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The role of irrationality in selected Ian McEwan's early works

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Annotation

The bachelor thesis “The role of irrationality in selected Ian McEwan’s early works” aims to identify and analyze subsequently the above issue in the early works of Ian McEwan. The thesis focuses on two short story collections, that is *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), and on the 1978’s novel *The Cement Garden*. In the theoretical part, postmodern literature is characterized in brief, with a focus on the question whether it is possible to label McEwan’s work as “postmodern”. The following practical part examines the theme of irrationality and analyzes the individual topics, using the author’s selected works as references.

Anotace

Předmětem bakalářské práce „Úloha iracionality ve vybraných dílech Iana McEwana“ je identifikace a následná analýza výše zmíněné problematiky v rané tvorbě Iana McEwana. Práce se zaměřuje na dvě povídkové knihy: *První láska, poslední pomazání* (1975) a *Psychopolis a jiné povídky* (1978), a na novelu z roku 1978, *Betonovou zahradu*. Krátce charakterizuje postmoderní literaturu a sleduje, do jaké míry je možné McEwanovu tvorbu zařadit do jejího kontextu. Hlavní, praktická část, zkoumá, jakým způsobem je téma iracionality ve vybraných McEwanových dílech rozvinuto a na příkladech konkrétních vybraných děl rozebírá jednotlivá témata.

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Introduction

Ian McEwan, the author of twelve novels, three short story collections, as well as several screenplays and even two books for children, established himself steadily as a respected writer of the contemporary British literature. Because of a certain controversy of his work, he was nicknamed “Ian Macabre” in his beginnings - the tag that has been notoriously misused ever since and that McEwan himself refuses. Despite this controversy, the fact that he won numerous awards for his work - among them Man Booker Prize in 1998 for *Amsterdam* – speaks for itself. He is also known for engaging himself in various public issues; some of them exerted a strong influence on his work, as his concern with feminism within the seventies and eighties (Groes, p.1) or his interest in environmental problems (for instance in 2010’s *Solar*). Also, a relatively extensive part of his work has been adapted for television or cinema, including two stories from his debut *First Love, Last Rites* (i.e. “Solid Geometry” and “Last Day of Summer”) and 1978 novel *The Cement Garden*, which are also discussed in this thesis.

McEwan never had any problems with finding publishers and his works were accepted by most critics positively from the very beginning of his writing career (Malcolm, p. 3), despite the fact that his first short story collection was quickly labelled as “literature of shock” (Childs, p. 160). McEwan himself speaks of *First Love, Last Rites* as a kind of “practice”:

The form itself is a good laboratory. I took the stories very seriously and worked on them very slowly, and I would want to stand by them (John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 1985, qtd. in Slay Jr., n.pag.).

Although they obviously helped him to establish himself as a respected writer, he admits that he probably would “not be able to write them as well as [he] did when [he] was younger...” (as above).

The second short story collection, *In Between the Sheets*, only validated McEwan’s “reputation as a master of a ‘short, sharp shock’ ” (Williams, p. 217) and definitely acknowledged the audience of the quality of his stylistic brilliance, which has been appreciated by the majority of critics since *First Love, Last Rites* (Hilský, p. 139), although several critical opinions emerged; yet, this was probably natural, with respect to the “extremity” or “obscurity” of both volumes. As Malcolm mentions,

one of the issues that were seen as generally problematic was McEwan's referencing to other literary works (p. 39); however, McEwan himself claims the referencing as intentional.

The question of plagiarism was once again raised with the publication of *The Cement Garden* in 1978. As Jack Slay argues, several critics have pointed out the peculiar analogies between *The Cement Garden* and *Our Mother's House* by Julian Gloag (n.pag.); though McEwan emphasized the different concerns of both novels:

The plots did resemble each other, but then plots often do (...) Gloag's concerns were more the supernatural and religious. I came at the subject from an entirely different route, which was partly through a wish to examine power relationships in the family and also an interest in the sexuality of young children (Amanda Smith, "PW Interviews", *Publishers Weekly*, 1987, p. 69, qtd. in Jack Slay Jr., n.pag.).

However, leaving the questionable problem of plagiarism in *The Cement Garden* aside, the novel shows indisputable qualities; Martin Hilský underlines its peculiar "lyrical fragility" (p. 140) and stresses the economy of McEwan's language (p. 140), while Williams values its accurate depiction of an immensely painful period in a human life during which a child becomes an adult (p. 223). It follows from the preceding paragraphs that McEwan's concerns are rather psychological. He confronts his characters with critical situations, the situations that force people to cope with things that are not easy to accept. His journeys into the subconscious of people are often very painful, starting with the theme of incest and children abuse and ending with various versions of sexual deviation. However, according to him, the events that shape destinies of people and create touchstones for human characters, are not necessarily only of the extreme kind; he lets his characters face murder and rape, but confronts them with loneliness or feelings of uncertainty as well.

This thesis does not aim to submit an analysis of McEwan's work in the full range of his writing career, but to focus on the relatively limited space of his early, aforementioned books. I have chosen to work with two short story collections: *First Love, Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*; and with McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden*. In the first part of the thesis the necessary context for the analysis will be provided, the concept of "postmodernity" will be characterized and upon that an attempt will be made to answer the question whether McEwan's work can be

classified as “postmodern” or not. With respect to the difficult nature of such question, several approaches to this concept will be applied.

The second part will be devoted to the main theme of the thesis itself, that is the issue of irrationality in McEwan’s early work. I would like to clarify the fact why I have chosen a method of close reading for my thesis at this place: this method befits my intention to sort out themes that are relevant to this issue most closely, and expound on them subsequently. In McEwan’s fiction the irrationality is displayed by various means, but it is always conditioned by the interaction with other people. The echoes of Freudian concepts, such as the system of a personal development based on the several stages, or Freud’s approach to a conscience and morale, can be traced in McEwan’s works. Therefore I have decided to analyze individual themes - in the case of both volumes using selected stories as references – and provide the interpretations; foregoing theories are taken into account when relevant.

In conclusion I will summarize my findings and comment on them.

1. Postmodernism

When *Granta* published its seventh issue with works of twenty British writers in 1983, “Best of Young British Novelists”, Ian McEwan was listed as one of the contributors, alongside authors such as Martin Amis, Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, etc. According to Childs, this “gathering” of authors marked the development of the post-war novel and served in a way as a landmark of the

time at which an old guard gave way to a new generation, a large number who have since become the celebrated stalwarts of contemporary fiction (p. 1).

It is difficult to make a clear distinction when the “contemporary period” in British literature started: for instance, for Nick Bentley the base year is 1975, the year when Margaret Thatcher was elected to lead the Conservative Party (p. 2). Martin Hilský places the beginning of contemporary British literature in the late sixties and the seventies in particular (p. 59), while Nicola Allen mentions the mid 1970s as a milestone of the contemporary period in British novels (in the Preface). Apart from the slightly problematic terminology, a conclusion can be made that it was the seventies that deeply influenced the form of British literature and allowed the “new generation” to enter it.

Naturally, with the rising of this new generation, new topics also arose – the interests of writers moved from themes such as war, constantly present in literature from 1945 (Stevenson, p. 397), through the 1950s and 1960s to discussions about problems of class and society (Stevenson, p. 401) to questions which resonated most in the society at that time and which earlier literature never dealt with before to such an extent – the problem of gender, ethnic origin, sexuality, and so forth. Yet, apart from the fact that the new topics emerged, the “contemporary” does not necessarily mean original in every aspect – Bentley mentions David Lodge’s essay “The Novelist at the Crossroad” (1971, qtd. in Bentley, p.30) and his claim that the contemporary novel, in terms of form, is inevitably a “mixture” of realistic style, which has a long tradition in British literature, and a modernist approach, characterised by experimentations in both style and content (p. 30).

Bentley also adds that the contemporary novel in reality contains elements of another concept, which is postmodernism (p. 31). This term is difficult to define

and really tricky, as various authors agreed on: for instance, Bentley states that “postmodernism loves paradoxes, and the term itself is something of a paradox” (p. 31); according to Linda Hutcheon:

in general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said (p. 1).

Indeed, the words “paradoxical”, “contradictory”, and so forth, imply that there is no simple explanation of what exactly postmodernism is. Leaving aside the issue of when the modernist period began and, more importantly, when it ended, there arises the question of how it is possible to label something as *postmodern* and at the *same* time contemporary? It seems that there is no way but to agree with Bentley: postmodernism *truly* loves paradoxes.

Fredric Jameson in his essay about various aspects of postmodernism says the following:

Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which “culture” has become a veritable “second nature” (ix).

Jameson understands the term “postmodernism” in a broader sense and relates it more to the state of the society, having defined it critically as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (ix). Although, as Linda Hutcheon observes, his neglecting of differentiation between “socio-economic periodization and the cultural designation” (p. 26) can be slightly confusing - she suggests distinguishing between the terms “postmodernism” and “postmodernity” in this case (p. 26) -, his notion of a human being as a rather shallow, flat character, living in a postmodern world that is highly mechanised and defined by mass production, is credible. He says that the postmodern world is much more distorted and much more focused on the particular events than modernism was; while modernism sought “new worlds”, postmodernism is interested in “breaks” (both p. vii). Indeed; in the 1970s the English reality was living in constant awareness of a possible nuclear conflict and this - no matter to what extent conscious - fear certainly must have found its way into literature. The omnipresent shadow of the question of whether the tension between the Eastern and the Western

Blocs would result in atomic war led to various versions of what such a world would look like (Stephenson, p. 434). The previous certainties were shaken, the continuity was broken – art, culture, everything reacted to that situation differently. The literature also reflected this fact and expressed its general disbelief in longer forms: this “fragmented temporality”, as Stephenson calls it, seems to be one of the prevailing tendencies in contemporary British literature (p. 435).

Yet, despite the possible expectation that it was the genre of the short story that was most favoured by both writers and readers, Stephenson argues that the popularity of this particular genre has in fact declined, in spite of the fact that there were still writers who preferred it over more profitable forms, such as the novel (p. 436). Nevertheless, at the same time he emphasizes the differences that the form of the novel has obtained since the nineteenth century, that is particularly since the Bildungsroman forms of novels, (e.g. *David Copperfield*) (p. 437). Stephenson observes that, in comparison with its earlier relatives, the 1970’ novel is usually shorter; he attributes this quality to the fact that both writers and readers adapted in a sense to the discontinuity and the fragmentation of the previous, modernistic novel, and at the same time he points out a certain economic insecurity among publishers. Therefore, as he suggests, the postmodern novel almost assimilated certain aspects, traditionally associated with the genre of a short story, into its own structure (p. 437). This reading can be seen as helpful, when related to Ian McEwan especially. Although during his writing career he gradually retreats from the initiatory form of the short story, his interest in the moments so powerful that can unbalance the life of a person, or even change the direction of his life route forever, is well observable in his early works equally as in the latter ones. This thesis will take a closer look at this issue later.

The complex nature of “postmodernity” or, in a broader sense, of “postmodern literature”, was already outlined. As was suggested, it is practically impossible to delimit its scope and to decide what it is that makes a piece of literature a postmodern one. Nevertheless, the next section will focus on the individual aspects that are generally associated with this concept, and subsequently will attempt to specify to what extent Ian McEwan works with them.

1.1 Ian McEwan and postmodernism: “Sense or sensibility?”

When tracing the postmodern aspects in McEwan’s work, Jean-François Lyotard might offer a useful insight; in his famous 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report*

on *Knowledge*, Lyotard defines postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). He makes an attempt to specify the problematic nature of such matter:

The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, and so on (xxiv).

Despite his pointing out the importance of a narrative form for what he calls “a scientific knowledge” (p. 7), he reasons that the certain discourses that originated from the “positive” sciences of the nineteenth century, the “grand Narratives”, as he calls them, cannot survive in the “computerized society” (p. 4). This new, postmodern society is too diversified for one big, universal narrative, therefore this singular concept must be replaced by lots of narratives. The “breaking up of the grand Narratives” (p. 15) does not necessarily mean a breaking up of some great unity of society’s structure, though; it means rather a chance for many smaller, local narratives, or “the language games” (p. 15). Thus, he rejects an image of a postmodern society as a structure with no solid bonds between people, and argues with such concepts – when compared with Jameson’s critique of the consumerist and the mass nature of postmodern society, Lyotard’s approach is clearly much more optimistic

When related to the literature exclusively, this attitude once again suggests the problem of complexity of the postmodern literature and implies a peculiar “plurality” of the individual approaches that postmodern writers often adopt. Leaving aside the debatable question whether these “grand narratives” really are being diminished or even exterminated from our lives to such extent, there is no discussion over the fact that a major movement in people’ thinking, and consequently in the art that they produce, really did exist. In the already mentioned David Lodge’s study “The Novelist at the Crossroads”, he describes the “evolution” of a novel, probably the most dominant literary form nowadays, that “stands to a modern, post-Renaissance civilization as the epic did to ancient civilization” (reprinted in *The Novel Today*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury, p. 85). He refers to the realism as to a certain catalyzer that served as in a way a connecting line between separate forms of allegory, romance and history (p. 86, as above). He accentuates the importance of this realism; nevertheless, he draws attention to Robert Scholes’s and Robert Kellogg’s hypothesis that the certain

differences in a novel's form were caused by a particular questioning of the realism as a form and in fact that it even happens to gradually losing its initial character (*The Nature of Narrative*, qtd. in Bradbury, p. 84-86). The realism, being a literary device that allows a writer to propose an "individual experience of a common phenomenal world" (Bradbury, p. 86), has been forced to face a modern society with all its problems and achievements, to which in Scholes's and Kellog's view rather fails. Lodge alludes to the fact that it is especially the development of the human knowledge which complicates the way people perceive the world, and he mentions developments in the field of psychology as probably the most prominent: the writer, instead of aiming to describe the physical world around him, is able to dive into the subconsciousness of his literary character, that in Lodge's view is full of dreams and myths (Bradbury, p. 86). His notion of "realism" is slightly different from Kellog's and especially from Scholes's; as the latter proposed in *The Fabulators*, the traditional realism cannot compete with the more mimetic forms of art, such as the cinematography (*The Fabulators*, qtd. in Bradbury, p. 87). Lodge does not reject realism: instead he only points out that it is natural that realism is slightly changing, and perceives the changes rather positive, offering a metaphor of a man standing at the crossroad, who has a choice to pick each of the ways (Bradbury, p. 100). In his view the developments in the fields of science (especially in psychology, as already mentioned) become a useful "tool" that enables the writer to express more than his literary predecessors could, a tool that the writer can, but does not have to use. This notion of a contemporary writer is clearly rather optimistic, especially in comparison with Jameson and his critique of the mechanical character of such society.

1.1.1 The image of truth

This certain "relativity", which can be observed in the above attitudes, is noticeable in the literary pieces as well. A reader is confronted with several elements, whose general purpose is to confuse him and make him to revalue the "truth" that he is presented with. In that sense, the truth, when seen by the eyes of a postmodern writer, loses its universality and becomes rather a construct, an "object" that is open to various interpretations; - therefore, if we are given the freedom to interpret everything around us as we wish, certainly many complications will emerge - and factors much more complex than our sense and logic will shape our perception of reality. In McEwan's work, the problem of relativity can be perceived as one of the most prominent. The

stories are often told from the perspective of first-person narrators, who present their own versions of what has really happened to them and to the people around them: this is true particularly about McEwan's early work (in his 1975 debut *First Loves, Last Rites* only one of the eight stories is narrated in third-person). One of the most striking examples can be found in "Butterflies", where an elderly man, who, after he has given a testimony over a subject of death of a young girl, in a rather casual style and during his normal day gives more and more clues to the reader that it was he, who in fact raped and murdered the child. In "Cocker in the Theatre" it is the reality itself that is being somehow inverted, making the simulated sexual act in a rehearsal for an unspecified show not so simulated after all. The question of what a reader can believe is of major importance to Jack, a protagonist and narrator of McEwan's first novel *The Cement Garden*, and it is also one of the major themes in McEwan's fiction in general. This conflict between what is real and what just appears to be real often proves to be essential or even fatal for many characters of McEwan's work in general, as in *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), where the protagonists Mary and Collins pay a high prize for the assumed "friendship" with the couple of Robert and Caroline, or it at least it drastically changes the lives of the people concerned, as it had happened to Robbie, Cecilia and Briony in *Atonement* (2001). The characters' decisions, based on the apparent truths that they are presented by the other characters, are thus nothing like well-advised, thorough analyses of the situations, they are much more the immediate reactions to immediate stimuli. It is exactly these decisions that turn the lives of the characters upside down and change them (and to be said, rarely to the good). This conception of the irrational nature of a human being as a certain driving force behind our decisions is entirely postmodern and is withal probably the most essential for McEwan's notion of what a human being is, as he himself admitted after all (see 2).

1.1.2 The image of a human being

Not only it influences the decisions of McEwan's characters, but the "relative objectivity" is central for another major theme of McEwan's fiction, that is the relationships between people, and between men and women especially. The fascination with the certain tension, which often originates from these actions, to a certain extent collides with the typical postmodern representation of a literary character as rather shallow entity; however, the conflicts in McEwan's works originate exactly from these confrontations. He lets his characters spend the long hours or days thinking, forcing

them to immerse in their traumas and the deepest fears - and at the same time allowing the tension to accumulate -, and then he releases them, setting everything, that has been suppressed, free, in a single moment that often changes their life for good.

Although he often – this time fully in the “postmodern” style - challenges the traditional roles of a man and a woman (his concern with feminism (Groes, 1, see Introduction) can illustrate this claim), and despite the fact that lots of the conflicts are evoked precisely by this overturn of the roles, the echoes of the old, ancient archetypes and symbols are also of a great importance in his fiction. In that sense, McEwan’s work has its roots firmly planted in the Freudian tradition which see a human being as a “beast” that is driven by its inner selfish instincts and lusts (Lahey, 461). The concept of sexuality as a destructive and often cruel power rather than a creative, positive vital force¹ is similar to both of them. Despite the fact that Freud’s emphasis on the role of sexuality and aggressivity in our behaviour underwent fairly radical re-evaluation during the 20th century, it still can offer various valid points even to the present time (Lahey, 467) and is of a great importance to McEwan’s notion of a literary character. Probably the first time he deployed this concept was in “Homemade”, where a pubescent boy, after having been prematurely acquainted with the nature of sex, is fascinated by it to such extent that he rapes his nine-year-old sister. Similarly, the deformed personality of the narrator of “Conversations With a Cupboard Man” was caused by the unnatural upbringing by his mother, who had treated her soon-to-be adult son as a baby. The elaboration of this theme can be observed in *In between the Sheets*, where the world, presented as an “adult” one, is inhabited by the numerous deformed characters, and where the sex is once again nothing more than a commodity, as for O’Byrne in “Pornography”, or a pastime, as for Mary and the narrator of “Psychopolis”. McEwan does not evaluate the futile behaviour of his characters at all, yet they are made to face the solitude and disorientation in the world that is often very cruel to them. Comparing McEwan’s early works, the progression of this tendency is well visible: while the first collection of short stories deals primarily with the children, presenting them often as the victims of the harsh adults, the second collection focuses much more on the results of this behaviour. The children from *The Cement Garden* can be seen as both the victims of the external causes and the not-so-innocent human beings themselves at the same time. The accentuation of the role of sexuality in the children’s behaviour goes again hand in hand with the Freudian tradition and completes a certain

polarity in McEwan's work, making this contrasting between childhood and adulthood one of the major themes of his fiction.

1.1.3 The image of the world

Another typical element that is used by McEwan, a significant movement from the centre to the edge, a peculiar "decentralization", as Martin Hilský has observed (p. 139), can be perceived as one of the most prominent attributes of contemporary literature (p. 139). In *The Cement Garden*, the family lives in a suburb of a bitty city and their surroundings in a way mirror the solitude and unhappiness the characters deal with. In that sense even the areas as vast as Los Angeles (alias "Psychopolis" in the eponymous story) are presented as rather claustrophobic places full of people that have no purpose in their life. This paradoxity of a human being, feeling purposeless in the world that is full of opportunities and that can offer practically infinity of the various life aims, can be considered postmodern, yet at the same time McEwan's works with this concept in a slightly different way, creating a picture of a world that lost its innocence a long time ago. This symbolization is well observable in *The Cement Garden*, where the family, introduced as nuclear at the beginning, gradually loses both of the parents, and together with the tightening of the relationships between its remaining members, a certain tightening of the space can be noticed as well. With the deaths of their parents, the children's living space is being diminished to the extreme; while the novel begins outside of the house, it ends in Tom's cot, and, consequently, at the bed in his bedroom. As Tew has observed, the novel bears a strong sense of melancholy that comes from a fact that both the children and the world around them are no longer innocent (p. 103). In that sense *The Cement Garden* can be read as a myth where the individual characters have their roles strictly chosen and where they embody the ancient archetypes.

Not only that the people inhabiting the world are no longer innocent, the world itself is often presented as a place without morals by the postmodern writers. As already mentioned, the reality perceived by the "postmodern optics" loses its universal value and becomes rather a construct; similarly, the world itself is no longer the safe place as it used to be. The Cold War's tension, together with the reminiscences of WWII, had given a rise to several novels that tried to imagine a world after apocalypse, the world that is set "amid the ruins of England" (Stevenson, p. 434). It was already mentioned that a certain "fragmentation" can be observed in these novels. In McEwan's works, this

“fragmentation” is noticeable as well. Naturally, the form of a short story contributes to this fact in a great deal, yet McEwan himself works with it deliberately, as can be concluded from one of the stories of the second collection, that is “Two Fragments: Saturday and Sunday, March 199-”, after all; the fact that he sets this short vision of a postapocalyptic London to an unknown, yet very near future, speaks for itself. Similarly, in “Reflections of a Kept Ape”, is it the narrator’s reminiscences and his comments that administer us the “message” about his master and lover, Sally Klee. However, not only the stories that focuses on single moments, on moments that are certain fragments themselves – such as “Cocker at the Theatre” or “To and Fro”, for instance – but also the stories that cover a longer period of time show this particular, “fragmented” quality. In “Psychopolis”, the narrator admits that, while staying in Los Angeles, “there were long pointless days where [he] thought, Everywhere on earth is the same“, and that “(...) the whole of the United States seemed to [him] then a very fine and frail crust on the limitless, subterranean world of [his] own boredom“ (p. 285). The world here is presented as a certain organism that is made up of an infinity of social bonds between people, the bonds that connect all of its counterparts by this enormous, all-absorbing boredom. No matter what the characters do to avoid this boredom and these feelings of rootlessness, no matter what relationships they form and the activities they perform, there is little hope left for them in a world where they cannot even have a proper conversation together.

1.1.4 The image of humour and language

The ape narrator in “Reflections of a Kept Ape” is not only capable of talking, but when using intelligent and humorous remarks he is able to submit a surprisingly apt picture of a female writer in crisis; a wealthy, busy man finds an ideal partner in a mute and obedient dummy in “Dead as They Come”; the boy from “Homemade” is influenced to a great extent by reading novels and watching movies meant for adults; in *The Cement Garden*, Jack and his siblings become immune to the passing of time. Indeed; McEwan’s characters often develop their stories in retrospective or ignore the chronology to some degree, they comment on their situations, using various literary, musical and pop-culture references. McEwan uses parody and absurdity as a means of capturing a deeper problem which would be difficult to deal with when depicted “raw”; and both parody and absurdity in McEwan’s version are rather black-humoured, with a pinch of horror. Bentley introduces an intentional emphasis on the verbal nature

of the narration, disruption of chronology, parody, or, in general, scepticism toward any kind of an established authority, to be examples of the techniques that a postmodern writer often adopts (p. 34): when related to McEwan, the relevance of such techniques is obvious.

1.1.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no discussion over the fact that numerous aspects that can be labelled as “postmodern” can be identified in the work of Ian McEwan. Probably the most prominent aspect that connects this writer with the concept of postmodernism is the issue of relativity. A postmodern person cannot take anything for granted, he or she must evaluate the presented facts at every moment practically. Truth is by no means absolute and reality is often not what it seems. There are several methods that McEwan uses in order to confront our perception of truth: he deploys a concept of unreliable narrator, who often has different outlook on the reality than the people around him have; he deliberately loosens the chronology or deconstructs a generally accepted notion of “normality” for instance. He often places his characters into desolate surroundings that are far away from populated areas, or, at least, he confronts them with the loneliness and confusion inside their own minds. This interest in what is hidden inside of a human being, what is the force behind a person’s decision, is also common for postmodern writers; however, McEwan’s work with the archetypes and myths, with the “grand stories” whose echoes can be noticed in many of his works, can be said to exceed the usual limits of a postmodern prose.

2. Rational and irrational

In an interview for *Bold Type*, McEwan answered the question of what fascinates him about the struggle between the rational and irrational in human character as follows:

Even for atheists, the question of faith has to be an issue of importance. I regard irrational belief as being the essence of faith. It's also an enduring quality of being human--perhaps even written into our natures. No amount of science or logic will shift it (...) (Bold Type, n. pag.).

Indeed, the “struggle” of rationality with the irrational is one of the key themes in McEwan’s writing. As he added in the above interview, “moments of crisis or danger represent a means of exploring characters--the strengths and defects of personality”. He is interested in events that serve as the breaking points in the development of a character – he writes about people who, under certain circumstances, are forced to mature too early; about people who are already adults but emotionally at the same level as children; about people who are confronted with the situations that influence them deeply. His characters are people whose actions, often violent or somehow defective, are driven by irrational causes: by internal conflicts between reason and faith. For McEwan, it is the devastating power of this never-ending fight between the consequential and the emotional self that makes us what we are – in both positive and negative ways.

These conflicts are displayed in McEwan’s early fiction in various ways. Generally, it can be stated that his first two short story volumes are concerned mostly with these themes: the relationship between men and women and the problem of adolescence and the “change” of a child into an adult; together with the question of what can happen when the normal process of this development is somehow distorted. McEwan broadens these themes further in *The Cement Garden* (Malcolm, p. 8).

His debut work *First Love, Last Rites* is mostly concerned with the problem of maturation – in “Last Day of Summer” an orphaned child is forced to mature because of the loss he experiences, while in “Butterflies” and “Conversation with a Cupboard man” the narrators are adults who, having been affected by particular traumatic experiences, show various marks of immature personalities. In the second collection, that is *In Between the Sheets*, children play an important role as well: the adult narrator of “Two Fragments: March 199-”, living in a post-apocalyptic London, wants to go

to the countryside because he can see no future awaiting his young daughter, in the city where basics such as water and wax are difficult to obtain. “In Between the Sheets”, a story of divorced novelist, contrasts the sexual awakening of his daughter with the break-up that her parents’ marriage has suffered.

However, as Slay has observed, the focus of McEwan’s second collection has shifted from the relationship between childhood and adulthood to more adult world (n.p.) - this fact might give a possible explanation for certain deviations that the characters of *In Between the Sheets* show (Malcolm, p. 23). In “Pornography”, the character of O’Byrne, who is a macho man and a cheater, realizes that he is submissive and that he likes to be humiliated during the sexual act. In the story “In Between the Sheets”, the father becomes aware that he is becoming attracted to his own teenage daughter, while in “Dead As They Come” the narrator not only falls in love with a figurine, but he also marries her; sadly, their romance ends in a catastrophe and he “murders” her out of jealousy. “Psychopolis” for the first time fully deploys a theme of feminism, which is generally claimed to be one of the essential themes of McEwan’s later fiction; nevertheless, as Malcolm argues, an interest in the Women’s Movement can be seen in the early stories and novellas from the 1970s, as well (p. 12).

In the following sections, a more detailed analysis will be provided and the individual topics will be further developed. The characters of McEwan’s works, typically the people whose irrational behaviour has been conditioned by their interaction with the people around them, at some point find themselves in conflict with these people; therefore, the following sections, covering the individual issues, are structured to keep the polarity of these conflicts and examine it. The only exception to this system is section 2.2.2, concerning the ill nature of sexuality in the contemporary society: this section examines the consequences of the mistreatment of the relationships between people rather than the causes of such doings, yet in McEwan’s early works this theme is in no way less important than the other ones, that is the polarity between masculine and feminine; between child and adult; between the relativity and the objectivity.

2.1 First Love, Last Rites

First Love, Last Rites presents a relatively consistent picture of the world where men are the dominant ones; the fact that is to be rather radically changed in the second collection (see 2.2).

In general, it is possible to point out the first sprouts of McEwan's proficiency at writing strong female characters here; the narrator of "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" is a man who tells his story from the inside of a cupboard, because it is the only place where he feels safe, after having been emotionally crippled by his mother; Mina from "Disguises" is a pedophilic aggressor who molests her deceased sister's son Henry; in the life of the small boy from "Last Day of Summer" actually two women who are of immense importance for him occur - Jenny, who reminds him of his dead mother, and her antipole Kate, an archetype of the "lover" figure.

Nevertheless, the female figures in *First Love, Last Rites* remind of the archetypes much more than of full-fledged characters. McEwan makes them interact with the male figures in order to create a picture of a world that is driven by certain energy, energy, which comes as a result of a certain "friction" between people. Simplifying to the extreme, Connie's role in "Homemade" is to enable her brother to become an adult; in "Last Day of Summer", Jenny's death allows the boy's narrator accept the fact that his mother had died and he must grow up; Maisie in "Solid Geometry" must be fooled and destroyed; a little girl in "Butterflies" must be abused and murdered; and, in a closer sense, a pregnant rat in "First Love, Last Rites" must be killed, in order to help the male narrator to overcome his fear of creating a new life.

As already announced, the following sections will take a closer look at polarity between masculine and feminine, and at the complex nature of the relationship between child and adult.

2.1.1 Masculine vs. feminine (I)

In "Solid Geometry", a man is trapped in a marriage that no longer satisfies him. He spends his days by reading a diary that once belonged to his great-grandfather, an educated man who lived in the late nineteenth century, and who had left him a peculiar heirloom:

the penis of Captain Nicholls who died in Horsemonger jail in 1873. It was bottled in a glass twelve inches long, and, noted my great-grandfather in his diary that night, 'in a beautiful state of preservation' (p. 5).

In the diary, the narrator's great-grandfather describes mostly his intellectual debates with a friend M., who is, unlike the narrator's ancestor, a travelled man. The protagonist

is becoming more and more attached to the diary; he can spend the whole day going through its forty-five-volumes, reading about mathematical problems that were discussed a century ago. His wife, on the other hand, is unhappily immersed in amateur psychology, in reading tarot cards and in long walks. The couple, which were close once, gradually become alienated from each other.

“Solid Geometry” not only depicts a marriage in crisis; through the description of a man whose interest in his own wife is replaced by a fascination with the “scientific” world, McEwan shows a crisis of the masculine when “jeopardized” by feminine principles (Ryan, n. pag.). The anonymous husband is irritated by his wife’s indeterminate fears: when she wakes from a bad dream and begs him to stay awake to keep her company, he rejects her request:

She shook my shoulder. ‘Please don’t go to sleep yet, don’t leave me here.’ ‘I’m in the same bed,’ I said. ‘I won’t leave you.’ ‘It makes no difference, don’t leave me awake ...’ But my eyes were already closing (p. 6).

To the narrator, her request is absolutely incomprehensible. He does not understand why she is unhappy: he speaks about her psychological books as of “fashion (...), fashionable metaphors, fashionable reading, fashionable malaise” (p. 12) and asks if they “could (...) tell (...) the best way to start a laundry business, (...) to make an omelette or a kidney machine?” (p. 9). Instead of diving into her inner traumas and her nightmares, he instinctively escapes into a rational, “male” world of mathematical paradoxes, symbolized by the diary and the bottled penis. He even identifies himself through the diary with his great-grandfather and takes up some of his habits:

Before going to bed I sit down for half an hour and think over the day. I have no mathematical whimsies or sexual theories to note down. Mostly I write out what Maisie has said to me and what I have said to Maisie (p. 7).

The narrator’s emotional coldness towards his wife is reflected in his refusal to have sex with her. Her constant, yet hopeless attempts to find the way back to her husband, only disturbs and restrains him: “I felt no desire for Maisie or any other woman. All I wanted to do was turn the next page of my great-grandfather’s diary” (p. 16). The crisis escalates when Maisie in anger destroys the valued “heritage” and breaks the jar

in which Captain Nicholls' penis was conserved. As Ryan argues, "it is Maisie's angry smashing of this precious icon of sexual difference and male supremacy that seals her doom" (n. pag.). At the moment of breaking the glass, the hatred starts to accumulate inside of him: "All this time I tried to prevent my resentment towards Maisie filling my mind. I wanted to continue with M's story" (p. 18). It having been the result of long-term emotional deprivation, Maisie's attack on the husband's emotional flatness provokes revenge against her. With the discovery of a mathematical scribble, able to make things look as they have disappeared, he creates this scribble, this "mathematics of the Absolute" (p. 22) directly from her body:

'What's happening?' cried Maisie. Now the positioning of her limbs expressed the breathtaking beauty, the nobility of the human form, and, as in a paper flower, there was a fascinating power in its symmetry (p. 25-26).

The "ultimate" victory of the male over female in "Solid Geometry" is underlined by the fact that she had been tricked by him: he pretends to make love with her and then he destroys her completely, using the logical mathematical principle. However, the narrator's success provokes certain doubts; in spite of his yearning for the organised and uncomplicated world of Absolute, the narrator's triumph is paradoxical - it can never be absolute. In the final scene, the act of lovemaking is inverted somehow and it becomes an act of destruction, not an act of genesis of the new life. The final deed is done – in this eternal combat between male and female, rational and irrational, it is the man who wins over the "source of life and healing", as Malcolm has put it (p. 187).

The polarity between men's and women's different perceptions is even more visible in "First Love, Last Rites", where a young couple spends the whole summer alone in a beach house. During the summer, they do not do almost anything but listen to music and make love, with nobody to disturb their solitude except the girl's little brother Adrian and the alien creature, a strange "something" whose presence in their lives grows more and more important. The seventeen or eighteen-year-old narrator fantasizes during the sex:

Then once I was inside her I was moved, I was inside my fantasy, there could be no separation now of my mushrooming sensation of my knowledge that we could make a creature grow in Sissel's belly. (...).

It was eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws, inches from my cock's end the unstoppable chemistry of a creature growing out of a dark red slime (...) (p. 114).

The striking graphical quality of the above excerpt, followed later in the text by the narrator's naturalistic description of their sex during Sissel's period, suggests much about the narrator's fascination by Sissel's, or in a closer sense, a woman's ability to create a new life; but while his fascination has a pinch of horror inside, she does not seem to care at all. Therefore, when he feels insecure and wants to talk about it with Sissel, he finds out that

(...) she did not make abstractions or discuss situations, she lived inside them (...). Sissel did things as they came to her, stirred her coffee, made love, listened to her records (...). She did not say things as I'm happy, or confused (...) (p. 111).

In the narrator's descriptions of Sissel's behaviour a certain repetition of the words and phrases can be noticed, such as "(...) she withdrew into silence" (p. 115), "she had nothing to say (p. 113)", or "she never made general remarks (p. 116)". He clearly perceives her as something calm, something constant; nevertheless, this certain "motionlessness" both soothes and appals him, and therefore suggests its ambiguous nature. This is well observable in the narrator's description of their life in a beach house, where he mentions that at the beginning of summer he was receiving postcards from his friends, but as the summer proceeded, they stopped writing to him. Therefore, instead of maintaining the relationship with the real, outer world, Sissel and the narrator in a way regress into their own, slow world where they examine the shapes of their bodies and the complexions of their skins. By excluding Sissel and the narrator of the outer relations, McEwan can concentrate more on their inner side and let them immerse in their psyches in a more detailed way: he expanded on this theme in *The Cement Garden* (see 2.3).

However, as this state of "immobility" gradually changes into lethargy, both of them are affected by this matter and both of them attempt to deal with it at some level. While Sissel tries to ease herself in a mechanical work in a factory, the narrator, together with Sissel's father, constructs the eel traps, although he sees no sense in such doing. Their unease accumulates with the increase in frequency of a strange sound

behind the walls, a rat's sound probably. This alien creature, which is never seen, but often heard, becomes an embodiment of everything that is untold between them: he refers to it as a "mouse", pretending for her sake that everything is okay, while Sissel calls it clearly a "rat"; nevertheless, they both are scared immensely.

A certain parallel can be drawn between "Solid Geometry" and "First Love, Last Rites" narrators and between their unconscious efforts to escape from the irrational, "abstract" world of their women to a much more logical, "empirical" world of reason that can be perceived through the senses and that can offer at least some certainties. In that sense, the younger narrator's trips to the eel traps and the older one's concern with mathematics bear similar symbolics; however, while the older man's victory over his wife becomes an act of an unproductive destruction, the second one is able to overcome his inner fears of everything that is associated with a female and "growing up". As Ryan suggests, this process is everything but easy: he offers a Freudian vision of a boy that cannot become a man if he does not get rid of the influence of his mother, or, in a narrower sense, of everything that can be labelled as "feminine" (n. pag.).² According to this logic, the narrator has no other choice than to kill the rat, who, as we learn eventually, was pregnant. McEwan's description of the dead animal is once again very graphic: when standing above the carcass, the narrator observes "a translucent purple bag, and inside five pale crouching shapes, their knees drawn up around their chins" (p. 124). Yet, while at the beginning of the summer he was both horrified and excited by the "eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws (...)" (p.114), with its ending he is mature enough to accept the fact, that he can contribute to a creation of a new life and take responsibility for such doing.

As already mentioned, McEwan considers the moments of crisis the most important moments in the development of a human being (see 2). We are confronted with the difficult situations in order to test our character and to move on with our lives. Having been made to face their opposites, the decisions of the male characters of *First Love, Last Rites* determine what kind of people they will become. The polarity between the different approaches of men and women is strictly distinguished here though; McEwan uses this polarity to depict the complexity of a human nature. The male characters of *First Love, Last Rites* are threatened by their female counterparts: they are often confused or even scared by the women's inclination to see the world rather abstractly, they are annoyed by the women's tendency to occupy themselves with the more complex and more vague sides of life. As "Conversation With a Cupboard Man"

or “Disguises” present, the feminineness is dangerous and can influence a man’s life very negatively, therefore, in a way, it must be destroyed: either literary, as in “Solid Geometry” and “Butterflies” for instance, or symbolically, as “Last Day of Summer” and “First Love, Last Rites” show. Yet, at the same time, the role of the feminine principle in the life of a man is crucial, as McEwan constantly suggests after all; but only if a man is able to accept its importance and reconcile with it, he can develop a composed and healthful personality. Sadly, the characters of McEwan’s early works are barely able to do so; and the next section will take a closer look at what the results of such doing can be.

2.1.2 Child vs. adult (I)

In “Homemade”, a fourteen-year-narrator tells a disturbing, dark story of his route to the manhood. Having been well-informed about the “variety of pleasures which [he] rightly associated with the adult world” (p. 31) by his older friend Raymond and by pornographic magazines and books, he decides to gain the final knowledge which he has not obtained yet, and get a sexual experience.

As Baxter argues, in “Homemade” McEwan mocks a world where sexuality has become just a commodity and where it is easy to obtain what she calls “ ‘ready-made’ forms of sexual desire” (p. 17). The narrator zestfully consumes everything that promises to get him closer to the desired knowledge of the adult experience, although he is not ready for it and does not understand it properly yet:

I smoked about ten cigarettes a day, I drank whisky when it was available, I had a connoisseur’s taste for violence and obscenity (...), and I was aware of my own sexual precocity, though oddly it never occurred to me to find any use for it, my imagination as yet unnourished by longings or private fantasies (p. 31).

He gets all of these experiences handed over by reading a sexualized novel of Henry Miller and Havelock Ellis, particularly of “the more interesting parts” (p. 34), by listening to workmen’s conversations about their sexual experiences and by pop culture in general; however, the most powerful factor in his “consecration” is his one year older friend Raymond. Ironically, Raymond himself is very clumsy and fails everything he attempts to master:

The world he showed me, all its fascinating detail, lore and sin, the world for which he was a kind of standing master of ceremonies, never really suited Raymond (...) So when Raymond produced cigarettes, it was I who learned to inhale the smoke deeply, to blow smoke-rings and to cup my hands round the match like a film star, while Raymond choked and mumbled (...) (p. 28).

Raymond's role is to "initiate" the narrator's progression into the final state: in the broader sense, he represents the old traditions of the world which slowly falls into decay, having been conquered bit by bit by a younger and fiercer generation; and despite his own longing for the ability to do the same, he is aware that he cannot accomplish it: "[p]erhaps," he said mournfully as we were leaving the site one afternoon, 'perhaps I'm little too old for that sort of thing' " (p. 31).

Significantly, the event which predestines the narrator's further development occurs in the cellar of a bomb site; Raymond teaches the narrator how to masturbate, which fascinates him to the extent that he wonders if "[he] could not dedicate [his] whole life to this glorious sensation" (p. 30). By placing this scene into a desolate, abandoned locality, and particularly into a basement, McEwan amplifies the anonymity of such behaviour and evokes a strong atmosphere of loss – although for the narrator the whole action is nothing more than a pleasurable way to spend his free time, at the same time it marks the end of a certain life episode and highlights the "defectiveness" of the narrator's sexual development.

As Baxter has observed, the reader's anxiety escalates as the story proceeds with particular hints that it will be the narrator's sister who will crown his progression to adulthood (p. 17), as it can be seen here: "[a]ll the way home I thought about cunt (...). I eyed my sister across the table" (p.39). In the next paragraph even broader insight into the narrator's thoughts is offered:

I exaggerated a little just now when I said she was an ugly bat - I was beginning to think that perhaps she was not so bad-looking after all (...). So it was not surprising that I came to be thinking over my toad-in-the-hole that with some cajoling and perhaps a little honest deceit Connie could be persuaded to think of herself, if only for a few minutes, as something more than a sister, as, let us say, a beautiful young lady, a film star and maybe, Connie, we could slip into bed here and try out this

rather moving scene, now you get out of these clumsy pyjamas while I see to the light ... (p. 39).

In this section, the narrator's discourse becomes more "distracted" – it becomes more of a chain of thoughts and associations than a proper telling; in his mind he projects his sister into the role of a "film star", because the consumption of pop culture had taught him to see the world as something unreal, something constructed. Even the persuasion of Connie to participate in his plan is performed "in name only" and appears to be just a sort of game of Mummies and Daddies.

With the promise that she will have fun he talks her into the game; he fully realizes that his intentions can result really badly and thus he is very careful to "not do to go scaring [his] little sister who would not think twice about telling [his] father everything", because "that would mean a scene of some sort, laborious lies to invent, shouting and crying and that sort of thing" (both p. 40). Once again, McEwan here somehow inverts the – only anticipated so far – sexual act. Connie does not understand what exactly her brother is doing and finds it rather odd:

"That's silly. Why do they want to do that?" (...) ["They do it because it's their way of saying they like each other"] (...) "But that's daft, why don't they just tell each other?" (all p. 44).

However, after he reassures her that if she wants to imitate their parents fully she must participate in the Mummies and Daddies game properly, she does not protest anymore and even helps him, taking the leading role actually; at the moment of her complete identification with her "role" of the mother she is able to accept the situation at some level.

In "Homemade" McEwan emphasizes the need that people – and children in particular – have for using various role models as "manuals" how to live their lives. He works here with the Freudian concept of a child whose maturation is conditioned by his identification with certain roles³ – he broadens this conception in *The Cement Garden* (see 2.3.2). According to McEwan, the child is never entirely innocent. The problem is when this never-entirely-innocent child is confronted with the reality of the adult world too early and the natural process of his development is deviated by the external causes. In that sense, it is the harsh reality of a contemporary world that is to blame for the corruption of the boy's development – McEwan broadens this vision of the "corrupted"

world in the second short story collection (see 2.2.2). After all, the narrator himself admits that although “[he] was pleased about that, but right then [he] did not want to see a naked girl, or a naked anything for a while yet” (p. 47).

If the boy from “Homemade” is depicted as a child who, while exposed to the certain outer circumstances, is able to rape his own sister, the life of the narrator of “Conversation With a Cupboard Man” had been similarly influenced, but even in a much more fatal way. The story itself is built as the confession of a man at the therapeutic session, or maybe at a consultation with social worker. The man remains nameless in the course of the plot, as the major part of the two collections’ protagonists after all; nevertheless, in comparison to “Homemade”, the sense of anonymity is much more striking. Not a single character’s name is revealed during the man’s speech, we do not learn names even of the people most important in his confession: “the pretty girl”, “the man that my mother brought home”, “the probation officer”; but also “Pus-face”, “Deafy”, and eventually “Scarecrow”, as he refers to himself by a nickname given to him. The shallow character of his descriptions of the people around him is well visible especially when compared with the much more profound remarks concerning his mother. He describes her as an “attractive woman [who] looked much younger” (p. 95), and says that he himself “had to be all the children she had ever wanted” (p. 94); however, he declares her to be “twisted, you know” (p. 93) and “insane” (p. 94), while right in the next paragraph he claims that “she was alright really” (p. 94).

The noticeable ambiguity of such remarks indicates the greatness of her importance in his life. Although he clearly admits that she is at fault for the fact that he is “dirty and bend” (p. 93), that he cannot have a “normal” life and be a “normal” person with a “normal” family, he repeatedly expresses a wish to return to his old home, to go back to the “old cotton-wool life when everything was done for [him]” (p. 103). For a short period of time, he is able to free himself of her influence and, after having found a poorly paid job in the kitchen of a luxurious hotel, to stand on his own feet; yet, the superficial nature of the “normality” that had been forced upon him at once, comes out at the moment of crisis. The spite between him and the chief cook, “Pus-face”, escalates rather quickly and, after the narrator refuses to act accordingly to Pus-face’s rules, he is punished badly. He describes it as follows:

(...) first thing next morning [Pus-face] came over over me and said, ‘Get and clean the main oven’. There was this enormous cast-iron oven

(...). It smelled like rotten cats inside the oven. I got a bowl of water and some scourers and crawled inside (...). I had been in there ten minutes when the oven door shut. Pus-face had locked me in (p. 101).

The oven becomes an emblem of the narrator's inability to lead a normal life and triggers the process of his regression off; even though the second time he was locked inside, the narrator got badly injured, to the social worker he admits that "[he] was secretly wanting to be shut it (...)" and "that [he] wanted to be where [he] couldn't get out" (both p. 105). Once again, the Freudian concept of a person's development through a repression of id and ego can be traced here: because when living with his mother he had been made to "[live his] first two years over and over again" (p. 95), with no chance to develop a superego, he is now unable to cope with the reality as a grown-up. Therefore, instead of trying to solve the problem with Pus-face within the limits of a civilized society, he pours the boiling oil on the bully as revenge; similarly, he discovers that if he is going to have himself arrested he will not have to provide for himself.

The feelings of anxiety and the tension he feels when confronted with the outer world escalates, after he makes a final attempt to return to the old house and, in essence, to his mother; and with discovery of the new family, and especially a "pretty girl of about eighteen" (p. 104) living in his old house, he is symbolically pushed to grow up once again. However, as he says, he would rather live together with the new family inhabiting the house, in the "warm" as he literary states – at the end he is not able to mature, having ended "stuck" in the childhood stage even earlier than at the time spend with his mother - in his words:

I want to be small. I don't want this noise and these people all around me. I want to be out of all that, in the dark. Do you see that wardrobe there, takes up most of this room? (...) I go in there, I lock the door behind me and sit in the darkness for hours. (...) Sometimes I wish the wardrobe would get up and walk around and forget that I was in there (...) (p. 109).

Both the narrator from "Homemade" and the narrator from "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" can be seen as the victims of the external causes: while the teenage boy's sexual assault on his little sister had been provoked by his premature acquaintance with the adult world – that is rather deteriorated, according to McEwan -, the other

one's deep-rooted desire for the lost childhood can be attributed to the exaggerated role of a mother in his life. Femalessness, as already mentioned, is threatening to the masculinity in McEwan's works, therefore it must be destroyed, either symbolically or literally: "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" shows us what happens when one principle prevails over another in one's life. A Freudian concept of a child that can reach adulthood and develop a superego through identification is credible here again: Freud suggests that the overcoming of the Oedipus complex⁴ is crucial for the natural development of a male. In that sense, it can be said that it was the absence of the fatherly figure in the narrator's life, together with his mother's obstinate selfishness, that had denied him the ability to pass all stages of development healthily - his irrepressible anxiety being the result. Thus, now, when abandoned in the world where he "[has] to pretend", where "all the things that ["normal" people] take for granted [he has] to do (...) all consciously" (both p. 95), he seeks exile in the safe space of the childhood, in the "warm" and dark vagueness of the wardrobe. It is the only place where he feels safe; at last, the conscience, the superego, the society's standards that had been forced upon him, dissolve and shows its fragile character. The reader is once again confronted with the importance of the outer powers in an individual's life; yet, the standards, the behaviour patterns that we consider normative, are presented here as the "constructs" and the social bonds and the morals as superficially planted. We are what we are, because we live in the world where everything is defined by the social contacts, where we adapt and where we identify with our role-models. Such concept must inevitably show its fragile nature as soon as we step out of the territory of - so to speak - "normality"; and therefore we find ourselves in the realm of the suppressed, the blocked, the irrational.

2.2 In Between the Sheets

While in *First Love*, *Last Rites* women generally adopted the roles of victims, or at least creatures that are much more vulnerable than men, *In Between the Sheets* they modified this fact quite radically (Slay, n. pag.). If it is a woman who is sexually dominant, a daughter of an ageing novelist, who is growing up into a confident human being, or a woman who clearly expresses her dissatisfactions with the chauvinistic version of the history, all of them are distinctly more active in their demeanour than their female counterparts from the first collection.

However, it would be misleading and simplistic to conclude that women in this collection are self-confident individualities, whereas men are weak and cowardly; Mary from “Psychopolis” is lost in the maze of the contemporary Los Angeles, “the city of narcissists” (p. 279) just like the narrator; Sally Klee in “Reflections of a Kept Ape”, despite having been admired and desired by her peculiar ex-lover, copes with the misery of an artistic crisis by copying her own best-selling book unproductively; an irritation and frustration of two nurses from “Pornography” escalates to the point where usual means cannot be used, and therefore both women mutilate the cheating man – an act that indicates anything but a healthy and composed personality. The major movement can be seen in the fact that the female characters in the second collection are behaving much more like real people in general; they are no longer the emblematic figures of “lovers” or “motherly figures”, and even if they are, they are able to take responsibility or behave much more aggressively than they were able in the first collection.

As the title of the collection suggests, the theme of sexuality and its different manifestation in people’s lives can be perceived as a major one in *In Between the Sheets*, where sex is generally seen as probably the most powerful element that shapes people’s lives, often in a destructive way. McEwan manifests it at the space of interpersonal relationships, mainly at the relationships between men and women. However, his version is not exactly optimistic; according to him, relationships are battlefields where men and women fight over power constantly, with intermittent success.

2.2.1 Masculine vs. feminine (II)

Once again, one of McEwan’s central themes has become prominent in his second short story collection. In “Reflections of a Kept Ape”, a dark-humoured and absurd story of a female novelist in crisis, the narrator - “kept ape”- while living in the same household as the novelist Sally Klee herself, closely observes and comments – surprisingly aptly or even ironically – on everything she does:

I am stacking the plates in the kitchen and sulking, almost to the point of forgetting to whistle. Despite my negative sentiments I set about preparing the coffee. Sally Klee will have a blend of no less than four different kinds of bean in emulation of Balzac, whose life she read in a lavishly illustrated volume while attending to the proofs of her first

novel. We always call it her first novel. (...) Secretly, I suspect, Sally Klee believes that good coffee is the essence of authorship. Look at Balzac (I believe she says to herself), (...) (p. 189).

Jack Slay points out that McEwan uses the absurdity in the story as a means of allowing the reader to accept the fact that the narrator is a humanized ape, who is clearly familiar with Yeats or Balzac and who talks in rather educated way (n. pag.). However, the nature of connection between him and Sally Klee is metaphorical, in fact; according to Slay, “the narrator’s apehood should *not* matter because, in essence, he is neither merely ape nor merely man; rather, he is *scorned lover*” (n. pag.).

The narrator, in his peculiar, neither fully monkeyish nor human behaviour, adapts to a strange mixture of habits; he recounts his first “time” (a word that he finds odd himself, but he notes that it appeared in Sally Klee’s book) with Sally Klee and says that it was “a little dogged by misunderstanding largely due to [his] assumption that [they] were to proceed a posteriori” (p. 194), and at the same he expresses his longing for the old days in Sally Klee’s bedroom, when he even dreamed of the role of her husband:

Yes, I saw myself, expensive fountain pen in hand, signing rental-purchase agreements for my pretty wife. I would teach myself to hold a pen. I would be man-about-the-house (...). Down to the pub in the evening with my husband credentials to make new friends, invent a name for myself in order to bestow it on my wife, take up wearing slippers about the house, and perhaps even socks and shoes outside (p. 193).

He recollects their past relationship (that dates back to the time of publishing Sally Klee’s book), claiming that he was happy at that time; while for Sally their affair was a way of filling her days with some activity, activity, that soon became real bother for her.

As mentioned before, the narrator stands for a rather archetypal figure of a rejected lover; the position that he occupied once, that is the position of Sally Klee’s “lover”, satisfied his need of happiness. He literally calls their affair “the happiest eight days of [his] life” (p. 195) and he would like to renew it. On the contrary, for Sally Klee their relationship was not as satisfying; she, unlike the male narrator, does not find fulfilment in the relationship with another being, because her personality is somehow complicated by the fact that she is a woman and at the same time an artist. The character

of Moira Sillito, in a way Sally Klee's literary embodiment from her debut, tries to unsuccessfully conceive a child in the course of the book; Sally Klee can have children, but uses birth control. Her affectional, half-conscious "arguments" with Moira Sillito, who stands out from the pages of the book more and more and forces Sally to deal with her, deepen Sally's despair to the point of her capitulation and compel her to commit what Slay calls "'the greatest of sins" (n. pag.), copying Moira Stillito's story word for word.

McEwan creates here a picture of two people, two opposite sexes (if we adopt the reading that the narrator's species does not have any significant value) that can never reach harmony; he observes her everyday fight with her own mind and the increasing despair over the blank paper in a silent wonder, and he does not understand why she would do that to herself. In the confrontation of two beings that seek for different, actually even the opposite, qualities in their lives, McEwan is able to contrast two sites of male – female relationships; the emotional and unbalanced feminine principle with a serene and logical male principle.

Although these two worlds, the world of women and world of men, constantly collide with each other, the people still have to seek the shelter from loneliness in the relationships with each other, in the "ancient to and fro" (p. 265). The eponymous story stands from the whole collection rather significantly. While the relationships - and the sexual relationships in particular - are often presented by McEwan as the battlefields, and the coexistence of the male and the female outlooks on the world is usually suggested to cause various crises, "To and Fro" offers a different reading. This poetic, experimental story contrasts the highly rational, highly organized surroundings of the working office with the safety and the warmth of the home. The anonymity of the narrator's working place is striking, especially when compared with the richness of the evocative and descriptive expressions concerning the environment of the home; the narrator at his workplace walks through "the empty room and along the doorless corridor" (p. 269), the conversations are referred simply as "(this) and (that)" (p. 267) and are obviously forgotten very quickly; even the identity of an individual is questioned:

The Director is briskly apologetic. As my colleague will confirm, says Leech, people are always confusing us (...). A very easy mistake, colleague, to allow yourself to be confused with Leech (p. 272).

In contrast, the space of the narrator's lover's bed and of her house are defined by the "colossal weight of stillness" (p. 266) and the time is shaped by the memories and the visions from his past; "(...) the [sweet] smells of sleeping children" (p. 267), together with the factuality of her body laying next to him in the dark, in a way creates his reality. The idea of harmony between the masculine and feminine, presented in the *First Love, Last Rites* as ideal but only rarely accomplished, had been given a re-think in "To and Fro". The intuitivity and the emotionality are not perceived threatening here: instead, it is the male surroundings of the logical calculations and the fake collegiality that the narrator fears. Thus, "the old" (p. 266) and barely conscious "To and Fro" can be said to beat the logical, the hierarchical, the systematic, in a way; yet, McEwan highlights here the importance of a certain equality between these two principles and stresses the sanctity of the act of sex.

2.2.2 Disruption of sexuality

For "the ancient to and fro" (p. 266) is considered immensely important by McEwan, it is the theme of "corrupted" sexuality and its impact on lives of contemporary people that became a central in *In Between the Sheets*. Sexuality has been degraded by its omnipresence, deviations became a norm; McEwan draws parallels between collapsing of relationships in present and ignoring the ancient sanctity of the act of sex, having highlighted the ill nature of the contemporary society.

In "Pornography", the introductory story of this collection, McEwan presents a character of O'Byrne: he is a playboy with narcissist traits, working for his older brother in a shop that sells pornographic magazines. The older brother Harold, apparently the only person in O'Byrne's life that is close to him at least at some level, is currently facing problems with business, because the magazines do not sell enough to make a profit. O'Byrne's relationship with his brother is difficult, marked by the ill-concealed displays of contempt of both sides and by rivalry between them; while the short Harold secretly enjoys the fact that O'Byrne got infected with gonorrhoea, O'Byrne thinks of Harold as of "Little Runt" (p. 169) and feels superior over him. In fact, he considers himself dominant not only when it comes to his brother: knowing that most of the men that go to the shop are feeling guilty about it, he deliberately uses this fact to amuse himself:

He hooked his thumbs into his jeans and sauntered towards the tight knot of customers. “Can I help you gentlemen, the magazines are all for sale.” They scattered before him like frightened fowl, and suddenly he was alone in the shop (p.169-170).

O’Byrne’s nonfunctional relationship with Harold is reflected in the fact that he goes out with two women at the same time. The younger Pauline is a passive, silent type who “want[s] to redeem O’Byrne with her love” (p.170), while the older Lucy is rather aggressive, “little plump” (p. 177) and very active in her behaviour. They do not know about each other, because he makes sure to alternate his visits at their places. O’Byrne’s lack of moral is evident also in the fact that he does not care whether he will pass the disease on them or not; when visiting Lucy, he even lets her wash off his underwear, because she notices that it is dirty, but does not say a word about the reason. He does care about hygiene though; yet, as Slay emphasizes, this behaviour is motivated more by the fact that the disease is bothering him, not by the attempt to avoid infecting both women (n. pag.).

His relationship with Pauline is rather stereotypical and passionless; despite the fact that she is emotionally involved, O’Byrne is not interested in anything but sex and finds it annoying that she is obviously not happy. On the other hand, the relationship between him and Lucy is solely sexual and excluded of emotions, with Lucy dominating O’Byrne. He struggles first, but relatively quickly learns to understand that he likes not only passing the power to Lucy, but also being humiliated and even threatened:

“Worm ... worm ... you little worm. I’m going to tread on you ... dirty little worm.” Once more her hand was closed about his throat. His eyes were sunk deep, and his word travelled a long way before it left his lips. “Yes,” he whispered (p.180).

Lucy and Pauline realize that O’Byrne is cheating on them and that he infected both of them because of the hospital records and they lure him into the trap – Lucy invites him to her place, ties him to the bed and together with Pauline sterilizes him. Paradoxically, at the time of complete horror he realizes that it excites him:

They arranged the table close to the bed. Lucy bent low over his erection. “Oh dear... oh dear,” she murmured (p. 186).

In “Pornography” McEwan sketches the horror vision of the relationships that went wrong; the relationships that were corrupted. Once again, the “relationship” is seen as a battlefield, where power is shifted from one to another. McEwan reminds us that nothing good can arise from the chauvinistic outlook on women, and despite the fact that there are plenty of men who think of women that way, he emphasizes the cruel nature that a woman is able to show to a world under certain circumstances.

As was already mentioned, it was *In Between the Sheets*, where McEwan, for the first time, hinted his later interest in feminism. Both – the sadistic Lucy from “Pornography” or the intelligent Mary from “Psychopolis” – are strong characters who are not satisfied with the reality that is presented by the men. The polarity of *First Love*, *Last Rites*, where the women are seen as the victims, while the roles of their destructors is reserved to the men, is not as strictly distinguished in the second collection; however, McEwan’s versions of people’s realities are only rarely as conciliatory and comforting as “To and Fro” is, for instance. In “Psychopolis”, the narrator – in a way, McEwan’s typical – is an adult man who is currently living in Los Angeles. He opens the story by retelling his first days in this metropolis: during the lunch on his second day, he met a woman, Mary, the same evening they became lovers, and “the following Friday [he] chained her by the foot to [his] bed for the whole weekend” (p. 275). The action had been initiated by Mary herself and for the narrator, as he admits, it is barely pleasant – rather than a pleasure, he feels boredom. He mentions that he only wanted to “please [his] new friend” (p.275), and admits that in reality he is rather scared by her doings; yet, his behaviour is conditioned by a fear that she might “despise [him] for being weak” (p. 275). When he asks her about the point of such “exercise”, she answers that she “[has] to go into to come out of” (p. 275).

Indeed, this self-observation is typical of the “city of narcissists” (p. 279), as he calls Los Angeles. Everything refers to something here, nothing is excluded of the outer relations; yet, at the same time the reality seems to lack any meaning. When the narrator goes to the bar with his acquaintance, he asks for a “pig oil with a cherry” (p. 279), because he wants to comply with his newly acquired reputation as a comic; when he should devote his time to work, he rather spends two hours by staring at his knees “till they lost their meanings as limbs” (p. 287). The man at the stand-up comedy bar, with the performance that maybe was not a performance at all; the narrator’s former friend who even failed to commit a proper suicide; Terence, who is constantly falling in love with emancipated women who have no interest in him; all of them are feeling trapped in

the world where everyone lives their own reality and where the individuality is elevated to the new god. In that sense, even the natural human need to form a connection with another human being, impinges on the rampart of his or hers adopted philosophy. The world of “Psychopolis” is a world where everything is possible and where anything is accesible; and it is exactly this easiness that wore the “Psychopolis” ’ characters out. The narrator, Mary, Terence, George, all of them can be – more of less – considered the succesfull people. Mary part-owns the bookshop in Venice, George had only finished building of his new house, the narrator is capable of lending a luxurious apartment for quite a long time. All of them are clearly educated people, all of them are used to travel a lot; yet they are incapable of forming a meaningful bond with each other. The narrator admits that he actually does not like Terence; however, he says that “it took [him] some time to admit [it] to [himself]” and that “by that time [Terence] was in [the narrator’s] life and [he] accepted the fact” (both p. 281). Similarly, the narrator’s sexual relationship with Mary is hardly more than a pleasant way of spending a free time, or a mutually beneficial arrangement: he affirms that she more or less lives with someone else, but he confirms that he is okay with it.

The certain superficiality of emotions, which the characters of “Psychopolis” experience, is striking - especially when contrasted with their highly developed intellectual capacity. In a way, they are the embodiments of the intellectuals who are able to discuss Freud’s theories and the role of a woman in Christianity, but at the same time their life was deprived of any authenticity. The emotions, the social bonds, the friendships or sex, everything is corrupted and affected by the omnipresent boredom of shallowness. In “Pornography”, it was Lucy’s animality, together with the fear O’Byrne was experiencing, that excited him; in “Psychopolis”, a symbolic appearance of George’s gun has a calming effect on the characters, and they are able to finally experience an authentic emotion. Despite the slight irony, McEwan’s ending with the narrator’s musical performace suggests the need for the real, the authentic in our lives: surely, there is nothing as the ultimate salvage from loneliness or boredom, but it is the best chance we have.

2.3 The Cement Garden

The Cement Garden, a story of four siblings who, after their parents’ death, are forced to live independently in an isolated suburb, shows interesting ambiguity: on one hand it

echoes the previous McEwan's short fiction, as he acknowledged himself in *Books and Bookmen*:

It seemed as though the novel was being, in a very condensed way, recapitulative of certain themes that were emerging in my fiction, and that I'd found different ways of expressing them—possibly more economical—ways of treating a messy range of themes and anxieties and putting them into a self-contained little box. (Ronald Hayman, "Ian McEwan's Moral Anarchy", 1978, qtd. in Sternlicht, n. pag.)

Indeed, there are various motifs that are to be found in McEwan's early stories as well, particularly in *In Between the Sheets*: the character of Jack in a way mirrors both narrators from "Homemade" and "Last Day of Summer"; the issue of changing the sexual identity via cross-dressing and also the theme of regression is important for the character of Tom (Sternlicht, n. pag.).

However, it certainly seems that *The Cement Garden* concerns mostly with the problem of maturation. As Malcolm has observed, one of the ways how to perceive *The Cement Garden* is to read it as a "psychological study of adolescence" (p. 51). The teenage narrator, Jack, turns fifteen in the novel's first half: all of his siblings (except for Tom, who is prepubescent) are in their teens. Another theme that emerges is the issue of the complicated nature of the truth, characterized by McEwan's concept of Jack as an "unreliable narrator"; as several critics have observed, the novel owes its peculiar atmosphere largely to this particular phenomenon. Lastly, the theme of relationship between men's and women's world is prominent again.

In the next sections these themes will be given a more detailed analysis, whereas the focus will be on the question of Jack's reliability and the problem of his maturation.

2.3.1 The relative vs. the objective

The story of *The Cement Garden* is told by fifteen-year-old Jack. The readers do not know much about him or the things that he likes to do; and even if they do, they know it because it was Jack in particular who has told them: they know that he enjoys reading sci-fi books, that one of his favourite pastimes is masturbating or that he "did not kill [his] father, but [he] sometimes felt [he] had helped him on his way" (p. 9); shortly, Jack is far from the extrovert type who is open-minded and hugely cooperative.

Therefore, as Malcolm has pointed out, it would be wrong to conclude that Jack's narration is straightforward (p. 46). On the contrary: Jack does not participate at all, telling the whole story from his rather remote point of view, and often acting that he is not involved anyway.

Naturally, there emerges an interesting question: to what extent we, as the readers, can believe Jack's utterances? We cannot take the issues that he presents as facts for granted, because the only reason that we became acquainted with them was that Jack considered them important for some reason: for example, while he narrates the story of how his father died, he includes a brief description of his physical appearance: "[h]e was a frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face" (p. 9), and then he adds the following:

I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal (p. 9).

In his 1993 study of development of 1st person narratives, Williams deploys a short overview of how the character of a child in literature had changed during the last four centuries: starting from the rationalists' idea of a child as a "tabula rasa", who is to be formed by education and the competent authorities, through Rousseau influenced romantic concept of an idealized childhood as a "state of nature" (Jean-Jaques Rousseau, Preface to *Emile*, 1762, qtd. Williams, p. 212), Dickensian outlook on the childhood as a period in a human life, in which a human being has to undergo various hardships, to the "escapists literature" (p. 214) of Lewis Carroll or J. M. Barrie (p. 211 – 214). He argues that, analogously with the end of Victorian era, beginning of the twentieth century and also with Sigmund Freud entrancing not only the public space, but also the way how people had thought about things, traditional concepts of children or adolescent narrator in literature were replaced by more profound and complicated ones (p. 214).

Williams states that, once again, the character of Jack seems to owe much to the Freudian concept of a child that is everything but innocent; in this respect, it can be claimed that Freud's accentuation of the children's sexuality (p. 214) has established a base for McEwan's approach to childhood and adolescence as to the period in a human life which is crucial and chaotic at the same time. Regardless of that, if we adopt this reading, the question of authenticity of such testimony emerges, as Williams insists (p. 214); he further announces a retrospective narrative as a possible solution:

By looking back on one's youth from the pinnacle of adulthood, the writer is legitimately entitled to use the full range of his or her descriptive powers (p. 216).

However, *The Cement Garden* does not employ this concept fully. Jack narrates the whole story from an unspecified point of time; we, as the readers, are given just a few clues in what period of time the events, starting from the death of the father to the arrival of police, actually occur. As Malcolm has pointed out, there are several hints that locate Jack and his family into the contemporary Britain, particularly at the suburb of an unnamed big city (p. 54); nevertheless, the "anonymity" not only of place, but also of time does contribute to Jack's status of an "unreliable narrator" and helps to increase a reader's feeling of distrust toward him.

Another device that is used by McEwan to complicate the relationship between the narrator and the reader is Jack's alienation from the rest of his family. This being true mainly for the first part of *The Cement Garden*, Jack can be perceived as in a way an outcast who stands apart and observes:

[By now I was all for letting him find out for himself], I just wanted to watch what happened (p.56).

Jack's complicated relationship with his family partly comes as a result of the fact that he is a teenager; Childs emphasizes the importance of Oedipus complex in Jack's behaviour during the opening scene of cementing of the garden (p. 161). However, the peculiarity of Jack's selfishness is striking;

And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed (p. 9).

As Malcolm argues, this technique allows McEwan to prevent a reader from identification with the narrator, and thus from establishing a trusting link toward him (p. 50). Indeed, Jack's own unreliability and inconsiderateness is not only emphasized with his emotional distance, but it is also constantly reminded by the other characters' remarks:

‘You stink’, [Sue] would say whenever there was disagreement between us. ‘You really do stink. Why don’t you ever change your clothes?’ Remarks like these made me loutish (p. 30).

A scene that illustrates this McEwan’s approach best comes in the second half of the novel: Jack visits Sue’s room and persuades her to show him her diary. He is aware of the fact that Sue constantly writes fictional letters to their dead mother and he wants to read them. At this point of the story he is already very distant from his siblings and inevitably feels lonely, therefore he seeks company. However, Sue is bothered by Jack’s presence and starts to read passages from her diary, which accuse him of being cruel and ignorant: “Jack was in a horrible mood. He hurt Tom on the stairs for making a noise”; “(...) He does not wash his hands or anything and he smells horrible. We hate it when he touches a loaf of bread”; “He’s always about to hit someone, but Julie knows how to deal with him” (all p. 98). She presents Jack as despotic and annoying, almost resembling their tyrannical father, which is a version that Jack does not want to hear.

In *The Cement Garden* McEwan created a typical unreliable narrator; Jack is a teenager living a rather complicated life in a rather complicated family, who is far from ideal. He tells lies. He keeps things to himself. He often prettifies the truth to look better. Therefore, his “unreliability” contributes largely to the attractiveness of *The Cement Garden*, creating a peculiar tension which goes through the novel.

2.3.2 Child vs. adult (II)

Despite the fact that the children’s parents’ death marks the beginning of a new episode in the children’s lives, a noticeable difference can be observed there; while Father’s death does not affect the family’s life nowise fundamentally, the day when Mother dies activates the “chain of events” that changes the siblings’ life forever. There is no wonder - the character of Father is far from ideal paternal figure:

There were a few running jokes in the family, initiated and maintained by my father. Against Sue for having almost invisible eyebrows and lashes, against Julie for her ambitions to be a famous athlete, against Tom for pissing in his bed sometimes, against Mother for being poor in arithmetic, and against me for my pimples which were just starting up at that time (...). Because little jokes like this one were stage-managed by Father, none of them were ever worked against him (p. 15).

The cruel jokes of Father are not to be ridiculed; when Julie and Jack try to make fun of him, their Mother calls it “quite unnecessary” (p. 16). In fact, Jack himself claims the jokes and the laughter they provoke to be “ritual” (p.15); they affirm the father’s position in the family as a dominant, silent tyrant who maintains his position by undermining the self-esteem of other members of his family.

In *The Cement Garden*, the process of maturation becomes a central theme (Childs, p. 163). Perceiving the whole story through Jack’s eyes we witness not only the gradation of the mutually shared sexual tension between him and Julie, but also the initial moment of Jack’s own physical maturity at the novel’s climax. With an act of incest with Julie he definitely abandons the area of childhood and takes a step into the adult world, which McEwan accents with the fact that right after Jack’s and Julie’s sex, the children are confronted with both the revelation of their mother’s grave in the basement and the arrival of the police. Malcolm emphasizes the strong polarization of *The Cement Garden*, where the male and female world confronts hugely (p. 58): in that sense, Jack does not have any other option but to connect himself with Julie and complete the process.

As mentioned before, the division between male and female roles in the novel is heavily marked. Although Jack himself asserts his father to be of a little importance to him, in fact he is influenced by this fatherly figure much more than he thinks: at the beginning, during the scene of cementing the garden with his father, he discovers that he actually enjoys this kind of masculine labour and admits that “for once [he] felt at ease with him” (p. 17). In the surroundings of the family, where their relationship was influenced by the unconscious rivalry, he often allied himself with Julie, but in the solitude of the garden Jack feels the connection to him. This particular division in a way precedes the further development and establishes this certain “parallel microcosm”, that is the family, an area with a complicated internal relationships between its members.

He is reminded by Sue that they both – he and their father - share similar characteristics, and although he protests against it, he unconsciously adapts his role in the family, with Julie in the role of mother. The process itself is rather painful though, filled with extreme displays of his immaturity: physically, starting with the rampant acne that he cannot control anyhow and ending with the masturbation, that gradually loses its initial attraction and begins to be nothing more but an obsessive, somehow sterile and in the end tedious habit. However, the displays of his immature psyche, expressed mainly by the various negative qualities that he unconsciously learnt from his

father and that he often deliberately misuses in order to maintain power between his siblings, are more relevant: in that sense McEwan appears to be rather critical of this “traditional male behaviour” (p. 63), as Malcolm has put it.

Conclusion

In my thesis I have introduced Ian McEwan as a prominent writer of contemporary British fiction, a public figure and, inter alia, a holder of the Man Booker Prize, as well as many others. McEwan was blessed with critical acclaim from the very beginning of his career - even the first collection that he wrote, *First Love, Last Rites*, was awarded by a prize – and he has never had to seek for publishers very hard. The controversial character of his fiction, the taboo thematics and elegance with which he is able to capture the more outrageous sides of human psyche, certainly contributed to a specific fascination by McEwan's writing to some extent, and compelled steady attention of both critics and readers to his works.

I have described a concept of “postmodernism” and have pointed out certain aspects that connect McEwan with this phenomenon; a particular “rootlessness” of his characters that is expressed by their alienation from the society - partly by the fact that they differ from what would normally be called “normal”, whether in a physical or psychological way, and partly by the actual, *local* alienation; a disruption of the chronology; the fact that McEwan's narrators are often unreliable, glossing the story from their 1st person perspective; or the absurd nature of part of his work.

My aim was to provide an analysis of the issue of irrationality in his three early works. As McEwan himself acknowledged, he perceives this phenomenon as one of the fundamental forces in human life, a stimulus that is behind every action which we take. This is reflected in his fiction in various ways – we, as beings that live in a civilized society and are social ourselves, grow, develop and gain knowledge by the interaction with other beings. The interaction is an important process, because it largely contributes to the character that we obtain over time; and if this process is distorted anyway, the consequences can be immense. Thus McEwan confronts the characters of *First Love*, *Last Rites*, *In Between the Sheets* and *The Cement Garden* with people that are to change their lives forever, with situations that force *these* people to behave the way they behave. Nobody is spared in this never-ending fight between rational and irrational – certainly not women, who end as victims of various individuals or, at best, their own lives. Surely not men, who, believing sweet talk of women, fall into their traps; not even children can escape these omnipresent forces, growing into world that lost its innocence a long time ago.

I have attempted to interpret these themes – that is the complexity of male – female relationships, the issue of child maturation, a theme of sexuality and its possible “corruption” and, in case of *The Cement Garden*, the problem of objectivity and its link with the protagonist Jack – with respect to selected stories from both collections, and to the novel itself. I worked with several texts which set a base for my close readings, and then I concluded with my findings and commented on them briefly.

I do not consider the nickname that Ian McEwan was given – “Ian Macabre” – relevant. Surely the things he writes about are cruel and often distasteful; after all, there is a small chance that you will feel better after you’ve read them. But this is not macabre. This is just people, forming the relationships and ruining them again. Influencing and letting themselves be influenced. Living their lives.

Notes

¹ According to Sigmund Freud, forming of a composed and moral personality is a long-term process. We are born with basically no morals at all, and it is the interactions with the other people, primarily with our parents, that help us to develop superego, the conscience. Without these conditions being fulfilled, we are unable to control the primary, aggressive and sexual urges of the id, and the deviousness of the ego that has a contact with reality, but no morals whatsoever. Lahey, p. 463.

² Freud's "developmental theory" presents a process of a child's development as a system of developmental stages (i. e. Oral Stage, Anal Stage, Phallic Stage, Latency Stage, Genital Stage). He stresses the importance of sexuality in such development and claims the opposite-sex parent the first sexual object in the child's life (the terms "Oedipus complex" and "Electra complex" are used in this context). The sexual desires of the child are consequently suppressed by his/her identification with the same-sex parent and the next stage can be entered (i. e. the Latency Stage). Lahey, p. 464 - p. 467.

³ "identification" - Freud assigns the ability to develop a superego, that is conscience and a morale, to a child's "imitation" of the individuals that he or she considers successful – the adult authorities. Although Freud stresses the importance of parental figures in the child's development – the parents are usually the first authorities in the child's life -, he suggests that we tend to behave accordingly the individuals that we consider successful "in gaining satisfaction from life" (Lahey, p. 466) - in a broader sense, thus, the society or popculture with its popular or glorified figures. Lahey, p. 466.

⁴ "Oedipus complex" - the term was borrowed from Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex*; Freud's theory says that as the first step in a development of a male, a boy possesses an unconscious desire to kill his father and connect sexually with his mother. However, the desire being unconscious, it is being blocked from the boy's consciousness; as a result, the dissatisfied boy

starts to fear his father, knowing that the father would be angry if he knew about these desirous feelings. The final step in the process of the boy's maturation arrives when the boy suppresses the feelings of desire and, in order to not make his father angry, he identifies with him. Lahey, p. 466.

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