



BIOGRAPHY

Alberto Moravia (1907–1990), the child of a wealthy family, was bedridden for years due to bone tuberculosis, and spent much of his childhood and teenage years at home or in sanatoriums. His first novel, *The Time of Indifference*, sometimes called Europe's first existentialist novel, was published at his own expense at the age of twenty-three. Moravia's many subsequent novels and stories continued to explore modern sexuality, alienation, and the hypocrisy and decadence of modern life. Banned from publishing under Mussolini, and with many works on the Catholic Church's index of censored books, he emerged after World War II as one of the most admired and influential twentieth-century Italian writers.

CONTEMPT

by Alberto Moravia

Introduction by Tim Parks

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“Rich in substance and resonant with meaning... a rare achievement.”

—*The New York Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Alberto Moravia's *Contempt* is a remarkable diagnosis of a modern marriage in collapse.

The plot could hardly be simpler: a writer, Riccardo Molteni, has put his ambitions on hold and taken a lucrative but, he feels, demeaning job as a screenwriter in order to pay for an apartment he bought to please his new wife, Emilia. Now, however, it appears that Emilia no longer loves him as she did. Molteni cannot see that he has done anything wrong, so why would Emilia's feelings have changed? Is something going on in Emilia's life that he doesn't know about, or is the growing coldness between them not the cause but instead the consequence of the resentment Molteni feels because he supposes Emilia has changed?

Molteni is obsessed with getting to the bottom of the situation. He seeks incontrovertible proof that Emilia still loves him or he wants to know why she doesn't. At the same time, he is not unwilling to deceive himself about Emilia's feelings—to misinterpret what she says and does—and not unaware of his desire to do so.

Everything comes (disastrously) together on the blue-and-white coast of Capri, where Molteni and Emilia have gone while he assists on a movie adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*. Battista, the brash, shallow movie producer, wants a crowd-pleasing spectacle; Rheingold, the brooding German director, wants to make a psychological modern drama about Ulysses' and Penelope's marriage in collapse. Molteni tries to find his own way into the story, even as his own marriage is foundering, and as he does his story gains depth and resonance as nothing less than a modern odyssey, whose lost Ulysses is anyone questing for love in the modern world.

Contempt is a tour-de-force of storytelling. The simplicity of Moravia's plot and the painful familiarity of the predicament he describes successfully dramatize the fact that relationships between people, and the ways in which they try to make sense of or ignore what others think about them, are complicated indeed. Moravia writes the whole novel from Molteni's point of view, but we come to doubt Molteni's thoughts and feelings as much as he doubts his wife's. As Molteni descends ever deeper into this hall of mirrors, his doubts, rationalizations, and outbursts of rage leave us wondering whether any one of us can truly know another person, much less arrive at self-knowledge.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The narrator, Riccardo Molteni, says right up front that “this story sets out to relate how, while I continued to love her and not to judge her, Emilia, on the other hand, discovered, or thought she discovered, certain defects in me, and judged me and in consequence ceased to love me” [p. 3]. Is that what the novel really shows? What is the real story?
2. Molteni begins his story of marital troubles by describing the incident when Battista gives Emilia a ride in his car. Only later do we hear about Molteni's frustrations with his new job [ch. 3] or Emilia wanting to sleep in different rooms in their new apartment [ch. 4]. Why do you think Molteni withholds this information? Does knowing it change your ideas about the incident in chapter 1?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Boredom, Alberto Moravia
(introduction by William Weaver)

Three Bedrooms in Manhattan,
Georges Simenon
(introduction by Joyce Carol
Oates)

Red Lights, Georges Simenon
(introduction by Anita Brookner)

The Pilgrim Hawk, Glenway
Wescott
(introduction by Michael
Cunningham)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from
Underground*,
trans. Richard Pevear and
Larissa Volokhonsky

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame
Bovary*

Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans.
Robert Fitzgerald

Alberto Moravia, *The Time of
Indifference*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

Contempt, starring Brigitte
Bardot and directed by Jean-Luc
Godard (film, France, 1963)

3. Quite a bit later, we learn that Emilia caught Molteni kissing a typist [pp. 89–91]. Does this information change your view of him? Why hasn't he told us about this incident before now? Why is Rheingold's theory about Ulysses and Penelope what makes Molteni think of it?
4. At what point in the book do you start to believe that Emilia no longer loves Molteni? For a while, she keeps saying she loves him, even when she no longer wants to sleep in the same room [p. 31] or when she wants him to accept the screenwriting job [pp. 69–70]. Is she right; can their marriage still be saved? If you don't believe her, then is it for the same reasons as Molteni?
5. When Emilia says she is moving back in with her mother, Molteni says, "But I don't *want* you to go, I don't *want* you to" [p. 128]. Does this response seem typical of his behavior? How else could or should he respond?
6. Rheingold's interpretation of Homer causes more and more "inexplicable irritation" in Molteni as it gets closer and closer to the facts of Molteni's marriage [p. 145]. When Rheingold describes Penelope's "contempt" for Ulysses, exactly like Emilia's, how did you think Molteni would react [p. 187]? When Molteni realizes the parallel, does he draw the right conclusion about what he should do [p. 195]? What do you think he *should* do?
7. Molteni rejects both Rheingold's psychological interpretation of Homer and Battista's idea of the *Odyssey* as a special-effects spectacular. Rheingold says that if Molteni doesn't agree with him he must agree with Battista [p. 206]; is Rheingold right? What *is* the third possibility that Molteni insists is "the only true one" [p. 233]? Why does he think Emilia cannot understand it?
8. When Emilia begs Molteni not to make her keep driving with Battista why doesn't he do what she asks [pp. 147–148]? Why doesn't he protect her from Battista?
9. Battista's attitude after he kisses Emilia in Capri [pp. 167–168] is a lot like when he drove her to his house [p. 7] or when they meet up during the drive to Capri [p. 146]. Do you think anything happened between Battista and Emilia then too? Did he try to kiss her then, and did she let him? How do you know?
10. At one point, Molteni "looked at Battista and once again I remained uncertain as to whether he really believed the things he was saying or only pretended to believe them. There was sincerity of a kind in what he said; perhaps it was only the sincerity of a man who easily convinces himself of the things that are useful to him; nevertheless, sincerity there was" [p. 84]. This sounds in many ways like Molteni; do his descriptions of other characters often apply to himself? And are his descriptions of himself sincere or only "useful to him"?
11. Emilia tells her husband "you're not a man, you don't behave like a man" [p. 220]. Do you agree? What does it mean to "be a man"? Molteni thinks that she wants him to be like Battista [p. 231]; do you think that is what Emilia wants?
12. Emilia says, "I shall never forgive you...I loved you so much,...and you've ruined everything because of your character" [p. 223]. Do you blame Molteni for the collapse of his marriage? Emilia also says she despises him "because you're made like that, and however hard you try, you can't change yourself" [p. 219]. Is this true, or is Molteni saying it to be self-serving? Either way, is Molteni's behavior his fault if it's outside his control? Is a person responsible for his or her character?
13. What is the nature of the ghost or hallucination Molteni sees in the boat at the end of the book? It satisfies his selfish desire for Emilia to come back to him; do you think that his telling the story is self-serving too, that he is trying to impress the reader with something about his character? How do you feel about Molteni at the very end of the book?
14. Is *Contempt* a comedy or tragedy or something of both? In what ways might Molteni come off as comic? How seriously does Moravia take his artistic aspirations?