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THE FLAWED RETURN: A STUDY OF THE HOMECOMING THEME IN JOHN BANVILLE’S THE SEA

Pier Paolo Piciucco

ABSTRACT: John Banville’s 2005 Man Booker Prize winning novel The Sea is, among other reasons, a remarkable work of fiction for the whimsicality of the homecoming journey engaged in by the protagonist Max Morden. If traditionally the return describes a homeward trip where departure and arrival points overlap, in this novel the narrator’s uneasiness with his self makes this trajectory shadowy in such a way that his travelling does not depict a circle but a spiral, where the curving line comes very close to the departure point, without touching it. In my essay I examine the peculiarities of this uncommon route that is mainly originated by the protagonist’s rejection of his original family—located too low in the social ladder for his expectations—and his dogged resolve to replace it with a fake one, more in keeping with his haughty temperament. My work is basically split into two sections: in the first one, psychology has become the tool of analysis to study the ways in which Max’s journey may be considered to conform to the general norm of subjects engaged in a homeward trip. In the second, a mythological approach has been used in order to offer supplementary clarifications to Morden’s bizarre return home.

The theme of one’s return to the place of origin has always been a favourite topic in literature with authors constantly focussing their attention on both the real and the metaphorical journey engaged in by their characters. Over the years, the homecoming theme has also become a sort of cliché in the fictional production of John Banville who, this paper argues, contributes to a discussion of the topic in a fresh and original way. His interest in the subject dates back to Birchwood but its centrality is confirmed in his more recent fiction, most notably in The Untouchable, The Book of Evidence and Eclipse, as well as The Sea. His 2005 Man Booker Prize winning novel The Sea is recognisably among his best achievements to date and his treatment of the homeward journey of the protagonist Max Morden, who is, according to what Banville himself

has inferred from the novel’s reception, ‘more sympathetic, more warm, than my other narrators,’ is a key factor not only in determining the success of the literary work but also, and most importantly, in the shaping of the narrator’s particularly disorderly identity. Briefly speaking, the homecoming voyage generally involves a convoluted tour that drives the subject from a departure point towards a destination that is in most cases reached during maturity: the homeward journey therefore brings the protagonist back toward his/her place of origin, describing a circular motion in which departing station and arrival point correspond. In John Banville’s *The Sea*, Max Morden’s uneasiness with his own self makes this trajectory obscure in such a way that we may discuss his travelling not exactly in terms of drawing a circle but a spiral, where the curving line comes very close to the departure point, without touching it. The present study purports to investigate the near-perfect back-circling course undertaken by Max Morden in *The Sea*, as well as the crafty rhetorical strategies he employs in order to claim that his return to his origins describes a perfect ring. On a parallel level, in fact, the (incoherent) homecoming journey entertained by Max may also help us demonstrate his failed acceptance of his social identity.

Basically, the present work attempts to throw light on the multiple oddities that Max Morden’s homeward journey shows by analysing Banville’s novel from two perspectives: in the first case, psychology has become the tool of analysis to view the way in which Max’s action may or may not be considered to conform to the general case of subjects engaged in a homeward trip. Since however Banville’s treatment of the trope displays a considerable number of coincidences with mythical accounts, in the second part of the essay a mythological approach has been used in order to offer additional explanations for the bizarre quality of Morden’s voyage back home. Two main texts have been employed in order to provide evidence for the proposed interpretations: in the first part, psychologist Jerry Burger’s *Returning Home: Reconnecting with Our Childhoods* (2011) has played a relevant role, while Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) has become the reference point in the last section.

Like many other (male) protagonists in the fiction of John Banville, Max Morden is a very authoritarian and proud character. Sharp-minded (and sharp-tongued), he always seems deeply aware of his potential and its limits, to the extent that his smugness drives him to lay a sort of grandiose emphasis on his resources, while cautiously hiding his defects. Egomaniacal and self-obsessed, he is endowed with a subtlety and finesse that are far from average, and he seems to be constantly playing hide-and-seek with the discomfort arising from his self-image. He uses a typical Freudian instrument to identify his malaise as he writes about his strange dream in which he finds himself writing his will on a typewriter missing the ‘I’ key. His troublesome attitude actually stems from a rejection of his origins, a problem that spurs his subconscious to create an alternative situation, his (impossible?) dream of belonging to a family of a higher social status. Acutely aware of the effects of social stratification since childhood, he does in fact develop a perspective on the world that appears to be divided into clearly delimited areas offering exclusive access, each to one’s own level only:
The social structure of our summer world was as fixed and hard of climbing as a ziggurat. The few families who owned holiday homes were at the top, then came those who could afford to put up at hotels—the Beach was more desirable than the Golf—then there were the house renters, and then us. All-the-year-rounders did not figure in this hierarchy. (*The Sea*, pp. 108–109)

In this Irish caste-system, Morden’s original family appears at the fourth level from the top, whereas the Graces—the family of his dreams—are located one level up: the fantasy of his being elevated to their social level constitutes the core of the plot. However, Morden needs to reach the end of his journey before he can acknowledge what is evident from the very first pages of the novel: ‘I will not deny it, I was always ashamed of my origins.’ (*The Sea*, p. 207) This statement requires considerable honesty on his part, and it appears to be a truth whose direct confrontation he has always tried to shun beforehand. In the first part of the plot, we find him at pains to recognise the true feelings for his parents: ‘I did not hate them. I loved them, probably’ (*The Sea*, p. 35). Possibly, this is not entirely a lie but it is evidently not the truth either, in full consideration of the fact that at that time he is talking about his relationship with them and, within a couple of pages, he manages to slowly bring to the surface his disposition. In a revealing and progressive acknowledgment of the lack of fondness towards them, he approaches the matter by calling them ‘my poor parents,’ (*The Sea*, p. 35) moving on to ‘my transparent parents’ (*The Sea*, p. 35), and finally getting to the point at which he identifies them as ‘my shaming parents’ (*The Sea*, p. 37). In a novel whose story is narrated by a self-centred protagonist at odds with his own identity, the fissure between real and desired parentage occupies a central position in the economy of the plot. O’Connell perceptively observes that ‘[a]gain and again in the novel, Max’s own lower-middle-class parents are depicted in pitiful contrast with the sophisticated and worldly Graces.’ In addition, the continuous reference to the Graces as the gods from the first line of the plot is very meaningful and it provides further evidence of this drastic mechanism of imaginary exclusion and replacement at work in the novel. It is in fact important to stress that the shift towards a desired identity may be considered effectively achieved only on the condition that he reaches union with a female subject from the upper social class. Of course, the crucial event occurs twice in the story: the first time it is with Chloe, while the second it is with Anna, whose images therefore intersect in Morden’s conscience for this fateful coincidence. Since this is the design enabling Max to re-assess his sense of self, we should hardly be surprised to read that he, swollen with pride, once plainly claims that ‘[i]n my life it never troubled me to be kept by a rich, or richish, wife’ (*The Sea*, p. 207).

Throughout the plot, Morden’s strategy of social climbing in a way bears some resemblance to many fairy-tales, with the gender-roles reversed. *The Sea*, in fact, is the story of a boy of humble origins who finds (two!) charming princesses and, by (more or less) falling in love with them, he ultimately reaches his goal of marrying (at least)
one. The convention of a fairy-tale with switched genders finds ultimate evidence when we read that marrying Anna is possible only after she proposes to him, not the other way round. This appears to be the stratagem that Morden adopts in order to restore an adequate sense of identity. In other words, he stops being Max Morden the child from a working-class parentage at the time he manages to replace the undesired with a more fulfilling identity: hence, he becomes Max Morden, the boyfriend or husband of a girl/woman from the upper class. He therefore loses his personal self and becomes the mirror-image of the girl/woman he has a relationship with. This fact becomes noticeable with Chloe when, after the first kiss, he claims:

> in her I had my first experience of the absolute otherness of other people. It is not too much to say—well, it is, but I shall say it anyway—that in Chloe the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity. Not my father and mother, my teachers, other children, not Connie Grace herself, no one had yet been real in the way that Chloe was. And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I. (The Sea, pp. 167–168)

Max can accept himself—he claims he feels he is real—when he starts a love affair with an upper-class girl: Cinderella-in-reverse. Cold-hearted as this statement may seem, in fact, Morden’s bliss is here due less to his first discovery of the pangs of love and more to the satisfaction of having found a way of filling his inner void. Later, when he marries Anna, the story is repeated and again his sense of being is dictated by Anna’s: ‘Anna, I saw at once, would be the medium of my transmutation. She was the fairground mirror in which all my distortions would be made straight’ (The Sea, p. 216), Morden confesses. The other side of the coin, however, is that his illusory sense of self remains necessarily chained to these female figures with the result that, when they fatefully die, his identity also vanishes with them. Narcissist that he is, one can hardly believe that he wastes such a long time mourning them: however, his palpable suffering is a manifestation of his loss of identity, a dramatic event that takes place twice in the course of his narration and that also explains why Morden resolves to go back to the Cedars after fifty years when his wife has passed away.

The Cedars, the original holiday-home of the gods with a vaguely exotic name, is the other key element in this narrative and it goes without saying that, while Morden engineers a fake identity, the Graces’ ‘summer house’ (The Sea, p. 4) turns out to be the suitable if illusory landing towards which his counterfeit self can move in his apparently circling route. Facchinello is correct when she points out that ‘Morden is denied three main elements of distinctiveness in the world of Banville’s fiction: a name, a home and a profession.’ In particular, his confusion about his identity and his place of origin are strictly connected with each other. At the time he remains widow, his decision to go back home—a real or fantasised destination, this is not an issue that seems to worry him at all—and rescue his lost self overlap: their interaction creates the dream about his challenging journey home in the snow. The need to heal his displeased selfhood in
the house which safeguards his memories soon appears evident as he feels elated at the
discovery that, although a long time has passed, very little has changed: ‘I am amazed
at how little has changed in the more than fifty years that have gone by since I was last
here’ (The Sea, p. 4). On these premises, it will be easier for him to pretend that he is
living in the past and start a new existence from that site.

His stay at the Cedars offers the reader a further chance to notice that his self is
not only wounded because of the loss of his wife but also, and more significantly,
because of the void that her death has left inside him. Because of this void, I
also claim that in his terrible outburst against his deceased wife, showing ‘some
of Banville’s most vivaciously arresting prose to date,’11 Morden’s subconscious
manifests his rage at her not only for having abandoned him but mainly for having
left him empty and disoriented, tragically devoid of any point of reference. Morden’s
strategy to regain his lost inner balance, in fact, takes a symbolic trajectory (or path):
he directly associates his identity with the mythical summer house and, indirectly,
with the Graces. It is striking that Morden asks to rent the same room that in the past
had hosted the gods. If Morden manages to snatch a few brief joyful moments during
a particularly saddening stay at the Cedars, these also come from his overlapping his
identity with that of the Graces, as well as from the impulse to make an old dream
come true:

[m]y bed is daunting, a stately, high-built, Italianate affair fit for a Doge,
the headboard scrolled and polished like a Stradivarius. I must enquire of
Miss V as to its provenance. This would have been the master bedroom
when the Graces were here. In those days I never got further than the
downstairs, except in my dreams. (The Sea, p. 23)

His fleeting elation therefore originates from his momentarily filling his inner void
with the reinstatement of an imaginary connection with the family of his dreams.

The Homeward Journey of the Psyche

Of the various texts written by analysts who focus their attention on the hidden processes
that drive the mind during the homecoming journey, Jerry M. Burger’s Returning
Home: Reconnecting with Our Childhoods provides a significant number of elements
of interest. To reflect on the fact that Morden’s personal trip to Ballyless brings him
towards only a desired and not an original ‘home,’ is to reveal that his case often seems
a case apart in the analyses engaged by other researchers. I will therefore attempt to
highlight some noteworthy features that emerge on using Burger’s Returning Home to
illuminate Banville’s The Sea.

After claiming that in most situations our memories of childhood become particularly
moving and poignant when associated with our holiday-times,12 the American critic
Burger goes on to discuss which notions contribute to orientate the subject’s choice towards a place identified as home, to reach the conclusion that:

[i]n some ways, selecting a childhood residence as one’s home is curious. Some participants had lived in that particular house or apartment only a year or two. In almost all cases, people had lived a far greater percentage of their lives in other locations, usually in another community. Some participants had not seen their childhood home in several decades before making the trip. Nonetheless, to them home was where they had grown up during these critical years.

But why these years? Many of our participants had an answer to this question. Quite a few talked about developing a sense of self during this time of life. In fact, more than a quarter of the people we spoke with mentioned ‘the formative years’ before we did. More than a third used the interview to reflect on how childhood experiences shaped who they had become and what.13

The strange case of Max Morden already becomes evident from the insights of these preliminary statements, because he has never actually lived at the Cedars, other than in his wild fantasies: in addition, the timespan of less than a month in which he happens to create his unshakeable bond with the place may reasonably seem extremely short-lived, almost ephemeral, the more so if one puts it in relation with ‘the more than fifty years that have gone by since I was last here’ (The Sea, p. 4), as Morden recalls at the beginning of the narration. Yet, regardless of the evident disproportion between the short term of his experience and its lasting effect, there he heads, almost as if under a spell, to start the process of the retrieval of a lost selfhood, because the Cedars has proved to be formative in his growth. His apparently bizarre choice of the Cedars as a healing place may be then explained in terms of a preference for the symbolic location that first gave him the opportunity to switch into his dreamed-of persona, allowing his unmentionable desires to shape his self.

In another thought-provoking passage, Burger examines the authentic motivations that generally goad people to start a homeward trip in the middle of their existence. Before approaching the issue directly, he clarifies that for some, ‘the reasons for returning to a former home remained elusive,’14 a situation that seems to describe Morden’s case fittingly, if we have to believe him that a ‘dream it was that drew me’ (The Sea, p. 24) to the Cedars. Unreliable a narrator as he is, literary critics, however, all seem to have opted to believe him that a ‘dream it was that drew me’ (The Sea, p. 24) to the Cedars. Unreliable a narrator as he is, literary critics, however, all seem to have opted to believe him in this situation: Imhof, for instance, stresses that the protagonist of The Sea ‘comes to realise that the Cedars is the destination for which, all along, without knowing it, he had been bound.’15 The unconscious in fact plays a crucial role in his present strategies, probably related to removal during childhood, when important but unpleasant information was hidden and stored in areas of the mind.
that are difficult, although not impossible, to access. On the basis of his psychological research on the broad context in which a return home takes place, however, Burger claims that the homecoming is generally triggered by one of three impulses: ‘[p]eople visit childhood homes to establish a sense of connection with their past, to deal with current crises and concerns, and to work on issues from the past that won’t go away.’\textsuperscript{16} It is therefore remarkable that in Max Morden’s decision to drive back to Ballyless, not only one but all the three motivations concur together in the creation of the basic need to return to the origins, although we may also note that the first two seem to have a greater impact on his mind. The three motives, Burger explains, work in such a way as to create associations between the returning subject’s needs and the destination of his/her trip, and it is fascinating to observe that in fact all three notions clearly operate in Morden’s view of the Cedars: a place to be, to grow and to heal.\textsuperscript{17}

Along with the three functions that the Cedars set in motion in Morden’s disturbed mind, a fourth intent gradually makes its way into his consciousness in a very impressive scene towards the end of the narrative. This is, according to Burger, a situation that typifies subjects who, during their childhood, suffered the death of a parent—or, by extension, of a person who had a particularly strong emotional bond with them and who, consequently, had a very delicate role in the shaping of their identity. Such a scenario becomes associated with grieving over the deceased one. In order to restabilise the balance with an unresolved past situation, Burger claims that ‘[m]any of these individuals included in their trip a visit to the cemetery where their parents were buried,’\textsuperscript{18} manifesting a psychic need that ‘psychologists call regrieving.’\textsuperscript{19} In a very touching passage, John Banville also shows the weight of Morden’s need to grieve when at the end of his stay at the Cedars he has his drunken and existentially-frustrated protagonist firstly involved in a brawl in a pub and then contemplate suicide-fantasies on the beach, the place that long ago had offered him the painful sight of Chloe’s mystifying death. In this perspective I register my total agreement with Friberg’s theory in her ‘discussion of the beach as a site of commemoration in Banville’s novel.’\textsuperscript{20} Morden’s night-walking to the place of Chloe’s death, and his fantasizing about his own death there, allows his unconscious to trail back to his first girl-friend’s tragic disappearance at sea and grieve again her loss.

What however makes Morden’s case an altogether singular situation—and his return back home flawed—is his perseverance in considering the Graces’ holiday accommodation in the past as his own home. Again, we should credit Facchinello with an acute insight when she claims that ‘[t]he homecoming dream that draws him back to Ballyless […] is clearly the dream of a homeless man.’\textsuperscript{21} With only one notable (but partial) exception, in fact, when writing about the Cedars, scholars have not considered it as Morden’s home but have instead chosen alternative definitions for it. Facchinello describes it as ‘a lodging house run by Miss Vavasour’,\textsuperscript{22} Friberg as ‘the house near Max Morden’s childhood summer home in Ballyless,’\textsuperscript{23} whereas Kenny as ‘the house where his befriended Graces summered, now a lodging house occupied by the mysterious spinster, Miss Vavasour.’\textsuperscript{24} In this sense, Turner’s voice that the Cedars
is ‘the holiday home of the Graces in the past, and the temporary home of Max in the present day,’ seems to be the only one in the choir to bend to Morden’s view, although the scholar clearly stresses the momentary role it plays. In a way that parallels the class-based contrast between the Graces and the Mordens, the comparative descriptions of the Cedars and the chalet in the Fields also highlight a remarkable class-distinction, that fully reveals his dream of replacing his original social identity with the Graces’, evidently more appropriate for his aspirations. Morden’s homelessness clearly emerges as a side-effect of his removal and replacement of identity and constitutes textual evidence in Banville’s intentions in the narrative. Once he visits his mother with his newly-wed spouse Anna, for instance, his problematic sense of self intersects with his knotty feeling about home: ‘[t]he first time we came home for a visit— home: the word gives me a shove, and I stumble.’ (The Sea, p. 209)

In his study into the homeward journey, Burger tackles the issue of what makes a habitation a home in our mind and, easy to imagine as it is, he does not provide a univocal, straightforward answer to the question. Of course, in the present essay the focus will necessarily be restricted to those elements in Banville’s text that become crucial to evaluating the context in which Morden’s atypical homecoming passage is located. As a consequence, the emphasis needs to be placed on the emotional bond generated between subject and abode, and the intensity of it which may even affect the intrinsic meaning of the concept of home. The American psychologist in fact argues that

[p]eople also use the words ‘home’ and ‘family’ synonymously. When we ask friends if they are ‘going home’ for the holidays, we want to know if they’re planning to visit their families, regardless of where those families now reside. People sometimes talk about going home when they reconnect with family members after an estrangement or a long period since last contact.26

This appears to be further confirmation that Morden’s homecoming is based in two major counterfeits: it is in fact a false acknowledgment of both a house, as well as of a family.

The Allegory of the Homecoming

The issue of the homecoming is indeed a cliché in literature and, if its conspicuous presence in recent fiction has tended to apply new methodologies for rewriting the canon, one should not underestimate the influence of the traditional forms of narration that first made use of this theme such as myths, legends, epics, fairy-tales, among many others, all of them together providing the suitable structures in which contemporary novelists can (re-)design their stories. In short, the traditional approach to the homecoming theme becomes a relevant factor in shifting the field of study from a merely literal to an allegorical plane, and therefore enriches discourses surrounding
the correct interpretation of the works under analysis. Additionally, part of the present essay has been dedicated to an analysis of Banville’s novel from a mythological point of view since the associations between the two are copious and deserve close attention.

Hence, in order to appropriately steer the argument towards this parallel dimension, a cross-reading of John Banville’s *The Sea* with Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has been undertaken. In conjunction with it, the present work also makes use of an extensive study of Campbell’s theory, made by David Hartman and Diane Zimberoff and entitled ‘The Hero’s Journey of Self-transformation: Models of Higher Development from Mythology.’ The purpose here is to analyse the parallel development of a traditional story and Banville’s major work in order to highlight the common aspects, as well as the differences, between the fictional text and the canon it belongs to: both serve to further clarify the issues connected with Morden’s return home.

The context alone in which the traditional story develops is stimulating for our discourse since Campbell identifies the first stage of the mythological journey as ‘the call to the adventure,’ whereas Hartman and Zimberoff discuss the hero’s progression in the title itself of their work in terms of a ‘self-transformation,’ and for the reasons that have been discussed previously, both these approaches provide a fitting structural design for Morden’s development. In legendary accounts, in fact, the hero’s adventurous journey originates from a momentary crisis to which he must promptly react. Hartman and Zimberoff’s explanation of the first phases of such a challenge is particularly revealing, if we also bear in mind the beginning of Morden’s story, when as a child he started frequenting the Graces:

*[t]he hero always experiences dissatisfaction with life in the conventional world of home, family and culture, and is yearning and searching for something more. The hero experiences a ‘call’ to enter on a mythic journey, which always involves a departure from the community and travel to the ‘otherworld,’ the Land of the Unknown. The journey is from the realm of limitation to a world wide open to unlimited possibility.*

Lack of comfort (or what he identifies as such) will prompt the little hero Max to be engaged in what Campbell terms ‘a mythic journey’ across social strata, a risky voyage towards an unknown world that both magnetises and scares him at the same time. However, those daring heroes who pay no heed to their fears and instead follow their instinct for adventure, challenging the mysteries of the enterprise, are soon rewarded with some supernatural support that quickly comes to their aid. ‘Not infrequently, the supernatural helper is masculine in form,’ argues Campbell, who also adds that this benign figure fully reveals himself under the guise of ‘a little old crone or old man.’ The archetypal design of Banville’s *The Sea* gradually comes to the surface because this fortunate coincidence awaits the daring Max Morden twice. The first instance is also the most evident and it occurs in the very first pages, when a hesitant Max from behind the gate exchanges ‘a comradely, a conspiratorial wink, masonic, almost’ (*The
Sea, p. 7) that the child appropriately intends as an authorizing sign from Mr. Grace. At this stage, we also understand why, of all the Graces, Banville has chosen Carlo as the initiator for Max’s journey, rather than the twins, or Connie, who may reasonably have played the same role with more emotional intensity.

The second time that Morden gains free access to a family of a higher social level happens when he meets Anna: ‘her preposterous little father’ (The Sea, p. 102), therefore shares both an older age and pocket-sized stature with the mythical helper described by Campbell, and again proves to be a critical factor at this crucial juncture. ‘Her Daddy, old Charlie Weiss […] took to me at once,’ (The Sea, p. 101) is Morden’s succinct but equally meaningful comment.

Only after obtaining protection from these supernatural figures can the hero have admission ‘to the zone of magnified power.’ Interestingly enough, in The Sea ‘the green metal gate’ (The Sea, p. 76), delimiting the entrance to the Cedars, offers a visual correspondence with the threshold found in legends. In mythical accounts, the passage has unmistakeably magical elements in it, ultimately involving a transformation on the part of the hero, who undergoes a process of self-annihilation first and rebirth soon afterwards. The remarkable fact about Banville is that his hero also follows the example provided by the ancient epics, but Morden happens to apply the transformation on a literary and not simply on an allegorical plane: in addition, whereas in traditional stories the hero’s change of skin is in keeping with the magic rules of the ‘regions of the unknown,’ in The Sea this is due to a whimsical rejection of his own familial identity on the part of the protagonist himself.

Once the hero gains access to the superior dimension, he must undergo a number of tests that repeatedly warrant his freshly-acquired rights. In The Sea, the episode that provides an equivalence to the examining process in traditional stories may be found in the ‘trashing’ of the townie by Chloe and Max, where the young protagonist also seems to be called to prove his loyalty to a new group. Success in this phase makes the hero an initiate in the new community. As an aside here, it may be significant to stress that the past evoked in The Sea is full of magical elements that surface when, for example, Morden recalls his childhood as having ‘an aura of the uncanny,’ (The Sea, p. 10) when he talks of Rose coming ‘out of the towel, in red shirt and black slacks, like a magician’s assistant appearing from under the magician’s scarlet-lined cape,’ (The Sea, p. 32) or when he describes Myles as ‘the malignant sprite.’ (The Sea, p. 226)

A further interesting coincidence between the two parallel developments occurs when, as an initiate to the new community, the hero heads off for the ultimate adventure: the mystical marriage with the ‘Queen Goddess of the World.’ The fateful encounter with the female—Connie first, then Chloe and finally Anna—ultimately shakes the foundations of the rigid social protocol that Morden has already learned to recognise and, by the effect of pure wizardry, he gains material access to a magical kingdom where all kinds of oddities become possible and where, for example, ‘there were parties at the flat two or three times a week, raucous occasions through which champagne flowed like a bubbling and slightly rancid river’ (The Sea, p. 103). It is at this time that the hero achieves full realization, a
state that Campbell terms ‘apotheosis’ first and ‘divinization’ later. This last definition has seemed particularly intriguing because his marriage to Anna ideally elevates Max to the higher social class that in his childhood he identified with the gods.

If, but for a few significant exceptions, The Sea seems to have quite regularly followed the canon of a mythical narration so far, it is at the next stage that Banville’s account most remarkably changes direction: the hero’s return. In reality, the regularity of his submission to tradition does not initially seem to be upset at this stage, since the proleptic hints drive the reader towards the belief that confirmation, rather than innovation and renovation, of the canon, will ensue. The crossing back from one world to another inevitably involves risks and problems of a sort, a predicament whose outlines are patent in Campbell’s study: ‘[t]he returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world’ and Morden’s drive back to Ballyless foreshadows a number of depressing consequences, varying from his coming to terms with his daughter, ‘a fastidious spinster,’ (The Sea, p. 46) to his even more unlikely tolerance towards her partner, the ‘chinless inamorato’ (The Sea, p. 258). However, it is the whole concept of homecoming that has undergone substantial modifications from the traditional story to Banville’s, creating a gap that is now too late to fill. After the hero has in fact achieved his apotheosis, in mythical narrations he can return home to his original community and show ‘his life-transmuting trophy.’ On the other hand, lost and bereft, the formerly boastful scholar, Morden cannot boast anything, maybe for the first time. His arrogant and big-headed attitudes have remained unaltered and, to tell the truth, one must concede that his ill-tempered and malicious disposition towards others generates some hilarious passages when he targets the Colonel, Bun or Jerome. Even so, if his attitude is being used as a destructive force against others—as it always has been—it now also turns out to be self-destructive, since at the end of the narrative, Morden cannot even bring himself to use his arrogance as a defensive weapon, but succumbs to a passivity that is quite unnatural in one like him. It is not even his alarming humility that brings him to admit that his book on Bonnard is ‘a modest project’ (The Sea, p. 40), but his general disposition that seems to leave him no way out. In fact, whereas in mythical fiction, the homecoming is a functional tool in order to make a grandiose celebration of the hero’s deeds in his challenging progress against all kinds of possible forces, Morden’s return to Ballyless delivers a sad verdict about Banville’s hero, who discovers that he is a failure, because—maybe for the first time—even his lack of self-sufficiency becomes evident to everyone. If he arrives in Ballyless as an elderly art historian driving his own car, shortly afterwards he is carried away as a defenceless old man. His inability to accept his state, his origin and his pain brings him to the brink of suicide but the tragedy is that he is even unsuccessful in this venture. Upon waking—can one say that this is his true awakening?—he finds himself dependent on others, incapable, unable to react. In the meantime, his daughter and Jerome have arrived to drive him home—something that sounds doubly ironic, considering that he thought he had just finished his homeward journey—and, his arrogance gone, he surrenders to their resolve, while evoking plans for the future that,
meditated half-seriously and half-sardonically, surely reveal a devastating incongruity:

[t]here are other things I can do. I can go to Paris and paint. Or I might retire into a monastery, pass my days in quiet contemplation of the infinite, or write a great treatise there, a vulgate of the dead. I can see myself in my cell, long-bearded, with quill-pen and hat and docile lion, through a window beside me minuscule peasants in the distance making hay, and hovering above my brow the dove refulgent. Oh, yes, life is pregnant with possibilities. (Banville, The Sea, p. 260)

The (fake) homeward journey leaves him shattered, a deluded misfit alone on the stage. In this twin light of a realistic account dealing with a troubled subject going back home and of a mythical story centred on the hero’s return home, John Banville’s The Sea fully shows an extraordinary potential for evocative allusions. Max Morden’s childhood mistake not to accept his lower social position—and his constant (pitiable?) attempt at replacing it for the rest of his entire existence—demands an extremely high price that his journey back to Ballyless dramatically discloses to the reader. The tragic impact of his story seems to be the consequence of his patent rejection of belonging to a social class too humble for his desire. In this sense, the whole of the narration in The Sea works in such a way as to create an intentional confusion in Max Morden’s mind between a real and an imagined family and, most importantly for my case, between a real and a desired home.

NOTE:
This article has been peer reviewed.

REFERENCES
9 Ibid., pp. 19-68.


13 Ibid., p. 9.

14 Ibid., p. 13.


17 Ibid., pp. 13–4.

18 Ibid., p. 94.

19 Ibid., p. 94.


21 Facchinello, ‘Belonging’, p. 36.

22 Ibid., p. 35.


30 Hartman and Zimberoff, *Hero’s Journey*, p. 3.

31 Ibid., p. 5.


33 Ibid., p. 63.

34 Ibid., p. 71.


36 Ibid., p. 72.

37 Ibid., p. 100.

38 Ibid., p. 138.

39 Ibid., p. 227.

40 Ibid., p. 209.

41 Ibid., p. 179.