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Bakalářská práce

Prostředí románů Iana McEwana The Environment of Ian McEwan's Novels

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Abstract

The bachelor thesis focuses on the analysis of the environment in the novels of the significant contemporary British prose writer Ian McEwan, primarily it focuses on his works *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, and *Amsterdam*. Through the interpretation of the primary texts, the work attempts to capture the symbolic image of the postmodern world in the environment of a European city in contrast to the closed world of the house from McEwan's first novel.

Anotace

Práce se zaměří na analýzu prostředí románů významného současného britského prozaika Iana McEwana, především na jeho díla *Betonová zahrada* (*The Cement Garden*), *Cizinci ve městě* (*The Comfort of Strangers*) a *Amsterdam*. Prostřednictvím interpretace primárních textů se práce pokusí vystihnout symbolický obraz postmoderního světa v prostředí evropského velkoměsta v kontrastu s uzavřeným světem domu z prvního McEwanova románu.

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1. Postmodern Age

Nowadays we can find a lot of significant authors born after the year 1945. However, it is really hard to discover some common features in their works, because each of them has their own individual style of writing which can be often seen from different points of view and therefore can be interpreted in several ways. This only hardly describable attribute of writing style can be conceived as a spin-off of post-structuralism for this stream considers the meaning the author intended as the secondary one to the meaning the reader perceives. Post-structural texts do not have one single meaning or purpose. Correspondingly, McEwan's work can be seen as a descendant of the Angry young men generation of the late 1950s because his aims and thoughts are similar to other contemporary writers *"who present mordant, even vicious, views of modern society. The Angry young men repudiated and ridiculed tradition and, simultaneously, also questioned, in usually angry terms, the new society that emerged in postwar England, producing such works as Kingsley Amis's Lucky Jim (1945), John Braine's Room at the Top (1957), John Osborne's Look Back in Anger (1957), and Alan Sillitoe's Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1960). Cynical, rude, boisterous, these novelists and their antiheroes demonstrated a particular bitterness against outmoded political values."*¹ Because of that, it is difficult to categorize McEwan's work into a particular place and time, and McEwan himself wishes not to be connected with any particular literary movement as he said: *"I know lots of writers and I like them as people, and there are certain of their works, their novels, stories, that I like, but I certainly can't locate myself inside any shared, any sort of community taste, aesthetic ambition or critical position or anything else. I don't really feel part of anything at all."*² Though, with a certain simplification we can still find some features which are more or less common for the young authors of the second half of the 20th century, although they are showing them in different extent and manner. After all, we can perhaps consider his work as *postmodern*.

¹ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 3

² SLAY, J., p. 4

The postmodern authors generally reject the previous concept of style writing, their innovative writing style can be marked as “open minded” for most of them are picturing, in new and shocking ways, the aspects of reality which had not been dealt with in former British literature. A great deal of main postmodern theme concerns the reverse side of the British society, the people on the edge and their breaking of the authority of any kind. This tendency to write about extraordinary topics can be understood as a need to face outward from the centre. It strongly contrasts with the opposite motivation of the mainstream authors to stick to the old writing style as usual. Therefore the breaking of authority does not occur only in the narration but also in the manner of the narration. This modern and postmodern narration is considered to be very subjective, however it is not a manner of subjectivity of a real world which is described, it is rather a depiction of the reality which is perceived individually. This specific narration voice fits exactly to Ian McEwan.

Many postmodern authors find inspiration not only in the past or contemporary world around them but they also gain the topics from their own experience. In McEwan’s works we can certainly identify several autobiographical features such as travelling to Venice in *The Comfort of Strangers* or strolls in the countryside in *Amsterdam*.

For postmodern English literature, the essential features are the will to experiment with writing, interaction of other texts in literature, and finding an inspiration in foreign pieces. Sometimes the author himself is one of the main characters; he addresses the reader and makes comments. When the narrator speaks in the third person, he usually acts like an omniscient raconteur who is able to describe even the most internal feelings, emotions, and intentions of the main protagonists. The texts usually lack unity, the story is hardly ever told continuously from the beginning to the end. It is rather split into fragments and we can often meet retrospective narration there. The fact that the text or different plots within the texts are fragmented and permeated with other situations only adds the dynamics to the narration.

This retrospective narration has often conscious sense for nostalgia for the past and lament connected with feeling of loss and gloom. It is also associated with a lot of

contrasts such as contrary psychology of the protagonists and their complicated relationships, alternation of dreams and reality, expectations and subsequent disillusion, growth and decay, slow time flow and sudden plot twists.

2. Introduction of Ian McEwan

Ian McEwan is a British contemporary writer of short stories, novels, screenplays, children's stories and a libretto. Since he was awarded the *Somerset Maugham Award* in 1976, he has been a leading personality of his generation including Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro. His motives alternate between incest, murder, violence, sadomasochism and feminism, includes rebelling against limiting and conventional societies and therefore his writing has been called "*the art of unease*"³. The disturbing subject matter he writes about earned him the title *Ian McAbre*.

2.1. Childhood and Life

Ian Russell McEwan was born on 21st June 1948 to David McEwan and Rose Lilian (Moore) McEwan in Aldershot, Hampshire. His mother already had two children from previous marriage when she married David McEwan. Her former husband died in World War II. Because of big age differences between him and his step-siblings, he has always thought about himself as an only child. His father was a soldier in British Army so Ian spent much of his childhood abroad, in Singapore and Libya, in the military camps. He recollects this period as "*secure and content if a bit overprotected*"⁴. From this could maybe rise the desire for freedom, and the feeling of being the only child could give birth to the idea of creation different inter-sibling relationships in his first novel *The Cement Garden*.

At the age of 11 he was sent to a boarding school Woolverstone Hall in Suffolk. He recollects this time as "*just empty*"⁵ which can be taken as another inspirational seed

³ QUIGLEY, M. M., *Ian McEwan*. Kastan, D. S., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. Vol. 3. OUP 2006. p. 436

⁴ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 1

⁵ SLAY, J., p. 1

in his later works. As a child bound by rules of the school he was rather bored, and therefore he doesn't find any interesting experience worth remembering; that is maybe why his children characters are forced by circumstances to behave as adults because he considers the time spent after school as more important than the time he was educated. Then the University of Sussex in Brighton followed. That is where he focused on French and English Literature and was honored by B.A. degree in English in 1970. One year later he reached his M. A. degree at the University of East Anglia where he was educated under auspices of famous literary experts Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson. This was also the time when he achieved his first big success as a writer by assembling his academic thesis into a collection *First Love, Last Rites*. A few years later, after publishing another collection of short stories and two novels, he was named one of the Twenty Best Young British Novelists by *Granta*.

After finishing his studies he came through his hippie period of time and trailed with other companions to Afghanistan – “a period he remembers as long, long weeks of waiting. Boredom and smoking hash in huge quantities without any real point”⁶. This can be also considered as a parallel between his experience and the children hanging around doing almost nothing during the long hot summer in *The Cement Garden*.

In 1982 an alternative healer and astrologer Penny Allen became his wife. She brought two daughters from previous marriage into Ian's life and later gave birth to their two sons. Nowadays, Ian McEwan lives in Oxford in England with his family, and he teaches creative writing at the University of East Anglia. Occasionally he enjoys hiking, as well as one of the main protagonists in the novel *Amsterdam*, and tennis.

2.2. Literary Works and Awards

As it is mentioned above, McEwan's first novel *First Loves, Last Rites* from 1975 earned him the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976. For this and the second collection of short stories *In Between the Sheets, and other stories* from 1978 the typical feature is the taboo erotic topics, as well as for his first novel *The Cement Garden* published in 1978, adapted for film in 1993 and directed by Andrew Birkin. The second novel from

⁶ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 2

1981 is called *The Comfort of Strangers* and it carries the same confrontation of innocence with perverse eroticism and violence as the previous works. McEwan was shortlisted for Booker prize in 1981 for this novel and it was adapted for film in 1991 by Harold Pinter. The third novel *Child in Time*, published in 1987 and honored by the Whitbread Award in the same year, captures a story about parents whom somebody steals their only child. Here the taboo motives aren't so obvious, more likely the story represents a parallel between death and rebirth. It also won the Prix Fémina Etranger in 1993 and Germany's Shakespeare Prize in 1999. Another novel *The Innocent*, which came out in 1990, represents a psychological study of crime and punishment. Next novel published in 1992 is *Black Dogs* where a young man tries to stitch together his family's memoirs. *Enduring Love*, 1998, "creates a central conflict – theology versus science"⁷. Other one word titled novels, *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005), "demonstrate McEwan's ability to assimilate vast quantities of knowledge for the benefit of his fiction."⁸ For the novel *Amsterdam* he deserved the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and his novel *Atonement* received the WH Smith Literary Award in 2002, National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award in 2003, Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction in 2003, and the Santiago Prize for the European Novel in 2004. McEwan also won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for the novel *Saturday*, and his novel *On Chesil Beach* was named Galaxy Book of the Year at the 2008 British Book Awards. In addition, "Ian McEwan has been named the Reader's Digest Author of the Year for 2008, the 2010 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, and in 2011 was awarded the Jerusalem Prize"⁹. The last but one novel is called *Solar* and it was published in 2010. His newest novel is *Sweet Tooth*, published in 2012.

Most of these works are not suitable for children so it is not surprising that there is only one book, among quite a lot of publications, which is designed for child readers. It is *The Daydreamer* from 1994.

⁷ QUIGLEY, M. M., *Ian McEwan*. Kastan, D. S., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. Vol. 3. OUP 2006. p. 438

⁸ QUIGLEY, M. M., p. 438

⁹ ROBERTS, Ryan. *Ian McEwan Webside* [online]. last revision 21st of December 2012 [cit. 2013-01-06]. < <http://www.ianmcewan.com/>>.

McEwan is also an author of screenplays such as *Last Day of Summer* (1948) which is based on one of his short stories; *The Innocent* (1993) which is adapted from his novel; and he cooperated on *Sour Sweet* (1989) with Mike Newell.

As an author of plays Ian McEwan is known for *Conversation with a Cupboardman* (1975), *The Imitation Game: Three Plays for Television* (including *Jack Flea's Celebration*, *Solid Geometry* and *The Imitation Game*), *Or Shall we Die: An Oratorio* (1983), *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1985), *Strangers* (1989) and *The Good Son* (1993).

McEwan is also a contributor to periodicals and literary journals, including *Guardian*, *New American Review*, *New Review*, *Radio Times*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Transatlantic Review*, and *Tri-Quarterly*.

2.3. Leading Figures

After assembling the characteristics of postmodern fiction mentioned above we can say that Ian McEwan's writing belongs to this postmodern era. In his works he creates controversial characters of contemporary society. On the first sight these characters seem to be living normal everyday life, but McEwan lets us take a look deep inside their world and see the dark desires which are hidden beneath their ordinary appearance. *"His characters – incestuous siblings, heartbroken gorillas, sadomasochistic lovers, infatuated prime ministers, corpse dismemberers – play the depraved lovers games of a modern wasteland, hoping that the procurement of any sustaining relationship can provide refuge from the chaos and turmoil of their very lives and worlds."*¹⁰ Nevertheless it does not mean that McEwan creates only deviants and psychopaths. These characters represent ordinary people through whom McEwan aims to shock and disgust the reader in order to give them a message *"which is forcing them to gaze directly into the horrors of contemporary society."*¹¹ McEwan's heroes *"are the embodiments of our neighbors, our acquaintances, ourselves."*¹²

The selection of the protagonists in McEwan's novels raises an important question: Who determines what is normal and where exactly does the border of normality and

¹⁰ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 1

¹¹ SLAY, J., p. 6

¹² SLAY, J., p. 7

abnormality lie? If we agree to the idea that the line of normality is set by moral and ethical values of the society, then we must also recognize that this line is variable as well as the society that is constantly evolving. McEwan indirectly, but perhaps intentionally, touches this issue in his novels. Therefore he chooses ordinary people and puts them into a conflict with the ethical standards of the society, in order to draw attention to the fact that such people and situations occur more and more and that their actions should not necessarily be considered bad seeing them from certain points of view. Of course McEwan maximizes these situations and leads them to the extremes so that the intention is easily understandable. He also might be pointing out the imbalance of both sexes in the society and by his novels he is trying to show that “...*the perversions [...] often occur as a result of the obsessions that flourish in a patriarchal world.*”¹³

2.4. Lethargic Environment

Taking into account the extraordinariness of the central figures, it is almost unbelievable that McEwan sets these heroes into such an everyday environment. However, these exact ordinary settings create the perfect parallels between the bizarreness and the mundane. Placements such as the suburb of industrial town in *The Cement Garden*, convoluted streets of foreign city in *The Comfort of Strangers* and the atmosphere of corrupted government in *Amsterdam* are not inherently lethargic as the title of this subchapter says. Only with the circumstances of the main protagonists the environment receives the coat of lethargy. The characters find themselves in certain life situations which would make most people helpless and lost. However, in McEwan's works the characters are handling these situations with remarkable lightness and ease as though nothing special happens. The reader almost gets the feeling that this is the right way of handling the difficult situations. For example in *The Cement Garden* the children are left without supervision in their house during a long hot summer. Since they have no duties and nothing much to do throughout the day they easily sink into indifference, apathy, and laxness of their new lethargic world, where as if the time stands still. This way they are slowly and maybe unknowingly

¹³ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996. p. 73

separating themselves from the outside world - from the place where the chaotic conventional society governs. The main protagonists are simply tainted by "the disquieting venues of our everyday lives."¹⁴

3. The Cement Garden Interpretation: Its Symbolic Reflection in Modern Urban Environment

The Cement Garden is Ian McEwan's first novel published in 1978 and since then it has been the subject matter of many and many literature reviews and one film adaptation in 1993. What is it that is so appealing about this story that past and present readers let themselves pull into the plot and cannot stop reading it till the end? The cover of the book reads it's "darkly impressive" and that is the thing that attracts us to this not very long novel, yet it still manages to tell everything important about the imperfection of contemporary city society. This repulsive, decaying, and shocking narration is served to the reader through words of a teenage boy, Jack, with lightness and carelessness of normal everyday life.

3.1. Story Line

In short, the main plot is about four children whose parents pass away and leave their children at the mercy of their own guardianship. In order to avoid being taken to the orphanage, the children bury their dead mother into a truck full of cement and hide her in the cellar of their house. After they are relieved of the adult supervision they slowly start to create their own isolated world in the middle of not a very busy city. The story about abandoned children, forced to guide themselves without a help of any adult, has been the topic of different books before (e.g. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding) however, "where other writers find savagery and violence beneath the trappings of civilization, McEwan discovers a vast and aching nothingness."¹⁵ This two months long isolation is soaked through with nothingness and ordinariness in which they are monotonously wandering, lingering, and at some point miserably existing. During this long, hot, and deadening summer they fall into incestuous relationship

¹⁴ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996. Preface

¹⁵ SLAY, J., p. 37

(Jack and the oldest one, Julie) and the youngest one starts to experiment with transvestitism.

3.2. Main theme: isolation

The initial trigger of the unusual mental and physical isolation of the main protagonists is paradoxically the suddenly gained freedom. Although at first it seems that the children will be enjoying this independence, at the end it is rather damaging and poisoning. As the author himself says: *"I had no doubt that my children too would suffer from, rather than exalt in, their freedom"*¹⁶ It only causes them incredible stagnation and freezing up in time.

In fact, the surroundings in which the whole plot is settled has great dispositions at becoming isolated and slowly decaying home, even before everything happens. First there is their own house situated on the edge of a street *"[...] once [...] full of houses. Now it stood on empty land [...] and the other houses were knocked down for a motorway they had never built."*¹⁷ Jack describes the house as a sort of forsaken and mysterious building. *"Our house was old and large. It was built to look a little like a castle, with thick walls, squat windows and crenellations above the front door. Seen from across the road it looked like the face of someone concentrating, trying to remember."*¹⁸ The narrator also lets us in the abandoned prefabs, which is in his words *"...a place of no order, everything had gone."*¹⁹ Nevertheless, whether he knew it at that time or not, his and his siblings' life was about to turn into the very *"place of no order"* as well. We can consider this example as the intention of the author to put the environment on symbolic terms in relation to the whole novel and its plot development. Even when the family is still complete we can observe signs of separation from the outside world mediated by the overprotective parents. The children were not allowed to bring any friends home and not a single one of the family relatives ever visited their house. This can be evidently seen on the part where the parents are exaggeratedly preparing the children for being home alone. *"Father, in his*

¹⁶ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 37

¹⁷ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 23

¹⁸ McEWAN, I., p. 24

¹⁹ McEWAN, I., p. 40

turn, told us what to do if someone knocked at the front door, though, of course, no one had ever knocked at the front door.”²⁰

This isolation is closely related to the perception of time flow in the novel. Throughout the whole story it seems that the time inside the children’s community goes a lot more slowly than the time outside of it. The heavy and dense air of the really hot summer adds the laziness to the dull atmosphere of the time flow represented mainly by the constant urge to sleep. The only time the reader conceives a feeling that the time runs normally again (except for the very beginning of the story) is when the children decide to clean the house finally. *“As far as I was concerned there was not much point in getting up. There was nothing particularly interesting to eat, and I was the only one with nothing to do. [...] I woke in the late morning, masturbated and dozed off again. [...] Some afternoons I fell asleep in the armchair even though I had only been awake a couple of hours.”²¹* In contrary to this description of Jack’s daily routine we can put his suddenly different attitude and feelings about the physical work in the form of cleaning. *“...Julie and Sue tidied up the living room and I went outside to clean the windows. I saw my sisters, blurred by a film of water, moving all the furniture into the centre of the room and for the first time in weeks I was happy.”* That is when the reader senses a complete reversal in the concept of time of the novel. The time is suddenly dynamic which is probably caused by the children moving actively all at once.

3.3. Haunting Nature

The first parent to die is the despotic father. His appearance is projected only at the beginning of the novel but his influence can be sensed throughout the whole story. After his first heart attack he decides to cover the garden with cement perhaps to avoid its slow decaying in the future when there will be no one to take care of it. It is obvious that the father really fancies the garden as his own *“special world”*, therefore the reader may get the impression that it is more important for him than the family members whom he only orders and mocks. The second and possibly more relevant reason for concreting the garden is the permanently re-growing weed. This weed

²⁰ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 69

²¹ McEWAN, I., p. 84-85

symbolizes a haunting nature as something that is beyond the father's authority and therefore he is determined to beat it. In this passage McEwan shows on a smaller scale what is happening everywhere in the modern urban society – systematic devastation of nature with concrete. This invincible nature is guiding us through the whole novel and it is a source of more and more obvious analogies. Jack's father could be likened with this powerful modern society for his big authority which Jack is indirectly trying to bring closer to us. The group of children isolated in their own world represents the nature which surrounds us. In addition the father, as a representative of the contemporary society, is affecting the children in the same way as the contemporary society is affecting the surrounding life of the nature. We can recognize certain parallels between the children's natural pure behavior and the haunting nature which is also acting according to its own basics. Simultaneously both the nature and the children are living inside another bigger and more powerful world. McEwan is putting two different yet closely related concepts of reality at the same position. The first is the children's way of existence and the conventions trying to seize them; and the second concept is the real world planning to take over the omnipresent nature. By holding our attention on the slowly decaying house with the children lingering inside McEwan is actually sending us a message which concerns the second concept of our real world. This present-day world is systematically destroying the nature, which is a part of the world itself, by trying to completely seize control over the wildlife. In our world the nature symbolizes something that has been here for a long time, has its own way of living – without any rules or sophisticated future plan, just like the children have. Before their parents' deaths, the children were bound by the rules of the society around them but from the moment they are free of any authority they seem to be acting naturally just like the nature in the real world is behaving. This image of the children no longer bound by the authority is clearly shown in the passage where they are left home alone for one day because of their parents' obligation to go to a funeral. *"We were more interested in the fact that we were to be left alone in the house in charge of Tom for most of the day."*²²[...] *"It was no more than a few hours, but this*

²² McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 69

time seemed to occupy a whole stretch of my childhood."²³ This was probably the time when Jack and the others first realized how it felt to be free of any supervision. Generally we can call this struggle, whether talking about the children in the novel or the whole humanity in the real world, as an effort of some authority suppressing the basic essence of being. The children in McEwan's novel – behaving according to their own basics - are corresponding to the nature which created everything at the beginning, therefore created the man as well and yet the human kind is trying to destroy it thus is paradoxically destroying itself – its basic essence of being. Peter Childs accurately depicts the issues of omnipresent nature in his chapter of *The Fiction of Ian McEwan* by quoting Horace: "You can drive out nature with a pitchfork but it'll keep coming back."²⁴ This quotation simply shows that the nature is everlasting. As long as the Earth exist the nature will always be here as well as the children in the novel will always feel their inner wild needs no matter how hard the authority tries to suppress them.

3.4. Struggle for Authority

The narrator is aware of his father's bad temper and that is why this first death is mentioned as if by the way. "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."²⁵ The fact that there is no closer relationship between Jack and his father is not so hard to understand. What is more interesting is the role which the father plays in Jack's life. Even though Jack is not so fond of his father he is certainly attracted by his father's confident position in the family. By repeating phrases, which he has heard many times in their house, such as "Out of the question." and "That's the end of it!" Jack is picturing himself as the leading person during the incestuous game with his siblings. We can consider this behavior as a particular identification with his father in spite of their bad relationship. In other situation Jack is trying to look stronger in front of his father as they are putting down the bags of cement into the cellar. "My father leaned with one hand against the wall breathing heavily. Deliberately,

²³ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 70

²⁴ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 33

²⁵ McEWAN, I., p. 9

*I breathed as lightly as I could, through my nose, even though it made me feel faint.*²⁶

Taking into account Jack's often contradictory attitudes towards his father it is rather hard to discover how Jack really feels about him. One time we can observe a certain kind of admiration in Jack's conduct; he has a need to imitate his father's actions which could signalize some form of identification but on the other hand the coldness and obviousness with which he deals with his father's death is almost outrageous. *"I did not have a thought in my head as I picked up the plank and carefully smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete."*²⁷ Here we can see that Jack could easily get rid of a memory of his father even though it was just an expression in the concrete. In this passage we can again observe parallels between Jack freeing himself from the last bits of the authority in the form of his father, as a representative of the urban life, and the returning nature as mentioned above.

On another similar situation we can witness perhaps an effort to erase any associations of his father when Jack is destroying the concrete path which he helped to build. He finds an old hammer in a burnt unused house and decides to smash the path which is *"serving no purpose"*²⁸ according to his own words. Jack's aggression towards the concrete which is reminding him of his father can be considered as a suppression of previous authority. After his father's death Jack is beginning to feel a lot more confident than before. He realizes his uniqueness and the absence of the dominance of his father is encouraging his defiance towards almost every established rule, for example the basics of hygiene: *"I no longer washed my face or hair or cut my nails or took baths. I gave up brushing my teeth. In her quiet way my mother reprovved me continuously, but I now felt proudly beyond her control. If people really liked me, I argued, they would take me as I was."*²⁹ Here almost as if Jack was transforming into the wild nature; allowing himself to simply exist without any conscious interventions. This is happening in the time when the reader already feels that the mother is going to die soon because of her sickness, which is evident from the way the narrator is describing her weak appearance. *"One hand was in her lap, the other on the table, the*

²⁶ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 14

²⁷ McEWAN, I., p. 19

²⁸ McEWAN, I., p. 41

²⁹ McEWAN, I., p. 21

arm crooked as if ready to receive her head. Near her was a squat black bottle which contained her pills. Her face mixed Julie's features with Sue's, as though she were their child. The skin was smooth and taut over the fine cheekbones. Each morning she painted on her lips a perfect bow in deepest red. But her eyes, set in dark skin wrinkled like a peach stone, were sunk so far into her skull she seemed to stare out from a deep well. She stroked the thick, dark curls at the back of her head. On some mornings I would find a nest of her hair floating in the toilet."³⁰ Jack is already thinking about who is going to be in charge after his mother's death and it almost appears that this concern occupies his mind even more after his mother expresses the wish for Julie and Jack to take care of everything together after she passes away. "McEwan does not suggest that if adults are removed, children revert to any kind of 'savage' state but that they will adapt, and adapt to, the role models that the removed adults provided for them."³¹ Peter Childs implies the changes that happened to the children in terms of social roles after they lost both of the parents. Jack and Julie jumped into adulthood literally overnight and took over the roles that they had been observing on their parents every day. Jack as a male member of the family naturally assumes the paternal role and Julie as the oldest one feels that the responsibility lies on her and therefore takes up the role of the mother. However the new roles are not even remotely identical with the roles of the children's parents. Jack's father had an undeniable control over the family and the mother who never opposed him. On that account Jack is surprised how spontaneously Julie slips into the mother leading position. After the children are free of the parents control their inner forces are no longer suppressed as Ian Hamilton is showing in his work: "...in the nuclear family the kind of forces that are being suppressed – the oedipal, incestuous forces – are also paradoxically the very forces which keep the family together. So if you remove the controls, you have a ripe anarchy in which the oedipal and the incestuous are the definitive emotions."³² Jack and Julie have strong relationship despite the fact that both of them want to have some kind of authority over the other. They have always been sexually attracted to each other and now this attraction is even more supported by Jack's oedipal force

³⁰ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 25

³¹ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 34

³² CHILDS, P. p. 35

inside him. After all, at the very beginning of the story Jack admits that he helped his father on his way to death. Jack suddenly perceives his sister differently than before; this might be caused by Tom, the youngest child, who sees Julie as his mother and follows her everywhere. Since Tom is Jack's brother, Jack can feel similarly about her to some extent. *"At his mother's death, Jack is seeking a replacement who will also be all women to him, as his mother was when he was a child. In Julie he therefore seeks mother, sister and lover."*³³ Here comes the situation about which Ian Hamilton is suggesting that *"the oedipal and incestuous are identical."*³⁴

3.5. Reflection of Contemporary Society and its Taboos

As we have seen in the previous chapters, there are many issues connected with contemporary society in this novel. McEwan is demonstrating the artificiality, corruption and absurdity of our modern society to contrast with *The Cement Garden's* children and their wild nature. Let us now have a look at some of the most evident patterns of the urban life in this novel.

Before the parents' deaths the family worked 'normally' (if we leave aside the incestuous game) according to the common conventions and rules of the society. The children went to school every day and obeyed the parents. The mother's death started the lapse into lethargy which could not happen on more convenient day than the last day of the school. This death symbolizes the end of the last rests of the supervision. It can be understood as an end of the old life, and simultaneously the oncoming summer can represent a beginning of the new life. This last school day connected with the death of the mother creates the perfect border between the past and present, the captivity and freedom. Although it may seem that the idea of hiding the death of their mother came from the children's heads, it was actually the mother herself who slipped the thought to them on her death-bed. *"They'll come and put Tom in care, and perhaps you and Susan too. Julie wouldn't stay here by herself. So the house would stand empty, the word would get around and it wouldn't be long before*

³³ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p 35

³⁴ CHILDS, P., p. 35

people would be breaking in, taking things, smashing everything up.”³⁵ In relation to the previous chapter about authority represented mainly by the father, we can agree that the mother did not play such an authoritative role but rather the typical loving and caring parent. Among other things we can recognize the concern about interruption of the house isolation in this passage. As it is proved later in the novel, it was never the mother’s intention to go to a hospital, therefore we can consider the fact that she prepared her children to take care of themselves and enable them the access to the money account as a part of the plan that followed. Of course we cannot suggest that she actually knew that her body would end up in the cellar, this part belongs to her children and that is where McEwan is serving maybe the most appalling taboo for us. Children hiding their dead mother encased with cement in the middle of the basement. This sentence itself is bizarre enough but what is even more outrageous is the fact that it was practically the society who drove the children to such an act. While burying their mother the narrator finds himself in such state of mind where he is not sure whether what they are doing is normal. *“Nor could I think whether what we had done was an ordinary thing to do, understandable even if it had been a mistake, or something so strange that if it was ever found out it would be the headline of every newspaper in the country.”*³⁶ By this contradiction and confusion McEwan casually manages to eliminate the borders between right and wrong and commonality and oddity. The children knew that if they exposed the situation to the public they would have been separated and probably taken to an orphanage. Therefore they decided to carry on with their lives as if nothing had happened and they were surprisingly not doing so badly on their own. *John Carey* suggests that *“...the novel ought perhaps less to make the reader question the children’s behavior than the officious response society makes to personal crises, intent on enforcing its own taboos and familiarity that is felt by the bereaved and the abandoned...”*³⁷

The youngest member of the family, Tom, represents a very shapeable character in terms of the taboos portrayed by the novel. Although he is already six years old, after the mother’s death he regresses into his baby period and seeks a new mother in his

³⁵ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 51

³⁶ McEWAN, I., p. 88-89

³⁷ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 36

sister Julie. Tom clearly misses his mother and by acting like a baby he tries to justify his new attitude towards Julie. It also illustrates his personal way how to deal with the loss. Nobody finds his behavior strange enough to forbid it therefore this game continues with the acceptance of the rest of the children.

Another Tom's deviation from the 'normality' comes in the form of transvestitism. He starts to enjoy being dressed like a girl and his sisters like it as much as he. Tom impersonates a doll which his sisters can dress and comb according to their wishes. However Jack's feelings about this new game are rather mixed. When Jack is observing the whole situation he mentions his brother as '*a little girl*' thus displays his suspicion that it might be somebody else. Later he confirms his confusion by saying: "*Of course, as soon as the girl spoke I knew it was Tom.*"³⁸ Although he realized it had actually been his brother hidden underneath the wig and the dress he suddenly saw Tom from an entirely different perspective. "*But I was looking at another person, someone who could expect a life quite different from Tom's. I was excited and scared.*"³⁹ The fact that Jack felt excited and scared at the same time only meant that he did not condemn this turnover entirely. He did not even defend himself as much as he would in other situation when Sue put a blue ribbon around his head. It was an act of welcoming him in their '*girls*' community which Jack obviously wanted to be a part of. "*If I took it off now I would become a spectator again, I would have to decide on an attitude to what was going on.*"⁴⁰ In the next citation we can recognize that McEwan does not consider transvestitism as some kind of extraordinary exception of the common life, contrarily he indirectly suggest this behavior as natural. "*Quite often now Tom played in the street in Sue's skirt. None of the other children teased him like I thought they would. They did not even seem to notice.*"⁴¹

In addition these changes which accompany the children have a function of some kind of a surface that covers the real terrors of their lives. "*The real horrors are there but smoothly covered by a banal, ordinary facade.*"⁴² Tom presents himself as an infant

³⁸ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 77

³⁹ McEWAN, I., p. 77

⁴⁰ McEWAN, I., p. 78

⁴¹ McEWAN, I., p. 86

⁴² SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 40

or transvestite, Sue grieves for her mother in form of private writing or reading, Jack struggles with his appearance which separates him a little from the others and Julie tries to date a strange man Derek. During the whole novel Jack feels rather sexual confusion towards Julie and even though she is repelled by his neglected appearance at first, she prefers him to her boyfriend in the end. This incest culminating at the very end of the novel, thus at the end of their isolation, is probably considered as one of the most alarming taboos of the story. However in this passage we again meet McEwan's art of describing an outrageous topic easily as if it is normal everyday circumstance. *"Incest in this novel is nothing more than a need to share, a need to love."*⁴³

In the following citation we can see another sign of contemporary society requirements. *"It might have been my mother's aunt, or my father's, or it might have been an uncle. Exactly who had died was not discussed, probably because the death meant very little to our parents. Certainly it meant nothing to us children."*⁴⁴ Even though the parents did not have close relationship with the relatives they were obligated to attend the funeral; they even might have been total strangers to them yet related by the same name.

3.6. Outside World Intrusion

As we have already discovered the environment of this novel consists in major isolation. However where there is an isolation, there must be some kind of intrusion sooner or later as well. Although the emancipation meant an adventure and freedom for the children at first, they soon discovered that they were only wandering around in boredom, nothingness and apathy. As *Jack Slay* is suggesting in his work *"...they soon wish for a return to the way things were, a return to parents and order..."* which will be achieved at the end of the novel. It is not actually said what happens to the children after the authorities are informed about them but the feeling of an ending is more than clear. The closing of their guidance is coming to an end together with the long summer. It is mentioned above that the beginning of the summer represents

⁴³ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 46

⁴⁴ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 69

a beginning of a new life and so it is only natural that the summer means the closure as well.

The intrusion of the outside world is mostly represented by Julie's boyfriend Derek. As he starts to spend more time in the house he notices a strange smell coming from the basement. Everybody is being a little secretive when it comes to this topic therefore Derek gains a suspicion. In the end it is him who finds out about everything what has happened plus catches Jack and Julie in one bed and totally disgusted and despised notifies the police. The distinction between Derek's perspective towards these extraordinary events from the perspective of the children marks how truly Derek does not belong among them because *"...disgust and repulsion are reactions of the outside world."*⁴⁵

Another pattern disturbing the balance of the isolated house is the rotting corpse in the cellar or more precisely the sweet weird smell which is slowly filling the entire building. The smell is constantly reminding them of what they have done and it also carries an indication of the imminent consequences. Here we can again find some connection between the pervasive weed and the smell penetrating through a crack in the cement. Jack describes their street and the old prefabs how it has changed during the summer and how the weed is occupying places once made of concrete, bricks and slabs. The parallel is obvious here – as well as the nature is expanding more widely so the rotting 'mother' is forcing her way up to the surface.

The whole summer feels like a dream to the children. Even the reader gets the same impression by reading the book as it is full of sleeping, dreaming and daydreaming. At some point it almost seems as though the children were not able to distinguish between the dream and reality because they are not so scared about what happens when Derek discovers everything; almost as if they were not concern about the consequences because no harm can happen to them in a dream. After all, when the police arrives the novel is finished by Julie saying with relief: *"There![...] wasn't that a lovely sleep."*⁴⁶ This way the long sleep lasting all summer is finally over.

⁴⁵ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 46

⁴⁶ McEWAN, I., *The Cement Garden*. London: Vintage U.K., 1997. p. 138

4. The Comfort of Strangers Interpretation: Its Symbolic Reflection in Modern Urban Environment

Not even the second McEwan's novel escaped from a big wave of criticism. However, it seems that in case of McEwan's arts the more critic reviews the story gets the more popular the story becomes. As *Douglas Dunn* said in *Encounter*: "McEwan's novel offers a kind of negative stimulus: it is to read a story about people one would run a mile from."⁴⁷ We already mentioned in the previous chapters that the main attractions of the stories are the disturbing topics and taboos described by the author as everyday experiences and opportunities. *The Comfort of Strangers* was first published in 1981, despite the contrary reviews it was soon shortlisted for the Booker Prize and in 1990 it was adapted into a film.

4.1. Story Line

The story contains rather strange holiday of unmarried couple, Colin and Mary, who are more likely suffering from their experience than enjoying the time which should be a time of relaxation. The narration takes place in unnamed city, though it is clearly Venice according to the detail depiction, which is so strange and unfamiliar that it makes the couple constantly lost and helpless. Colin and Mary feel very deeply and intimately about each other though they are not passionate as the other couple they meet in the city. Robert and Caroline lives in Venice and as the English couple soon discovers they have rather peculiar relationship. Robert as a consequence of strongly patriarchal upbringing has more than sadistic tendencies and Caroline as loving and dedicated wife lets her husband treat her as he wishes. These horrifying facts are revealed to the couple gradually with constant thread in the voice of the narrator. Randomly or not the two couples are meeting again, and every time Colin and Mary are more affected and sort of infected by the passionate charm of Robert and Caroline. These encounters change Colin's and Mary's relationship, and they are soon caught up in a raw human sexuality although in much less drastic way then Robert and Caroline

⁴⁷ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 72

whose bizarre desire goes so far that it culminates in Colin's sadistic murder while Robert and Caroline make love. The menace of this situation is further strengthened by the fact that Mary, as the only one who could possibly help her lover, is drugged and forced to watch the whole murder.

4.2. Style of Narration

McEwan's very specific language is performed in his novels through no less specific narration style. Whereas *The Cement Garden* was narrated through the eyes and voice of teenage boy, *The Comfort of Strangers'* narration culminates between the point of view of Colin or Mary however it is now a third-person narrative. "*The McEwan voice, introduced in his short stories, hovers inscrutably over the narrative. This voice is detached, but teasing.*"⁴⁸ By 'detached, but teasing' Peter Childs probably means that this narration provides every detail of the story to the reader yet it only reveals the facts that the involved character can observe in that particular moment, i.e. what Colin or Mary can observe. Robert and Caroline do not have any part in the narration and that is why the story peaks in such a shocking ending where the whole scheme is disclosed. Caroline reveals how every step of Colin's and Mary's encounter with Robert was carefully planned and prepared in advance in order to satisfy Robert's and Caroline's deviant desires in the end. Despite the fact that we learn the whole plan at the end of the story, a constant thread can be sensed in the voice of the narrator throughout the novel which makes the narration more dynamic and grading. For example, at the end of the first chapter the way how Colin and Mary leave the hotel room implies something unpleasant in the future or some thread which is waiting for them outside, in the city. "*'Ready?' Colin called. She went inside, closing the french window behind her. She took the key from the bedside table, locked the door, and allowed Colin down the unlit staircase.*"⁴⁹ Also other small but important details, such as the fact that they did not take any maps and they never left the hotel so late and that "*Mary was to attribute much of what followed to this fact*"⁵⁰, indicates some threatening events in the future. This thread in McEwan's voice manages to keep the

⁴⁸ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 46

⁴⁹ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 8

⁵⁰ McEWAN, I., p. 8

reader at attention and expectation of oncoming events. The small details which in the end create the very explosion of the story are served to the reader little by little throughout the novel.

This interpretation of narration through the thoughts and eyes of Colin or Mary is important in connection to their specific intimate relationship. Although they are clearly closely connected to each other they see the events completely separately and there is no shared point of view. *“Indeed, the novel emphasizes this. As they wander the empty streets of the city, Mary inspects mannequins and a bed in a department-store window; Colin passes on to look at a book of carpet samples. Sitting in the square waiting for a coffee, they have quite divergent perspectives on the same world.”*⁵¹

However, there are several moments in the novel when the narration is given not by Colin or Mary’s point of view but from sort of third narrator who is omniscient and provides an insight to those situations which do not include the main protagonists directly yet the situation more or less concerns them both. This may for example relate to the description of a kiosk with maps and the difficulties to find a suitable one. *“Another map was in the form of a badly printed booklet and it was easy, Mary and Colin had found, to get lost as they walked from one page to another.”*⁵²

4.3. Settings

As we already revealed earlier the main environment of the novel is Venice, though the author does not explicitly say it in the book, he later admitted that the visit of the city inspired him in writing a novel. *“Penny Allen and I spent a week in Venice in 1978, at the height of the tourist season, and something of our visit found its way into the book.”*⁵³ The choice of world renowned metropolis suggests that the author followed the pattern of modern urban wasteland similarly as in the first novel. Furthermore and in the opposition to *The Cement Garden* there are two main settings except one within the city: the hotel room and Robert’s and Caroline’s apartment. Besides these two places Colin and Mary occur on several other locations of smaller significance yet they

⁵¹ MALCOLM, D., *Understanding Ian McEwan*. Columbia, SC, 2002. p. 68

⁵² McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 9

⁵³ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 48

still play a certain role in the story; these concern places such as a beach, a bar, a restaurant or the narrow streets of the city.

It seems that since their arrival Colin and Mary spend the most time in their hotel room instead of enjoying the beauties of the city. The reason might be the familiarity and cosiness of the room which represents a safe place for them, a sort of substitute home. They are leaving the hotel room only out of obligation of being on a holiday and the need to eat. The hotel room is perhaps the only place where they actually enjoy the luxuries of being on a holiday; it symbolizes a safe place where they can calmly relax, indulge in their peaceful lovemaking or smoke some marihuana on the balcony which as if increases the slow lethargic perception of their experience. On the contrary every time they leave the hotel for a dinner the narration feels like they are throwing themselves into a great danger of a strange city. Their wandering through the city is interwoven with culmination of extremes; once the city is crowded with people, which as if was taking the air away from the narrow streets, and then the city is abandoned and the stores are closed which feels gloomy and lonely.

An interesting place represents the bar where Robert takes them the first time they meet. They entrust themselves into hands of this stranger after long going around in circles in search of an open restaurant. Robert leads them into his bar where they do not get any food, only wine, however it does not seem to bother them for they are glad to be finally sitting somewhere. Even though the bar is crowded and smoky Colin and Mary soon realize that they appear on a special place without any tourists and thus they can relax a little and finally enjoy some real experience of the foreign country. *"...they began to experience the pleasure, unique to tourists, of finding themselves in a place without tourists, of making a discovery, finding somewhere real."*⁵⁴

The danger of Robert's and Caroline's apartment represents the opposite to the safe hotel room. Their house is quite large which suggest that they could easily get lost in there as well as in the city and thus they are in the hands of the strangers whom the house belongs. After the long night in the bar with Robert they are invited to his

⁵⁴ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 17

apartment; they mysteriously wake up naked in a big bedroom but their clothes are nowhere to be found in order to make them stay. They are left only with some kind of robe which looks more like a women's dressing-gown and also the door is open. These all circumstances evokes rather creepy atmosphere which should alert them from keeping a distance of Robert and Caroline yet they are still getting closer to them.

4.4. Principal Characters

In the chapter *Leading Figures* we already established which characters McEwan usually picks for his novels and what are their essential features. The protagonists are ordinary people from around us yet they always carry an extraordinary feature which is in direct opposition with the contemporary society. The protagonists of *The Comfort of Strangers* include two not even remotely similar couples entering into mutual relations. Colin and Mary as the emancipated, mildly feministic English couple experiencing rather a sober kind of love form a complete opposite to Robert and Caroline. This native couple of Venice embodies perhaps everything which Colin and Mary despise yet there is something so appealing about Robert's and Caroline's relationship that they are not able to protect themselves from its influence. The main diversity between these two couples is represented by different attitudes towards patriarchal and matriarchal relationships. Besides this main issue McEwan is suggesting the roles of woman in today's patriarchal society.

4.4.1. Colin and Mary

Rather matriarchal relationship is represented by Colin and Mary in the novel; and it is mainly because of Colin's a little bit feminine character and Mary's protective, sort of motherly, attitude towards her lover. Here we can see a certain resemblance with *The Cement Garden* where Julie represents the role of a mother. Although this is a matter of two different stories these two female protagonists are distinguished by similar qualities. As we already established earlier, Julie has a strong sense of self and does not allow Jack to intimidate her in her leading position. The same could be said about Mary who "...defines her own terms of engagement with men in her

*relationships.*⁵⁵ She is strongly opinionated, bigger feminist than Colin and she stands up for her views which can be witnessed on several parts where they discuss the woman role in the society.

Despite the fact that Colin and Mary work as separate mediators in terms of the narration, concerning the description of their relationship they cannot be divided. Throughout the whole novel they occur as a closely connected couple which creates a complete opposite to Robert and Caroline. At the beginning of the novel the narrator says that *"...they found it difficult to remember that the other was a separate person."*⁵⁶ When they walk their shoes make the sound of only one pair and later Caroline even compares them to the twins. Their closeness is shown in several occasions throughout the novel and as they meet the other couple which is influencing them their relationship begins to change. At the beginning of the story we actually learn very little about the two tourists, however we learn enough about their mutual personal relationship to understand how and why they are transforming in terms of their intimacy. We gradually learn that they are together for seven years even though they are not married nor live together; and from the description of their routine activities it is obvious that this relationship is rather stable and well known to them than passionate. Their backgrounds are even bigger mystery than their common life. We only know that Mary has been married before and has two children whom she left home with their father, and Colin has some experience with singing and acting. *"Eventually, they remain as unfamiliar to us as the strangers of the title."*⁵⁷

Besides the information about their personal background we also know very little about their appearance. Colin's appearance is described through Mary's eyes when he is sleeping, but we learn absolutely nothing about Mary's look. We can only suppose she is rather good looking because she exercises yoga every day. Even though they are on a holiday and therefore they grow lazy in almost every aspect, they still dress themselves carefully before going out. Almost as if they expected there would be somebody who would care about how they look like very much. Especially Colin,

⁵⁵ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 57

⁵⁶ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 7

⁵⁷ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 75

whose look is highlighted several times throughout the novel which is why, as *Christopher Ricks* suggest in his review, he is destined to be a victim. It is not only because he represents the weaker half of the couple or because of his precious look, also his behavior agrees to this. *"There is something about Colin's behavior which suggests from the beginning that he is a victim; he goes along with Robert and is easily manipulated, which suggests an unconscious contractual agreement. I think such an Agreement can exist between oppressor and victim."*⁵⁸ Whenever he is in Robert's company he seems to be unable to defy Robert's seizing. Consequently, Robert as highly dominant male despise of Colin who is mild feminist and a weak individual in Robert's eyes therefore he wishes to punish him for that. Colin does not try to hide his female side, on the contrary he seems to be fascinated by women and even *"...said that he had long envied women's orgasms, and that there were times when he felt an aching emptiness, close to desire, between his scrotum and his anus; he thought this might be an approximation of womanly desire."*⁵⁹

The first chapters give the impression of routine and monotonousness in description of Colin's and Mary's actions as well as in the description of surrounding circumstances. *"Each afternoon, when the whole city beyond the dark green shutters of their hotel windows began to stir, Colin and Mary were woken by the methodical chipping of steel tools..."*⁶⁰ By using such words and phrases as 'each afternoon', 'methodical' or 'ritual hour' the author achieves the effect of repetitiveness. The protagonists are sometimes becoming even confused by this routine; for example Colin shaves twice and even though they agree on going to a restaurant neither of them moves. During the long time they have been together they fell into a stereotype kind of relationship which has very similar lethargic patterns as in *The Cement Garden*. *"...Colin and Mary appear as shallow and superficial, disinterested passersby of the world around them."*⁶¹ As well as the children, Colin and Mary are sleepwalking through their little everyday rituals, feel comfortable in their well known positions and it does not seem they want to change anything about that. Taking a vacation can

⁵⁸ CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 51

⁵⁹ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 61

⁶⁰ McEWAN, I., p. 1

⁶¹ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 75

appear as an attempt to escape from the everyday routine and to experience a little change in their lives, however in case of this couple the holiday turns into a daily struggle and soon results in the wish to go home. As in *The Cement Garden* what starts as something new and enjoyable turns into struggling in the end.

There can be many parallels found between *The Comfort of Strangers* and *The Cement Garden*, only it seems that in the second McEwan's novel these parallels get the opposite direction. Whereas in *The Cement Garden* the death starts all the following events, in *The Comfort of Strangers* it is the death which ends it all. Consequently there is a certain evolvment in the main protagonists' characters; the children in *The Cement Garden* changes their social roles from dependent 'children' to 'adults' while Colin and Mary with the beginning of their holiday turn into childlike lost tourists dependent on their hotel maid and total strangers – Robert and Caroline. Their childlike behavior reflects for example in several situations where they are not on speaking terms because of something clearly irrelevant since none of them is able to remember the reason. Despite their unity and closeness there is also a hint of inconsistency in their relationship. Each evening they are mutually telling their dreams except for they are not doing so in order to discuss each other's dreams, they only listen "*patiently to the other's dreams in exchange for the luxury of recounting their own.*"⁶² Their attitude towards their relationship looks as it was something they could take turns at. They are applying this order as much as they can. "*The demand to be looked after was routine between them, and they took it in turns to respond dutifully.*"⁶³ This behaving also suggests that Colin and Mary have some communicating issue which is solved through sex. Their lovemaking corresponds to the relationship; it is caring, familiar, relaxed but not passionate or astounding and it is even often interrupted by sleep. "*Its pleasures were in its unhurried friendliness, the familiarity of its rituals and procedures, the secure, precision-fit of limbs and bodies, comfortable, like a cast returned to its mould. They were generous and leisurely, making no great demands, and very little noise. They would have denied indignantly*

⁶²McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 1

⁶³McEWAN, I., p. 30

*that they were bored.*⁶⁴ For them this kind of relationship was the best they could hope for because of its familiarity and understandability. This familiarity of each other is paradoxical to the fact that they are unable to take care of themselves on the vacation and thus they are dependent on somebody else's help. *"...together they moved slowly, clumsily..."*⁶⁵ First they get used to a maid who comes daily to clean their room; the awareness of this makes them more and more lazy and it increases the incapability of taking care of themselves into an extreme. *"One late morning, they returned to their room to find it as they had left it, simply uninhabitable, and they had no choice but to go out again and wait until it had been dealt with."*⁶⁶ Second they are dependent on a stranger's help because they are constantly getting lost in the city. The problem with communication does not occur only between communicating to each other but they are also unable to be assertive enough with speaking to another person. For example in the part where they finally find some place to sit down in a crowded restaurant only to sit there uselessly because they are not capable of attracting the waiter's attention. Also after they first meet Robert who reveals everything about himself to them at the first occasion, more importantly he shares his most embarrassing memories with them which should alert them, they are not talking about it afterwards. They do not share their opinions even after they leave Robert's house and have certain suspicion that his wife is being abused by him. However, the fact that they are not speaking about the strange encounter with Robert and later Caroline, only gives them the space to communicate this experience through sex again. Only this time, their consciousness is influenced by the encounter and their intimate life is changing into whisperings of darker, passionate and twisted sexual fantasies while making love.

Nevertheless their communication with each other goes through an evolvement as well as their intimate relationship. As Mary's suspicion about Robert stalking them grows higher she starts to speak about the foreign couple with Colin more and more. One early morning Mary is woken up by a nightmare and she suddenly realizes that on

⁶⁴ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 7

⁶⁵ McEWAN, I.,. p. 4

⁶⁶ McEWAN, I., p. 3

a photograph, which was shown to her by Robert at their house, was actually Colin. She tries to explain it to Colin, but he falls asleep again in the process and it is not until the next day on the beach they are finally discussing and sharing their thoughts about Robert and Caroline. This sudden awareness of the events which are clearly reaching a line is shown on contrast with Mary swimming too far from the shore.

4.4.2. Robert and Caroline

The extreme dominant patriarchal relationship is represented by Robert and Caroline in the novel. This second couple forms an interesting opposite to Colin and Mary, whose closeness excels even more in the light of Robert's and Caroline's disconnection. To Colin's and Mary's eyes the relationship of their new friends appears rather dysfunctional; Robert's attitude towards his wife seems fairly cold and indifferent. However, what appears to be defective is in reality agreement of dominance and submission providing pleasure to both sides, which Colin and Mary are going to find out to their misfortune at the very end of the story.

*"Robert, the chauvinistic, sadistic minotaur who preys within the labyrinthine streets, plays the archetypal false host, seductively luring the innocents into his lair and wickedly dispatching them to satiate his own desires."*⁶⁷ Robert as a stranger, who offers assistance to conveniently lost Colin and Mary in the moment of most need, embodies a possessor of the valuable knowledge of all corners of the city. This ability puts Colin and Mary blindly into hands of this stranger, which gives him the power over the situation. McEwan intentionally puts Robert's disturbing tale about his childhood at the first encounter with Colin and Mary in order to emphasize that his sadistic temperament is a result of his father's despotic and chauvinistic upbringing. Consequently this thought is supported by the fact, that Robin told this long story only to answer the question of how he met his wife. Here we can again observe parallels with *The Cement Garden*; in both stories there are despotic fathers shown as a criticism of the contemporary society. The fathers have even the same characteristic qualities. The difference is only in the sons' perception and relation to them. Unlike Jack, for Robert his father was infallible godlike idol whose qualities

⁶⁷ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 79

should have every strong and healthy man. As a little child Robert was not able to understand that his father is taking advantage of him in order to manipulate the rest of the family, however still Robert as the only son was the most favorite and favored of the children. In time many of his father's practices found its way into Robert's temperament and caused his disrespect to emancipated women and non-dominant men. His views on feminism are presented several times throughout the novel. When Mary observes a feminist proclamation Robert explains the reasons for such behavior almost as if he wants to apologize for them: *"These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. [...] They are ugly."*⁶⁸ Furthermore for understanding Robert's temperament it is also important to mention his effort to presume the memories of his father and grandfather. The first thing he shows to Colin and Mary in his house is sort of sanctuary dedicated to memories of his adored father, who dominated all members of the family. This desire was later transferred to Robert, only with the difference that his dominance projected in sexual brutality.

Slowly, Robert manipulates his way between the two tourist and at every opportunity he discreetly but effectively shows his dominance over Colin. He is doing so by putting his arm around Colin's shoulder, grabbing his elbow whenever he leads him somewhere and once he even punches him in the stomach and subsequently act like it was just a friendly prank. At the same time Robin also shows Mary that she is not the person in which he is interested in by turning his back to her when speaking to Colin.

The object of Robert's sadism is impersonated by his wife Caroline. Caroline, too, as her husband expresses signs of sexual desires and even just to talk about the sadistic relationship seems to cause her enjoyment. The first encounter with Caroline is rather peculiar for Mary because Caroline's moves are clearly accompanied by pain and when Mary asks what causes it, Caroline gives only evasive reply. Caroline then in their conversation admits nervously that she was watching them sleep and as if by that statement politely calls for understanding. According to Caroline love means *"that*

⁶⁸ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 16

you'd do anything for the other person, and you'd let them do anything to you. [...] If you are in love with someone, you would even be prepared to let them kill you, if necessary."⁶⁹ In this part it is clear that Caroline represents the submissive one of their relationship and by talking about it with Caroline she tries to justify her attitudes and also find out about Mary's opinions on that topic. She obviously took over her husband's opinions for hers in the process of becoming the object rather than person to his obscene desires. Later when they discuss the woman's role in the society by talking about Mary's experience in woman's theatre group, Caroline is not able to accept only woman's group without any man as serious one. She tries to point out that even though the theatre itself is made only by women, they must perform plays about men or topics which concerns men at the first place; and that is what she finds most relevant. By touching the topic of feminism McEwan is trying to show how absurdly our society is divided; one half is generation from generation taught to be subjugated to the other.

From Mary's point of view, Caroline's appearance underwent a certain evolution as well. Mary at first saw her only as *"a small pale face watching her from the shadows, a disembodied face..."*⁷⁰ but as her and her husband's trap was coming to an end she suddenly started to look better than before. *"The hair, so tightly drawn back before, was slightly awry; loose strands softened her face which in the intervening days had lost its anonymity. The lips especially, previously so thin and bloodless, were full, almost sensual."*⁷¹ Almost as if the knowledge of the fact that their scheme will be fulfilled soon gave her new energy.

4.4.3. City as the Fifth Character

McEwan opens the story with a quotation of *Cesare Pavese*: *"Travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things – air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky – all things tending towards the*

⁶⁹ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 46

⁷⁰ McEWAN, I., p. 43

⁷¹ McEWAN, I., p. 84

eternal or what we imagine of it. ⁷² The theme of this quotation basically permeates throughout the whole novel and throughout every anxiety of Colin and Mary. These two tourists certainly do not feel satisfied by their holiday and the staying in a foreign city is not in any case a time of relaxation. On the other hand they are not acting as if what they are experiencing was something unusual defying the concept of tourism. They are often saying to themselves that they are on a holiday as words of comfort, which only confirms Robert's statement: *"The thing about a successful holiday is that it makes you want to go home."*⁷³

Although the novel introduces only four main protagonists, we cannot omit the city itself which in many ways behaves as if it was a character with its own consciousness and agendas. The choice of anonymous city built in a lagoon without any road traffic which would bind it with rules is very suitable for this kind of story. *"It is the ideal setting in which visitors take missteps and become disoriented, in which tourists and other strangers make the dearest of mistakes."*⁷⁴ The city as much as the nature in *The Cement Garden* plays a role of omnipresent feature which affects the other characters of the novel without even them realizing it. Every time Colin and Mary leave the hotel room and go to the centre, the city as if worked constantly against them; they lose their way, they cannot find what they are looking for and the feeling of despair of the strange environment and unknown language always accompanies them. The city's strongest weapons are paradoxes which are used against Colin and Mary every time they exert every effort to fulfill the role of tourists. For example, when they are in desperate search for some free seats in crowded restaurants, they cannot find any. However, when they wander around the centre well fed, there are plenty of almost empty restaurants to be found. In similar situation when Colin and Mary dying of thirst finally take the seats in a full restaurant, first they are unable to attract the waiter's attention and when they finally do they are forced to order something more valuable than just water, so they ask for coffee which is the first sort of international drink that comes to their minds. Of course, this choice of drink does not help them in their thirst

⁷² McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981.

⁷³ McEWAN, I., p. 83

⁷⁴ SLAY, J., *Ian McEwan*. London: Twayne Publishers, 1996, p. 73

at all. Despite all the misfortunes they are experiencing on their holiday, they still insist on holding on to the touristic schedule. In every difficult situation they are just repeating to themselves that '*they are on a holiday*' as if it would apologize and justify everything that has happened to them. Here we can observe a parallel with *The Cement Garden*, where the whole story feels like a dream in the end; in *The Comfort of Strangers* the sentence '*We're on holiday*' could possibly stand for the sentence: '*It's just a dream.*' which would explain their unconcern about the unpleasant circumstances of their holiday. However sometimes, we can find passages in the novel which provide us a proof that they are not enjoying the stay and they are certainly realizing that something is wrong. "*You know this place can be terribly suffocating sometimes. [...] It's like a prison here.*"⁷⁵

4.5. Reflection of Contemporary Society and Its Taboos

As well as in *The Cement Garden*, there can be many reflections of contemporary society found in this novel. The main issues displayed as common taboos in the society concern stalking, masochism and sadism. These taboos are presented in the novel as the consequences of today's patriarchal society with one half which is dominant.

4.5.1. Stalking

McEwan presents two kinds of visual pleasure which are in mutual contrast in this novel. First, we can witness Colin and Mary, sitting at the balcony of their hotel room, occasionally observing the groups of tourists moving around the square. For Colin and Mary this may be enough to satisfy their needs as the tourists; by watching others from the safety of their hotel room they gain the feeling behind being a tourist and thus they do not need to chase after the historical sights of the centre since the city is bringing them so much hardship. This harmless observing is put into contrast with Robert's stalking and taking photographs of Colin and Mary without them knowing it. Even though Mary, and thus the reader as well, does not know about the whole plan until the end of the novel right before she is drugged by Caroline, we can see some little signs which suggest that something strange is happening around Colin

⁷⁵ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 34, 35

and Mary all the time. For example, once Colin had the feeling he caught a glimpse of a face watching them from behind a corner but when he turned again to look properly there was no one to see. Mary first realizes that they are being stalked and photographed when she wakes up from a nightmare and understands that the photograph Robert showed her before was actually a photograph of Colin. Even though they are now more aware of the danger which Robert and Caroline represent for them, the city as if mysteriously leads them back to their house and they are without resistance accepting an invitation. After they are separated, Colin is led to a bar by Robert and Mary has a conversation with his wife in the meantime, Caroline then shows Mary the incredible collection of photographs of Colin above their bed in the bedroom and it is then when the whole plan is revealed to her. Unfortunately, she is already drugged and falls asleep. When Robert and Colin come back, Mary is woken up and only with difficulties and with the help of Caroline manages to walk. Mary realizes that they are in the middle of terrible danger and tries to warn Colin by uttering only 'go', however Colin is confused and shocked by the situation, fails at insisting on calling help for her and he absently gives himself in to Robert's and Caroline's final desire.

4.5.2. Masochism and Sadism

Masochism in men and sadism in women are undoubtedly the most important motives which penetrate throughout the whole novel. There is no wonder that these two issues are amongst the most arguable topics of nowadays society which provides both patriarchal and emancipation views. That is why McEwan chose them as the main theme of the novel since he has shown before his interest in controversial matters which can be found in the contemporary urban life.

Through the characteristics of Robert and Caroline the novel shows the extremes to which the darkest human desires can reach. Robert embodies a dominant masochistic chauvinist whose dark desires culminate and in time the satisfaction provided by his submissive sadistic wife is not enough. With the opinions uttered by this extreme figure the author offers his own views of women's and men's natures of unconscious. *"Whatever they might say they believe, women love aggression*

and strength and power in men. It's deep in their minds. Look at all the women a successful man attracts. If what I'm saying wasn't true, women would protest at every war. Instead, they love to send their men to fight. The pacifists, the objectors, are mostly men. And even though they hate themselves for it, women long to be ruled by men. It's deep in their minds. They lie to themselves. They talk of freedom, and dream of captivity."⁷⁶ The novel is trying to provide a sort of understanding to these basic natures of human unconscious; this understanding is provided through the voice of Caroline who is revealing all the secrets of her and her husband's intimate life to Mary. Even though we do not know anything about Caroline's life before she got married for Robert, we can certainly claim that the sadistic desires were woken in her by her husband; maybe she even started to like the dark sexual lust only because of his influence. *"Robert started to hurt me when we made love. Not a lot, but enough to make me cry out. I think I tried hard to stop him. One night I got really angry at him, but he went on doing it, and I had to admit, thought it took a long time, that I liked it. [...] It was as if I was discovering something that had been with me all my life."*⁷⁷ Mary surprisingly listened very patiently to this confession and quite a detail depiction of how exactly Robert was hurting Caroline; it made her think about their peculiar relationship more deeply all the more because her relationship with Colin was absolutely different. Earlier in the novel Mary is considering the value of passionate love in today's society. *"Why is it so frightening to love someone this hard? Why is it so scary?"*⁷⁸ Though she does not say it directly from the contrast between the two divergent intimate relationships follows the conclusion that to love somebody so passionately and blindly means to give absolute power to the hands of the other person and not to have any security at all.

Robert's lust does not stop at breaking his wife's back which causes her permanent consequences and makes her a prisoner in their own house since she is not physically able to climb the stairs; upon that he has the final fatal sexual wish – to kill her. Even though it looks like he does not care about his wife so much, even for Robert to

⁷⁶ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 54, 55

⁷⁷ McEWAN, I., p. 86

⁷⁸ McEWAN, I., p. 70

murder her would be too much, therefore he shifts his desire to another person, thus Colin. Making the plan and finally committing the murder makes Caroline interestingly change her position from a victim to a participant of a crime. By murdering Colin during their sex act they fulfill the biggest desire; then the reader can only wonder how much their desires would escalate further since they already crossed the line. One might think that this kind of murder would be brutal, however Robin kills Colin smoothly: *“See how easy it is’, he said, perhaps to himself, as he drew the razor lightly, almost playfully, across Colin’s wrist, opening wide the artery.”*⁷⁹

The final apprehension of the whole sadomasochistic concept is given through the ultimate Mary’s thoughts when she is sitting by Colin’s dead body at the mortuary. *“She was in the mood for explanation, she was going to speak to Colin. She was going to recount Caroline’s story, as closely as she could remember it, and then she was going to explain it all to him, tell him her theory, tentative at this stage, of course, which explained how the imagination, the sexual imagination, men’s ancient dreams of hurting, and women’s of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth.”*⁸⁰ She reached the understanding of it after all, thanks to Caroline who told the whole story carefully to her before; this is the way in which McEwan serves the main point to the reader – through a person whose reaction should be completely different in such situation. However Mary is acting calmly, exactly how a person who understands would. At this point the novel basically blames the corrupted society, which puts the dominance of one gender above the other and thus supports this hierarchy even in the sexual matter.

⁷⁹ McEWAN, I., *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Vintage U.K., 1981. p. 96

⁸⁰ McEWAN, I., p. 99

5. The Amsterdam Interpretation: Its Symbolic Reflection in Modern Urban Environment

Unlike the two previous novels, *Amsterdam* did not suffer from so much negative criticism. On the contrary, the reviews of this novel were mostly positive so it is not surprising that it won the *Booker Prize* in 1998, which was also the year of the publication. This moral social satire is divided into five parts and it provides a brilliant psychological insight into the protagonists' minds. The story of corrupted politician, the greed and intrigues of publicly known persons are the main subjects of this novel.

5.1. Story Line

As well as in *The Cement Garden*, the story of *Amsterdam* opens with a death which changes everything and directs the future events in a one direction. At the funeral of Molly Lane, her husband George and her three former lovers meet. All three of them have some points in common; each (except for Vernon) is a publicly known person, each had a personal relationship with Molly at some time, each regards himself very highly and finally each will face a kind of moral decision in the novel.

Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday, two of Molly's lovers, are very close friends and they feel quite the same disdain about her husband George as well as about Julian Garmony, a corrupted politician, whose relationship with Molly is especially not understood by them. Molly died of some unspecified brain disease which gradually made her stay in bed and completely dependent on her husband's help. Vernon as a newspaper editor has the opportunity to destroy Garmony's reputation thanks to some controversial photographs given to him by George. Clive does not agree with this quite unmoral act, nonetheless he himself fails at moral dilemma, which provides the chance for Vernon to criticize him in return. As a consequence of the arguments they independently of each other decide to implement their former mutual pact, which says that if one of them happened to be at similar physical incompetence as Molly, the other one will take him to Holland and help him with the euthanasia. Followed by a series of intrigues, they both appear in Amsterdam, where they mutually kill each

other with exchange of the glasses of poisoned drink. Paradoxically they both had quite high expectations about their professional lives yet they died as deceitful contemptible individualities. The end of the novel almost satirically corresponds to the saying 'Two dogs fight for a bone, and a third runs away with it'; the third dog in this case is George who maybe planned it all to happen exactly like that, which makes him the most plotting person of them all.

5.2. Style of Narration

Before we start to analyze the narration of the novel, it is important to mention the manner how the story is divided, for these two aspects are closely connected. The novel is separated into five longer parts within which there are several smaller ones in each. Originally the novel was supposed to be a tragi-comedy, therefore it is divided into five acts. From every small subchapter the reader can learn the events around one of the main protagonists, their thoughts and feelings, plans and attitudes, though the whole story is narrated in the third person as well as *The Comfort of Strangers*. In case of this novel, the narrator is even more omniscient than in the previous one; this fact gives us the opportunity to make a wider picture about the events, and allows us to know even more than the protagonists themselves know. "The narration switches point of view with the ease of a mid-nineteenth-century British novel. The narrative, too, is in this tradition: linear, logical, chronological."⁸¹ In terms of the narration both *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers* correspond to the patterns of post modern British novel. The point of view of the narrator is often similar to the ones in *The Comfort of Strangers* since here, too, we have several main protagonists who as if provide the story from their perspective, however it is still some kind of other person who actually narrates it and thus adds the information which the involved characters do not perceive at the given time; for example a depiction of a landscape.

⁸¹ MALCOLM, D., Understanding Ian McEwan. Columbia, SC, 2002.p. 191

5.3. Reflection of Contemporary Society

As we already mentioned above, there are four main protagonists in this novel, who more or less represent the model characters from the contemporary society, two of which can be considered as more important than the others because the narration concerns them more often. Unlike the two previous novels, *Amsterdam* is considered as more relaxed in terms of the extreme dark topics. Although the novel ends with the deaths of the two main figures, the whole story does not provide the impression of some horrifying tale as the other two certainly do; the author himself admits that “*Amsterdam is meant to be lighter in tone, and much more based in a recognizable, shared social reality.*”⁸² The novel, indeed, provides a reality which is much more familiar to a contemporary reader. Nowadays, political affairs are no longer just a matter of the politicians and the stakeholders, owing to various kinds of media a completely ordinary man learns all the information about current political issues, and therefore this sphere of life becomes a public matter. That is a big difference from the previous two books, where the given controversial matter always applies only to a small group of individuals. The recognisability of the current world and people in the novel makes it more appealing and real for the reader.

5.3.1. Art of Corruption

The two protagonists whom McEwan did not dedicate so much space in the novel are no less important than the main ones, because without them the scheme of corruption and manipulation would not impress to such an extent as it does. Julian Garmony represents the corrupted political system which does its best to look as pure as it can in the eyes of the public. McEwan depicts this clearly dishonest politician, who should perhaps represent a common politician outside the novel, to put him into an interesting contrast with Vernon, who should provide the real information to the public yet he tends to incline more to what appears as yellow journalism than serious press. Both of them basically cross an imaginary moral line to gain a higher position and make more money. Then the author playfully lets the reader decide which of them is worse. Despite the contempt Vernon feels towards Molly’s husband, he does not

⁸² CHILDS, P. (ed.) *The Fiction of Ian McEwan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. p. 120

reject his help to put Garmony down. George provides him humiliating photographs, where Garmony poses in the woman's lingerie; at the end of the story all seems like one big plot against Vernon and Clive under leadership of George who could not resist revenge on his wife's former lovers. In the end McEwan manages to picture a credible reflection of similar political and other scheming in our reality. George feels highly possessive about his wife, whose role in the novel is still influential even though she is dead from the beginning. We do not know much about Molly, as well as about Mary in *The Comfort of Strangers*, however, it is not hard to conclude that her marriage was not the happiest one since she had changed several lovers. Her affairs later gave her husband a breeding ground for the creation of desire for taking the revenge on her former lovers and even on herself, when she was due to illness tied to the bed and thus completely surrendered into the hands of George, and so he had her finally just to himself only when she could not do anything about it. McEwan here perhaps suggests that George, too, is a carrier of the quality of selfishness, which is so decisive for all the main characters of this novel. In the end, it was George who as if won an imaginary competition for the best corruption and achieved the satisfaction by his opponents basically destroyed each other. He even goes so far behind the moral line, that right after bringing the dead bodies from Amsterdam, he is already thinking of asking the widow of Vernon out on a date.

As a completion to this rotten picture of selfishness, Clive, a famous composer, is put in the middle. His moral dilemma is slightly different from the Vernon's; Clive who thinks of himself as a virtuosic genius has the opportunity to stop a man who is probably about to rape or kidnap a woman, instead Clive hides behind a rock and eagerly notes the melody which enlightened him at exactly that moment. When it is over he still rejects Vernon's urges about reporting everything to the police, so he does it instead of him as an expression of the disagreement with his unconcern. Both of them are not hesitating in criticizing others and especially each other, which is ultimately why they are led to each other's homicides.

5.3.2. Transvestism

The issue of transvestism is approached from two different sides, within each of them provides diverse perception of it. First, there are the shameful photographs which are meant to be used as a weapon which should ruin the reputation of a famous politician. Viewing from this perspective, the public would certainly reject this politician as unmoral and not fitting for the public office, and since this politician should represent the voice of the people, there is no way he would have enough votes after this scandal. However, Garmony manages to turn this situation into his advantage; his election team lets his wife speak touchingly of his deviation, and since his wife is a recognized children's doctor she has the certain credibility Garmony needs for his campaign. With this kind of contradiction McEwan expresses the hypocrisy of not only the politicians, but the ordinary people, who can be easily manipulated, as well. The topic of transvestism in this novel is very close to the issue about Tom in *The Cement Garden*, where, too, McEwan provides two points of view – the rejection represented by Jack and the acceptance by his sisters.

5.3.3. Euthanasia

As the story begins with the funeral of a woman, due to whom all the next events take place, the question of the manner of death rises almost naturally. The pattern of a dead woman who still manages to, symbolically, influence the other protagonists is quite similar to the one in *The Cement Garden*, where the growing smell spreading from the cellar was slowly filling the whole house. Through the story of *Amsterdam*, McEwan indirectly offers the option of having a thought about the life and death; should we, as the free thinking individuals, have the chance to decide how we want to die? This novel through the words and thoughts of Vernon and Clive suggests the question of euthanasia, still current issue for the contemporary society. Clive is almost certain that if “brain-dead” Molly did not fall “into George’s clutches”⁸³ she would have chosen rather quicker and painless death and Clive would have helped her if he had the chance. He implies it several times throughout the novel. “*You know, I should have married her. When she started to go under I would have killed her with a pillow or*

⁸³ McEWAN, I., *Amsterdam*. London: Vintage U.K., 2005. p. 5

something and saved her from everyone's pity."⁸⁴ For Clive, to die slowly and helplessly as Molly was forced to, means an undignified kind of death which is not worth of a person of Molly's unrestrained character. Clive and Vernon probably knew Molly pretty well and they respected her free-spirited nature, unlike George, who could not take her as she was and he maybe thought that by marrying her she would become his own. Here we can observe a parallel between the married dysfunctional couple George and Molly and the unmarried harmonized couple in *The Comfort of Strangers*, Colin and Mary. Again, McEwan suggest the couple unbidden by rules and conventions to work better despite the general assumption.

The funeral of a loved one forces Clive and Vernon to think more about death as if it were suddenly closer; it is not just something distant, what does not concern them yet. Eventually, it makes them enter into an agreement that says that if one of them gets into a similar state of health as Molly, the other would take him to Holland and help him to undergo the euthanasia, which is legal there. Obviously, none of them would ever think this agreement would be somehow abused. By this McEwan suggests that in an honest society having a choice of euthanasia would work perfectly, however as we can see the friendship of Clive and Vernon decay, we can also observe the corrupt society which seizes the opportunities to exploit the euthanasia to a murder.

5.3.4. Isolation of Place

Perhaps the most significant resemblance with *The Cement Garden* is represented by Clive and his as if isolated mind and personality. It seems that Clive is completely absorbed by his work, his symphony to which he puts great hopes and which provides even greater stress for him when the deadline is approaching. Locked up in his house working day and night he often loses track of time and by not keeping in touch with almost anyone he changes into a misanthropist. Even Clive's life philosophy can be summed up into four words: "*Make something and die.*"⁸⁵ This cynical view of life as if directly corresponded with his unfinished symphony, which for him symbolizes something significant which would prevail in this world after he is gone. However, Clive is somehow unable to finish the melody, so when the final inspiration comes to him,

⁸⁴ McEWAN, I., *Amsterdam*. London: Vintage U.K., 2005. p. 8

⁸⁵ McEWAN, I., p. 19

he does not care about anybody else but himself. This desire of wanting something so badly that it actually exceeds the acceptable moral boundary is similar to the sexual one in *The Comfort of Strangers*. With the isolation Clive, as much as the children in *The Cement Garden*, creates as if his own world of simply music, which is the only thing that provides harmony for him. Even the physical appearance of Clive's house has a sort of the same charm. "Clive inherited from a rich and childless uncle a gigantic stuccoed villa with a purpose-built two-storey artist's studio on the third and fourth floors [...] As the decade progressed, the house calmed down [...] for the house was a history of an adult life, of changing tastes, fading passions and growing wealth."⁸⁶ Also in the part where Clive is caught in the middle of composing, neglecting everything else, his studio starts to resemble the house in *The Cement Garden* by the inattention to tidiness and hygiene. It is possible that McEwan put some autobiographical elements into Clive; his book *Recalling Beauty*, which was "loathed and loved"⁸⁷ in equal measure, could symbolize McEwan's first work, *The Cement Garden*, which also received a lot of both negative and positive reviews. Also the quick passing feeling of inspiration that only an author or a composer can experience could count as autobiographical. Unlike the children, Clive tries to escape from time to time from his isolated world into the nature, where he finds inspiration. As he is travelling by train we can, too, observe the wasteland which surrounds us, the concrete by which the nature has been replaced. "[...] countryside appeared and with it the beginnings of beauty, or the memory of it, until seconds later it dissolved into a river straightened to a concreted sluice or a sudden agricultural wilderness without hedges of trees, and roads, new roads probing endlessly, shamelessly, as though all that mattered was to be elsewhere. As far as the welfare of every other living form on earth was concerned, the human project was not just a failure, it was a mistake from the very beginning."⁸⁸ What is shown in a smaller scale in *The Cement Garden* is shown directly here – the devastation of the nature by human is placed as if by the way, just to fill in the time with something until Clive reaches his destination; however, McEwan's criticism of human consumption of the nature is direct here.

⁸⁶ McEWAN, I., *Amsterdam*. London: Vintage U.K., 2005. p. 45-46

⁸⁷ McEWAN, I., p. 23

⁸⁸ McEWAN, I., p. 64

Conclusion

The task of this thesis was to analyze the environment of Ian McEwan's novels, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Amsterdam*, to describe the symbolic image of the postmodern world in the environment of the contemporary city society, and to put the symbolic expressions into contrast to the closed world of the house from the first novel.

In the first chapter, we ranked the author's unique writing style into postmodern age and by identifying several common features with the works of other writers, we have included Ian McEwan among the postmodern authors. In the second chapter, we briefly introduced Ian McEwan's life, childhood, literary works, and awards. Further, this chapter deals with the determination of the usual features of McEwan's main characters, and it also answers the question how the extraordinariness of the main protagonists relates to the ordinary settings. We found out that the environment in these novels could be described as lethargic for its ordinariness which displays the main characters even more and thus creates the perfect parallels.

The third chapter concerns more detailed analyzes of the first novel *The Cement Garden*. Its main focus consist in the reflection of the mental and physical isolation of the main protagonists in their house, the relation of nature with the principal characters' personalities as well as with the modern urban environment, and the changes in the relationships and positions of the children after their parents died. Another aim of this chapter was to reveal taboo themes in the novel and determine the parallels between these taboos, represented by the children's actions in the story, and the contemporary society. These themes concern mainly the children hiding their dead mother in the cellar, transvestism of the youngest boy, and incest of the two eldest children. McEwan manages to put these topics in front of the reader with remarkable lightness, which makes the reader sympathize with the children and not with the conventional society, which is symbolically trying to seize them.

The fourth chapter deals with the interpretation of McEwan's second novel *The Comfort of Strangers*. It first focuses on the style of the narration which differs in many

ways from *The Cement Garden's* one. Then, it concerns the role of the setting in connection to the main protagonists and their struggling in the city. The main focus, however, rests in the determination of the two different relationships represented by the protagonists and their transformation throughout the novel. McEwan puts two different aspects of relationship between a man and a woman next to each other; they are sadism and masochism which also represent some of the taboos recognized in the story. Among the taboo topics belongs stalking in contrast with a kind of visual pleasure represented by two of the main protagonists.

Finally, the fifth chapter interprets the symbolic reflection of the story of Amsterdam in modern urban environment. This chapter, too, first examines the style of the narration for it has several common features with McEwan's second novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*. The main point of this chapter was to identify the author's criticism of the contemporary society through the characters who represent it in the book. It mainly deals with the corrupted politics, manipulation, and selfishness as a defining element of the main characters. Further, it deals with the controversial question of euthanasia, where the author indirectly outlines the pros and cons of this subject through the events of the story. The similarity of this novel with *The Comfort of Strangers* does not occur only in the narration but also in the topic of transvestism which is described in this chapter as well. The final concern rests in the depiction of isolation of place in this novel with its connection to McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden*, through the behaviour and actions of one of the principal protagonists.

Overall, we discovered that in these three novels there can be many common elements found, which can be easily linked with the contemporary society and thus provided to the reader as a specific issue in different perspective than before. Even though the novels were written at different times, they still have common features, and therefore many parallels could be identified and analyzed between them. The dominant parallel is the theme of isolation pervading all three novels in varying extents and different meanings.

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