

## The Skull and the Nightingale

William Morrow Paperbacks

By Michael Irwin

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### Introduction

Michael Irwin's *The Skull and the Nightingale* is a chilling and deliciously dark, literary novel of manipulation and sex, intrigue and seduction, set in 18th-century England.



When Richard Fenwick returns to London, his wealthy godfather, James Gilbert, has an unexpected proposition. Gilbert has led a sedate life in Worcestershire, but feels the urge to experience, even vicariously, the extremes of human feeling: love, passion, and something much more sinister.

It becomes apparent that Gilbert desires news filled with tales of carousing, flirtation, excess, and London's more salacious side. But Gilbert's elaborate and manipulative "experiments" into the workings of human behavior soon drag Richard into a Faustian vortex of betrayal and danger where lives are ruined and tragedy is only a step away.

With echoes of *Dangerous Liaisons*, Michael Irwin's *The Skull and the Nightingale* is an urgent period drama that seduces the senses.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What do Fenwick and Gilbert find out about themselves in the course of the narrative? Should they be seen as having gained or having lost something with their pact?
2. What are the emerging implications of the novel's title? Where do Skulls and Nightingales feature in the text and what might they represent?
3. Much of the story is told through the medium of letters. What are the advantages and the drawbacks of this "epistolary" method?
4. In what ways does the novel illustrate eighteenth-century habits of debate, speculation, and experiment? What is the relevance of those preoccupations to the narrative?
5. Why was the London of the period regarded as being itself, in some sense, an "experiment"? How does this problematic setting influence the lives of the characters?

6. How remote, at this time, was the way of life in the countryside from that of London? How does that contrast affect the story?
7. In what ways are the female characters shown to be confined and oppressed? Where and how do they display their strengths?
8. What is the meaning behind the numerous physical injuries and indignities featured in the novel? In what ways do these representations impact the novel's themes?
9. What do the styles of language in the period, whether written, spoken or sung, tell us about eighteenth-century habits of thought and feeling?
10. Which of the characters emerge with the most moral credit and which with the least?
11. Why do you think Richard Fenwick is so often reduced to laughter?
12. How important to the novel is the part played by "Nature"? Discuss how the characters tend to seek examples from nature in order to shed light on human conduct.
13. Why, at this period, was the masquerade felt to be so liberating and so dangerous a pastime?
14. What part is played in the novel by eighteenth-century psychological theories?