Abnormal Psychology in Selected Novels of Ian McEwan

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Thesis Examination Committee

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Dedication

Cordially dedicated to my compassionate mother and father;

To the soul of my grandfather;

To my uncle Jamaal;

To my daughter;

To Enas;

To my sister, Rana;

To my loving aunt, Nayfeh;

To her daughters, A’alya & Rania;

To my loving brothers, Ahmed, Mohammed, & Mahmud.
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List of Abbreviations

Ian McEwan’s Novels:

The Cement Garden: CG

On Chesil Beach: OCB

Theoretical Sources:

Civilization and its Discontents: CD

The Interpretation of Dreams: ID

Powers of Horror: PH
Abstract

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This thesis studies three novels by the British novelist Ian McEwan which are *The Cement Garden* (1978), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), and *Saturday* (2005). It explores the preoccupation of McEwan with the macabre and grotesque in his writing in the light of some psychoanalytic concepts. In order to achieve this end, this study approaches the psychology of the characters in the targeted novels by relying on Julia Kristeva’s views on abduction, Freud’s explication of sexual repression, and Freud’s and Helene Cixous’ observations on the uncanny. In *The Cement Garden*, individuation is achieved through abjecting the mother’s body as an initial step to forming a separate identity through the act of writing. In *On Chesil Beach*, sublimation through accomplishment in music is shown as a positive rechanneling of the repressed libidinal energies. The main character in *Saturday* finds the familiar world as terribly unfamiliar in which meaning is lost, but he eventually manages to impose some kind of order through his “artistic” surgical skills and through music and poetry.

The three novels illustrate the therapeutic power of artistic creativity as prose, music, and poetry. Further, the uncanny is viewed as the common ground where McEwan’s works converge. Moreover, it is noticed that McEwan’s career as a novelist progresses from the status of introversion to extroversion; from the solipsistic to the communal, thus indicating a process of maturity.

Keywords: abjection, McEwan, psychoanalysis, repression, uncanny.
McEwan’s Novels in Context: An Introduction

This thesis explores Ian McEwan’s novels *The Cement Garden* (1978), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), and *Saturday* (2005). Since Ian McEwan published his first piece of art, *First Love, Last Rites*, for which he won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976, the themes of his writings have been always associated with psychological issues related to the dark side of human psyche. From that time on, McEwan has attracted the interest of worldwide criticism and media. As a result, dissertations and critical responses were written on his fiction in different languages, such as English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and more. To add, he is celebrated as the British national novelist who has won several awards and is getting major public and critical attention. Jake Kerridge says, in his article "Ian McEwan: Profile" (2010), that "[McEwan] and Martin Amis [are] dubbed the most important young British novelists at work." The gloominess of his writings earned him the nickname "Ian MaCabre" as a result of the identification of his themes with the enigmas of human psyche. Actually, in many ways, he echoes Joseph Conrad’s fascination with the abominable.

Many of McEwan’s literary attitudes seem to find an echo in his own life. He was born in Aldershot, Hampshire, in 1948 to a Scottish army officer. As his father moved a lot between Germany, North Africa, and East Asia, McEwan lived fertile childhood and puberty that made him acquainted with different cultures and topics. His father, as he describes him, is a tyrant who lives a dumb life with his family that has many outbreaks of domestic violence. As a result, McEwan developed an antagonistic attitude towards his father because of his being a tough person, especially with his mother.
His mother, Rose, played a good deal in building up his personality. She was married twice; the second is to his father, by whom she had Ian and David, McEwan’s elder brother, who is born out of wedlock relation between his parents and the fact of his birth remained concealed for a long time. His parent’s relation starts in the fifties of the previous century, a time of sexual difficulties which forced them to surrender David secretly to adoption.

His mother’s relation with his father was a troubled one, full of fear and silence. She treated Mr. McEwan like a god before whom she is utterly docile. He used to go away to his work and return without talking to her. Their dull life that was void of understanding led to domestic violence and lack of mutual harmony. The suppressive and the passively yielding nature of his father terminate any kind of amity. Accordingly, McEwan’s oedipal impulses of wishing the father to die and embracing the maternal materialize in many of his writings. His attitude towards the feminine is built on his love and sympathy to his horrified mother. McEwan says in his article “Mother Tongue” (2001):

I developed a romantic notion that if the spirit of women was liberated, the world would be healed. My female characters became the repository of all the goodness that men fell short of. In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set my mother free. (online)

Other complicated details in McEwan’s life that have the force to storm his works are his relation to his mother’s language, her dementia, and his marital life. McEwan suffers from a linguistic displacement that rendered him shy adolescent at
school. He fears even to write down his thoughts and give them a life on paper before he contemplates them in his mind. This linguistic lack of confidence seems to be inherited from his mother’s uncertainties and fear of her corrupt and vulgar language. After his mother is plagued with Alzheimer, McEwan starts a new problematic phase in his relation to the mother, whose ghost obviously haunts the third novel of this study.

Including many clear details of such a complicated course of life, McEwan’s writings may explain his interest in the psychoanalytical approach. It is obvious that through his writings McEwan can get in touch with his complexes and inner conflicts through living them in disguise. Thus, in his writings, McEwan gorges his appetite for the macabre themes that focus on the psychical conflicts and gruesome dark disturbances.

After McEwan’s award-winning First Love Last Rights, he published The Child in Time (1987) for which he got the Whitebread Novel Award. In (1998), McEwan wrote Amsterdam, which was awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction in the same year. Atonement is another success in (2001) which won him the W. H. Smith Literary Award, and is adapted into film in (2007). There are other important works that were short listed for literary prizes closing up with the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize winner Solar in (2010).

In addition to his own experience, McEwan succeeds in foregrounding the spirit of the time, making it harmonious with his personal experience in his works. He starts writing out his psychological conflicts focusing on the unresolved oedipal complex. He seems to antagonize the patriarchal system by expressing his wish of killing the father in many of his writings. McEwan embraces the alliance to the mother’s and feminine’s
world through considering it the healing power that assimilates the effect of art as a sublimating process. His novels mirror skillfully the sexual difficulties juxtaposed with other psychical problems that result in many sexual anxieties, representing a crippled society and an impotent generation. Themes of the cold war, the attack on Iraq, the Twin Towers events, and the disturbances of global climate changes are targets of McEwan’s works. McEwan continues to utilize the grotesque aspects of the human psyche though his course of writing seems to develop more to the social and global interests.

In his early works, McEwan sheds light on issues more related to the complexities of childhood and puberty enclosed within such infantile societies. His production embodies stories of claustrophobia, sexual aberrations, necrophilia, paedophilic tendencies, death circumstances, kids’ abduction, traumas, transvestism, and other apocalyptic catastrophes. His mission starts spinning on a wider span of social strata including corrupt families and more complicated stories about the vulnerability of human life presented in disasters of the domestic and global lives of the characters. Generally, McEwan experiments on characters with mental disorders such as the Parkinson, Alzheimer, Huntington diseases, and other kinds of brain damage.

McEwan's writings further explore the macabre themes yielding to psychoanalytical Freudian and Neo-Freudian theories. For example, the psychoanalytical Freudian and Neo-Freudian concepts of abjection, sexual repression, and the uncanny are central to the novels of this study. As mentioned earlier, this thesis will analyze three novels by Ian McEwan as examples of his interest in the themes of psychological disturbance, as well as human experience of the macabre, the uncanny, the shocking, the startling, and the horrifying. It will explore the psychoanalytic concepts of abjection,
sexual repression, and the uncanny in these novels: *The Cement Garden* (1978), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Saturday* (2005). In the first novel, the protagonist, Jack, gets his individuation through abjection by writing. In the second, Florence gets over her sexual repression through sublimating it into music. And in the third one, love is the power that enables people to have a temporary hold on meaning in their uncanny lives.

According to general theorization on the Oedipal phase, at an early age a libidinal desire to possess the mother sexually arises, opposing an antagonistic desire to get rid of the father as a rival who obstructs achieving such a wish. Freud maintains that to develop a natural psychosexual progress, those impulses should be tamed by repression. The outer authority that forces the individual to suppress such impulses is the father figure who threatens the sexual identity of the child if such impulses endure. Failure in subduing such desires constitutes the base of many psychosexual aberrations, complexes and severe problems later on.

According to the Neo-Freudian critic Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the concept of abjection entails that in order to achieve maturation or "subjectivity", one should reject the mother and what is maternal as an “abject”. This notion is manifested where the individual or a whole culture/society achieves "subjectivity" through creating border lines to separate them from what is maternal. On the personal level, the individual comes to maturation through separation from the mother's body and rejecting it as “abject”. On the societal level, cultural/societal groups (as families) create their identity through distinguishing themselves from other groups that are associated with the maternal. For example, white people associate themselves with the patriarchal symbolic system and separate themselves from black