

# queer classics: andré gide's "the immoralist"

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

**A**ndré Gide (1869-1951) was a man of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions.

He was a leading intellectual figure of the twentieth century who unashamedly relished more earthy pleasures, particularly ones involving teen-aged boys. His long marriage to his cousin Madeleine apparently was never consummated, though he fathered a daughter with another woman. He considered himself "profoundly Christian" but found Catholicism "unacceptable" and Protestantism "intolerable." (For its part, the Catholic Church placed his entire *oeuvre* in its Index of Forbidden Books.) He was a nonconformist who paid attention to societal standards, his art always negotiating, in the words of Jean Paul Sartre, "a compromise between risk and rule."

Far from denying the contradictory elements within himself, André Gide wrestled with and embraced them. He spent his writing life examining the nature of a true self and the meaning of sincerity. While his artistic focus was narrow, his work took many forms: journals, essays, letters, criticism, plays, prose poems, fiction, political arguments, travel books.

Likewise, he looked at homosexuality from various angles, with varying degrees of directness. The autobiographical but fictional *The Immoralist* (published originally in French as *L'Immoraliste*) does not – until its last sentences – overtly spell out its protagonist's latent homosexuality, even if there are plenty of homoerotic clues along the way. On the other hand, the non-fictional *Corydon* consisted of four dialogues which explicitly and bravely defended the homosexual's place in society. It was published "disastrously" in 1924; a U.S. edition didn't appear until 1950.

Biographical factoids, always reductive, seem particularly so in Gide's case, since his work was so inextricably connected to his life and his life was such a dauntingly influential one. But here are a few of the queerer tidbits: He first threw-off his puritanical Victorian upbringing by journeying to North Africa in the 1890's, hooking up with none other than Oscar Wilde, who successfully encouraged him to follow his homo-tendencies. (Among Gide's works is a book on Wilde.)

Not long after discovering Arab boys, Gide returned to

France to marry. His marriage, however, had little effect on his productive gay sex life. In 1916, when he was in his late-40s, Gide began an affair with a teenager named Marc Allégret. Allégret, considered Gide's "spiritual son," went on to become a well-known director and later filmed Gide's politically motivated travels in the Congo.

For Gide, the biggest crisis in his marriage came in 1918 when, in the aftermath of his affair with Allégret, Madeleine secretly burned all of his letters to her.

Gide's mature years were increasingly devoted to humanitarian concerns, among them the rights of prisoners, women, and homosexuals. In the 1930s he aligned himself with

ance speech he said he suspected the honor was less for his work than for "the independent spirit that animates it."

One of Gide's best known works, *The Immoralist* (published, amazingly, in 1902), deals with many of the issues which occupied the author throughout his lifetime. The book is basically the confession of a young intellectual named Michel to worried friends after his wife's death. The confession begins with Michel admitting he married not for love but to please his dying father. Michel and his wife, Marceline, embark on a honeymoon trip to North Africa where Michel has a tubercular attack and nearly dies.

Gradually, he begins to recuperate and becomes infatuated

with "calm happiness of hearth and home." After Marceline suffers a miscarriage and her health deteriorates due to the tuberculosis he passed on to her, Michel cruelly sees his wife as "a thing that had been spoiled." Often abandoning her at night, he becomes more and more interested in fraternizing with his farm hands, preferring the "rudest and roughest among them," going so far as to aid them in poaching his own game.

In the book's concluding portion, Michel and Marceline return to the places they visited as newlyweds, though the recovery Michel found in North Africa eludes Marceline. At one point Marceline justly accuses Michel of adopting a doctrine that "does away with the weak." Gide says

had the benefit of a broader personal and historical context into which to place the work. This more (I hope) mature reading allowed me to take pleasure in the coded queerness even when the half-naked Arab boys and rascally farm hands were well off-stage. Still, there were moments when I was tempted to tell Michel to get over himself and get laid already.

A century after *The Immoralist* was written Michel's rebellion may seem passé and a bit silly to some queer readers. In today's cultural climate it's his – and Gide's – objectification (exploitation?) of "exotic" boys that's likely to raise eyebrows, and this thorny issue is left unexamined. What Gide does successfully examine is the ambiguity

## Quotable Immoralist:

**"Upon this, he let himself go and soon stripped the countryside of every rag of respectability. I lapped up his mysterious secrets with avidity. They surpassed my expectations and yet at the same time failed to satisfy me. Was this what was really grumbling below the surface of appearances or was it merely another kind of hypocrisy?"**

Communism but reconsidered after a disillusioning trip to the Soviet Union in 1936. His evolving political conscience went hand in hand with his perpetual self-analysis, the link between the two succinctly put in a biographical summary of Gide ([www.andregide.org](http://www.andregide.org)) which suggests that he was "a humanist only in wishing that nothing should be alien to him." Gide's open-minded intellectual curiosity was, no doubt, crucial to his acceptance of homosexuality as something non-alien, and therefore natural.

Four years before his death, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his accept-

ed with some of the local Arab boys his wife innocently brings home. In a key – and symbolically weighty – scene, Michel catches one of these "protégés" stealing a pair of his wife's scissors but pretends not to notice. Keeping the small crime secret brings him unexpected joy, and Moktir, the misbehaving protégé, becomes his favorite.

The second part of the novel (or  *récit* as Gide referred to it) finds the couple at Michel's childhood estate in Normandy, where he alternately devotes himself to a pregnant, increasingly fragile Marceline and to the idea of getting rid of all possessions before he is strangled by the

in the preface to *The Immoralist* that he intended the book neither as an indictment of Michel nor as an apology for him. Many readers thought the author didn't judge his "hero" nearly harshly enough, though of course it's Gide's neutrality – along with his simple, seductively elegant prose – that makes Michel's story compelling.

I remember reading *The Immoralist* years ago – when I was in self-confessional mode where sexuality was concerned – and being alternately frustrated and captivated by its reticence on the matter of queer affections. At the time, I knew nothing of Gide's life. This time around I

that defines the human condition, whatever moral dilemmas we may individually or collectively face. At a time when shades of gray are increasingly absent from public discourse, Gide still has something essential to say about the importance of exposing to the light questions for which there are no easy answers ▼

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