DISCUSSION GUIDE

*The Absentee* by Maria Edgeworth

1. Jane Austen once wrote to her niece, “I have made up my mind to like no novels really, but Miss Edgeworth’s, yours, and my own.” Austen and Sir Walter Scott were both admirers of Edgeworth’s work; do you see any similarities in their writing? How does Edgeworth’s novel differ?

2. Edgeworth was herself an Anglo-Irish absentee, and this novel is semiautobiographical. From whose point of view is this book written? Are there any characters that you view as stand-ins for the author?

3. This book was originally serialized. How do you think this affected its narrative structure?

4. What archetypes do you see in *The Absentee*? Which character is the most nuanced or believable? Which is the least?

5. Are there any characters that are truly honest?

6. In Chapter IV it’s said, “Lady Clonbrony knew nothing of love—she had read of it, indeed, in novels, which sometimes for fashion’s sake she had looked at, and over which she had been obliged to doze; but this was only love in books—love in real life she had never met with.” Are Lady Clonbrony’s lack of experience with love and destructive obsession with climbing the social ladder connected? Do you think Lady Clonbrony is the only character to feel this way?

7. Is this a love story?

8. What role does national identity, or pride, play in the book?

9. With its simulated “oriental” gala rooms, false housing façades, and faked accents, how does the book define what is genuine?

10. How do the ways in which men and women form their identities differ within the novel? How does this compare to today?

11. The book contains many scenes of people observing or overhearing others. What does this re-representation of removed perspective reflect?

12. The cover of *The Absentee* features George Barret’s painting *Powerscourt, County Wicklow*, on view in *Ireland: Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690–1840*. The scene is an idyllic sweeping landscape of Ireland’s countryside. In whose home in the novel do you imagine this painting might hang? Why?

13. What ideals do the furniture and decorative items in *Ireland: Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690–1840* represent? Do you see these values reflected by any characters in the book? If so, which one(s)?

14. Many objects in *The Absentee*, such as the yellow damask furniture, are symbolic of characters in the story. Which pieces do you feel carry the most symbolic significance? Do you see symbolism reflected in the objects featured in the exhibition?

Suggested additional reading and viewing:

- *Ireland: Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690–1840* is on view March 17–June 7, 2015. Be sure to take a look at the *Edgeworth Family Sketchbook*, a small book of drawings and paintings made by Maria Edgeworth’s younger siblings during the early 19th century (located near the back of the exhibition, in the gallery with the musical instruments).

- “Maria Edgeworth’s Deja-Voodoo: Interior Decoration, Retroactivity, and Colonial Allegory in *The Absentee*,” an article by Clara Tuite

- *Castle Rackrent*, a novel by Maria Edgeworth