

A heap of postmodern strategies: a study of postmodern elements in the novels of the comfort of Strangers and the Child in Time of Ian Mc Ewan

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Abstract

Postmodern fiction consists of various elements like pastiche, temporal disorder, magic realism, irony, playfulness, black humour, intertextuality, multile narrative technique and so on. As a postmodern novelist, Ian McEwan employed all the postmodern elements or strategies in his fiction from his early writings. This paper is an attempt to bring out those elements in his early novels, *The Child in Time* and *The Comfort of Strangers*.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, obscene, alienation, estrangement, setting, narrative technique and gender issues.

The most evident postmodern feature of *The Comfort of Strangers* is the subject itself. According to Lye “the challenging of the borders and limits, including those of decency” is one of the typical elements of postmodernist fiction (Lye 1997). Here the relative borders of “decency” are disregarded by an overt description of human perversion leading to abnormal violence and crime. Robert and Caroline are unable to rise above their

physicality; they are confined in their bodies, obtaining sexual pleasure from sado-masochistic practices. As Lye points out, postmodern authors put an emphasis on the incarnate, on the humans as physical beings in a physical world (Lye 1997).

The obscene subject matter is however not the core of the story. The author seems to turn away from any unified theme. The subject matter is somehow dispersed or disrupted by the characters' aimlessness. They are passive, trapped in their meaningless existence which is symbolized by the paralyzing heat. The protagonists, Colin and Mary, seem to be bored with each other's company. Sometimes their mutual attitude is almost hostile. They sleep in separate beds and their communication is restricted to a “ritual hour” before dinner when they listen to each other's account of last night's dreams only because they need to share their own:

This was no longer a great passion. 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 would deny indignantly that they were bored. They often said they found it difficult to remember that the other was a separate person. When they

looked at each other they looked into a misted mirror. When they talked about the politics of sex, which they did sometimes, they did not talk of themselves. It was precisely this collusion that made them vulnerable and sensitive to each other, easily hurt by the rediscovery that their needs and interests were distinct. (McEwan 1982: 18 – 19)

The author suggests their alienation in the foreign city. When exploring the city, they get lost frequently and fail to agree on the right way. Their estrangement and hopelessness makes them vulnerable and they end up as victims of Robert and Caroline's perverted plan.

Colin and Mary's misunderstandings as well as the unequal relationship between Robert and Caroline serve yet another purpose. McEwan frequently touches on gender issues and feminism:

Mary had climbed the first steps of the palace and was reading the posters. 'The women are more radical here,' she said over her shoulder, 'and better organized.' . . . She turned and smiled at Colin. 'They want convicted rapists castrated!' . . . 'It's a way of making people take rape more seriously as a crime.' Colin moved again and stood, with his feet firmly apart, facing the street on their left. . . . 'It's a way,' he said irritably, 'of making people take feminists less seriously.' (McEwan 1982 : 24)

Gender issues and inequality take its extreme form in Robert and Caroline's relationship. Robert's male dominance is clear from the very beginning. He reveals it while telling Colin and Mary the story of his childhood in a typically patriarchal family after he has invited them to his bar. He tells them about his father's cruel treatment of the whole family: "Everybody was afraid of him. My mother, my four sisters, even the ambassador was afraid of my father. When he frowned nobody could speak. At the dining-table you could not speak unless spoken to first by my father" (McEwan 1982: 32). Robert also tells them how severely his father punished him when he broke his ban on eating chocolate:

Later my mother came to see me in my bedroom, and in the morning a psychiatrist came and said there had been a trauma. But for my father it was enough that I had eaten chocolate. He beat me every night for three days and for many months he did not speak kindly to me. . . . And to this day I never eat chocolate, and I have never forgiven my sisters. (McEwan 1982: 38)

It becomes clear that Robert follows in the footsteps of his father in the way he treats his wife. Caroline's position, however, remains under the mantle of mystery till the penultimate chapter of the book. Colin and Mary suspect Robert of beating his wife, who behaves in a subservient manner. Only towards the end of the novel, in her conversation with Mary, Caroline reveals her own attitude to her husband and tells Mary of her weird

pleasure in being humiliated:

Robert started to hurt me when we made love. . . . 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, though it took a long time, that I liked it. . . . It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it and being reduced to nothing by it. It's pain in a particular context, being punished and therefore being guilty. We both liked what was happening. I was ashamed of myself, and before I knew it, my shame too was a source of pleasure. It was as if I was discovering more and more. I needed it. Robert began to really hurt me. He used a whip. He beat me with his fists as he made love to me. I was terrified, but the terror and the pleasure were all one. (McEwan 1982: 108 – 109)

The subject matter is not the only postmodern feature of the novel. McEwan's style is characterized by sophistication and refined complexity. It may be said that the plot is sacrificed to style. There is little action, the author prefers to concentrate on the depiction of the gloomy atmosphere of the city and the protagonists' feelings of misery and aimlessness. The narrator remains detached from the story and describes the settings, events and feelings with precision and formality. This technique makes the reader aware of the narrator's presence. Malcolm identifies the author's pursuit of self-referential fiction

frequently reminding the reader of the narrative process. He points out extensive intertextuality, allusions to several literary works such as Ruskin's and Mann's (Malcolm 2002: 70 – 71).

The setting, both local and temporal, is somehow blurred. It is not identified explicitly, although it is generally considered to be contemporary Venice. The city, however, is never named. Moreover, it is described as a hostile place, with its maze of narrow streets and imposing palaces, without signs. The maps are sold in the kiosks but tourists never know which one to buy and the mysterious vendors never answer their questions about directions. The loss of direction is symbolic – both the story and the characters are trapped in a vicious circle. The gloomy atmosphere of the city contributes to the sense of the Gothic style. The author thus makes use of pastiche, which is another characteristic tool in the hands of postmodern writers. According to Malcolm “the novel's Gothic elements are used to emphasise the intrusion of past into present and the eruption of the brutal and the macabre into the seemingly every day. . . . Such a treatment also functions as a metaliterary comment on the Gothic and as an attempt to refresh an at least partly automatized and stale genre” (2002: 79 – 80).

Although *The Child in Time* shares a lot of motifs with its predecessors, it is often considered a breakthrough in McEwan's literary career. In her review for *The Irish Times* (23rd August 1997) Eileen Battersby points out that in his third novel “McEwan has shifted away from the grotesque extremes and has instead become

concerned with disturbed and disturbing psychological trauma” (qtd. in Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 172). The diversion from McEwan’s typical elements of the Gothic including violence, psychotic states, sordid details and other macabre or taboo subjects is emphasised by Malcolm (2002: 90).

There are several themes, however, which appeared in McEwan’s previous works and he treats them from a new angle in this novel. These involve the themes of childhood and adulthood and the tension between their respective worlds, gender roles and relations, personal freedom, the relativity of time and the role of chance. Other topics treated in the novel foreshadow the primary concerns of the author’s later works – public policy and the practices of political circles, the intricacies of science, obsession behaviour and the state of the society. The author reveals his intentions regarding the thematic structure of the novel in the exclusive interview for Reynolds and Noakes’s guide to McEwan’s works. He was interested in “how private fates and public events collide” and aimed at uniting public and private concern. (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 12). The postmodern tendency of the novel also resides in focusing on the fact that security is a mere illusion and we are always on the edge of danger. According to the postmodern theory every “truth” is relative.

The author emphasises this idea of relativity, which is supported by the central theme of “the child” or childhood. The children’s world is presented as a counterpart of the adults’ world. The development of an individual through time articulates the transience of things in time.

Stephen often emphasises the difference between his views as a child and as an adult. He recollects his unquestioning respect and admiration for his parents during their “five-year idyll” in North Africa where his father, Flight Sergeant Lewis, served in the RAF. These memories stand in sharp contrast to his view as a grown-up man. He can see weaknesses in his parents, their doubts and uncertainties. He is no longer able to understand the children’s world which is manifested in Stephen’s incomprehension of Charles’s “childish” behaviour.

The style of the narrative is distinct from the previous two novels. First and foremost, it is not presented in a linear, chronological order. The narration starts two years after the abduction of Stephen’s daughter Kate. The reader becomes acquainted with the protagonist, Stephen Lewis, an author of children’s books, who walks from his flat to Whitehall to attend a meeting of the Official Commission on Childcare, where he participates in the Subcommittee on Reading and Writing. This is his only commitment as most of his life is spent in seclusion. His life gradually seeps away and he drowns his memories of the happy times with his wife and daughter in Scotch. The reader gets to know about the protagonist’s life story in fragments separated by episodes in the Whitehall. While sitting in the committee, Stephen recollects various incidents from his past life: “He daydreamed in fragments, without control, almost without consciousness” (McEwan 1999: 7). This fragmentariness is characteristic of the whole novel. The author alternates descriptive passages with

stream of consciousness. There are fragments of Stephen's life before Kate was lost, recollections from his childhood, the beginning of his career, glimpses of his relationship with Charles Darke and his wife Thelma, visits to his parents' house. Chapter three, for instance, is about his visit at Julie's new home, a country cottage she bought after they separated and sold their common flat in London. The detailed description of the journey is suddenly interspersed with a passage recollecting Stephen's encounter with Julie after her return from a retreat in a monastery. This section is devoted to the description of their mutual feelings and how their relationship was influenced by the sense of loss. He gradually proceeds to a deeper, almost philosophical contemplation on male and female interpretation of life and its sense. After a few pages the author returns to the realistic account of the journey only to interrupt it again with an account of the protagonist's metaphysical *déjà vous* experience which proves to be a kind of transfer into a different time where he witnesses his parents as a young unmarried couple discussing something very seriously. He watches them sitting in a pub and talking and starts to feel lonely and excluded and experiences a strange reversal into an unborn child having no one to look forward to his birth: "He had nowhere to go, no moment that could embody him, he was not expected, no destination or time could be named; for while he moved forward violently, he was immobile, he was hurtling round a fixed point" (McEwan 1999: 66).

Later his mother tells him about the

situation she experienced with her future husband and her account exactly corresponds to what Stephen saw through the window of the pub. She tells him they were talking about an abortion but suddenly she saw a pale face of a child at the window and she "knew" that she was looking at her own child. That was the moment when she started to love the child inside her and decided firmly to have him. This story, however, comes more than a hundred and fifty pages later. Chapter three thus reveals the author's postmodernist understanding of the concepts of time and memory. Their validity is impeached by his supernatural experience as he recognises a place he has never been to: "He had never been here before, not as a child, not as an adult. But this certainty was confused by the knowledge that he had imagined it just like this. And he had no memory of imagining it at all. . . . How could he have expectations without memory?" (McEwan 1999: 61). He is "attempting to connect the place and its day with a memory, a dream, a film, a forgotten childhood visit" but finally he has to admit that the strange familiarity of the location has "its origins outside his own existence". The postmodernist character of this element resides in the fact that a subjective experience creates reality. The traditional perception of objective reality is in contradiction with subjective reality but here they surprisingly correspond. Reality arises from what we experience. The sense of elusive memory is strengthened by an appearance of two old-fashioned black bicycles, an allusion to the episode in the previous chapter where Stephen and his mother recollect their trip to the sea on the

same heavy black bicycles. Reynolds and Noakes come up with the idea that Stephen's journey to see Julie is a metaphor for a journey through time (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 39).

The treatment of time plays a significant role. The novel itself is written as a series of overlapping memories, flashbacks and "current" accounts. The characters are aware of the relative and perfidious nature of time which may be explained in many ways. Stephen discusses this issue with Charles's wife Thelma, who is a scientist. He tells her about the experience he had on the way to their country house in Suffolk. He witnessed a road accident and helped the driver of a lorry whom he later transported to the police station. The passage about the accident and the process of saving the driver are described in great detail. Stephen points out his strange perception of time: "In what followed, the rapidity of events was accommodated by the slowing of time" (McEwan 1999: 106). A few pages later he tells Thelma about his feelings: "It's got something to do with time, obviously, with seeing something out of time" (Ibid. 134). Thelma explains him that the understanding of time may have many forms: "But whatever time is, the common-sense, everyday version of it as linear, regular, absolute, marching from left to right, from the past through the present to the future, is either nonsense or a tiny fraction of the truth. . . . Time is variable" (Ibid. 136). The most experimental treatment of time is presented by Charles Darke, Stephen's friend and a successful politician and businessman who retreats into childhood

and completely succumbs to this illusion. In the interview included in Reynolds and Noakes's *Ian McEwan: The Essential Guide*, the author expresses himself to the notion of a deeper patterning of time. He talks about childhood and its perpetual presence in our lives which makes the sense of time very subjective. He confirms this subjectivity of time by the way it accelerates in a crisis. Finally, he stresses the play with time he used in his novel which he framed by the sense of arrival of Stephen and Julie's second child: "The novel more or less unfolds within the gestation period of a pregnancy" (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 13). Time is, without doubt, the central theme of the novel. The title is symbolic and may be interpreted in several ways as well as the notion of time. It may denote the development of a fetus in a mother's body as Stephen's second child develops in Julie's body throughout the novel's plot. It may also represent the miracle of birth of Stephen and Julie's second child after a long period of anguish after the loss of their daughter Kate. It is also worth noting that the novel is divided into nine chapters.

As in McEwan's earlier novels, the narrator is anonymous but it is always Stephen, the protagonist of the novel, whose point of view is presented. The author, however incorporates a typically postmodern element of metafiction – stepping in the text with a detached comment. Malcolm adduces several examples of this technique when the narrator addresses the reader. A few pieces of the text do not present anyone's viewpoint. These are rather detailed

accounts of situations or events given by the anonymous narrator. Furthermore, Malcolm points out several passages where the point of view belongs to a different character, namely to Mrs Lewis (Malcolm 2002: 93).

There is another feature drawing attention to the process of writing. *The Child in Time*, as many other postmodern novels, is a self-referential work. Malcolm ascribes great significance to the formality of language and syntactical complexity (Malcolm 2002).

Last but not least, the style of the novel in question bears several elements of pastiche which present themselves both thematically and stylistically. As was mentioned above, the author himself attempted to compose a mixture of private fates and public matters such as political problems, public policy on childcare and gender issues. In terms of genre, *The Child in Time* is a combination of a psychological novel, a novel of social criticism and a political novel. The author was inspired by a book on the history of childcare manuals – *Dream Babies* by Christina Hardyment – and he created fragments of such a satirical manual which he used as epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. Then he decided to write a “social comedy” which was generically turned into a novel combining both strong emotional passages and issues of public interest. Other features incorporated in the novel involve supernatural elements, scientific theories and philosophical contemplation. Malcolm considers psychological novel and dystopia as the most noticeable genres present in the

novel (Malcolm: 2002). The latter deals with the political and social situation in Britain in the near future and reveals the author's expectations regarding the political development as a result of the so called “Thatcherism”, the system of political thought which pursued the free market economy, monetarism, privatisation and a reduction of the welfare. The condition of the country is far from being portrayed in flattering colours. The narrator describes the collapse of public transport, the presence of licensed beggars, the privatisation of schools, armed policemen in the streets and tendentious media slanted in favour of the government. Pastiche is also employed in the presence of a real historical figure in the text. The author merges history and fiction when he introduces the character of the Prime Minister. Although the Prime Minister is neither referred to by name nor his/her sex is mentioned, most critics and experts agree that the character was inspired by Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the UK between 1979 and 1990.

Reynolds and Noakes also stress a significant aspect of the novel's formal structure: “Every detail serves a purpose in a wider picture although the reader must often wait to see how” (Reynolds and Noakes 2002: 39). This narrative technique makes the reader involved in the creative process of narration. It helps them to take an active part in discovering the protagonist's inner life and in the interpretation of the symbolic devices used in the novel. Some of these symbols remain hidden to individual readers as it is possible to explain them in different ways. “The

Bell”, which is first mentioned in Chapter three, may serve as a good example. On his way to Julie’s house Stephen has to pass a pub called The Bell. It is the place that features in his enigmatic vision from his parents’ past before he was born. The name of the pub is mentioned several times and it seems to be used as a symbol of the female principle of the perfection of wisdom.

The complexity of this novel makes it impossible to classify as a purely postmodernist work. The first of the features beyond postmodernism is the treatment of the characters. While postmodern characters are typically flat, the novel’s protagonist, Stephen, is a psychologically elaborate figure. The author pays attention to the way Stephen copes with the loss of his child and to his relationship towards the people around him. The detailed descriptions of emotional states are very compelling and create an impression of describing a personal experience. The despair after Kate’s abduction, the period of estrangement from his wife and the process of the recovery of their marriage are skilfully written passages in which the feelings play a crucial role.

Another feature opposed to postmodernism is McEwan’s partial focus on describing outer reality. He does not resign on the existence of objective reality except a single passage describing Stephen’s experience of stepping back into the past before his birth which is presented as a supernatural and inexplicable event. All the other “hallucinations” he has are strictly explained using scientific or psychological arguments. These involve for example Stephen’s distorted perception of

time in the road accident he witnesses while driving to visit Charles and Thelma or his illusion about seeing Kate in another young girl. The former is also an instance of McEwan’s interest in science which he often demonstrates through his later novels and emphasises in interviews. He expresses his respect for rationality and celebrates the achievements of scientists. He even criticises the “post-Romantic” sense in literature where the character who trusts his intuition wins over the one with a rational attitude. McEwan is convinced of the necessity of writing a novel “in praise of rationality” (Koval 2004). The realistic and detailed descriptions of settings only confirm this tendency. The author makes a point of the depiction of London streets, people’s appearances, the interior of the supermarket where his daughter was abducted, his parents’ house, his own flat, Charles’s treehouse, and Julie’s house in the country where they finally find each other again before their second child is born. He gives attention to such details as the position of a cup and a saucer, a carton of fruit juice or a stack of ironed laundry. These passages alternate with exhaustive accounts of the characters’ feelings which together make the internal structure of the novel rather complicated.

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