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**Octave Mirbeau**

**The Torture Garden**



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## Description

Following the twin trails of desire & depravity to a shocking, sadistic paradise--a garden in China where torture is practiced as an art form--a dissolute Frenchman discovers the true depths of degradation beyond his prior bourgeois imaginings. Entranced by a resolute Englishwoman whose capacity for debauchery knows no bounds, he capitulates to her every whim amid an ecstatic yet tormenting incursion of visions, scents, caresses, pleasures, horrors & fantastic atrocities. The Torture Garden is exceptional for its detailed descriptions of sexual euphoria & exquisite torture, its political critique of government corruption & bureaucracy, & its revolutionary portrait of a woman--which challenges even contemporary models of feminine authority. This is one of the most truly original works ever imagined. Beyond providing richly poetic experience, it will stimulate anyone interested in the always-contemporary problem of the limits of experience & sensation. As part of the continuing struggle against censorship & especially self-censorship, it will remain a landmark in the fight against all that would suppress the creation of a far freer world. Written in 1899, this fabulously rare novel was once described as "the most sickening work of art of the 19th century."

## Insightful reviews

Tim Pendry: This is a remarkable book, a brilliant book, a powerful book but two warnings are in order for the general reader.

The first is the more obvious one. The second half contains descriptions of sadistic torture and of erotic responses to cruelty that are remarkably frank and will be disturbing to most people.

Nothing is spared. Do not pick up this book if you cannot draw the essential mental distinction between reality and the imagination.

As for the second, it is also only fair to warn that this is a political and social satire that is firmly set in the decadent and corrupt milieu of the Third French Republic.

The first pages in the book will read a little dully to most people uninterested in the politics of corruption and sleaze.

These two aspects - political satire and sexual 'depravity' - are connected but the modern reader might find it hard to make that connection if he is not a specialist in the period.

These aspects collide to great and troubling effect only once our hero and his new girlfriend arrive in China and Mirbeau cleverly makes a sharp and decisive break between the two halves of the book.

One moment we are in Ceylon where the weak hero gives up all for his girl and the next we are in a Chinese palace with a long back story of bisexual adventure.

We find a passionate and tormented relationship with a lengthy history scarcely referred to

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before the woman drags the 'hero' off to the torture garden.

Now we see the angry nihilism of a radical anarchist merge with the repressed and torrid sexuality of the apparently misogynistic decadent. This is, after all, 1898.

The modern reader may be repelled more by the apparent misogyny of the book than he or she is by the cruelty but we should consider that the 'bourgeois' sexual mores of the period not only involved exploitation of women by men but equally gross exploitation of men by women.

And, as I will suggest below, we should make a distinction between the opinion of the weak narrator of the tale and what the author, Octave Mirbeau, was trying to convey.

Bourgeois morality seems to have been perfected in late nineteenth century France to ensure that the mass of any population could be held in psychological pens to be shorn by psychopaths. This book merely suggests that an erotic psychopath might as easily be a woman as a man.

We have a very weak, almost contemptible, male telling the story but the heroine is Clara, a monster of the first order but a monster whose engagement with sex and death is told in such poetic terms that we are in danger of becoming enthralled by it.

There is thus not only an essential misogyny in the book insofar as our narrator seems to think that Clara's cruelty is shared by all women but also an ambiguous orientalism in which the western empires are condemned as barbarous just as we see a refinement of cruelty in the prisons of the East.

The tortures of the Chinese are reversed psychologically, not as merely the excesses of some 'yellow peril' (the meme of the era to be presented later as 'Fu Manchu'), but as an authentic form of artistic sensibility which is refined and cultured. Very 1898 and very decadent!

The brutal achievement of the book lies in its ambiguities but the most evident ambiguity is that this monster of a woman also evidently 'suffers' from her experience, trapped into a cycle of depravity.

She achieves an ecstatic state that leaves us with the conclusion that she is truly alive within that cycle whereas her male companion is nothing but an insipid petit-bourgeois without will or use except as observer of her dark pleasures.

Of course, we have to stand back here and remember that this is not a book about a 'real' China but a book about male rage in a France where the scramble for profit and the deadening hypocrisy of middle class society has created a need for this fantasy of violence and sex.

The writing is, regardless of what it writes about, superb. The description of the journey to the East match anything by Maugham but this is capped with the most exquisite accounts of the prison and the garden. We can more than visualise it. We are there 'in the flesh'.

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When both the horrors and the sexual excesses appear, they really do enter into our own minds as parts of our own fantasy world which we can then either choose to reject or engage with.

We are observing these things alongside our cruel voyeur and her horrified, sickened and fascinated partner. Mirbeau cleverly forces us to mirror their positions - we can either be like him and weak or like her and strong.

But what we are, in reading this book, is a voyeur of cruelty and only better in that we must presume that they are looking at the pain and death of real Chinese people, although, of course, they are not. It is only a story and we are as implicated as they are by that fact.

The final section, set in what must be a very high class tantric brothel and opium den, describes scenes wholly reminiscent of Crowley's account of eroto-comatose lucidity.

This eroticism may be judged rather attractive stuff if we forget that the pleasure appears only because the woman has required the close observation of Sadean levels of cruelty in order to overwhelm her senses. The touch of death has been required for this ecstasy.

She is not unaware of the enormity of what is going on. She takes the vision of observable and real horror as a path to 'ekstasis' beyond good and evil. There is every indication that she knows what she is doing.

He, on the other hand, is the worst sort of inadequate whiner, totally subject to her strange psychology.

This may be no surprise in an era that brought us Sacher-Masoch's Severin but his lapdog-like loyalty should make any 'real' man feel very uncomfortable as he reads the book.

So, the book works at multiple levels - opening up our imaginal realm but under conditions where our observation of events is not allowed to be wholly detached by the sheer horror of what we are perceiving.

Both hero and 'heroine' do little but observe during the book and we observe them observing. If they are 'guilty', then we are guilty. After all, they condemned no one themselves and they took no part in the tortures. They merely watched as we watch them watching.

In this dark dream, the man is led through horrors and erotic experiences as a passive creature who has no real comprehension of his situation. He comes across, bluntly, as not very bright. She comes across as interesting. That is disturbing in itself.

To her, he is one up on her dog, someone to witness her engagement with horror, loved as a tool of pleasure when near but as disposable as all the other creatures who adore her. Her callous remembrance of her dead lesbian lover sets the tone here.

One superficial implication, from the beginning of the book, is that this is what all women are at heart (this is the apparent misogyny that I referred to earlier) but I think that Mirbeau is actually

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honouring women with a back-handed compliment.

This is not what women are like (he is really saying) but what humanity is really like if you look at it dispassionately. It is simply that women can be as cruel and as erotically exploitative as any man.

We have to go back to 1898 to understand this point. It is too simplistic to say that men are good and women vile - or vice versa as we get from some of the more primitive feminists.

Humanity is a pretty unpleasant species all round (he dwells on one or two nasty Western cases of cruelty with no artistic merit or erotic component).

The attempt to turn middle class women into little saints to be worshipped while treating working class women as sluts is futile and hypocritical. Clara is definitely upper middle class English with decidedly angry and radical views on empire herself.

We are, he is saying in 1898, utterly hypocritical in covering up our cruelties and sexual desires and that these cruelties and desires are as strong in women as they are in men.

The hint about Clara is that her cycle of depravity is a salve for the despair that follows a righteous radical anger - a feeling not uncommonly found by many young radicals when their eyes are opened to the nature of humanity in the round.

Whatever Mirbeau meant, the book is well worth reading for the luscious descriptions, even of the barbarities, but I do repeat my warning, do not even open this book if you confuse what is imagined with what is real. You may have nightmares.

In summary, this is a brilliant insight into a nihilistic psyche expressed through a game of extreme imagination. It merges sexual ekstasis and cruelty in a Sadean manner.

But it is angry rather than psychopathic. We might even say that this is what happens when a well-meaning moral man discovers that the world deserves to be seen in nihilistic terms. It is the reaction that Nietzsche had feared only a couple of decades before.

We hear here the scream of a complicated man who has seen too much of the world but who knows what is right and what is wrong. But this man also knows that, thanks to weak men and cruelty within the species, nothing can put the world to rights. Syria today might confirm that.

And so the most immoral of stories, in terms of decadent style and incident, is surreptitiously the most moral of stories, pointing out that failure to be more than human as a society means that the solipsistic narcissism of the worst forms of the blond beast becomes possible.

Nate D: Blood from blossoms, blossoms from blood, les fleurs du mal, terrible and exquisite sensations. Vicious, grotesque, fleetingly beautiful, then again utterly abject. Necessary and unnecessary. I'm startled, both by the fountaining bile of the book, and that any can claim this has been dulled by time into quaintness.

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Murder is the very bed-rock of our social institutions, and consequently the most imperious necessity of civilized life. If it no longer existed, there would be no governments of any kind, by virtue of the admirable fact that crime in general and murder in particular are not only their excuse, but their only reason for being. We should then live in complete anarchy, which is inconceivable. So instead of seeking to eliminate murder, it is imperative that it be cultivated with intelligence and perseverance.

Katarina: Iako vidim da je ova knjiga ponekad svrstana u erotsku literaturu, ja ne pronalazim ništa veoma erotično u njoj. Iako autor, naročito u zadnjoj trećini knjige, na neobičan način povezuje ljubav (odnosno požudu) sa smrću i mučenjem, ovo definitivno nije "Venera u krznu". Za mene, ova knjiga je precizna, stilski predivno napisana i veoma mučna kritika licemjernog zapadnog društva, ali i korupcije u cjelini, kulture umorstva i mučenja, ali i filozofski pogled na dualnost života. Torture Garden istinski utjelovljuje princip dualnosti, u kom se ljepota i patnja isprepliću i međusobno podržavaju. Zanimljivo je kako je ova knjiga, iako napisana krajem 19. stoljeća, skoro pa u potpunosti primjenjiva i na današnje društvo. Mnogo toga je prikazano u ovoj knjizi, mnogo tužnih istina o našoj civilizaciji. Na samom početku knjige, u razgovoru među filozofima, znanstvenicima i ostalom inteligencijom, nevjerojatno precizno ocrтана je i razložena kultura "opravdanog nasilja" i ubojstva, licemjerno uvijena u slike heroja, slave i osvajanja.

*As soon as man awakens to consciousness, we instill the spirit of murder in his mind. Murder, expanded to the status of a duty, and popularized to the point of heroism, accompanies him through all the stages of his existence. He is made to adore uncouth gods, mad, furious gods who are only gratified by cataclysms and, ferocious maniacs that they are, gorge themselves with human lives and mow down nations like fields of wheat. He is made to respect only heroes, those disgusting brutes saddled with crime and red with human blood. The virtues by which he rises above others, and which win him glory, fortune and love, are based entirely upon murder. In war, he discovers the supreme synthesis of the eternal and everlasting folly of murder—regulated, regimented and obligatory—a national function. Wherever he goes, whatever he does, he will always see that word: murder—immortally inscribed upon the pediment of that vast slaughter-house—humanity.*

U nonšalantnom, poetskom, idealističkom načinu na koji likovi govore o smrti, patnji i umjetnosti mučenja nalazi se najveća snaga ove knjige. Način na koji jedan od krvnika govori o tradiciji koja je mučenje dovela do forme umjetnosti, i onda je suprostavlja zapadnjačkim "civiliziranim" *mass murder by progress* postupcima, istovremeno je hipnotičan i apsolutno zastrašujući, poziva na odbacivanje naših uslovljenih pogleda na život i smrt, na patnju, na ono što nazivamo civilizacijom i ono što nazivamo divljaštvom. Nemoguće je ne upitati se, postaje li smrt i bol prihvatljivija ili pak manje prihvatljiva ako je uzdignuta na pijedestal ljepote i umjetnosti. Ipak, više od djela koje potiče na promišljanje o idejama poput ovie, za mene, ovo je knjiga koja ocrтava svijet onakvim kakav jeste - predivni vrt natopljen krvlju miliona.

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*Ah, yes! the Torture Garden! Passions, appetites, greed, hatred, and lies; law, social institutions, justice, love, glory, heroism, and religion: these are its monstrous flowers and its hideous instruments of eternal human suffering. What I saw today, and what I heard, exists and cries and howls beyond this garden, which is no more than a symbol to me of the entire earth.*

Mirebau ovim riježima opisuje svijet onakvim kakav istinski je, vrt u kom se mješaju ljepota i bol, smrt i ljubav, umjetnost i tortura.

Jedno je sigurno, baš kao što je navedeno i u samom uvodu, čitanje ove knjige je definitivno djelom i fizičko iskustvo. Ne znam da li je uopće moguće pročitati ovu knjigu, a ne biti, ne samo emocionalno i psihološki, nego i fizički uzdrman, ne osjetiti je kao mučninu u stomaku i trnce niz kralježnicu.

Wyatt: Uglavnom sam pretpostavio da ovo može biti odlično vrijeme da provjerim Torture backyard kada razmislim da jednostavno gledam Diary of the Lifeless i ne mogu zaspati u ovom trenutku. Ako postoji univerzalna nit koja prolazi kroz nekoliko stvari koje sam analizirao i gledao nedavno, stvarno je da smo svi gluttoni za horor--to je tako dugo zbog toga što je horor jedna stopa udaljena od nas. Torture backyard uključuje ljubav između čovjeka i njegove ljubavnice koja voli nazivati ​​ga "neznačajnom malom ženom." bez obzira na naslov, to nije bez humora. Iako je napisano prije stotinu godina, dobro izvedeni sarkazam i cinizam mogu jednostavno biti i savremeni. Naš protagonist dobiva kaznu i identifikaciju kao državno sponzoriranog lažnog znanstvenika kako bi mogao osloboditi svog prijatelja od njegove otrovne prijateljstva. On pokušava osvojiti ženu koja se ispostavlja vrlo običnom Viktorijankom, iako u njoj vidimo nešto od te siromašne humorističnosti koja je u njoj, koju ona izvlači iz svoje torbe u toku nekoliko odličnih i neugodnih večeršnjih razgovora--to je kompletno autorova kritika kolonijalizma i čovječanstva. Anti-heroi se raspadaju i priznaju sa suzama u nosu otprilike to što je ona, ali ona brzo pokazuje njemu da je zapravo samo dio bube koja je. Morat ćete naučiti dugo i detaljno opisati Torture backyard sami, ali scena u kojoj ona muči svog bivšeg ljubavnika/poeta analizirajući njegovu osobnu poeziju dok je još uvijek u zatvoru i životinjski...memorabilno. Okej, to me vraća na Diary of the Dead. Iako je horor unutar priče jednostavno automobil koji nam služi kao podsjetnik na užasne stvari koje činimo u stvarnom životu. Iako sam volio Katrina referencu: "To je poznato kao pljačka." "Ne, zapravo se to odnosi na to što vam treba učiniti." Budući da sam relativno jednostavno napisao ovo za sebe, različite misli: Teeth, bivši horor film koji sam gledao, također je imao ovu socijalno-kritičku kvalitetu. Ona je otprilike feminizam i nosi s sobom kritiku kršćanske konzervativne idealističke perspektive čistoće--to je ono što sam odabrao da radim u njoj. Iako su alegorije bez sumnje vrlo raznolike i složene, iako ja ne moram nužno dovesti svaku osobu do kraja ili odstupiti... Kao i u ovom sub-par blog postu, primjećujem kako sam volio pravi ton Diary of the Lifeless i način na koji se katastrofa razvila u (za trenutak) samopouzdanu medijsku "revoluciju." Iako je to vrijeme prošlo, to nije više vodeći rubni žurnalizam, već čisto obsesivna--kao dijete koje pokušava prenijeti kulturu na životni stil koji sada više nije važan, najvjerojatnije jednostavno zbog toga što je to sve što je znao. Mislim da mogu napraviti nekoliko veza ovdje do

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lately accomplished Painter of Battles, simply because Josh's courting together with his digicam in D of the D (which he chooses over his girlfriend) certainly had a few unintended effects in universal with these among struggle photographers and their subjects. He turns into a martyr for movie simply because he will not pass cover within the shelter. it is too cozy. there is not anything there to film. He can simply watch the surveillance cameras which might make him a watcher, no longer a shooter. He should be the shooter. i have certainly develop into a watcher those days. I don't believe it will get my rocks off within the comparable method that Josh's digital camera does it for him, or the torture backyard does for Clara, but...ya, who am I to claim i am an exception? Anyone be aware of any shiny and satisfied books for my subsequent read?

Clint: an easy tale a few jaded man who meets this crazy-ass girl in China who takes him to this leisure park of torture. totally dazzling imagination! And the finishing is so strange...

Jonfaith: Monsters, monsters! yet there are not any monsters! What you name monsters are better forms, or types past your understanding. aren't the gods monsters? is not a guy of genius a monster, like a tiger or a spider, like any people who stay past social lies, within the surprising and divine immortality of things? Why, I too then, am a monster. Curious concerning the Torture Garden? you could desire a tall absinthe and a dearth of vacation cheer for a formal appreciation. that's not fully accurate. not like the thrust of the decadent lettres, there is no default pose of ennui on display. ardour pulses here. The manifestations of such are irregular, to claim the least. Such wish is maintained, and the unconventional remains, well, beautiful. the luxurious descriptions of the backyard itself are exhaustive and totalizing: a horticultural Eden regardless of the deaths of 1000 cuts and the carrion being provided to the deliriously starved. i used to be inspired through the tone, which is not sensational, yet grounded and appreciative.

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