube of paint.

Oliver tries to console Marcus, whose wife he is having an affair with While Oliver is back in his hometown, he meets his old friend Marcus – Polly's husband. He ends up trying to console Marcus, who is distraught about Polly's infidelity. Marcus is unaware that Oliver is the culprit and, at the same time, Oliver is unwilling to admit to the affair to Marcus. Oliver is also unaware at this stage that Marcus and his wife Gloria are themselves having an affair of some kind. Marcus is an older man and it is clear from how he is described by the narrator in this first section – "[p]oor Marcus shuffled along beside me with the gait of a weary old man" - that he has been seriously affected by the affair. However, we don't see any great emotion from Oliver beyond a general sense of fear that his affair will be discovered by Gloria and Marcus. Oliver has not yet told his wife Gloria about the affair, but he is convinced that she will work it out and we can sense that he is dreading seeing her.

Oliver dreads his wife finding out His memories of his affair with Polly come flooding back to him as he waits in his childhood home for the arrival of his wife, Gloria. The first section ends with the narrator believing that it is his wife's car that has just driven up the driveway outside the gate lodge.

Part 2

Oliver and his wife meet at Fairmount House The second part of the novel describes the life of the narrator, Oliver, and his wife Gloria in the house he bought, called Fairmount House. He has been away only a matter of days after the affair with Polly has been discovered but silence prevails in the house. He knows that Gloria knows what has happened but she doesn't appear to be angry.

Gloria talks about wanting to move "south" and Oliver remembers their daughter Gloria says that she wishes to move down "south" to where they lived previously. The narrator is not sure if it is because of what he has done. The narrator then remembers the daughter, Olivia, they had together. We learn that she died tragically when she was 3 years old. It has been a deeply traumatic event for the parents. Oliver digresses constantly as he tells the story of Olivia and of his life with Gloria.

It is Polly who discovers Oliver at the gate lodge and not Gloria We then discover it is Polly who had arrived up to the gate-lodge and not Gloria. She has come to the gate-lodge to be with the narrator. She had brought her daughter, Little Pip, with her. Oliver tells Polly that he wishes to paint

her. He then digresses again and starts to reflect on what women mean to him. He recalls the dark and dank room beside the one they are now in where him and his brothers used to sleep when they were growing up. He also reflects on what has been the main driving force of his life: "Don't you see? What concerns me is not things as they are, but as they offer themselves up to being expressed."

Polly tells Oliver that she has left Marcus Polly tells Oliver that she has left Marcus. It turns out that Marcus was violent when he had found out about her affair and cut Polly's face with his ring finger. Polly tells Oliver that she plans to return to her family home and her parents.

Polly and Oliver flee to her parents' home for a few days Polly and Oliver drive to her parents' house in Marcus's old car. The home of Polly's family, the Plomers, is called Grange Hall. Her parents live there alone. We learn that her father is suffering from dementia and that her mother is also struggling with old age.

Oliver and Mr. Plomer discuss poetry Oliver has a discussion with Polly's father about the poet Rilke and how he wrote his classic collection *The Duino Elegies*. Oliver sees his own isolation in his childhood home as somewhat similar to that of Rilke writing his classic work at the famous Italian castle owned by the Prince.

Oliver has an epiphany about his writing Oliver then digresses again and begins thinking about his own childhood and how he came to be attracted to words. He admits that what he finds frightening now is not "the general malevolence of things" but their "cunning plausibility". He has a kind of epiphany about why he paints. He finds that with his painting and his stealing he was only ever trying to "break through the surface of things" to "see what was hiding behind".

Oliver has an odd nocturnal meeting with Polly's mother While staying at the home of Polly's parents, Oliver decides one night to open the sash of one of the upstairs windows so he can urinate out the window. As he is urinating, he senses someone behind him. He then hears Polly calling to her mother from downstairs and he realises it is Polly's mother who is observing him in silence as he stands there with a blanket around his shoulders and wearing nothing but his underwear. There is an obvious reference here to the scene in *Hamlet* where Hamlet accosts his mother Gertrude in her rooms with his pants unfastened. The author then has a rather beautiful realisation about childhood. He compares his feeling at that moment (as he stands in silence and in the dark saying nothing to Polly's mother) to a moment from childhood and of "childhood's calmly uncomprehending acceptance of the incommensurability of things". When Polly's mother finally goes back to bed, and Oliver and Polly go to bed together, Oliver has the sudden feeling that the woman beside him under the covers could be his daughter, brought back to life.

Flash Forward to the Present: All of a sudden, we get a flash forward to the present and are in the presence of the writer Oliver Orme as he scribbles out the story of his reflections on what he calls "futile pages". He admits to the reader that he does not "understand anything". This reminds us that he is a kind of unreliable narrator and it adds to the symbolism of the title, *The Blue Guitar*, which refers to the late modernist poem of Wallace Stevens and the painting by Picasso. The author tells us that he considers adding the title *A Treatise on Love* to his piece of paper and following up the title with a series of blank pages.

The "Prince" AKA Freddie Hyland arrives The next morning 'the Prince' – or Freddie Hyland – arrives and discusses poetry with Polly's father. Freddie recognises Oliver and as they begin to discuss art and poetry, Mr. Plomer notices that the child Little Pip needs changing. This once again leads to a digression where Oliver admits to himself that he is glad he had a daughter and not a son. He thinks to himself that he finds the spectacle of a son and father who look similar "absurd" and "slightly grotesque".

Oliver remembers his father and finds he feels more insecure since he has stopped painting He then thinks of his own father, who owned a print shop, and wonders what his father thought of him, his last-born, and how his father might also have gone on to be a painter if only he had had the financial means to be educated and trained. He then leaves the house and he reflects on the fact that he is no longer a painter. He says that since he has stopped being a painter he has felt the need to keep "verifying himself".

Oliver meets a troupe of travelling musicians The writer then has what he describes as a strange experience. As he is walking away from the house, he hears music and a group of "merchants" or "peddlers" made up in eastern apparel appear around a bend in the road. They are accompanied by

half a dozen caravans and a group of “ragged children” follow behind them. After they have passed, the author tells us that he is not sure if he imagined them. He then meets Freddie on the road who offers him a lift. Oliver learns that Freddie’s family had bought the house a hundred years earlier. It is the gate- lodge to this house that Oliver’s family has rented. Freddie’s family were Regensburgers, who came from Regensburg.

Oliver has stolen a book from Mr. Plomer and is slow to return it – it marks the end of his relationship with Polly When Oliver returns to the house after his walk, Polly is very upset and accuses him of having insulted her family. She also accuses him of having stolen the book of poetry that Freddie had given to her father. Initially, Oliver denies it, but when Polly tells him that Little Pip saw him take it, he removes the book out from under his old oilskin coat. She accuses him of having taken numerous things from her and her family. Oliver sees it as his day of reckoning. He feels a sense of complete indifference to Polly and realises now it is the end of their relationship.

Part 3

The funeral of Marcus This part begins with the funeral of Marcus. We learn at the end of the novel that Marcus has driven his car over a cliff and into the sea. After he realised he had lost Polly and his soul-mate Gloria, life became too much for him. Oliver is once again found casting his eyes over the people about him at the funeral and he comes to a realisation about himself. In letting his eyes “play over” the world, he realises that he has always been trying to think “I was making it mine”. He feels the same about love.

Oliver has another epiphany about himself as an artist and person He realises that when he runs his eyes over objects he is always “working to transform, transfigure, the flesh made form”. In representing things as a painter, or now as a writer trying to get down all his thoughts about his life, he realises he is unhappy to just let things be; he needs to feel he can change them. However, he realises it has all been in vain and that – the world and women – have always remained what they were.

Oliver has a flashback to a day in his studio when he discovered his vision as an artist Oliver recalls another moment from his early days when he was obsessed with painting and had spent days tirelessly working on a new canvas. At that time, he felt a vision come to him, one that made him feel he not only had to be a representative of life, of everything about him, but *the* representative.

Gloria finally comes to discuss their future After the incident with the book and Polly, Oliver returns to his studio and hides away for a few days. Gloria finally comes to see him. They discuss all that has happened between the first picnic, where the four of them first got to know each other (Oliver, Gloria, Polly, Marcus), and the second picnic where Gloria and Marcus were spotted alone together. We discover that Oliver’s affair with Polly lasted about 9 months. We also hear about Oliver’s jealousy, convinced that Gloria and Marcus were having an affair. but Gloria tells him they simply discovered that they were ‘soul-mates’. We also learn that Gloria has now also left Marcus.

Gloria invites Perry Percival the art dealer to Oliver’s studio Gloria then invites Oliver’s art dealer, Perry Percival, to his studio. Perry is on the lookout for new works by Oliver. He has come to encourage Oliver to return to painting. Oliver tells Perry he has stopped painting for good. However, Perry will not accept it. He keeps searching in the studio until he finds something of interest. He finds a half-finished canvas and he tries to encourage Oliver to finish it, but Oliver destroys it in front of him. In the end, Perry leaves empty-handed.

Oliver pays a visit to his sister Olive Oliver pays a visit to his sister, Olive, and her partner of many years, Dodo. He had been seeking some kind of support but discovers that his sister has little sympathy for his plight. At this stage. the reader comes to realise that Oliver’s longing for sympathy hides a more profound lack of empathy on his part. He might even seem to be a little self-centred.

Gloria is pregnant with Marcus’s child and Polly says goodbye We learn that Gloria is going to have Marcus’s child and that Oliver and she are going to keep the child. Later, Polly asks Oliver to meet her one last time in the studio. He rushes forward to embrace her, but she stands back and keeps her distance. She tells Oliver that she is leaving for Regensburg with Freddie and that she, too, is now pregnant. As a parting gift, she asks Oliver if he will take her dog.

The novel ends with a memory of his father As Oliver asks himself why he stole so many things throughout his life, he recalls a memory from his childhood when he was sick for many days with a

fever. Each night before he slept, his father would come into his room and raise his head and turn up a cool corner of the damp pillow. Oliver used to pretend he was asleep. He tells us that he felt weightless at and at peace “on the soft, sustaining darkness” at such moments.

THEMES

Memory Memory is an important theme in the novel. The plot is revealed to us through a series of recollections on different moments from Oliver’s life. Oliver uses memory to understand better how events have led him to his current state. He has clearly not come to terms with the death of his infant child and this is one traumatic moment from his past that he uses memory to work out. There is a suggestion in the novel that even Oliver’s stealing might be related to his devotion to the past. Stealing things from others might be a kind of substitute for the things he feels time has taken from him. It is only throughout his week of reflection after the discovery of his affair with Polly that he is able to find the time to go back to these moments and take the meaning from them that had eluded him for so long.

Representation On many levels the novel is concerned with how we represent things and even with whether representation as we imagine it is possible. Oliver Orme is a painter who has stopped painting because he felt he had never been able to truly represent things as he felt he should. He has always been obsessed with transfiguring what he sees, so much so that he describes his ideal kind of creative effort in terms of a transfiguration of “the flesh made form”. He realises after his sexual affair has finished, and after he has stopped painting, that this kind of representation is impossible since things tended to remain what they always were. We also come to realise that this kind of visionary thinking has shaped his relationships with other people. He seems to have been obsessed with Polly and imagined an impossible future with her.

Banville uses an unreliable narrator who is somewhat obsessed with the past throughout the novel. It is a technique which makes the reader question whatever is described or represented in the novel. It also makes the reader question whether characters are really as the narrator describes them. For example, Gloria, Oliver’s wife, is given very little time in the novel but she is surprisingly accepting of Oliver’s infidelity. We are also given very little information about why Polly has come to the decision so quickly to have a child with Freddy and move to Germany with him. We only ever hear about these decisions in brief asides and only in terms of how they affect the feelings of Oliver. These are examples of how the unreliable narrator is used and how it can sometimes prevent us from a more rounded presentation of other characters.

Infidelity Infidelity and faithfulness are important themes in the novel. All the main characters in the novel are having extra-marital affairs and yet they seem unable to make these new relationships last for very long. All the characters are also anxious about how their original partners will react to their infidelity. It is perhaps fitting then that the novel has an unreliable narrator. The narrator is unfaithful in terms of keeping to his word as he frequently questions whether what he just experienced or described is actually the case. We come to realise that we, too, are only seeing one side of the relationship in Oliver’s reflections. We learn very little about how Gloria and Polly are feeling and must read a great deal into their actions. For example, when Oliver and Polly meet for the last time in his studio and Oliver still feels the need to rush towards Polly with open arms, Polly’s drawing back is quite revealing. We learn that she is already with another partner and that she is pregnant. The suggestion is that relationships forged through infidelity do not last. Gloria and Oliver stay together and when Marcus dies, Polly decides she must start a new life elsewhere.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Oliver

Oliver is a retired, middle-aged painter who is hiding away from his wife in his week-long absence from the family home after his affair with Polly has been discovered. The author’s heavy reliance on memories from Oliver leads us to see him as somewhat self-obsessed and even selfish. He is clearly unable to communicate his emotions of guilt and sorrow to either Marcus or his wife Gloria; therefore, he disappears completely and spends his time reflecting on moments from his life that have meant he has come to this crisis in his life.

Selfish Oliver comes across as a somewhat self-centred character. Since he is our narrator, we only hear his perspective on everything; however, he seems at times oblivious to the emotional lives of others. He can also be somewhat dismissive in his descriptions of characters with disabilities. In the first section, he is friendly with Marcus even though he is the cause of Marcus's distress. Oliver is unable to find the courage to admit to Marcus that he is the cause of his unhappiness. When we are told that Marcus has driven off a cliff because of his wife's infidelity, the narrator shows very little emotion and he seems more concerned about whether Marcus has missed him – as he must have missed Gloria and Polly - when Oliver stopped contacting him. Oliver also shows little interest in Polly's daughter and her parents when he is staying in their house. He steals a book of poems from Mr. Plomer and refuses to return it even when he sees Mr. Plomer looking everywhere for it.

Anxious Oliver is clearly experiencing what might be called a mid-life crisis. He has stopped practising his two professions—painting and stealing—and he has also become obsessed by a much younger woman. He can't seem to give any clear reasons to others for why he has stopped painting and we only find clues if we look very carefully at his reflections on how he conceives of painting and representation. He also immediately goes into hiding once he realises his affair is public knowledge rather than trying to be the first to come and talk to his wife. He would rather hide away in his childhood home, or his studio, and wait for his wife to make the first move and come to him. He also tells us that after he stopped being a painter that he feels he had to keep “verifying himself” by knocking up against himself to give himself the proof he needed that he still existed.

Polly

Polly is, once again, half a character as we only hear from her very briefly in her own words. All her actions are described from the perspective of a narrator who is experiencing an emotional crisis and reliving traumatic moments in his life. She comes across as a charming, happy go lucky character who is well able to act on her emotions. However, she is in a relationship with a much older man who seems to be a lot more reserved than his wife.

Unhappy Polly gives us the impression that she is unhappy in her relationship with Marcus. Even though we rarely get insights into her own emotions in the novel, and even though she is always described in terms of what she means for Oliver, the fact that she so quickly tires of Oliver suggests that she is unsure what she wants. She also starts a relationship very shortly after Marcus's funeral – if not before – and is found to be pregnant by the end of the novel.

Realistic Polly also acts as a foil for Oliver in that she is quite realistic while he is a little ungrounded and visionary. When Oliver rushes forward to try and embrace her in the studio, she is quick to back away. She recognises that they cannot continue to act as they used to, especially now that she is committed to Freddie and is preparing to leave for Regensburg with him.

Gloria

Gloria is also a half-sketched character and we only hear her own words briefly in the novel. She only really reveals herself close to the end, when we hear her speaking about her relationship with Marcus. She seems to be far more in touch with her emotions than Oliver. She has an affair with Marcus not only because of physical attraction but because she discovered, after long conversations, that they were “soulmates”.

Serious Gloria is a little one-dimensional mainly since she is given very little time in the novel and is mainly described as someone who will either patch things up with Oliver, give in to him, or knock him into shape. She is a serious woman of few words. She does admit to Oliver that she had discovered that they were “soulmates” but very little else is explained about their relationship. She also has the common sense to try and get Oliver back into painting when he is at such a low ebb. She contacts his art dealer and arranges for him to visit Oliver's studio. It didn't work out as she had hoped and realises that it is probably best to stay with Oliver at the end.