

Laura Vipond - January 2008

**How to Read the Unreadable: A Post-Structuralist Approach to the Works of
Ian McEwan.**

University of Edinburgh
Department of English Literature
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Now in his third decade of writing, Ian McEwan has established a literary reputation marked by persistently shifting concerns, styles and literary forms. The degree of indeterminacy and variability throughout the criticism that swarms around this writer immediately points to a focus on the reader's response and on an absence of universal meaning common to each text. Each new publication is a complete departure from the last, making it difficult to identify a particular trend in McEwan's literary project. The marketplace of theories, from feminism to modernism, realism to postmodernism, vies for the title of the 'true' meaning behind McEwan's literature. Yet, ironically, it is exactly this nature of McEwan's work which should be recognised: the kaleidoscope of interpretations sit exponentially alongside his still evolving style, both culturally conditioned, so that the meaning of the 'aesthetic object is constantly being structured and restructured' (Iser, *Act of Reading*, 112). The orthodoxy within narrative theory to identify a single universal reading is one that must be seriously reckoned with. McEwan continues to experiment with innovative representations of the human psyche, prompting the reader to recognise the active judgements they make within the narrative, and thus their own complicity with the text. His most recent novella, *On Chesil Beach*, published only last year, offers a fresh opportunity to realise the key implications of post-structuralism on McEwan's work. Discrepancies between critical responses and the unrecoverable authorial intent demonstrate how his literature is both actually and metaphorically in the reader's hands. Every interpretation is subject to a myriad of biases and assumptions, but equally valid and a fundamental part of the crucible that is a work of literature.

Hailed as 'our national novelist' (Cowley, 'Interview', par. 3), McEwan is a member of that clique of writers who have received both popular and critical acclaim. Emerging in the 1970s, he was received by the media as one of the *enfants terribles* sprung from a post-war generation of writers such as Kingsley Amis, Irish Murdoch, and Angus Wilson. McEwan was a maverick of a very new and rebellious literary generation and admits his career grew out of a reaction against these novels that were 'too concerned with those things that the English novel has done well – the nuances of class'

(McEwan, Garner 2). Yet, his prominence amongst his contemporaries such as Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, and Graham Swift, has now grown into pre-eminence, as his literary scope has extended to encompass an unparalleled range of concerns and formal experiments that push contemporary literature. But this scope has never been appreciated as many critics have tended to homogenise his work, and ignore the aberrations. The only way, therefore, to critically understand McEwan's oeuvre is through post-structuralism, which allows for a free play of meanings and recognises that every McEwan text is subject to continual modifications via its readers, and consequently, via culture, history and the evolving literary traditions. A McEwan novel can never be rendered determinate. The inevitably vulnerable and speculative nature of writing about a contemporary author is therefore partly annulled as these alternative sources are never authoritative, and promise no stability.

Characteristic of all of McEwan's critical responses is the way in which each new publication is read through the prism of the last, and equally, every past book is reread through the prism of the most recent. Connections between them are constantly being forged and broken as they percolate through an infinitely transforming 'horizon' of culture. McEwan himself recognises the power of the reader as 'the moment [a novel is] published it will assimilate itself and retrospectively shift everything along' (McEwan, Weich par. 10). The catalogue of sexual aberrations paired with cruel Kafkaesque horrors, or as Walsh declares, 'pregnant rats and pickled penises' (par. 11) of *First Love*, *Last Rites* from 1975, won McEwan the soubriquet of Ian *Macabre*, a nickname he still trying to shake off ten novels later:

once this set of expectations is set up round my work, people read it in this way. And even when, as in *The Child in Time*, there isn't this element, then *all* people write about is the absence of it. So, yes, I have a problem with my reputation . . . because I think my work is not a monochrome of violence and horror (McEwan, Gonzalez 41).

As post-structuralism privileges the reader, this 'set of expectations' becomes an integral part of the text's 'seething multiplicity' (Eagleton 138). However, this tendency to automatically attach the same labels that previous works have earned does risk neglecting the author's true diversity. The

implications of the bi-active model of literature should therefore be recognised in regards to McEwan's work to ensure that reader responses do not become arbitrary or unfounded. This critical approach, associated with Wolfgang Iser and the 'Constance School', sets up an oscillation between the text's power to control and the reader's concretisation of it in terms of their experience.

An example of how just one element of McEwan's work has generated an array of different interpretations is his view on gender, and the way many readers have attempted to classify it. McEwan confesses that reading Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* in 1971 was 'a revelation' (McEwan, 'Mother Tongue', 41), and his oratorio of 1983, *Or Shall We Die?* clearly continues this interest: 'Shall there be womanly times or shall we die? / . . . Shall we change or shall we die? (24) However, other works such as *The Comfort of Strangers* have provoked fervent ripostes from both pro and anti feminist camps. As Roger notes, feminist Mary 'could not have been the victim . . . because she has established her own identity as a woman' (18), whereas Caroline has prescribed herself to Robert's violent patriarchy and sees herself only in terms of men. She cannot even comprehend a women-only theatre group: 'I don't understand how that could work . . . They're probably waiting for a man' (*Comfort*, 71). The ironically stereotypical depictions of the feminist, the patriarchal misogynist, and the dominated woman would, in theory, point to a pro-feminist novel. However, Dominic Head sees it as exposing the limits of feminism as a popular credo, as a 'failure of intellectual codes (feminism in particular) to relate to actual experience, when such codes are no more than an ideological veneer' (*Ian McEwan*, 22). McEwan's views on gender are complex and inconsistent; from his 'romantic notion that if the spirit of women was liberated, the world would be healed' (McEwan, 'Mother Tongue', 41), to suddenly realising that he did not want to be used as a spokesman for women's affairs' (McEwan, Haffenden 176), to paradoxically, advocating the very views of his own caricature of 'the opposition' (28) in *The Comfort of Strangers*. Robert deeply believes that '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' (*Comfort*, 76). Although this seems to be a frontal assault on the notion of inherent female submissiveness (Robert

is revealed to be a sadistic misogynist, closet homosexual and murderer), McEwan has claimed that 'true freedom would be for such women to recognise their masochism' as 'it wasn't enough to be rational, since there might be desires . . . which act out the oppression of women or patriarchal societies but which have actually become related to sources of pleasure' (McEwan, Haffenden 178). The *Marxism Today* conference at which McEwan proposed this controversial notion, attacked him for providing a 'rapist's charter' and 'poaching on forbidden territory –women's experience' (178). This accusation is the binary opposite of the one he originally feared after writing *The Imitation Game*. Just as Lynda Broughton reads 'Homemade' and 'Pornography' as both feminist and anti-feminist stories, in which the pastiche of writers like Mailer inevitably become an example of the genre it parodies, Roger too believes that 'McEwan himself is complicit in subscribing to the patriarchal power structures which the novel seeks to criticise' (19). Evidently, the conclusions of McEwan's texts are far from determinate.

McEwan's next novel attracted an even wider spectrum of readings. Surprisingly, its gender politics were scrutinised even more intensely, especially by Adam Mars-Jones who positions *The Child in Time* as a 'masculinist narrative masquerading as a feminist one' (Childs 62) that 'mounts an extraordinarily daring raid on the citadel of fertility' (Mars-Jones 28). However, as this dystopian novel is set in a projected third-term Thatcherism in Britain, it is most frequently read as political criticism of 1980s' government (D.J. Taylor, Allan Massie, Malcolm Bradbury). Head considers McEwan's literary demonstration of post-Einsteinian concepts of temporal plasticity is reminder that 'all science must have recourse to metaphor' (*Modern British Fiction*, 235). For Ben Knight, *The Child In Time* is a 'green parable' (218) caused by patriarchal disaster, whereas Paul Edwards reads it in the context of British literary responses to modernity and socio-political malaise, especially those of the poet Philip Larkin. These different interpretations indicate a striking epistemological shift away from the author and towards a posterior knowledge. McEwan himself acknowledges that 'a reader's response is out of [his] control' (*Writer's Talk*) once a novel has been published. One anonymous reader asks whether Charles Darke represents a regressive form of government, indicated by the

character's psychological regression to infancy, but McEwan admits that this was certainly not his intention, and realises now that 'casting Darke as a politician obscured [his] actual intention' of displaying the dangerous effects of combining public and private realms (*Writer's Talk*). Rather than being invalidated by McEwan's 'corrections', these interpretations are crucial to understanding the novel, as they reflect not only the autonomy of McEwan's 'blanks' and ambiguities once they have been written, but also the ephemeral social, political and cultural zeitgeists of the novel's 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss 379) that so influences the readers' elucidation of the text.

Post-structuralism is, therefore, the only critical approach which incorporates all these ideologies that are attached to McEwan's work, and realises their significance in the creation of his literature as a constantly evolving, indeterminate artefact. Every individual reader creates a new purpose, meaning and existence for a given text, and retrospectively, all past texts, thus decentring the author. As Terry Eagleton affirms, Barthes' 'death of the author' has become a slogan that modern criticism is now confidently able to proclaim (138), yet McEwan still clings on to his works, perhaps more avidly than other writers of his generation. In the many interviews and talks McEwan gives, he often tries to reject or reaffirm certain elements of his novels and short stories. Orthodox schools of New Criticism, structuralism and reader-response theory would immediately discount these instances of the author positing textual revisions from beyond the page, as it were. For post-structuralism, however, McEwan's own readings and even reinterpretations of his works can also be credited; the transitory process of writing can never be recreated and thought progressions never duplicated, so one could argue that McEwan is still rewriting his texts, just as his many readers are. McEwan reveals that before the conception of each book, 'some ground has to shift very slowly under [him]' (Weich par. 6); he waits for the historical horizon to change and for this movement to percolate down his consciousness, ensuring that each work is a fundamentally fresh departure from the last. It is this process that places McEwan in the same position as the reader: of looking back on the work of literature's unique moment of formation, which even he can never replicate.

But what makes McEwan's reception so unusually diverse? A combination of immensely varied form and content, along with forceful reader complicity certainly points towards an emphasis in post-structuralism on a single text's ability to generate 'a hundred different perspectives which dwindle to vanishing point' (Eagleton 138). McEwan's principal literary interest has always been with experimentation; his corpus reads like a grand laboratory, meticulously mixing various ingredients to find the best concoction. By never repeating the same literary format, he manages to constantly evade labelling. He trials and tests different forms, such as short stories, screen plays, oratorios, children's stories, novels and novellas, with different narrative techniques that explore very different human psyches. McEwan avers that 'experimentation in its broadest and most viable sense should have less to do with formal factors like busting up your syntax and scrambling your page order, and more to do with content – the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them' ('State of Fiction', 51). However, it is his specific narratives and signature writing style that is so replete with what is *not* said, that tacitly compels the reader to engage and collude with the text. As Ryan observes, McEwan has a 'preoccupation with complicity . . . not merely as a theme, but as a condition of writing and a consequence of reading' ('Sex', 212). So, although McEwan was 'astonished to read the plot summaries in reviews' and had to accept the experience of 'having your fiction described back to you in ways that you wouldn't describe it yourself' (McEwan, Hamilton 19), his texts are strikingly punctuated with 'blanks' (Iser, *Languages*, xii), 'indeterminate spots' (Ingarden 332) and 'smudges' (Ridgeway 11), which force the reader to become an active participant and fill these gaps laid down by the author. So despite McEwan's clinically constructed prose, it is in fact characterised by 'the implied meaning, the spring, in the space between [the sentences]' (McEwan, *Contemporary Writers*). His sentences weigh heavy with nuances of a darker side to humanity; there is always something the reader is not quite being told that is left open to plethora of assumptions.

McEwan confesses that each story was an opportunity to try something new, sometimes only having 'very trivial rhetorical ambitions' like writing a story in the present tense, ending with the word 'yes' (McEwan, *Haffenden*, 169), or writing a 'pastiche' of 'either a particular writer or a

particular style' (*Hamilton*, 10). But these rhetorical experiments are all notable for their ability to provoke the reader's participation with the text. Many of these short stories from *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*, such as 'Homemade' and 'Butterflies', are made unbearably claustrophobic by the cloying first-person narratives. Ryan stresses McEwan's exploitation of the first-person narrative voice as a power that can create 'an illusion of unmediated intimacy' ('Sex', 213). McEwan's child molesters and incestuous fathers are owning up to *us*, 'their secret sharers and *hypocrite lecteurs*¹'. That act of confession and confinement with the isolated voice, casts the reader in the corresponding role of confidant, expected to share their point of view. Ryan explains how 'McEwan's cunning effacement of his presence, of all signs of authorial intent' (213) compels our identification with his estranged soliloquists. Head concurs and suggests that the torturous lack of moral judgement from the narrator doesn't demonstrate amorality, but instead 'can be seen as one strategy for awakening the collective conscience' (*Ian McEwan*, 2). The technique of unrelenting first-person narrative coupled with a confessional tone forces the reader into a new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations.

A second device McEwan employs to inculcate the reader is metafictionality. By reminding the reader that the text in their hands is a fictional artifice, a constructed contrivance, they are awakened to the author's process of writing, and consequently, to their involvement within that process. Iser describes this ability to 'perceive oneself during the process of participation' as a 'strange, halfway position' (*Act of Reading*, 134). The detached third-person narrator in *The Comfort of Strangers* flaunts their knowledge of Colin's imminent death and teases the reader with ominous threats and prolepses of the future course of morbid events: 'Colin and Mary had never left the hotel so late, and Mary was to attribute much of what followed to this fact' (18). The narrative is laden with heavy connotations of what is to come, as though the couple seem to expect their own fates; they appear to conjure Robert up as Mary 'pointed at the doorway several yards ahead, and,

¹ 'hypocrite lecteurs' (hypocritical readers) comes from the last line of Part One of *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot. Eliot himself took the phrase from the 'Preface' to *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil* 1857) by Charles Baudelaire.

as if summoned, a squat figure stepped out of the dark into a pool of streetlight and stood blocking their path. 'Now look what you've done.' Colin joked and Mary laughed' (25-6). This nervous laugh lingers menacingly. *Atonement* is similarly replete with pre-echoes and warnings to the reader, such as: 'within the half hour Briony would commit her crime' (156), however, it experiments with the notion of metafictionality to a degree unparalleled in contemporary literature. McEwan exploits the conventions of intertextuality until the novel is bursting at the seams with writers from the British literary canon such as Austen, Waugh and Hartley. He manages to include the metafictional trope of a play ('The Trials of Arabella') and a novella ('Two Figures by a Fountain') within a novel, and in a final coup de théâtre, the narrator reveals her true identity as the fictional writer of the entire novel in the 'postmodern' (Wood 9) coda. By questioning its own fictive status and exposing itself as a construct, the reader finds himself in Iser's 'halfway' position; engaged with the text but also watching his own involvement.

So if a posterior knowledge has been transposed onto the reader, can McEwan still have a 'language project' (Weich par. 3)? The most recent critical work to be written about McEwan positions him as part of a new trend in 'narrative ethics' (Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan*, 13). This is the first serious attempt to suggest a common element to McEwan's oeuvre, apart from the usual observations that McEwan writes particularly meticulous prose (arguably, a truism about many novelists). However, for Head, McEwan's 'quest to establish a viable ethical stance for contemporary novelists' (2) is fundamentally antagonistic towards the idea of post-structuralism, as encoding moral dilemmas within the text negates the value role of the reader and subscribes McEwan to an absolute meaning. Despite McEwan himself recognising that it is 'hard to bind [his works] within any single scheme, there is no doubting that he has a preoccupation with morality. His journeys into the human psyche have traversed the minds of the debauched and psychopathic, from children and adolescents to even the minutiae of the female mind, particularly in *On Chesil Beach*. He believes that empathy 'is the core of our humanity . . . and is the beginning of morality' (McEwan, 'Only Love' par. 16). McEwan insists that 'we must bring our own general understanding of what it means to be

a person' to the text, as we rely on our own 'theory of mind' and our 'automatic understanding of what it means to be someone else' ('Literature', 5). For Head, however, this 'implies a necessary recalibration of poststructuralist critical reading' (*Ian McEwan, 202*). But although McEwan is interested in 'a commonly held stock of emotion', he is also conscious that these emotions are 'shaped by culture', that 'our ways of managing our emotions, our attitudes to them, and the ways we describe them are learned and differ from culture to culture.' ('Literature', 10). As there is no universal reader, there can be no universal morality; the process of empathising with a character entails an inevitable degree of disparity. McEwan's oeuvre explores the multiplicity of reading through fictional empathy which arguably stages the emphasis in post-structuralism on the indeterminacy of the individual, language and meaning.

For example, *Atonement* is a novel principally composed of three perspectives. The pivotal scene at the fountain is described in detail from the perspectives of Briony, Cecilia, and Robbie, and so the reader is not only prompted to empathise with each, but also to choose between them, demonstrating how the reader is still in command of the ultimate meaning. Just as Briony believed that 'she did not have to judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own' (40), *First Love, Last Rites, In Between the Sheets* and *The Cement Garden* are deliberately purged of moral responsibility. The reader is forced to empathise with McEwan's degenerate characters through the unbearably claustrophobic narrative, which has the ability to 'unseat our moral certainties and sap our confidence in snap-judgements' (Ryan, *Ian McEwan, 5*), whether we recognise an affinity with the characters or not. *Enduring Love* illustrates how two people who supposedly love and know each other, Joe and Clarissa, can interpret the same experience completely differently. The ballooning accident is recreated so vividly, with such precision and intense clarity, that the reader can imagine his or herself in the predicament, and not only envisages what they themselves would do in such a situation, but empathises with each of the characters and the ways in which they respond to the event. As Iser asserts, 'the significance of the work...does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that the meaning brings out

what had been previously sealed within us' (*Act of Reading*, 157). McEwan's novels affect the awakening of the collective conscious to their own morals, however unsound they may turn out to be. Cowley recognises McEwan as 'almost alone among modern British writers' in this ability to 'dissect contemporary morality with the ruthlessness of a child pulling the wings off a butterfly' ('Amsterdam').

This interrogation of the human psyche is one of the crucial components of McEwan's most recent work, *On Chesil Beach*, but the role of reader is more present than ever in this novella. McEwan is acutely aware of the 'eighteen inches of bookshelf' (McEwan, Weich par. 8) that his corpus occupies, and the 'meta-story' of his own literary career. Subsequently, *On Chesil Beach* seems self-consciously aware of its particular 'horizon of expectation' and the back catalogue of novels it is being read against. The anonymous narrator teases the expectant reader who waits for the literary coup of *Atonement's* finale, or a gruesome death inspired by *The Comfort of Strangers* or *The Innocent*. But now McEwan is battling against his own reputation, and for the first time, there are no deaths, the narrator is never identified, and in a seeming confront to the reader, sexual intercourse never actually takes place between Florence and Edward. The novella itself acts as a model for post-structuralist interpretation; its form, discourse and indeterminacy point to a plethora of meanings and metafictional questioning of the role of the reader. The subtlety with which McEwan inaugurates the reader into the text is achieved by employing techniques present in previous works, but which are now consummate and invisible. The novella traverses new terrain in its form and content, but is still unmistakably McEwanesque, with its well-wrought prose, subtle ambiguities that draw the reader deep into the fabric of the novella, and two compelling perspectives that vie for the reader's sympathy.

Set in 1962, during 'that hinterland in British courtship between repression and licence, the Lawrence litigation and 'Love Me Do' (Adams 242), *On Chesil Beach* chronicles a young couple's fears about their wedding night and the tragedy of how 'the entire course of a life can be changed – by doing nothing' (*On Chesil Beach*, 166). By experimenting with Beckettian inaction, the novella

offers McEwan an opportunity to represent the deepest and most ephemeral workings of the human mind through the minutiae of language. *On Chesil Beach* lays bare the extent to which words, or the inadequacy of words, can cause two people's lives to completely fall away from each other, even when 'their love was so obvious' (91). For Edward, 'a boundless sexual freedom, theirs for the taking, even blessed by the vicar' (96) was just waiting for them to embrace, but 'a slight change, a combination of tiny factors, little zephyrs of doubt, and [Florence] could change her mind' (98). They were simply unable to voice their true feelings, as 'a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible' (1). Ryan describes how this austere style is in fact 'electric with tension, taut with the strain of excluding what it cannot trust itself to say, but which seethes nevertheless beneath the surface of each word' ('Sex', 209). Their sentences are sated with connotations they can never voice: of sexual ecstasy, sexual repulsion, and even violence.

On Chesil Beach's preoccupation with the simultaneous power and limitations of language is explicit on every page; the couple are bristling with newlywed excitement, yet believe that 'from these new heights they could see clearly, but they could not describe to each other certain contradictory feelings' (*On Chesil Beach*, 6). Now married, they were 'theoretically free to do whatever they wanted, but they went on eating the dinner they had no appetite for' (23); if only Edward 'had known how to propose it' (19) or if Florence problems were not 'matters beyond words' (21) they could have been 'so free with each other' (150). This inability to voice their anxieties, followed by their inability to describe Edward's premature ejaculation, directly leads to the end of their marriage. As Florence 'understood it, there were no words to name what had happened, there existed no shared language in which two sane adults could describe such events to each other (139), just as Edward knew that there were no such words to 'broach the matter of his own particular deformity', 'they did not exist. Such a language had yet to be invented' (141). From this failure of language, Florence and Edward are equally trapped by language's power to define and attribute meaning. Edward's mother became a different person when the term '*brain-damaged*' was attached to her condition: 'this simple naming, by the power of words . . . dissolved intimacy' and

‘coolly measured his mother by a public standard that everyone could understand. She was brain-damaged and he was not’ (72). Edward defines himself by what his mother is and therefore his difference to her. In the same way, Florence is given an identity by the term ‘frigid, that terrible word . . . She was exactly what the word meant’ (156). Florence is literarily being constructed by language; she did not understand herself until she was given a label. The word ‘bitch’ was ‘like a starburst in the night sky’ (149) for Florence, as it allowed her to say what she liked, whereas Edward ‘had gone too far with this word, and now he was trapped with it’ (149). With so little action, words have become invaluable; each one carries surplus significance for the couple as they are so bound by their ‘silent manoeuvrings’ (149). McEwan also explores the way in which individual words can have a variety of meanings for different readers. Florence’s visceral dread of sex is exacerbated by the very words from ‘a modern, forward looking handbook that was meant to be helpful to young brides’ (7): ‘*mucoous membrane*’, ‘*glistening glands*’, and ‘*engorged penis* – another horrifying term’ (8) had the potency to ‘almost make her gag’. That fact that Florence’s experience of these signs is the opposite of how they were intended to be read, signals to the reader that the text in their hands can, too, be read in such contrary terms.

The form of the novella is composed from various elements of McEwan’s previous works: the intense forward linear movement over the course of one evening is reminiscent of *Saturday*, which occurs, like *Ulysses*, over one day, and the scenario of two autonomous lovers recalls Colin and Mary from *The Comfort of Strangers*. However, the structure of *The Innocent*, in which the narrative is interposed with accounts of the protagonist Leonard’s biography, is advanced by McEwan in *On Chesil Beach* by suggesting that the aetiologies of Florence and Edward are in fact crucial to the understanding of their relationship. The novella is equally divided into five acts which move between the chronological sequence in the hotel, and flashbacks of the characters’ backgrounds. Part One and Two are conjoined by the assumptive sentence: ‘how did they meet, and why were these lovers in a modern age so timid and innocent?’ (37); the narrator is deliberately juxtaposing their meeting with the reason for their problems. The weight McEwan dedicates to Florence and Edward’s family,

education and class is emphasised, thereby pointing to an anti-formalist model of reading in which the significance of 'external' factors such as these should not be ignored. Equally, there is evidence in the text that reminds the reader, like in *Atonement*, that the narrator, and thereby the author, is unreliable. This consequently undermines the story's authority, and prompts the long-awaited 'birth of the reader' (Barthes, 'Death', par. 7).

McEwan's use of free indirect discourse manoeuvres the reader towards certain interpretations by insidiously combining the omniscient narrator's voice from the present, with the perspectives of both Florence and Edward. Like *The Comfort of Strangers*, the narrator appears to boast his hindsight advantage. Similar to *Atonement*, the narrative intimately describes every thought and feeling of the two characters, but in *On Chesil Beach*, McEwan juxtaposes the perspectives next to each other, rather than divide them into chapters, to heighten the sense of Florence and Edward's misinterpretations of each other. Although the reader empathises with both characters, the insidious use of the disjunctive silently urges the reader to *sympathise* with one or the other, and to judge who or what is responsible for the tragic denouement. Edward lovingly describes Florence as 'painfully honest and self-aware, whose every thought and emotion appeared naked to view' (16), fatally mistaking her repulsion and frigidity for 'a form of coyness, a conventional veil for a richly sexual nature' (21). There is a pervading sense of ironic humour throughout the novella, as though McEwan is mimicking the instability of the act of reading; like Edward here, the reader is equally vulnerable to making such serious misinterpretations of the text. The narrator's description of a single kiss from each point of view is an example of how two people can experience the same situation so differently: 'with his lips clamped firmly onto hers, he probed the fleshy floor of her mouth, then moved round inside the teeth of her lower jaw to the empty place where three years ago a wisdom tooth had crookedly grown until removed under general anaesthesia' (29), until the 'hard tapering tip of this alien muscle, quiveringly alive' (30) almost made her sick. Edward, on the other hand, seems to be experiencing an entire different event, as he understands the 'sound of her breathing rapidly through her nostrils' as 'passionate' excitement, and 'when he heard her moan,

[he] knew that his happiness was almost complete (30). Florence fears that 'if the entire wedding ensemble of guests and close family had been somehow crammed invisibly into the room to watch, these ghosts would all side with Edward and . . . assume there was something wrong with her' (33); the narrator is prompting the reader to do the same and make a decision like all the guests have done.

But the reader's judgement is blurred by McEwan's typical insinuation of murky undercurrents that imbues the text but is never clarified. Edward demands to know 'why weren't they up there now, instead of sitting here, bottled up with all the things they did not know how to say or dared not to do?' (96). The narrator sardonically suggests what stood in their way was

their personalities and pasts, their ignorance and fear, timidity, squeamishness, lack of entitlement or experience or easy manners, then the tail end of a religious prohibition, their Englishness and class, and history itself. Nothing much at all (96).

All perfectly valid reasons for reservations about sex, but the undermining last sentence begins to kindle doubt in the reader's mind. In the first few pages, the narrator tells the reader that the couple were stuck in stasis because 'the times held them. Even when Edward and Florence were alone, a thousand unacknowledged rules still applied' (18), so the reasons above begin to unravel. Something looms in the shadows, something we are not being told, something distinctly unpleasant that we only get mere glimpses of, and only if we are really looking.

As Ridgeway reminds us, 'we are all products of our times, created by what surrounds us, condemned to play out the game according to the prevailing rules' (11). For Ryan, the specific 'horizon of expectation' that foregrounds McEwan's oeuvre is defined by

a universal stranglehold of nuclear and market forces, which have turned Eros and Thanatos . . . into commodities to be screened and narrated, watched and consumed. Violence has bled through into sexuality with a vengeance . . . while violence conversely, has been eroticised ('Sex', 210).

So perhaps that 'smudge' is an anachronistic interloper from our own times. This cultural relativity undoubtedly qualifies our reading of the text, but it cannot alone be responsible for filling McEwan's ambiguous blanks. Along with the unsaid suggestion Florence's sexual abuse, Edward's violent temperament lingers in the margins. The reader is warned that Edward is 'prone to the occasional violent eruption' (58) but the narrator's description of how Edward must frequently repress it, evokes the way in which Florence must also repress her sexual repulsion, suggesting that violence is a less peripheral, and more central concern than McEwan lets on. Edward admits he is 'frightened by his own savage impatience' (95) as it provokes 'a darker reckoning, a trace of poison that even now was branching through his being. Anger. The demon he had kept down earlier' (133). McEwan calculatingly includes Edward's violent incident, in which he took a man 'by the throat and pushed him back against a wall. The man's head clunked satisfyingly against a cast iron drainpipe. Still clenching his throat, Edward hit him in the face, just once, but very hard, with a closed fist' (94). The most disconcerting thing about this act is the way McEwan uses the same word, 'ecstasy' (19, 94), to describe both Edward's orgasm and anger. As Ryan observed, sex and violence have bled into each other. In the final scene between the lovers, Edward 'took a step towards [Florence], with the hand gripping the stone raised, then he spun around and in his frustration hurled it towards the sea' (156). McEwan directly confronts his readers' expectations with a mixture of relief and bathos, finally shedding his 'macabre' label.

Many have questioned the presence of Florence's sexual abuse by her father in the novel, even to the extent that McEwan has to clarify, post-publication, that Florence *was* abused as a child. For the reader, the novella leaves this somewhat crucial aspect ambiguous. Although part of this interpretation is potentially goaded by McEwan's own fictional history and 'our dirty twenty-first century minds' (Ridgeway 11), part of it clearly does reside in the text. McEwan's sentences carry more meaning than the syntax can contain; 'Edward' for example, 'knew too little about the world to be surprised by his welcome into the Ponting household' (112). Although McEwan decided that it

would have been too 'heavy handed'² to concretise Geoffery Ponting's paedophilia in the closing pages, the inference of it is still present in the text. Whether or not the reader interprets it is out of McEwan's hands, so to speak. As the narrator recollects, Florence's father 'used to take her out with him, and several times, when she was twelve and thirteen, they crossed all the way to Carteret, near Cherbourg. They never talked about those trips. He had never asked her again, and she was glad' (50). Even the unobservant Edward sensed the disquiet in their relationship: 'he thought they were intensely aware of each other, though, and he had the impression they exchanged glances when other people were talking . . . It crossed Edward's mind, barely seriously, that he was rather too keen to give his daughter away' (115). Just as the couple approach the four-poster bed, McEwan resuscitates these niggling thoughts as Florence's 'indistinct past' comes flooding back:

She was twelve years old, lying still like this, waiting, shivering in the narrow bunk with polished mahogany sides. Her mind was blank, she felt she was in disgrace. After a two-day crossing, they were once more in the calm of Carteret harbour, south of Cherbourg. It was late in the evening, and her father was moving about the dim cramped cabin, undressing, like Edward now (99-100).

McEwan never makes the incestuous child abuse determinate. By leaving it ambiguous, the novella remains open to multiple interpretations and resists diagnosing Florence with a whole host of Freudian complexes which would thereby impose a very concrete meaning onto *On Chesil Beach*. McEwan is attempting to anticipate what Sampson terms, the 'close reader' (68), by evading a definite conclusion and by confronting his traditional host of psychoanalytical interpretations with a self-ironising retort: as Florence wryly muses, 'perhaps what I really need to do is kill my mother and marry my father' (153).

By reading McEwan principally in terms of the reader, a much greater understanding can be gained from his works. Instead of trying to homogenise his oeuvre, post-structuralism recognises each and every interpretation as an equally valid component of a constantly evolving meaning. Not quite slipping into postmodernism, in which all meaning is rendered futile, McEwan retains this core

² <http://www.voy.com/109204/1485.html> See the official forum (www.ianmcewan.com) for further debate on this subject.

of meaning, without necessarily deeming it final. McEwan is acutely conscious of his readers; even his confident first works draw them deep into the text to awaken their sense of morality. However, his works seem to be increasingly confrontational, subverting not only moral expectations but his own reputational expectations. Meaning is never fully surrendered to the reader, as McEwan compromises with an Iserian co-partnership: 'by reading we uncover the unformulated part of the text, and this very indeterminacy is the force that drives us to work out a configurative meaning, while at the same time giving us the necessary degree of freedom to do so' (Iser, *Implied Reader*, 287). McEwan enjoys the wealth of different interpretations that his texts generate, and seems to purposefully tease the reader into the maze of his own 'meta-story'; one could even argue this directly reflects a post-structuralist model of reading through his own rigorously indeterminate narratives and shifting cultural concerns. Meaning remains in flux, for McEwan, and therefore always open to further modifications and revisions as his horizon of expectation evolves. If the reader is armed with this critical approach, McEwan's next publication can be understood not as an aberration of his preceding themes, but as part of his unique experimentalism and diverse literary scope, in which the reader is as embroiled in the construction of the text as McEwan himself.

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