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Subjection and Domination in the Work of Ian McEwan

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Abstract

The thesis identifies the theme of domination and subjection as a significant one in the work of the contemporary English novelist, Ian McEwan. Throughout his work he demonstrates how personal relationships can be seen as a microcosm of wider social and political perspectives.

Chapter I contains an introduction to the theme and sets out the various ways in which it is discussed in the thesis. In Chapter II McEwan's treatment of the theme with reference to children is explored, looking especially at his early short stories and his first novel, *The Cement Garden*. His representation of unequal power relations in families focusses upon siblings' power struggles and the abuses of power exercised by adults upon children. This chapter concludes with an exploration of McEwan's depiction of childhood and adolescence as a time of freedom and resistance. In Chapter III the various representations of sexual domination and subjection are explored, such as sexual sadism and masochism, especially with reference to his second novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*. McEwan's representation of traditional patriarchal conditions of unequal power distribution invites feminist perspectives to propose possibilities for resistance. In Chapter IV McEwan's representations of the social and political aspects of the drive for mastery are explored, with a particular focus upon *Black Dogs* and *The Innocent*. This includes a consideration of his treatment of war as a background to his imaginative work. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the drive for mastery through scientific domination.

The final chapter concludes that McEwan's critique of the struggle for mastery through these various realms of dominative practices serves as a commentary on the struggle within unequal power relations which is a feature of the human condition in contemporary society. His writing is therefore arguably a form of resistance to the tendency towards domination and subjection.

Declarations

- (i) I, Angela May Roger Buchanan, certify that this thesis, which is approximately 83,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.
- Date: 2/ March 2000
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- (ii) I was admitted as a research student in October 1996 and as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in July 1997; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1996 and 2000.
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Reference System and List of Abbreviations

Full details of original texts appear in the Bibliography. In the body of the thesis, texts by McEwan will be referenced in a footnote on their first mention. Where the text is quoted from, and the edition used is different from the original publication, page references will cite page numbers in the relevant edition. References for short stories published in collections, and for plays and the oratorio published in collections, will give the abbreviation of the collection, and the page number(s) in it as follows:

Collected Short Stories

First Love, Last Rites FLLR

In Between the Sheets IBS

Collected Plays and Oratorio

The Imitation Game, including *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration* IG

A Move Abroad, including *or Shall We Die?* AMA

Where McEwan published more than one piece in a year the publications will be distinguished sequentially, according to the order in which they appear in the Bibliography, by the suffixes 'a', 'b' etc. References to sources other than McEwan's writing will use the 'author-date' system with full details being provided in the Bibliography. Cross-references within the thesis will cite the page number in the form '(p. n.)', in order to distinguish them from references to McEwan's work.

Chapter I: THEME AND VARIATIONS

Introduction

In a radio interview about his 'private passions' Ian McEwan revealed that theme and variations in music fascinate him: 'I was entranced by the simple matter we all take entirely for granted in classical music that a theme is stated and then work is done, as it were, in all directions' (O'Donnell 1997). This fascination also manifests itself in McEwan's fiction. For example, musical theme and variations is one of the central motifs in *Amsterdam*¹ where he portrays a composer who feels it to be his final failure that he is unable to compose the last set of variations for his millennium symphony. His failure to master his work is reflected in other dimensions of his life, such as his social responsibilities, his friendships and his sexual relationships. These failures lead to the expression of his drive for domination in the murder of his former friend. McEwan has shown a consistent concern with issues of domination and subjection throughout his work. It is a theme on which he has worked endless variations.

McEwan returns again and again to certain other themes in his work such as: adolescence, alienation, emotional frigidity and war. One of the most prominent, however, is the theme of subjection and domination. It appears in various forms: amongst children; amongst adults and children; in sexual relationships; in political relationships; between states; in the triumph of science over Nature; and in professional rivalry. In representing human relationships in this way, essentially as power struggles, McEwan appears to be making the comment upon human society that it is locked in a constant state

¹ Jonathan Cape, 1998a.

relationships in this way, essentially as power struggles, McEwan appears to be making the comment upon human society that it is locked in a constant state of conflict. Throughout his work, he explores dynamics of power relations among individuals, the institutions of society and among nations. Individuals are portrayed in relationships where power is unequally distributed. McEwan invites readers to believe that the struggles which ensue are at the root of the human condition. His work exposes the motivations of his characters, and shows the consequences of their actions and in so doing he invites readers to judge whether it is an accurate view of society and whether it is the kind of society that is desirable. The author holds a mirror to his readers, inviting an ethical response, though he seldom provides explicit moral guidance in this respect. Indeed, an absence of a clear moral position in his work has invited criticism from some quarters, especially at the beginning of his writing career (e.g. Hayman 1978; Jones 1987; Byrnes 1995b). However, in an interview with Christopher Ricks (1979) the interviewer proposes that McEwan is, in fact, a writer in the tradition of Kipling, writing ‘short stories of exceptional imagination, of cruelty, humiliation and very traditional moral values’.

McEwan responded:

I’m not sure I would share with you the sense that my fiction has been quite as moral as you would suggest. There are certainly rather frail kinds of statements embodied in them, a rather fragile kind of optimism about life. I hope to avoid any programmatic moral manipulation of the stories, and of the novel, too—I try to keep that sense of the story that is going to be moral in some kind of abeyance, and hope that, through restraint, one will generate a degree of compassion for the right people, even if the right people are in some other sense the

wrong people. That is why, in *The Cement Garden*,^[2] there is no authorial voice that will tell you that incest is a bad show, don't do it, but neither does it say the other, neither does it recommend that everyone should try, and therefore liberate themselves. (526–7)

McEwan goes on in later interviews and articles to express a more moral position and to demonstrate it in his fiction. See, for example, his introduction to *A Move Abroad* (1989: 1–16), and the interviews with Rosemary Bailey (1987), Rosa Casademont (1992) and Kathy Stephen (1987).

Writing as he has done in the last quarter of the twentieth century, McEwan's imagination has been influenced by several major societal changes and these are reflected in his work. The aftermath of the Second World War brought a revulsion at totalitarianism and its manifestation in genocide, and a vow that history should never repeat itself. With the ending of the war also came the realisation of another more awful vision: the destructive power of nuclear weapons. The advent of the Cold War only brought renewed fear of a nuclear holocaust. Politically, the Women's Movement exposed the underlying inequality of women under a patriarchal system and the last quarter of the century saw some significant moves to create a more equal society. Over the last twenty years in Britain, the rise and fall of the New Right dominated the political agenda. At the same time, science has been in crisis. On the one hand it is hailed as the salvation of humankind; on the other it is seen to have been harnessed by the powerful to exploit the vulnerable, and to have polluted the environment. All of these influences are represented in

² Jonathan Cape, 1978b.

McEwan's work and help to explain why the theme of subjection and domination is a significant one for him to explore.

McEwan works through the theme in a variety of contexts and under different conditions. Physical, mental, sexual and social representations of subjection and domination appear throughout his work, from the early short stories to the more rounded, later novels. That is not to say that there are not moments of harmony and equanimity to be found in McEwan's writing. For example, a truly equal if not idyllic relationship is to be found in one of the early short stories, 'First Love, Last Rites'³ and the central relationship in *The Child in Time*⁴ is restored at the conclusion of the novel to provide a vision of hope and optimism. Nor is it claimed that subjection and domination is the only theme which is worth writing about. On the other hand, not to recognise the representation of subjection and domination throughout McEwan's work is to miss an important dimension of his fiction.

To proceed, four areas of experience are identified in which subjection and domination are explored. They are: mental, physical, sexual, social and political. This introduction provides an overview of the development of the theme of subjection and domination in McEwan's work.

Psychological Domination

Psychological subjection and subordination permeate McEwan's fiction. Many characters are portrayed in the grip of their emotions, some as

³ In *First Love, Last Rites*, Jonathan Cape, 1975a. Edition used, Pan 1976, 88–99.

⁴ Jonathan Cape, 1987a.

victims of parental abuse (such as the man in ‘Conversation with a Cupboard Man’⁵), or as subject to the pressures of a patriarchal society upon them (the boy in ‘Homemade’⁶), or the Italian host in *The Comfort of Strangers*.⁷ Many of these characters in the early work are depicted in states of incomplete psycho-sexual development, arrested in the oral, anal, phallic or genital, and latency stages of development. Most of them are egotistical and narcissistic. They can be understood through the perspectives afforded by psychologists such as Freud and Jung who offer models of psychological development which are intra-psychic: that is, they proceed upon the notion that the self develops along pre-determined lines, while others support, arrest or suppress growth. Especially in the early work, McEwan often shows the physical outcomes of such mental states offering psychological explanations for some of the worst excesses he depicts in his characters: in ‘Butterflies’,⁸ the explanation for the man’s murder of a child is that he has been alienated from society; in ‘Homemade’, the boy’s rape of his sister is presented as preparation for a sexual encounter with the local siren; and in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the Italian host’s murder of his guest is presented as gratification of his all-consuming desire for power, which his father had promised him as his birthright. The mental states McEwan constructs for his characters are therefore to be interpreted as providing explanations and mitigating

⁵ In *First Love, Last Rites*, 75–87.

⁶ In *First Love, Last Rites*, 9–24.

⁷ Jonathan Cape, 1981b. Edition used Vintage 1997.

⁸ In *First Love, Last Rites*, 61–74.

circumstances for their coercive actions. At the same time, his use of unreliable first person narrators encourages readers to identify with these perpetrators, for want of any other perspective.

McEwan dwells upon the mental anguish of his characters in a significant number of his works. Some of these mental tortures are esoteric and relatively harmless, such as the nightmare of writer's block which forms the context for 'Reflections of a Kept Ape',⁹ or the misrepresentation of a writer's fiction in *The Child in Time*. Others are more poignant, for example, his depiction of the writer's mental breakdown in *The Child in Time* might be regarded as equal to the ground-breaking description of a woman's by Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* (1962). McEwan's later novel, *Enduring Love*¹⁰ concerns the gnawing sense of guilt experienced by a would-be rescuer who fails to save the victim of an accident, as well as the psychological torture visited upon him by a stalker.

McEwan suggests through his imaginative work that mental subjection and domination are ubiquitous and equally as damaging to the individual as any physical force. The antidotes he offers are typical of psychoanalysis, one of the new disciplines of the twentieth century: the 'talking cure' of confession and narration. The first person narrator of 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man' is literally portrayed as confessing as if to a therapist; the narrator of 'Homemade' talks through his early exploits from the point of view of a

⁹ In *In Between the Sheets*, 27–41.

¹⁰ Jonathan Cape, 1997a.

middle-aged man reflecting (without remorse) upon his life; the narrator of *Black Dogs*¹¹ seeks to make sense of the two principal characters' encounters with evil by writing their story; and Jed Parry's letters and case notes which are represented in *Enduring Love*, all fulfil a similar function. In all of these representations, readers are cast in the role of the listener or therapist, interpreting the stories as they unfold. McEwan's representation of confession also gives his characters the power to construct their own version of events unchallenged, for, as both Freud and Foucault agree, the act of confession allows individuals to construct themselves as a certain kind of subject. Furthermore, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault argues that there is a consistent compulsion to confess, especially one's sexual activities, and most especially if the behaviour is outside of the norm. This accords with his view that sexuality is a secret and that bringing it out into the open is part of discovering truths about the human condition (Foucault 1978: 69).

Psychoanalytical theories can therefore inform the analysis of much of McEwan's work. Freud's theory of childhood sexuality, and the absolute prohibition of incest provide the interest in a number of McEwan's representations of family relationships: in 'In Between the Sheets'¹² a father wrestles with the fear that he is developing sexual desire for his daughter; in *The Cement Garden* McEwan explores adolescent incest. Explanations for his characters' actions are often given in psychological terms. A thesis of maternal deprivation is also advanced as an explanation for unsocial behaviour in short

¹¹ Jonathan Cape, 1992.

¹² In *In Between the Sheets*, Jonathan Cape, 1978a. Edition used, Pan 1979, 78–93.

stories such as ‘Last Day of Summer’¹³ and ‘Conversation with a Cupboard Man’.

Freudian theory of psycho-sexual development especially informs a reading of McEwan’s treatment of sexual domination and subjection. In the *Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan meticulously represents the psychological ill treatment of the main protagonist as the root cause of Robert’s crimes, presenting him as a classical anal-repressive: Robert’s narration of his childhood trauma at the hands of his father and sisters, his obsessive neatness, and Mary and Colin’s dreams are all implicitly derived from a reading of Freudian psychoanalysis. Colin, the victim, is also represented as repressed, inarticulate, and inviting the abuse which is finally visited upon him in an excess of physical domination. Psychological domination is discussed in relation to McEwan’s fiction in all three main chapters of the thesis.

Physical Domination

The physical manifestation of subjection and domination in McEwan’s fiction often erupts into violence and McEwan’s propensity for depicting menace and brutality in stark and chilling form is frequently illustrated in his work. Perhaps its most bizarre representation is in the depiction of the woman who arranges the castration of her partner in order to bind him to her will in an untitled early short story,¹⁴ but a similar castration is arranged by two women as revenge on their faithless boyfriend, in ‘Pornography’.¹⁵

¹³ In *First Love, Last Rites*, 41–55.

¹⁴ In *Tri-Quarterly*. Evanston, Illinois: Winter 1976, 62–3.

¹⁵ In *In Between the Sheets*, 11–26.

Physical domination also finds its expression in the killing of, or attack upon, animals in, for example, 'First Love, Last Rites', 'Butterflies', and *Black Dogs*. It is also visited upon children by adults in 'Butterflies', and in *Black Dogs*; in violence between men in fights such as in *The Comfort of Strangers*, *Black Dogs*, *The Innocent*,¹⁶ and in *Enduring Love*; between men and women in *The Innocent*, and amongst nations in a state of war in *The Ploughman's Lunch*,¹⁷ *Black Dogs*, *The Innocent*, and in *or Shall We Die?*¹⁸

Murder and other forms of homicide are the most extreme forms of bodily domination. There are numerous deaths portrayed in McEwan's fiction but death is seldom the resolution of a problem. For those left behind, there is the problem posed by the need to dispose of the body. These bodies often appear to have a will of their own, and mastery of the situation is continually unsettled by their reappearance, or by the reassertion of their organic presence. The child murderer in 'Butterflies' must identify the body of his nine-year-old victim, which has been dragged from the bottom of the canal; in *The Cement Garden*, the children in the novel do not kill their mother, though they hide her body as if they might have, and it refuses to stay buried for long; and *The Innocent* contains the most gory of problems in disposing of bodies where the victim's body is dismembered, bound up, consigned to two large suitcases and hidden in a secret spy tunnel. Even then, it re-surfaces. McEwan resolves this

¹⁶ Jonathan Cape, 1990a.

¹⁷ Methuen, 1985a.

¹⁸ Jonathan Cape, 1983a. Republished in the collection *A Move Abroad*, Picador 1989a. Page numbers refer to the collection.

problem for his characters only in *The Child in Time* where the child, Kate, disappears leaving no trace. Perhaps in so doing, McEwan extracts from his readers an even more poignant response than had he portrayed his characters grieving in a more conventional manner.

Foucault's post-structuralist perspectives on domination and power are useful for interpreting both McEwan's early and later work. Domination of bodies, incarceration and surveillance all have a place in McEwan's fiction. In particular, the subjection of the body is a prominent feature of McEwan's early work, such as in *The Comfort of Strangers*, whereas the power of the gaze is paramount in later work such as *Enduring Love*. This perspective informs both the sexual and social interpretations of subjection and domination.

Between the two novels, *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Enduring Love*, there is a shift from overt physical control to psychological control. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, Robert has power over Caroline, though he has used force to exert it. Foucault's contention that there is no power without the potential for resistance (Foucault 1980), would suggest that Robert's power over Caroline is really force, not power. Caroline is not depicted as being forced to participate in the capture of Colin and Mary, or in Colin's murder. Caroline submits to her husband's desire and helps him to fulfil it. However, feminist critics (e.g. Benjamin 1988) have pointed out that Foucauldian theory ignores the context under which individuals operate. The context in which McEwan portrays Robert and Caroline, for instance, is overtly patriarchal. Caroline, on the other hand, is powerless to resist because

she subscribes to her husband's right to the use of force—McEwan even represents her submission as *enjoyment* of her physical subjection, portraying it as masochism. Conversely, Colin and Mary do have the power to resist in the early part of the novel—they are relatively free to make choices. However, McEwan depicts the reproduction of a relationship of violence, which they sense from their observation of their hosts' relationship, in their own relationship. They are portrayed as fantasising about sado-masochism in the privacy of their hotel room. Robert's basis of power over the couple is portrayed as turning upon his intimate knowledge of the city and their ignorance as strangers in an unfamiliar and particularly impenetrable city; upon his pretence of hospitality in offering assistance and home comfort to his guests; and in his all-seeing gaze which is made tangible in his photography.

Foucault's perspective also helps us to understand why Robert is portrayed as preying upon Colin, as a man. Taylor (1994) represents Foucault's argument as follows:

The relation of domination within man, which is part of a stance of domination towards nature in general, cannot help engendering a domination of man by man. What goes on within must also end up happening between men. ... the disciplines which build this new way of being are social; they are the disciplines of the barracks, the hospital, the school, the factory. By their very nature they lend themselves to the control of some by others. In these contexts, the inculcation of habits of self-discipline is often the imposition of discipline by some on others. These are the loci where forms of domination become entrenched through being interiorized. Seen in this way, Foucault offers ... an account of the inner connection between the domination of nature and the domination of man... (76–7)

McEwan portrays Colin accepting unequivocally the power of Robert, a diplomat's son and a rich and successful business man over himself, implicitly an out-of-work but obviously middle-class actor. Colin bears the physical violence against himself without demur, as if it is the natural order of things.

Foucault's analysis of the disciplinary society also comments on the idea of torture as a form of punishment which was acceptable historically but which no longer fits the modern world. In modern society, punishment is inflicted through incarceration, not torture, and people are controlled by surveillance, not chains. This transition mirrors the shift in perspective that McEwan makes between *The Comfort of Strangers* and *Enduring Love*, in the representation of control by the oppressor of the oppressed. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan represents Robert exerting control over Caroline, Colin and Mary by means of physical torture, capture and confinement. The power that a vantage point, confers upon the observer, or, in Foucauldian terms, the gaze, in both cases, is an important instrument of power. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, Robert spies on Colin and Mary and captures their image on camera; Caroline observes the sleeping couple in her apartment and Mary is forced to watch Colin's murder as if it is some kind of entertainment or object lesson. Foucault's argument about the gaze is developed in the medical context of *The Birth of the Clinic*, where he develops the idea that the patient is rendered more and more under the control of the doctors—they are observed, examined, monitored, reported upon. Interestingly, McEwan

himself uses just such medical imagery in Caroline's clinical dress and her use of drugs to render her 'patient', Mary, powerless.

In *Enduring Love*, on the other hand, attempts to control Joe Rose are made by overt as well as covert surveillance. McEwan shows the form of control he assigns to Jed Parry to be equally as powerful as that which he assigned to Robert. Although Parry does not confine Rose to his home—Rose and Parry frequently confront each other in the street—Parry's gaze is omnipresent. In the novel Parry contends that the look he and Rose exchange over Logan's corpse is instrumental in his obsession. Indeed, McEwan's intensely visual description of the balloon accident and its aftermath is testimony to the power of the gaze, and it also points to the power of observation required by a novelist. The fact that Parry stakes out Rose's home and imbues even the movement of the curtains or Rose's touch of the privet hedge with significance testifies to the power of observation. This perspective is illustrated in the dust cover of the first edition of *Enduring Love* which depicts the image of an all-seeing eye superimposed upon the canopy of a hot-air balloon. Rose is also given to imagine that Parry is spying on him as he conducts his own research in a library. Significantly, Rose himself is unable to observe his tormentor. Only the glimpse of a red shoelace, ephemeral and partial, alerts him to Parry's departure: '...all I saw was a flash of a white shoe and something red' (42); as he follows, he sees nothing.

The importance of visual memory also becomes significant in the scene in the restaurant where Parry is present to witness the botched assassination

attempt on Rose. Crucially, it is the failed power of visual identification not just a lapse of memory that causes Rose to fail to recognise Parry and his fellow witnesses to confirm his own sighting: ‘We saw and remembered in our own favour and we persuaded ourselves along the way. ... Believing is seeing’ (180–1). This is an interesting reversal of the scientific adage that seeing is believing. It is mirrored in the embedding in the novel of a deconstruction of the nature of science, and particularly, science writing, both academic and popular. Simone de Beauvoir suggested in *The Second Sex* that ‘male activity’ in exerting dominance over the ‘confused forces of life’ (97) subdued both Nature and woman and there are many manifestations of this in McEwan’s work. In *Black Dogs*, for example, he shows Bernard’s callousness in killing a beautiful dragonfly, which his wife is admiring, in order to further his scientific enquiry. McEwan invites us to believe that Nature exacts revenge upon him for so doing. Secondly, McEwan suggests that Bernard imperils his wife in order to study a chain of caterpillars—ignoring the present dangers of the real world in the pursuit of science. In *or Shall We Die?*, also, McEwan equates science with masculinity and brands them both guilty of sins against Nature and humanity. Physical domination is discussed mainly in the two chapters of the thesis which focus respectively on the domination of children (Chapter II), and on sexual domination (Chapter III).

Sexual Domination

McEwan especially depicts the dominative practices of what de Beauvoir calls ‘male activity’ in sexual relationships but it is mainly confined to

his early work. The principal vehicle for McEwan's exploration of sexual domination and subjection is *The Comfort of Strangers*, although he explores aspects of the theme in several of his short stories such as 'Pornography', 'Psychopolis'¹⁹ and 'Homemade', where, paradoxically, the males' pursuit of sexual domination is also subject to a threat to their virility from the girls and women around them. The original study of sadistic sexual domination and subjection appears in the work of the Marquis de Sade, whose first novel, *Justine: les malheurs de la vertu* (1791) presents a repetitive series of episodes in the experience of the eponymous Justine. Though setting forth de Sade's own argument in defence of libertinism, *Justine* is written from the point of view of a moralist. Justine's catalogue of abuses and torture are described in lurid detail and little of the victims' feelings is adduced. Nothing is offered to justify the treatment of the victims, other than the gratification of their masters over those powerless to resist, many of whom are imprisoned and killed. This extreme libertinism that values the freedom of an individual to do what he wants, yet denies the freedom of others, remains without justification. In de Sade's 'utopian' world, no-one cares whether cruelty is right or wrong or whether there is one life more or one less. It just is. His writing is a vindication of his rejection of the conventions of his society, corrupt as he perceived them to be. Like McEwan, de Sade does not confine his study of domination to heterosexuality. In *Justine*, boys and young men are sexually exploited as well as women, and he depicts homoerotic sexual behaviour as

¹⁹ In *First Love, Last Rites*, 103–27.

well as heterosexual. *Justine* therefore presents an interesting comparison to McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. Just as de Sade presents a series of debauched torturers without conscience (or consequences), McEwan attempts a more reasoned explanation of the sadist Robert, which is heavily dependent on the new perspectives on human sexual psychology afforded by psychoanalysts such as Freud.

Freud asserted that women were masochistic, men sadistic. His phallogocentric analysis of psychology locates women in a position of self-hate and self-denial. In his view, male aggression denies the existence of a female eroticism and replaces it with masochism that transforms their pain into pleasure (Freud 1990: 285–6). Women, he argues, suppress their sexual pleasure to the needs of men. Freud therefore codifies and rationalises the sexual subordination of women. McEwan seems to subscribe to this view that heterosexual relationships are essentially sado-masochistic, and invents a turn in the plot of *The Comfort of Strangers* to overcome the self-defeating nature of the relationship. His solution is that the masochist humiliates herself as completely as possible but stops short of death, in order to procure new victims for the sadist.

Jessica Benjamin points out, by citing the original 'masochist' in *Venus in Furs* (von Sacher-Masoch 1870), that, although erotic domination of women is a logical extension of the ubiquity of men's dominance over women, the dominant and submissive roles are not necessarily male or female (Benjamin 1988: 74). Further, she argues that the sado-masochistic

relationship, where the sadist negates the right of the other as an independent subject, and the masochist only recognises the rights of the other person, is self-defeating unless the sadist's need for the other's recognition is eliminated.

Amongst the more brutal forms physical subjection and domination take in McEwan's work is the depiction of male violence. One of McEwan's imaginative explorations is that of domination and subjection of the body in rape and torture. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan shows Robert exerting sadistic control over his wife, through both physical and mental torture (he not only broke her back, but refused to help her once injured to return home after she had left against his wishes); and Colin is tortured to provide further sadistic, sexual satisfaction for Robert. Mary's having to witness this is, in turn, a form of torture for her. Such sexual violence is not confined to McEwan's early work, though it is there that it is most vividly portrayed. In *The Innocent*, the rape of a German woman by a soldier is summarily punished by his commanding officer; and Leonard's attempted rape of Maria is symbolic of the domination of Germany by the allies, just as the violation of Otto's body is symbolic of the partition of Germany after the War. In *Black Dogs* physical abuse and torture appear in the background. The parental violence against Sally, the narrator's cousin, is unspoken and unexamined in the narrative of the novel, referred to only in dim memory, and by allusion and suggestion, as is the rape and torture of Mme Bertrand in France.

McEwan seldom portrays homosexual relationships among his characters; indeed, he appears to portray same sex relationships as part of a unified web of relations which denies traditional Cartesian or Derridean binary opposition. The boy in 'Homemade', for instance, learns to masturbate from his friend but there is no contact between them and no suggestion of any. Rather, the anti-hero of the story mocks his friend's naivety while exploiting his friendship. The treatment of Robert in *The Comfort of Strangers*, similarly, portrays Robert's obsession with Colin in a cultural context where men customarily hold hands, and in the context of a sado-masochistic heterosexual relationship where domination, rather than sexual satisfaction, is the object. Readers are encouraged to believe that the same sex contact between Colin and Robert is not a sexual issue, but one of power—Robert's kiss is the direct equivalent of his earlier blow to the stomach—an assertion of his power. Although McEwan shows Robert referring to Colin as his lover, and none of his acquaintances appear moved by it, the point of showing Colin off to his friends is to assert his possession of Colin. In *Enduring Love*, likewise, although McEwan portrays the deluded Parry to be in love with Rose, there is no attempt to deny the problem posed by the fact that Rose is in a heterosexual relationship, and the person believing himself to be in love with him is a man.

A partial explanation for McEwan's depiction of the fluidity of gender may be found in his life experiences. His family's lore recounts that at the age of eight, he came downstairs to say 'Please, I want to be a girl' (Lawson

1990: 46), a wish he goes on to explore imaginatively in the short story, 'Disguises'²⁰ and in the character of the little boy, Tom, in *The Cement Garden*. It is only to be expected that one's attitude towards sex will be influenced by sexual experience during adolescence. McEwan described his boys' boarding school experience in an interview with Ian Hamilton in 1978, denying that he was aware of sexuality until the age of 16 or 17, even remaining vaguely wary of masturbation in his early years at school (Hamilton 1978: 11). Perhaps a tendency vicariously to make up for this abstinence helps to explain the frequency with which boys' adolescent sexual experiences, including their compulsive masturbation, familiar from the work of Philip Roth, appear in McEwan's early stories (e.g. 'Homemade', *The Cement Garden*). In the interview with Hamilton, with hindsight, McEwan also recognised the prevalence of homoeroticism in the school. He reports that certain pupils were particularly attended to by certain teachers whom he assumes to have been 'pederasts', although he denies that there was ever actual sexual contact between teachers and pupils. It was not until the 'hormone surge' at 16 or 17 that he began to become competitive and to be noticed by teachers, and to form 'intense friendships' with other boys. At that time, he acknowledges that his passions were for other boys: 'Because the school was completely girl-less, one started to eye little boys with passion. That took up quite a bit of my time' (Hamilton 1978: 12). McEwan and his contemporaries were also, in the sixth form, writing 'long solemn pieces in the school magazine about the legitimacy

²⁰ In *First Love, Last Rites*, 100–25.

of homosexual relationships' (ibid.); and he recalls writing poems modelled on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, because, he speculates, of the 'pederastic elements' (ibid.). He also wrote poems that had the names of little boys spelled out in them. He recalls being caught out in this endeavour by one boy who wrote to his parents complaining of his wickedness. Luckily, McEwan believes, his mother intercepted the letter before his father read it, although it caused her some distress. As McEwan put it, his mother thought he was destined to become a 'raging gay' (ibid.).

The homoerotic effect of boarding school is not unacknowledged in the history of other English literary figures. For example, John Betjeman, who was at Marlborough after the First World War, writes of the 'unspoken longings' he also experienced at school. In 'Summoned by Bells' he describes the experience of first love:

First tremulous desires in Autumn stillness
 Grey eyes, lips laughing at another's joke,
 ...
 Here twixt the church tower and the chapel spire
 Rang sad and deep the bells of my desire.
 Desire for what? I think I can explain.
 The boys I worshipped did not notice me:
 The boys who noticed me I did not like.
 ...
 And then there came my final summer term...
 Here was love
 Too deep for words or touch.

Homoeroticism may also be regarded as a social phenomenon which is reproduced in an unequal and gender segregated society, such as is created under patriarchy. Sexual domination, then, is discussed in Chapter III,

although it is also relevant to the exploration of the domination of children in Chapter II, and in its socially and politically codified forms in Chapter IV.

Social and Political Domination

Patriarchy describes the social structure of relations that arranges for the systematic oppression of women. Feminists have argued that patriarchy must be understood as an organising principle which permeates social and sexual relationships between women and men both within families and throughout society. McEwan's writing has been developing at a time when the growth of the feminist movement has been making readers, particularly women readers, question novels which present patriarchal man/woman relationships. In particular, women novelists like Margaret Drabble have been portraying women as women see themselves in a patriarchal society and she has gradually moved towards portraits of women who assert their female identity. A male novelist who has been extremely successful in creating women characters that women believe in is Brian Moore in, for example, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955) or *The Doctor's Wife* (1976). On the other hand, McEwan was less successful at depicting well-rounded female characters in his early work. He was, however, made well aware of the pitfalls which awaited his attempts either to appropriate a woman's voice (Bailey 1987: 96), or to depict relations of male dominance as the norm (Casademont 1992: 44). Writing on the state of fiction in *New Review*, McEwan said that he expected, on the other hand, that women's writing would provide some of the most exciting departures in English fiction (1978e: 51).

Nevertheless McEwan's work affords many opportunities for exploring how patriarchy moulds his characters and determines the outcome of his fiction. Throughout his work a developing critique of patriarchy can be seen, though it may be argued that he has not yet achieved outcomes which would satisfy a feminist reader. Heidi Hartmann (1979) recognises that patriarchy allows for the domination and subjection of men, as well as of women, by other men: for Hartmann, it is 'a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women' (232). This interpretation helps us to understand the treatment of patriarchy in McEwan's work, for he also represents it as harmful to individual men as in *The Comfort of Strangers*; and as damaging to whole societies, as in *or Shall We Die?* What McEwan fails to do is to allow any of his female characters to mount a truly successful challenge to patriarchy or to create a well-rounded female character in whom readers could believe. Adam Mars-Jones, in particular, criticises McEwan for this failure in *The Imitation Game*²¹ where he accuses McEwan of merely 'appropriating' a woman's voice (Mars-Jones 1990), although it seems bizarre to criticise a male novelist for not adopting a feminist point of view. Perhaps it is for women novelists such as Doris Lessing to create women as women see themselves in a patriarchal society, and to present women who assert their female identity as she does in *The Grass is Singing* (1950) or for a feminist

²¹ In the collection entitled *The Imitation Game*. Pan 1981a, 79–143.

novelist such as Sally Miller Gearhart to create a believable woman-dominated world as she does in her science-fiction novel, *The Wanderground* (1985).

A feminist critical approach therefore helps us to understand some particular aspects of McEwan's early work. A feminist approach is also informative in looking at patriarchy in *The Imitation Game*. In the later work, post-structuralist theoretical feminism can shed light on significant issues.

Take *Black Dogs*. One of the central concerns in *Black Dogs* is the writing of the history of June and her family. Yet the narrator maintains his authority in the text since he is the writer of it and subordinates June's account to his own. She is depicted as the image of the archetypal hysterical women, such as those identified in Gilbert and Gubar's study of the representation of women, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). June's languishing in the nursing home associates her with the decay of the body. Her writings are largely dismissed as visionary nonsense, and only reported incidentally (172). Conversely, the men—Bernard and the narrator—are associated with ideas and books that do not die, mirroring the Lacanian notion that maleness is connected to the power of the word which men control—'phallus' and 'logos'. The representation of June's report of her sexual initiation with Bernard (55–7) is constrained—far from Cixous's concept of *jouissance* in which women writers discover and write from the experience of their own pleasure—and McEwan counterposes a totally different account from Bernard's point of view: their 'first time', according to Bernard, was 'a complete bloody disaster' (86). McEwan takes such a representation of the decayed woman to an extreme in his latest novel,

Amsterdam, where the only female ‘character’ is the dead Molly Lane, who suffered rapid onset dementia, although her death was ultimately due to euthanasia.

Feminist criticism is also helpful for interpreting *or Shall We Die?* This is the only published text of McEwan’s that is in poetic form (though he did write poetry while at school, as cited above, p. 20). In *or Shall We Die?* the dominant voice is that of a woman. Perhaps this is the closest McEwan comes to Cixous’s idea of ‘*écriture féminine*’, which Cixous does not see as confined to women’s writing. In fact, all of the examples of ‘*écriture féminine*’ in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976) are, after all, drawn from men’s writing.

McEwan consistently associates male experience with scientific and rational realms of meaning, and women’s experience with holism and spirituality. He portrays many female characters helping their partners come to terms with death and birth. In *The Child in Time*, Thelma deals pragmatically with her husband’s suicide, and both Thelma and Julie aid Stephen in coming to terms with the loss of his daughter. The novel also shows Julie contributing significantly to Stephen’s rehabilitation by virtually including him in the act of birth. In *The Innocent*, in addition, Maria is decisive in killing Otto, and less sensitive in the gruesome business of butchering him than is Leonard. In *Enduring Love*, as with *Black Dogs*, representations of more equal heterosexual relationships amongst the principal characters are seen.

Feminism’s foregrounding of gender can also help readers to understand McEwan’s portrayal of masculinity. As Elaine Showalter writes:

At the beginning of the decade few feminist critics were analysing men's writing as a gendered literary discourse ... while a number of prominent male theorists took up the question of feminist criticism few perceived masculinity as a subject; unlike femininity, it seemed 'natural, transparent, and unproblematic'. (Showalter 1983: 197)

McEwan portrays masculinity in crisis in several of his works. In *The Cement Garden* the boy feels that his rights as head of the household are undermined by his sisters, as is the masculinity of his little brother, who is dressed up in girls' clothes by them. Likewise, in *The Imitation Game*, Cathy's lover is threatened by her sexual forthrightness. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, feminist sympathiser, Colin, is victimised and destroyed. In *The Innocent*, the naive and misguided Leonard betrays his relationship with his girlfriend and his country. In *The Child in Time*, as has already been discussed, the principal male character endures a mental breakdown. And in *Enduring Love*, the principal male character almost fails to hold his mature emotional relationship together as a consequence of his crisis of guilt and the unwanted attention of a man who is obsessed with him. These explorations of male crisis may well be a sign of the times, wherein women are asserting their rights not to be dominated, throwing traditional patriarchal power relations into confusion.

Beyond the confines of sexual relationships, McEwan also demonstrates a concern for wider social inequalities. Marx's analysis of capital, labour, and the subordination of the working-class to the owners of the means of production are all familiar and virtually taken for granted in contemporary culture. McEwan claims not to be an autobiographical writer.

However he does from time to time acknowledge parallels between his own life and his writing. Where relevant, then, it is appropriate to refer to elements of his fiction that appear to relate to his life. Class is one of these elements that is relevant both to McEwan's life and his fiction. His mother, who had had two children in a previous marriage, lost her first husband in the Second World War and fought poverty to bring them up. She married McEwan's father who had joined the Highland Light Infantry as a regular in 1934, as a way out of unemployment, and had worked his way up through the ranks. He was commissioned in 1955 and retired a major. McEwan seems proud of the fact that his father remained a staunch Labour supporter, unlike other non-commissioned officers (McFerran 1989: 14). The young McEwan was aware of the influence of social class on the way he was treated in his early years: when posted abroad he was aware that beaches were segregated for the sons of officers and other ranks, and even when his father became an officer, it was clear that there were officers and officers—those from Sandhurst and the others (Davies 1983: 14). The school McEwan attended was Woolverstone Hall, an Inner London Education Authority boarding school in Suffolk, which took children from deprived areas of London together with ordinary boarders. McEwan described it as 'a peculiar school ... although its intake was mostly intelligent working class London kids, it was run along the lines of a minor public school' (Hamilton 1978: 11).²² Between school and university McEwan

²² Woolverstone Hall was dubbed 'Poor Man's Eton' in a BBC profile in January 1989. The school was not a traditional public school but a comprehensive. The profile also states that 'It's more expensive than Eton' (*Radio Times* 31 December–6 January 1989, 65). The school is now closed.

worked in London as a dustman (Hamilton 1978: 13). Reading English literature and French at Sussex University, McEwan found the university to be ‘absurdly snobbish’ (Davies 1983: 14). It was ‘very debby and snobbish ... more so probably than in Cambridge—a thriving nucleus of upper middle class girls and boys who wanted to become media kings and were involved in the London season, or what was left of it’ (Hamilton 1978: 14). For the second time in his life, he became aware of the power of class: ‘I was very aware of being a lower middle-class kid. ... I just stayed with my own chums, a serious student, working hard’ (Davies 1983: 14).

Political concerns do therefore occasionally arise in McEwan’s fiction. In *The Child in Time* an important contextual element in the background is how the dominant politics of the day have recreated a lumpenproletarian class of beggars and street people. In *Black Dogs*, McEwan represents two Marxist characters who become disillusioned with their politics. Class dominance is alluded to in Bernard’s conversation with the taxi driver; and in Bernard’s insistence that he never had ‘the common touch’ (74). And in *The Ploughman’s Lunch* the depiction of Susan and Ann Barrington’s aristocratic background causes Jeremy to be ashamed of his working class family. Political aspects of dominance and subordination also in *Black Dogs* relate to the Nazi occupation of France, and there are concrete examples of their campaign of terror upon the populace. McEwan compares this to the contemporary violence in Berlin when even at the point of the Berlin Wall coming down, neo-Nazis set upon a Turk. In *Enduring Love*, too, Rose is cast as socially

superior to Parry—he is a successful popular science writer and his partner an academic, whereas Parry has no work, only a small inheritance. This appears to be a feature of the social dynamics of ‘de Clérambault’s syndrome’, from which the character of Parry is said to suffer, that the pursued person is of a higher social standing than the pursuer. Indeed one of the first accounts of the syndrome described a commoner believing King George V to be in love with her.

Patriarchy as a political position also contributes to the interpretation of *The Imitation Game*, and *The Comfort of Strangers*. McEwan implicitly criticises the politics of the New Right in *The Child in Time* and in *The Ploughman’s Lunch* and the power politics of war are criticised in *The Imitation Game* and in *or Shall We Die?*

Central to the complicating factors associated with the portrayal of subjection and domination in social and personal relationships is the complementarity of the relationship. This has been recognised by analysts of the human condition, by structuralist perspectives such as those of Marx, and by poststructuralists such as Foucault, who argued that unequal power relations are consented to by the subordinate group. Novelists and poets have also represented power relations so. For example, D. H. Lawrence ([1921] 1982) has explored the idea that every murderer requires a murderee:

‘No man’, said Birkin, ‘cuts another man’s throat unless he wants to cut it, and unless the other man wants it cutting. This is a complete truth. It takes two people to make a murder: a murderer and a murderee. And a murderee is a man who is murderable. And a man who is murderable is a man who in a profound if hidden lust deserves to be murdered.’ (40)

William Plomer's poem, 'The Murder on the Downs',²³ also articulates this idea in the representation of the 'murderer' literally expecting and desiring to be murdered: 'I knew this would happen... I was not displeased'. Both of these fictional representations are presented from a male point of view and as such are eloquent testimony of a patriarchal world view. Social and political domination is discussed mainly in Chapter IV.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

All of the perspectives discussed above help to illuminate McEwan's work. To proceed, a number of contexts will be identified in which issues of unequal power relations may be explored.

For the most part, McEwan develops the theme of subjection and domination in the context of relationships—the very stuff of novels—and particularly within sexual relationships. In his earlier work especially, there also appear many representations of the subjection and domination of children. Over the past twenty-five years of his writing, McEwan's treatment of the theme gradually moves from the abuse of individual children to a more psychological and political kind of struggle. This indicates a shift in focus from the body to the mind, and a growing trend from depicting the lurid and grotesque in the early work, to the more intimate and erotic representations in middle and later work.

The three contexts to be explored are: the treatment of children; the treatment of sexual relationships; and the treatment of the relationship

²³ In *Visiting the Caves*, 1936.

between the individual and the state. Together, they involve psychological, physical, social and political manifestations of the struggle for domination.

McEwan's treatment of the abuse of children is a clear-cut example of subjection and domination and it is represented in his work in psychological, physical, and political forms. In the short stories 'Butterflies' and 'Homemade' the abuse portrayed is physical; in *The Cement Garden*, it is psychological; in the *Child in Time*, it is both social and political. McEwan's treatment of children may be compared with Golding in this respect, especially in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *Darkness Visible*. The theme as it is explored among children is more tangible than the examples amongst adults which are more abstract, and which involve questions of free will and more complex representations of sexuality.

McEwan foregrounds sexual domination and subjection in much of the rest of his work. It is central to the plot of *The Comfort of Strangers*, of *Solid Geometry*,²⁴ *The Innocent*, and *The Imitation Game*. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, the form that it takes is particularly brutal and may be compared with de Sade's representations. The treatment of the theme in McEwan's early work is problematic, because as with de Sade, he tends to represent the excessive exercise of power and force without comment. Whereas it would be unthinkable to justify the abuse of children, adults' free will and their implied consent to unequal treatment presents problems of interpretation, especially in the private sphere of eroticism and sexual desire.

²⁴ In *The Imitation Game: three plays for television*, Picador, 1981a, 43–78. The play was adapted from the short story 'Solid Geometry', in *First Love, Last Rites*, 25–40.

McEwan's representation of domination and subjection of the individual by the state broadens the scope of his writing from a concern with individual relationships within the sometimes claustrophobic confines of the home, to the public one of whole societies. A prime example of this theme is in McEwan's treatment of that most extreme struggle for domination, war. War provides the background for *The Imitation Game* and *The Ploughman's Lunch*. It is threatened as a real catastrophe in *The Child in Time*, it casts its shadow over *The Innocent*, and it haunts *Black Dogs*. It is also the premise of the argument in *or Shall We Die?* Like George Orwell and Milan Kundera, McEwan portrays the struggle of the individual against the state as a necessary one for the defence of freedom. Like David Hare, McEwan plays out the wider scenario through private relationships. Therefore, although the subjection and domination of children, adults, and the individual by the state, are considered in turn, it is to be recognised that there is some considerable overlap among these contexts. Nevertheless the construction of discrete chapters, which consider these contexts separately, is a pragmatic way of organising the thesis. In addition, in the treatment of the theme, primacy is given to the texts rather than to the various critical approaches which help to explore them. In the first chapter, then, McEwan's exploration of the theme of subjection and domination in children is considered.

Chapter II: SUBJECTION AND DOMINATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Introduction

McEwan's treatment of the theme of domination and subjection in his early work is mainly concerned with its sexual, physical and mental representations. The short stories 'Butterflies' and 'Homemade' are concerned with sexual abuse of little girls; in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man', McEwan offers the mental domination of a boy by his mother as a form of abuse leading in turn, to the 'cupboard man's' violence and other inappropriate behaviour in adulthood. McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden*, is also concerned with physical and mental subjection and domination, first by the family's father and then among the children themselves. *Black Dogs* opens with the narrator's acute but repressed memories of witnessing child physical abuse. In addition, in the scene at the French restaurant, which could be read as a short story embedded in the novel, McEwan evokes gratuitous violence against a little boy. In *The Child in Time*, McEwan explores a variety of representations of childhood and varies the theme by representing a social aspect of the subjection of children. The struggle between freedom and domination will be explored by considering McEwan's treatment of infantilism in a number of contexts. Finally, McEwan's representations of adolescence as a state of resistance to domination will be considered.

Childhood is generally regarded as a time of freedom but also a time of great vulnerability. For that reason, modern society sets out explicitly to protect its children. This has not always been the case. McEwan reminds us in *The Child in Time*, for example, that childhood is a concept which is relatively recent: 'Childhood is an invention, a social construct, made possible by society as it increased in sophistication. (*The Authorised Childcare Handbook*, HMSO)' (1990: 93). In the so-called golden age, children worked alongside adults in the fields and had to sleep with them communally. They were often used sexually, there being no concept of an age of consent to sexual experience. The treatment of many of the children in McEwan's work poses difficulties for readers because in real life society has learned to respect and protect childhood. In the short story, 'Butterflies', for example, a child is ruthlessly exploited by a social misfit whose psycho-sexual development has been arrested. In his quest for the affection which was denied to him as a child, he abducts, molests and murders a child. Even McEwan, with hindsight, finds this representation difficult. He reports, for example, that he could not have written 'Butterflies' as easily as a father, as he was able to do as a single man of twenty-two:

there are things you can do when you are young which you can't do later on. I once wrote a story which I would find impossible to write now. It was called 'Butterfly' [sic], and it was narrated by a man who sexually assaulted a girl and pushed her into a canal. As a parent now, I find that my responses are so much more complex that it would take a lot more to take me into that situation.

Maybe you don't have quite the same freedoms that you have at the age of 22. (Danziger 1987: 13c)

Earlier, he had explained to John Haffenden:

‘Butterflies’ is appalling; it’s a story written by someone who had nothing to do with children. I couldn’t possibly write that story now, it would frighten me too much. As children come more into your life the possibility of their death is not something you can play with lightly. (Haffenden 1985: 172–3)

But, as a young writer, McEwan did ‘play lightly’ with the abuse of children.

Several of the early short stories deal explicitly with child sexual abuse and depict characters who exploit the vulnerability and confusion of children for their own gratification, especially in relation to sexuality.

The work published between 1975 and 1978 consists of a group of short stories mainly about children. The children are shown in various states of innocence, some orphaned and confused, others exploited and subjected to abuse. All of them are caught up in some grotesque, frequently sexual event. They are variously physically and sexually abused. We shall examine several of these stories to show the development of McEwan’s treatment of children: ‘Butterflies’, ‘Homemade’, ‘Disguises’, ‘In Between the Sheets’ and ‘Two Fragments: March 199–’.¹ The degree of innocence and responsibility borne by children for their fate is an issue in ‘Homemade’ and ‘Butterflies’, both of which appear in the first collection of stories, *First Love, Last Rites*. In both of these stories, child sexuality is explored and exploited, a favourite theme in McEwan’s work. Only in ‘Two Fragments’ and ‘In Between the Sheets’, the title story of the second collection of stories, do the representatives of the adult world show responsibility towards children.

¹ ‘Two Fragments: March 199–’, *In Between the Sheets*. Edition used, Pan 1979, 42–93.

Keeping It in the Family

'Homemade' is a sordid tale of incest and rape made comic by setting it in the context of a young boy's search for sexual experience. As such it plays out the theme of domination and subjection in social, physical and sexual settings. McEwan often uses children's games as an element in his plots. In 'Intersection',² for example, the boys are genuinely playing a game and cannot be held responsible for the death of the man who is killed. In *The Child in Time*, Kate's building a sand castle, too, is innocent and idyllic, although McEwan takes the opportunity to refer to Nietzsche's observation that true maturity is to attain the seriousness of a child at play (106). However, McEwan also uses child's play to point up the fine distinction between innocence and experience which makes acts of subjection and domination apparently more acceptable.

In 'Homemade', for example, Connie plays two childhood games with her brother, 'Hide and Seek' and 'Mummies and Daddies', the latter a typical game for children to play with members of the opposite sex in the genital stage of psycho-sexual development. McEwan uses both of these apparently innocent games as vehicles for her abuse. Connie is cynically manipulated by her brother whose early adolescent intention it is to rape her as the outcome of the games:

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, however, the blood having drained from brain to groin, literally, one might say, from sense to sensibility, by the time I was catching my breath on the top stair and closing my moist hand round the bedroom door-handle, I had decided to rape my sister. (*FLLR*: 19)

² *Tri-Quarterly*, Evanston, Illinois, Fall 1975, 63-86.

‘Hide and Seek’ appears to be appropriate to the boy’s purposes since the small size of their house compels Connie to choose a bedroom to hide in. Connie is not portrayed as entirely gullible, nor herself wholly well-intentioned. Although she fulfils her brother’s plan insofar as she hides in the bedroom, she simulates her presence in a bed but conceals herself in a wardrobe (a familiar place for McEwan’s characters to conceal themselves),³ from where she emerges to deliver ‘a blow ... of such unthinking vigour as can only be inflicted by a sister on her brother’ (*FLLR*: 19). The only motivation for her attack which suggests itself is revenge for her brother’s staring at her during their meal, although Connie could not have known his lewd intentions at that point.

The game of ‘Mummies and Daddies’ is a more successful excuse for the brother to lure his sister into bed than ‘Hide and Seek’, although her brother still has to practise some patience. In a well-observed passage, Connie is described as being transported by ‘Mummies and Daddies’ into the role of *mater familias*, which permits the illusion of her being in control:

She was complete, I have never seen another human so complete, she smiled, wide open, joyous and innocent smiles which I have never seen since—she tasted paradise on earth. And one point she was so blocked with the wonder, the ecstasy of it all, that mid-sentence her words choked up and she sat back on her heels, her eyes glistening, and breathed one long musical sigh of rare and wonderful happiness. (*FLLR*: 21)

³ See also ‘Conversation with a Cupboard Man’, where the dysfunctional man seeks solace by hiding in a cupboard, and in *The Innocent*, where the brutal ex-husband of Maria falls into a drunken sleep, before rousing to attack Leonard and Maria.

It is therefore through 'Mummies and Daddies' that the boy finally achieves his aim:

we're leaving out the most important things that Mummies and Daddies do together...They fuck together...it's what they do at night, when they go to bed at night, just before they sleep.
(*FLLR*: 21)

McEwan represents Connie's brother's plan to rape her as comic since his incompetence and ignorance seem to doom him to failure. Ironically, the little girl's innocence is not complete. Connie facilitates her own rape through her unsophisticated knowledge of her body: 'I know where it goes' (*FLLR*: 23), she says, and guides him between her legs. Just how she has obtained this knowledge is not explained in the story, nor is it even speculated upon. The incident is therefore represented in a way which suggests that Connie's innocence prevents her from realising the full import of what is happening to her. Physically, she is even portrayed as experiencing no pain, since she is said to fall asleep before her brother ejaculates. Even then, she is shown to believe that he 'wet inside [her]' (*FLLR*: 24), which suggests she suffers only indignity rather than harm. The incident must be interpreted as sordid and abusive, even although the outcome is portrayed by McEwan as relatively benign. Connie comes to no subsequent harm, at least within the story, and there is no indication from the narrator that the game is to be played again or that she is to suffer more abuse. It is to be recognised, however, that one of the major evils in brother-sister rape in real life is that the victim is constantly vulnerable and the abuse likely to be repeated. What is represented here as a game is sadly a

malevolent reality for some children. A balanced reading of the story would be incomplete, however, without recognition of the way in which the boy is represented also as being exploited by the dominance of the patriarchal order, which compels him to seek sexual experience at any cost, as a rite of passage.

The story is related by an adult narrator whom McEwan explains is ‘a wizened sixty’ (Hamilton 1978: 18), reflecting upon his sexual initiation. As such, readers are assured that the boy suffered no enduring ill effects from his initiation. The story follows the boy’s progress from his discovery of masturbation to the loss of his virginity. The fact that this simple sequence also involves betrayal, rape and incest is not hidden by the narrator, although he is not depicted as showing any remorse. With the hindsight granted him in middle-age, McEwan shows that he acknowledges the emptiness of his sexual success and the pathetic pointlessness of such a display of virility.

‘Homemade’ depicts the narrator and his friend, Raymond’s, psycho-sexual development progressing through the classical stages of homosexual to heterosexual eroticism. Their growing socialisation into manhood, it is suggested, is also a process which involves the necessary sexual domination of women. The narrator shows how he despises each of the normal routes to development and how he achieves his goal of manhood in his own, typically perverse fashion. The narrator’s insistence that the story is less about the boy’s initiation and more about the role of his friend Raymond is a key point. Raymond, like Connie, is also exploited by the narrator. Whereas he is prepared to act as the narrator’s guide and procurer—it is he who sets up the

tryst between the boy and Lulu—nevertheless he remains touchingly innocent and unworldly, though he is mocked mercilessly in the story. Raymond is portrayed as possessing a rudimentary knowledge of the secrets of men, but does not know how to capitalise upon it. His companion, on the other hand, does. Raymond is described as introducing his friend to a full catalogue of ‘manly’ pursuits: smoking, drinking, pornography, masturbation, taking drugs, and stealing. Yet Raymond is shown to derive no pleasure from them himself, as the narrator recounts:

He could not smoke because it made him cough, the whisky made him ill, the films frightened or bored him, the cannabis did not affect him, and while I made stalactites on the ceiling of the bomb-site cellar, he made nothing at all. (*FLLR*: 12)

The conventional role-models of the men in the narrator’s family are also roundly rejected. The narrator mocks his father’s and uncles’ attempts to offer insights into the world of men and despises their honest genuine employment, sneering at the gifts of ‘hard-earned shillings’ but taking them anyway, while observing that the magnanimity of giving is pleasure enough for them (*FLLR*: 15). These ‘parlour miracle-plays’ are the compensation for the day-to-day humiliations of their work. Instead of emulating these men, the narrator is depicted as preferring to line his pockets by thieving, an occupation justified by the specious logic of economy of effort: ‘a good afternoon’s work in the bookshop earned more than they scraped together in a week’ (*FLLR*: 15). Unlike his elders’ honest labour, his ‘work’ is re-interpreted as stealing and resetting books—to his mind, a less onerous and more lucrative job than

toiling on the factory floor. It is no surprise to readers, therefore, that this character will achieve other goals by deceit, economy of effort and a blatant disregard for the feelings of other human beings.

In character, the narrator also learns about sex from obscene films, shared fantasies, and the boasting talk of working men. These lessons are of course portrayed as haphazard and incomplete, dependent more on myth than reality. McEwan reproduces the tone of such a crude education in typically suggestive fashion:

we listened to who and how the dustmen fucked, how the Co-op milkmen fitted it in, what the coalmen could hump, what the carpet-fitter could lay, what the builders could erect ... (*FLLR*: 14).

As McEwan has the narrator acknowledge, his learning is accomplished through 'timeworn puns and innuendo ... folklore and bravado' (*ibid.*). To complete his sexual initiation, the boy must undergo the final ritual: to lose his virginity. The local siren, Lulu Smith's lubricious reputation makes her an ideal mate though she poses a daunting prospect. First, her female body is portrayed as larger than life, described in terms of 'physical enormity', 'grossness' with a 'wobbling girth' and 'piggy's eyes'. She is described as if she is less than human, having copulated more with various beasts and inanimate objects than with men, though this last category of sexual partner includes a man in an iron lung and a traffic warden. These allusions define her effectively as the other, scarcely human, safely to be objectified by the boy for his own sexual gratification. Secondly, Lulu is sexually experienced which

immediately portrays her as threatening in the face of the boy's ignorance. Her sexuality is portrayed as dominating and hostile—her sexual power is described as consuming men, reducing them to 'frothing idiots', 'broken minds' and even death (*FLLR*: 13). It is the prospect of Lulu's superior sexual experience which strikes terror into the narrator. Its certain attractions are at the same time 'deadly'; the persistence of his virginity, on the other hand, is a punishment, 'my malodorous albatross' (*FLLR*: 13). The prospect of exposing his inexperience to a girl who is by repute already experienced, is shown to be too daunting for the boy. His need for foreknowledge is therefore portrayed as paramount. The 'logical' response is to rape his sister. In the pursuit of the self-centred need for sexual experience, without conscience or remorse, a vulnerable child is subjected to rape. The pride in being able to say that he has been in that 'manly position' is sufficient for him to proclaim that he has 'made it into the adult world finally' (*FLLR*: 24).

What is troubling about the boy's initiation as it is depicted in 'Homemade' is that it illustrates the willful destructiveness of the boy's action without satisfactory moral condemnation, although it is impossible for readers to identify with such a self-deluded and unsympathetic character. The narrator's assertion that the story is not so much about various sexual activities as about his friend, Raymond, does not fully absolve the author from responsibility for depicting reprehensible behaviour without comment. It does, however, enable us to see that the story is about the boy's *perception* of manhood and the means by which he *proved* it. Being a man is here defined

purely in terms of physical sexual experience, achieved here by the domination of a little girl, without any recognition of the values of caring or responsibility. As such, it invites a criticism of stereo-typical machismo male values which deny the common humanity of males and females.

There are other examples of McEwan's exploitation of children's games for the progress of his plots. In *The Cement Garden*, the variation on 'Doctors and Nurses' played by Jack and his sisters presages Jack and Julie's subsequent incest, a theme more elaborately worked out here than in 'Homemade'. It is also presented in a more morally defensible way since Julie and Jack appear to be not only willing but also knowing partners whereas Connie was willing, insofar as she could be as a young child, but unknowing. In *The Child in Time* Darke's boyish games in the treehouse signal the self-destructive turn that his personality has taken. Furthermore such a malicious appropriation of a child's game as perpetrated by the boy in 'Homemade' would be unthinkable for the youthful Jeremy playing 'Sailing to a New Place' with his cousin Sally in *Black Dogs* (17). In this more mature novel, the young man recognises the trusting innocence of his cousin, but would never think to abuse it. On the contrary, her innocence provokes feelings of protectiveness, not exploitation:

When I ... saw Sally ... on her back, sheets and teddies pushed down below her knees, arms and legs flung wide, in what I took to be an attitude of completely misguided trust in the benevolence of her world, I was elated by a wild and painful protectiveness, a stab in the heart ... (10)

In 'Disguises', McEwan shows that subjection and domination of children can be perpetrated by adults in the home as well as by self-absorbed brothers as in 'Homemade' or by strangers in the street as in 'Butterflies' which will be considered next. In 'Disguises' McEwan depicts the exploitation of a young boy by his narcissistic aunt. In this story, Mina is supposed to be a responsible adult caring for her orphaned nephew, the eleven-year-old Henry. Here the domination of the boy is both mental and implicitly sexual. He is manipulated and controlled by his aunt who successfully confuses him about his role in the household, humiliates and abuses him, all at a time when the young boy is beginning discover his sexual identity, mirroring the portrayal of the fifteen-year-old Melanie in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), who is obliged to live with an evil and oppressive uncle. There is no doubt that McEwan intends no sympathy for the rather hideous character of the aunt, as the story is laced with Mina's menace: she is described as 'vicious' (*FLLR*: 108), with a 'dark' purpose (107), bent upon humiliation (114). She is established from the outset as mentally unstable and violent. The story opens with Mina's ill-tempered and violent outburst in the theatre:

friends said even then the mind of that Mina was slipping.
 Prompted, they say, in act one, shouting at the guilty A.S.M. in
 the interval, and scratched him with her long vermilion nail,
 below the eye and to the right, a little nick across the cheek.
 (*FLLR*: 100)

The story contrasts the surreal and perverse life Henry is forced to lead behind closed doors with Mina, and the conventional life he enjoys outside.

Henry's attraction to a girl of his own age and their innocent friendship and intimacy at school and at Linda's home provide a strong contrast to the unequal power relations in Henry's home. In contrast to the domestic environment McEwan creates in Mina's home, which is austere and controlled, Linda's home is chaotic and open: her mother has pillow-fights with her and allows her to lie in bed till lunchtime on Sundays. McEwan presents the relationship between Henry and Linda and Henry's opportunity to experience another household in Linda's as a normalising force in the story but also an experience which enables the boy to realise that the way he lives might not be right. Henry is shown to resist talking too much about his own life in his conversation with Linda's mother:

he had never spoken so much in one go before and he was going to tell her everything, the dressing up and the getting drunk, but he held back, he was not sure how to say it and he wanted her to like him, perhaps she wouldn't if he told her how drunk he was and sick over Mina. (*FLLR*: 120)

The school is also presented as a contrast. School is 'open and free' (*FLLR*: 109); the boy identifies with the other boys in their rejection of the company of girls: 'Like the best of Henry's friends at school he did not care for girls' (105) and it is to school and to Linda that Henry escapes after Mina has intoxicated him (117), realising that Mina's getting him drunk had given away the fact that she was untrustworthy and harmful to him: 'she had forfeited something' (117). The relationship depicted between Henry and Linda, their sharing a desk and Henry's enduring the taunts of classmates,

could be based on the intense childhood friendship McEwan experienced with his cousin, Paula, who came to stay with his family when her mother was ill. Writing on his own experience as an only child in *The Observer*, he describes his relationship with the girl: ‘we shared a desk at school, facing out together the derision of a class in which boys and girls kept ... determinedly apart’ (1982a: 41). McEwan’s description of Linda giggling and whispering to encourage Henry into her bed again compares to McEwan’s recollection of his real-life experience with Paula: ‘Paula and I had to share a huge double-bed. Night-time became a delirium of whisperings and giggling under the blankets’ (ibid.).

By contrast, McEwan shows Henry’s home to be ordered, ritualised—everything planned and controlled by Mina: the ritual of telling each other their news over two cups of tea then dressing for dinner (*FLLR*: 102–3). Mina is portrayed as confident in her control over her nephew: ‘so certain’ Henry is unable to resist her exerting her will over his (*FLLR*: 105). Yet in contrast to Mina’s certainty Henry is shown to be confused about the role he has to play in Mina’s home. For example, he is never sure whether he should play-act along with Mina (*FLLR*: 102, 107); she talks to him about matters beyond his ken such as abortion (102), as if he is her husband rather than her nephew (ibid.). He is shown not even to understand the nature of sexual relations. For example, he asks what does Linda’s mother’s boyfriend sleep with her for (*FLLR*: 113). McEwan constantly shows Henry to be wary of Mina. First, in establishing a certain distance from Mina—she is introduced in the first

sentence as ‘Mina that Mina’, and always thereafter referred to in the third person. But McEwan also depicts the struggle that the boy has with the sense of trust and friendship he wants and needs to show: ‘Sure she worried him but for the most part she was not unkind, tea was ready in the afternoon when he came in from school, special treats, some favourite’ (*FLLR*: 102); ‘Henry for the most part liked her, she was his friend, she wanted to make him laugh, not to tell him what to do’ (107). But there is an undercurrent of confusion: ‘there was something dark...something he did not understand and he pushed it from his mind. ...Afraid of the thing in her he did not understand’ (107); and questioning his gut reaction to keep the sex of his friend from Mina: ‘why was it important not to mention the sex of his friend?’ (119).

As in ‘Homemade’ childhood games are exploited in this story: dressing up is done by the adults as well as by a child and there is an undercurrent of menace about the invitation to come to the party ‘disguised’ for the party is to be ‘formidable, fantastical, awful’ (*FLLR*: 108), not ‘fun’ as Claire—a normal mother—expects it to be (118), and the disguises have to be ‘impenetrable’ (*ibid.*) and ‘secret’ (109). Henry realises that it is not a party to invite his friends to: ‘Could the ones he played football with be in the same room as Mina ... How could they be in disguises, costumes and things like that, he was sure it would not fit’ (*FLLR*: 109). Indeed, the only friend he does invite, Linda, is to come undisguised for ‘she was not known, she was a stranger and all strangers are in disguise’ (*FLLR*: 123). Whilst the childish games of the story confuse the boy, McEwan also shows the boy’s failure to

understand the adult games Mina plays with him, such as the emotional manipulation and blackmail she tries to use over him (*FLLR*: 120).

In 'Disguises', McEwan shows the boy being subjected to endless confusions, communicated in the constant questions he poses and in the lack of structure of the stream of consciousness sections, which McEwan uses to represent the boy's intoxication. The most important confusion in the story, and the one which is indicative of the exploitation of the boy on the brink of adolescence, is over sexual identity. His aunt is characterised as an occasional transvestite, as are her friends, and Henry is forced to dress as a girl for his aunt's pleasure. In McEwan's other stories children are also variously molested by a paedophile stranger in 'Butterflies', and by an incestuous brother in 'Homemade'. In addition, in this story McEwan complicates paedophilia with gender switching. To balance these destructive phenomena, in 'Disguises' McEwan depicts the boy's experience of the first stirrings of love:

Growing up you fell in love, Henry knew that, with some girl you met, and that was when you got married, but only if you met a girl you liked, and how for him when most girls could not be understood? This one, though, he could see her elbow almost on to his part of the desk, this one was frail and different, he wanted to touch her neck or put his foot near hers, or did Henry feel guilty with all this new, this confusion and feeling? (*FLLR*: 111)

These delicate emotions become nascent sexual stirrings when Linda invites him to her home:

she was waiting smiling as he came towards [*sic*], ready to press a note in his hand, a scrap reading, 'Are you coming Sunday?' He turned it and wrote yes, in the same spirit he had run free this morning, held it under the table for her to take it

with her fingers which came locking into his and did not let go a moment or two, gripped and slid away. In his stomach the pit, in his groin a little blood stirring in a pre-pubertal skin, pushed up like spring flowers, into the folds of his clothes and the note fell unnoticed to the floor. (*FLLR*: 117)

These innocent moves contrast vividly with his contacts with Mina, which are overbearing and cruel: '[Mina] caught his forearm in a pinching mean grip and was looking close in his face, sucking him in with her look' (*FLLR*: 106); 'escaping Mina's hands to pull him on her knee' (107); and,

[Mina] seemed to want this girl [Henry] and pushed his face closer to her breast, for there was nothing beneath the tunic, nothing but Henry's face against the faintly scented corrugated skin of her limp old dugs and her hand was cupped by the back of his neck. (*FLLR*: 116)

The disguises of the title are the costumes which his aunt and he wear for their ritual soirées. What begins as a harmless theatrical diversion becomes, by the end of the story, a sordid corruption of the little boy's domestic experience and the apparent abuse of his friend. Dressing the boy in a frock is seen as rendering the boy subject to the predatory desire of his aunt. To assert her domination in the fantasy she creates, Henry is made to dress as a girl, while Mina dresses as an army officer. The sexual innuendo and patriarchal dominance implied by these chosen roles deliberately imply that the role-playing is exploitative. However, Henry in his innocence is shown to feel that dressing as a girl is not only disgusting but also as a humiliation in itself:

Catching his breath he touched the dress, cold, ominously silky, it rustled when he picked it up, all flounces and frills, layer on layer with white satin and lace edged with pink, a cute bow falling at the back. He let it fall back on the bed, the most girlish thing he ever saw, wiped his hand on his trousers, not

daring to touch the wig which seemed alive. Not these, not him did Mina really want him to? He stared miserably at the bed and picked up the white tights, not these, surely. All right being a soldier, a Roman, a pageboy, something like that, but not a girl, it was wrong to be a girl. (*FLLR*: 104–5)

McEwan uses a similar device in *The Cement Garden*, where Jack's sisters explain to him the implicit code of dressing which mirrors the patterns of dominance in a patriarchal society. Here, dressing as a boy is seen in terms of 'promotion', whereas dressing as a girl is 'degradation':

Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy, for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading. ...If I wore your trousers to school tomorrow and you wore my skirt we'd soon see who had the worse time. Everyone would point at you and laugh.

'Look at him! He looks just like ...ugh...a girl!'

And look at her,' Sue was pointing at Julie, 'she looks rather ...clever in those trousers'. (*The Cement Garden*: 43–4)

Just as the girl characters in *The Cement Garden* deconstruct the patriarchal code by ganging up in this scene to assert their superiority over their older brother, as they have already done with their younger one, Mina in 'Disguises' is shown to subject her ward in a similarly subordinate position by making him wear the satin dress. Furthermore, dressing the boy in a dress invites the molestation by the 'drunken soldier' his aunt plays at the same time.

Unlike the dominating characters in 'Butterflies' and 'Homemade', McEwan does not seek to offer explanations for Mina's conduct. We are

invited to believe that depravity and viciousness are mental afflictions, games people play, spurred on by a theatrical turn of mind. It is from the boy's perspective that McEwan explores these ideas:

was she very wicked or very mad? He could not decide, but for sure the dressing-up game loses its fun by this, he sensed some compulsion in it for Mina, he dared not contradict it, there was something dark—the way she pushed him, the way she hissed, something he did not understand and he pushed it from his mind. (*FLLR*: 107)

Mina is drawn as an individual seeking to reinvent herself in each character: 'the art of acting as Mina sees it, creating a self, in other words a disguise' (*FLLR*: 109). Indeed, this is just what Henry is seen to do in order to resist his aunt, to reinvent himself as Linda in order to escape his mental torture, thereby achieving solidarity with his soul mate and finding escape from his predicament by merging his identity with the girl. Henry in the dress is 'Henry and Linda at once...inside her now and she was in him. It was no longer an oppression, he was free of Mina's anger, invisible inside this girl' (*FLLR*: 114).

Ironically, Henry is molested when he is dressed like Linda:

she... lifted him up under the armpits half carried him half dragged him to the armchair pulling him there on to her lap and ...pressed tight hot and all over him like a wrestler...She seemed to want this girl and pushed his face closer to her breast...and even when she began to sing and her other hand began to wander in the layers of his dress in and around his thigh, she half said, she half sang, 'A soldier needs a girl, a soldier needs a girl'. (*FLLR*: 116)

Linda herself is also molested when she comes to the party, either by Mina in disguise or by some other guest:

the man in the chair was pulling Linda on to his lap, Linda and Henry...was pulling Linda on to his lap held her tight there behind her head, she was too frightened to move, terrified and could not make her tongue move and who would hear her in all these voices? was [sic] unbuttoning his shirt with one hand the man in the chair, ... no one could see, the man in the chair pressed her face tight against him, would not let her go. (*FLLR*: 125)

For Mina's reinventions, there is no explanation except madness or badness. However, McEwan has the boy struggle with ideas of blame in a way which offers a partial vindication of Mina's actions. In his guise as a little girl, he is able to dissociate himself from his actions. As the pretty little blonde girl in her party frock, he told himself, 'It's for [Mina], it's nothing to do with anything, it's for her, it's nothing to do with me' (*FLLR*: 107). Just as McEwan accords a certain responsibility for their demise to the children in 'Homemade' and 'Butterflies', he has Henry wrestle with responsibility for his actions: 'when you are not yourself you are still someone, and someone has to take the blame, blame, blame for what?' (*FLLR*: 124). And, as he witnesses his friend being molested, he also struggles to apportion blame: 'Henry thought who was to blame' (*FLLR*: 125). It seems a cruel fate for a child character to be deliberately confused about their sexual identity and their responsibility for their behaviour, while they are being manipulated and subordinated to the decadent desires of adults. The monster mask in the story may have been chosen and worn by Henry, but the real monster of the piece is

Mina, whom McEwan depicts abusing her trust as guardian to her sister's child.

So, in the absence of parents who are there to care for their children, as in 'Homemade', 'Butterflies', 'Disguises', McEwan depicts the propensity for harm to come to children through other less caring or responsible individuals who subject these children to abuse. In the second collection of short stories, *In Between the Sheets*, there is a perceptible development in the portrayal of the treatment of children. Only two stories feature child characters and in both cases, the children are shown in relation to their parents, whereas the treatment of children in the first collection is distinctive in that they are shown mainly in isolation from their parents. The two stories, 'Two Fragments: March 199-' and 'In Between the Sheets' are concerned with the relationships between fathers and daughters. They therefore signal a shift in McEwan's focus away from individual children in isolation, to children in interaction with parents, anticipating the fuller treatment of childhood and parenthood in *The Child in Time*.

It may be significant that McEwan chooses to develop imaginative representations of parenthood and childhood mainly in the context of father-daughter relationships since at the time of writing McEwan had probably met his then girlfriend, Penny Allen, and her two daughters, who would have afforded him ample scope for observation. Indeed, most of his writing where there is an interest in parents and children focusses upon fathers and daughters, e.g. *The Imitation Game*, *The Child in Time*, and *Black Dogs*. The two stories

in *In Between the Sheets* of interest here reveal two different approaches to the relationships. In the first, 'Two Fragments: March 199–', there are three father-daughter relationships, of which one is abusive and involves the domination and exploitation of a young girl. The story is related from the point of view of the father, Henry (it is perhaps accidental that the man is given the same name as the confused child in 'Disguises'), who has a three- or four-year old daughter, Marie. Henry includes in his narration of the second part of the story vignettes of two other father-daughter relationships: the first shows the subjection of a daughter by her street showman father to a brutal physical abuse, the second shows the relatively benign psychological betrayal by a daughter of her Chinese father. The story is set in the stricken society of the near future, as is *The Child in Time*.

The relationship between Henry and Marie is portrayed as wholesome and loving. At the beginning of the first part of the story, for example, the little girl opens a conversation at her father's bedside with 'I've got a vagina' (*IBS*: 42). In 'Butterflies' or 'Homemade' the imaginative consequences of such an opening would be obviously dangerous, yet there is no sense that McEwan has written Henry's character as capable of exploiting his daughter in the way that other child characters are, for he is clearly portrayed as caring for her. When Marie gets into her father's bed paternally he watches her fall asleep and later slips out of bed gently without waking her. Their journey to his work and her nursery is interrupted by Henry stopping on Chelsea bridge and lifting up his daughter to look into the river, an innocent rehearsal of

Jane's last journey in 'Butterflies'. Like the other parents, Henry values the time he spends with his daughter, queuing up at lunchtime to take her out, 'out of need, not duty' (*IBS*: 45).

Fatherhood alone is not sufficient an explanation for the quality of their relationship as McEwan shows by means of depicting a second father-child relationship. In the second relationship between the street performer and his daughter, the father's role is exploitative, not protective—the daughter's value to her father is shown to be purely economic. He uses his daughter for his own financial gain. Henry and Marie witness the absurd ritual of the man extracting money from the gullible but ghoulish crowd in order to see his daughter pierce her body with a sword: 'Through her belly, out her back, without blood' (*IBS*: 48). The scene is a brutally intense demonstration of cruelty inflicted upon an innocent girl, doubly exploited both by her father and also by the spectators.

The third father-daughter relationship is more complex. It appears in the context of the Chinese family home to which Henry has helped the father to carry a heavy cupboard. The father is depicted as relying on his daughter to communicate with Henry, but perversely, she undermines him by recommending Henry not to eat the soup which he has been given: "It's muck," she said vaguely. Then she changed her mind and hissed vehemently. "It's piss" (*IBS*: 60). The father who cannot communicate with his daughter represents the baseness of the society which has lost its way. Both of these other relationships point up the quality of Henry and Marie's relationship.

Theirs is founded upon unconditional love. Despite its bleak context, the story confirms our faith in human nature.

The father-daughter relationship in 'In Between the Sheets' also offers an affirmative statement. In this story, the father, Stephen Cooke is depicted trying to maintain a paternal relationship with his daughter, Miranda, following his divorce from her mother. At the outset, their communications are confined to a simple exchange of letters, a plea for money from the daughter and an agonised, over-generous response from her father. For her birthday, McEwan paints him buying an excessive amount of presents, in an attempt to expiate his own sense of guilt at being separate from her: an economic response to an emotional crisis is doomed to failure. McEwan uses this motif later for the father in *The Child in Time*, also called Stephen, who indulges in a buying spree for his lost daughter's birthday. In this novel it represents an equally futile gesture. The father's attempts to reunite with his daughter in 'In Between the Sheets' however are disturbed by his awareness of her burgeoning sexuality at the same time as his own is in abeyance. Furthermore, Stephen is depicted as having been a sexual failure with his wife who regrets 'all the wasted hours between the sheets' (*IBS*: 88). The story begins by depicting the only sexual activity left to Stephen in the story, a wet dream, which he notes in his writer's journal as 'a nocturnal emission like an old man's last gasp' (*IBS*: 81). The dream consists of a fantasy involving his wife, the young girl waitress at the cafe in which they meet, and a coffee machine. Stephen imagines himself as the coffee machine, filling the cup in the waitress's hand. The connection

between his sexual fantasy and his daughter is reinforced when Miranda plays the role of waitress to him at home, 'Miranda brought him coffee. She set it down on the table with the mock deference of a waitress' (*IBS*: 89). As such, McEwan makes a conscious acknowledgement of Freudian theory, especially in his reference to a book on the interpretation of dreams which is quoted as saying: 'An orgasm cannot lie' (*IBS*: 85). However, there is a gulf between the uncontrolled unconscious and the practical structure of family life. The story appears to be moving towards incest, slowly building from the dream, to Stephen's awareness of his daughter's growing breasts (*IBS*: 86), and finally to the point when Stephen kisses his daughter goodnight and gets an erection (91). His daughter's growing sexuality, however, provides for Stephen a powerful reminder of the failure of his sexual relationship with his wife and his own inadequacy. His daughter embodies his sexual fears when he imagines that he hears his daughter, in bed with her unusually small friend Charmian, having an orgasm. There have already been several allusions to a homosexual element in their relationship (their naked caresses (*IBS*: 82–3), their evasion about discussing boyfriends (90)), typical of adolescent psycho-sexual exploration. It appears to confirm Stephen's fears of his inconsequentiality of himself as a man. However, the prohibition of incest is strong and the paternal concern McEwan draws in wins the day. Finally the relationship as father and daughter is restored—he is convinced of her virginal innocence and confident that he will not despoil it himself. However, McEwan provides sufficient suggestion that the story would be resolved in incest to serve to remind

readers of the jeopardy of the vulnerable, and how easily they might be subjected to the desires of adults, and how easily adults' desires can be unloosed.

Sibling Rivalry

Although McEwan also develops the ideas of mental and physical domination in *The Cement Garden*, there is no sense of evil or exploitation in this story. The children are innocent victims of their circumstances. Their innocence appears misguided, however, resulting in a bizarre, grotesque outcome which is the result of a struggle for domination within a family which in turn is attempting to reject the normalising effects of society. The struggles acted out in the novel turn upon the relationships between the family and its environment; and within the family, especially between Jack and his father. On the father and mother's death, the struggle shifts to the efforts of the family to resist society's influence; and finally the struggle for domination between sister and brother, which is resolved for them in a way which is not sanctioned by convention. Once again, McEwan explores imaginatively what could happen to children when adults are largely absent.

The family at the heart of the novel is both physically and socially remote from the rest of the community. Their house is isolated by the demolition of surrounding houses to make way for tower blocks—a potent symbol for McEwan to use of concrete towers which dominate the skyline and permit surveillance of those below (56). The father is portrayed as intent on smothering the garden under a sea of cement to render it neat and to obliterate

any vestige of rude nature: 'He had constructed rather than cultivated his garden.... He chose flowers for their neatness and symmetry... he would have nothing that tangled' (14). Indeed, McEwan indicates the extent of the constraints which this character plans over nature : 'Before his first heart attack he had intended to build a high wall round his special garden' (ibid.). This introduces the theme of surveillance and confinement of the organic: an obsession played out by the father over the garden, and over his elder son. McEwan shows the boy quickly rejecting this controlling influence after his father's death by attacking the concrete covering the garden and allowing his body to grow dishevelled. The theme of surveillance of the body is also developed by McEwan where he depicts the children in their game of doctors and nurses. But the organic prevails in the novel, and the body of the mother triumphs over the enveloping concrete when it breaks through its protective blanket and releases the odour of decomposition. Equally, the natural attraction the older brother and sister find for each other achieves expression in a physical fashion, breaking convention and offending the moral code.

The novel is narrated by Jack, one of McEwan's typically anguished adolescent boys. The boy's moral detachment is established in the openly Oedipal denial of the opening sentence: 'I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way' (9). The opening of the novel, is as David Sampson comments in his article on the novel (1984), a 'parody of modernist paradox' (68). In the novel Jack shows no filial loyalty in recounting 'the little story' (9) of his father's death and denies its significance

in relation to both his burgeoning sexuality and the events which follow. In the opening scene, his detachment is also established from other adult men, represented by the cement delivery men. He is portrayed like a sub-dominant male ape, sitting outside the dominance ladder in order to learn, but also to wait his chance to take over. Like the narrator of 'Butterflies' portrayed as failing to find the right words to engage with the boys from whom he craves recognition, Jack cannot connect with the adult men:

'Cement?' one of [the men] said. I hooked my thumbs into my pockets, moved my weight on to one foot and narrowed my eyes a little. I wanted to say something terse and appropriate, but I was not sure I had heard them right. I left it too long, for the one who had spoken rolled his eyes towards the sky and with his hands on his hips stared past me at the front door. (9)

His father, on the other hand, is represented as fully familiar with the monosyllabic functional language required, assuming the authoritative role of the foreman:

My father counted [the bags of cement], looked at his clipboard and said, 'Fifteen.' The two men grunted. I liked this kind of talk. I too said to myself, 'Fifteen'. (10)

Even by the end of the novel, McEwan allows Jack no progress on this front, portraying him as unable to compete with that other adult male, Julie's boyfriend Derek, who is admitted to the family home and is accorded superiority over Jack by his sister, at least for a time. He is said to be 'incredibly rich', playing snooker for a living (85), whereas Jack has not yet found a job (77); but even by dint of his age, it seems Derek cannot compete with Jack for the admiration of his sister Julie (86).

The entire family is cut off from normal social interaction partly because of their lack of an extended family:

There was an unspoken family rule that none of us ever brought friends home. ... No one ever came to visit us. Neither my mother nor my father when he was alive had any real friends outside the family. They were both only children, and all my grandparents were dead. My mother had distant relatives in Ireland whom she had not seen since she was a child. Tom had a couple of friends he sometimes played with in the street, but we never let him bring them into the house. There was not even a milkman in our road now. (19, 21–2)

Therefore, the normal controls over children by adults are shown to be absent. Jack himself is also shown to refuse his father's right to dominate him at the beginning of the novel, refusing his father's rules. In fact, Jack is the antithesis of his obsessively neat, authoritarian, constipated father, and rebels against him. Unlike the repressed and ordered figure of his father, McEwan portrays Jack as filthy, untidy, indolent and a compulsive masturbator. Readers can perceive, however, that Jack is probably more like his father than he admits. Jack is given to recognise that his father's behaviour is deliberately provocative towards other members of the family; for example in the way he scrapes out a pipe over his untouched dinner plate and calls a halt to a discussion with his wife by inserting his pipe between his teeth with a terse 'out of the question'. As Jack is allowed to comment perceptively, and in recognition of the phallic significance of the pipe, his father 'knew how to use his pipe against [his mother]' (10). In imitation of his father's authoritativeness, McEwan has Jack terminate an erotic game with his sisters using the same phrase, '[o]ut of the question' (12), spoken through an imaginary pipe.

Jack, too, is portrayed as just as unreasonable as his father in his conduct. He allows his father to take the strain of lifting the heavy bags of cement and holds back from helping him, thus precipitating his father's fatal heart attack (13). His final act of domination over his father is to eradicate his impression from the wet concrete where he had fallen (18).

In defiance of the normal manners of society, Jack abandons his personal hygiene with the perverse logic that if people really like him his smell and appearance will not repel them. His subjectivity is a matter for himself alone. As if to press home the point that he has over-stepped the bounds of convention, McEwan shows the boy's reflection seeming to separate from him and to disown him:

One morning, shortly before my fifteenth birthday, ... I glimpsed myself in a full-length mirror which leaned against the wall ... Coloured light through the stained glass above the front door illuminated from behind stray fibres of my hair. The yellowish semi-darkness obscured the humps and pits of my complexion. I felt noble and unique. I stared at my own image till it began to dissociate itself and paralyse me with its look. It receded and returned to me with each beat of my pulse, and a dark halo throbbed above its head and shoulders. 'Tough,' it said to me. 'Tough.' (20)

Whereas Lacan's metaphor of the mirror provides a confirmation both of the separation from the (m)other and of the constitution of the self, Jack's mirror image refuses the act of recognition and dissociates itself from him. As the novel develops, Jack finds a better confirmation of his identity in the mirror that his older sister represents, as discussed below (p. 68).

Further to emphasise Jack's desire for dominance, and to overcome his sense of alienation, he is depicted as identifying with the space captain in his science fiction novel (80) whose mission it is to dominate and destroy a space monster, and, portentously for the plot of the novel, to dispose of its carcass (34). Indeed, on the death of both parents, Jack and his brother and sisters do become like the crew of a spaceship, cut off without the normalising force of parental authority. As if they, too, are free of gravity, they drift aimlessly around the house with nothing to do. There are no longer any rules to be followed. Jack himself adopts the dominant persona of the spaceship captain as he surveys the cracking surface of his mother's cement tomb. He is reminded of the landscape of some alien planet over which Commander Hunt and his crew fly, and like the Commander he drifts on, without doing anything about it (80–1).

To emphasise Jack's desire for dominance over his family, McEwan portrays Jack indulging an almost voyeuristic interest in other people's lives. As Elizabeth Grosz (1990) points out with reference to Sartre, 'the look is the domain of domination and mastery; it provides access to its object without necessarily being in contact with it' (38). Jack's predilection for surveillance is developed before the death of his mother:

I used to sit around, watching [Julie] at the ironing-board,
getting on her nerves (19);

I slouched in the doorway and watched the family at breakfast
(20);

I walked round the side of the house to the back garden and watched my mother through one of the kitchen windows (23);

I had a strong wish to spy on my sisters, to be with them and be invisible. (70)

He is constantly portrayed on the outside, looking in, unable to take part in the life of the family and excluded from it. He is determined not to be subject to the rules of the house, especially, once his father and mother are dead, those of his sisters. Jack's relationship with his mother demonstrates his anguish at being denied his proper position of mastery. The existence of his siblings ensures that he cannot have her exclusive attention and her progressive illness which causes her to withdraw completely to her room threatens even more isolation for him and subjection to his sister's control. Instead of moving closer to his mother, to care for her, Jack is shown to distance himself even more, avoiding conversation and meetings wherever possible—if he is not to be in charge, then he will remain outside. After his mother's death, McEwan depicts Jack trying to re-establish connection by visiting her mausoleum but he finds it impossible even to envisage her face:

I tried hard to make a picture of her face in my mind. I had the oval outline of a face, but the features inside this shape would not stay still, or they dissolved into each other and the oval turned into a light bulb. ... Once my mother's face appeared briefly, framed by the oval and smiling unnaturally the way she did when she posed for snapshots. (80–1)

The imagery in this passage is evoked in the later novel, *The Innocent*, where Leonard is more successful in conjuring up the image of his girlfriend, Maria:

Leonard had no difficulty at all recalling Maria's face. It shone for him, the way faces do in certain old paintings. In fact there

was something almost two-dimensional about it; the hairline was high on the forehead, and at the other end of this long and perfect oval, the jaw was both delicate and forceful, so that when she tilted her head in a characteristic and endearing way, her face appeared as a disc, more of a plane than a sphere, such as a master artist might draw with one inspired stroke. (44)

Just as Leonard's motivation is depicted as a desire for domination, Jack's desire in this novel to envision his mother is also a desire to possess her body. As in the later novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*, the desire to possess manifests itself in physical control over the desired body. Significantly, Jack's desire takes the form of wanting to dig his mother's body out of her cement-filled trunk—a double sacrilege of an unburied body being disinterred.

Throughout *The Cement Garden*, Jack's difference from his family is cultivated, yet the anguished desire to be included is always present:

I watched my sisters crying ... I felt excluded but I did not wish to appear so. At one point I placed my hand on Sue's shoulder, the way Julie had on mine...

...but neither of them noticed me, any more than wrestlers in a clinch would, so I removed it ... I wished I could abandon myself like them, but I felt watched. (50)

When he does, finally, feel included, McEwan emphasises the sense of sharing power with them: 'I felt safe, as if I belonged to a powerful, secret army' (78).

Jack's anguish about feeling alienated and resisting his sister's domination is not a condition shared by his brother; quite the opposite. Tom accedes to total acceptance by his sisters, and his subjection to their will. He assumes the role not only of a baby through which he is able to recreate his mother, in Julie, but also by becoming one of them—by dressing up as a little

girl. Although McEwan depicts his sisters offering the same resolution to Jack, it is rejected (71) because his identity is strongly masculine as demonstrated by his obsession with masturbation and his growing sexual desire for his sister. Jack therefore remains alienated and is outnumbered by all the 'girls' in the family. McEwan employs a similar device where a child submits to both the natural and contrived feminine culture around him by dressing as a girl, in 'Disguises'. In so doing, McEwan subscribes to the view that gender is a social construction rather than a deterministically biological given.

McEwan thus includes in the story a strong theme of conflict between the genders. This is played out in the gendered games between the siblings. These games are significantly different from those explored in 'Disguises' because all of them are basically innocent. The first game is that of 'Doctors and Nurses' where the two older children explore their younger sister's body (11). Although in itself it is harmless, it does provide the fantasy for Jack's routine masturbation: 'As usual, the image before me was Julie's hands between Sue's legs' (17), and it is a substitute for his latent attraction to his older sister, Julie: 'I longed to examine my older sister but the game did not allow for that' (11). The gender play reaches a climax of disorder when Julie reverses the stereotypical gender order in a scene of mock castration. As in 'Disguises', the boy is shown to be confused as to whether he should join in a game (78), this time Julie's mock gunning down of the irritating flies and rubbish in their kitchen:

Julie whipped round and filled my belly with her bullets. I collapsed on the floor at her feet...Julie took a handful of my hair and pulled my head back. She swapped her gun for a knife and as she pressed it against my throat she said, 'Any more trouble and I'll stick it in here'. Then she knelt down and pressed her fist near my groin. 'Or here,' she whispered dramatically...' (78).

McEwan provides a final resolution for Jack's conflict within the family by his physical union with Julie in an incestuous relationship, effectively achieving the Oedipal goal of usurping the role of his father, albeit at one remove. His sister, who has assumed the role of mother, becomes his lover. He thus finally achieves symbolic superiority over his father.

The main focus of the novel is upon the relationship between Jack and his older sister, Julie. It is an ambivalent one, by turn collaborative and competitive, the one seeking domination over the other. Early in the book, for example, Jack and Julie are shown conspiring to tell a joke at the expense of their father, and together they explore their sister's anatomy in a scene calculated to subject the younger sister to the power of her older siblings. The first hint of an erotic attraction between the two older children appears when Jack acts out a play of power and control over Julie, which is highly evocative of rape. The scene, however, concludes not in Jack's triumph but in his humiliation, as in his excitement he urinates—an embarrassing outcome to the childish tickling game. Nevertheless, McEwan effectively emphasises the game's suggestiveness as an erotic act. The incident is replete with references to a rape fantasy where dominance is the aim. The gloves Jack wears are 'huge and filthy', 'last worn by [their] father'. Jack drags Julie onto the bed,

‘delighted by [his] power’ and holds her down only to feel ‘hot liquid spreading over [his knee]’ (29). Readers are reminded of Connie’s failure to distinguish between urine and semen in ‘Homemade’, when her brother rapes her. In turn, Julie is portrayed as vulnerable and helpless: the sight of the advancing gloves ‘made her weak’, ‘she was writhing in her chair, squealing “No ... no ... no”’; her attempts to fight him off are futile: ‘feebly she tried to catch at my wrists’ (ibid.). There is ‘an edge of panic’ as she ‘thrash[es] about’ (ibid.). Finally, Julie asserts her authority by ordering him to ‘Get out’ (ibid.), thereby re-assuming the dominant position which this character has been seen to seek all along.

McEwan portrays the gradual evolution of Julie’s superiority in the course of the novel. Julie progressively withdraws from Jack’s company, becoming increasingly silent and secretive. As their mother’s illness progresses, Julie looks after her mother alone whilst Jack stays apart. Julie is portrayed as becoming more purposeful in response to her mother’s encroaching frailty, Jack increasingly aimless. Julie’s feminine bond with her sister, too, effectively works to exclude Jack. The nascent sense of freedom which began on the death of the boy’s father, and which grew during the illness and death of his mother, is finally curtailed by the authority of his older sister:

[Julie] was suddenly so remote from us, quiet, certain of her authority. I wanted to say to her, ‘Come on, Julie, stop pretending. We know who you are really.’ (31)

McEwan provides an interesting twist to the plot as the mother nears her death: she instructs Jack (but not Julie) that they are to share control and

responsibility for the household. Once the mother is dead, however, neither of the characters can fulfil the wishes of their mother and Julie is allowed to assume control. Jack's claim to hold sway in the family, as his father had done, diminishes rapidly.

Jack and Julie are shown to grow gradually aware of their mutual sexual attraction as the novel progresses. Julie's handstand at her mother's bedside can clearly be read as a sexual signal addressed to Jack, and it wins his approval, for afterwards he agrees to perform his own party-piece; and Julie knowingly cultivates the jealousy between her boyfriend and her brother. Jack and Julie's relationship ultimately turns on collusion rather than competition, predicated upon the similarities rather than the differences between them. Each is the mirror for the other. Their unity is perfectly depicted by McEwan at the moment of their mother's death: 'I saw ... the unmoving tableau we formed, sitter and stander, and I was unsure briefly which was me' (49). They also make comparisons of each other's bodies which emphasises as many *similarities* between them as differences:

Julie laid her palm on my belly. 'Look how white you are,' she said, 'against my hand.' I took her hand and measured it against mine. It was exactly the same. We sat up and compared the lines on our palms, and these were entirely different. We began a long investigation of each other's body. Lying on our backs side by side we compared our feet. Her toes were longer than mine and more slender. We measured our arms, legs, necks and tongues but none of these looked so alike as our belly buttons, the same fine slit in the whorl which was squashed to one side, the same pattern of creases in the hollow. (125)

Their growing intimacy is consummated in their love-making. McEwan represents it as unsurprising that they are mutually attracted since they are likely to see something of themselves in each other, the ultimate narcissism. This notion of finding sameness as erotic, rather than difference, is revisited by McEwan in the characterisation of the two lovers in *The Comfort of Strangers*. In that novel, the two are described as 'almost like twins' (70), and they feel so close to each other that '[w]hen they looked at each other they looked into a misted mirror' (17).

Julie and Jack's incestuous coupling in *The Cement Garden* is suggested by McEwan to be an affirmation of the bond between them within the family and as an attempt to keep the conventions of society, embodied by Derek, Julie's obsessively neat suitor, out. A purely Freudian interpretation of their relationship is also possible. Jack has rejected the primary principle of socialisation represented in his father's prohibition of incest, projects his Oedipal longings onto Julie and has achieved union with her as his mother's substitute; he has finally achieved liberation from the oppression of his father and fulfilled his primal desire. Jack and Julie, who have grown into the role of father and mother for each other, and for their brother and sister, have also taken the next step in reaffirming their relationship.

The sense of liberation McEwan permits his main characters is short-lived, however, since Derek, the only character McEwan presents as representative of normative society, penetrates the children's defences. His introduction to the household coincides with the crack appearing in the

concrete of their mother's sarcophagus, and he is the witness to their incest. It goads him into exposing their hidden secret, breaking up their private celebration along with the concrete tomb in the cellar and preventing their resistance to convention. The moral imperative is restored; society is safe.

Jack's offence is portrayed as not so much committing a criminal act, since there is no victim in his crime, as failing to conform to conventional manners: he precipitated his father's fatal heart attack although McEwan has sown the seed that he was prone to this as the result of an earlier attack; his mother is dead before her undignified interment in a cement-filled trunk; and his sister is both older than he, and a willing partner. In contrast to the outcome of 'Butterflies', where the crime depicted is unequivocally evil, and a victim suffers, the normalising forces of convention prevail and the private utopia of Jack and his siblings is broken up. Between 'Butterflies' and *The Cement Garden*, the focus of McEwan's fiction has moved from an individual operating on the periphery of society with no prospects of redemption, and exerting complete and final arbitration over another's existence, to an individual who achieves at least some sense of belonging and some recuperation from domination.

The Danger of Strangers

In 'Butterflies', as in 'Homemade', McEwan represents a child being ruthlessly subordinated to the desires of a more powerful individual. In both these stories McEwan also shows the little girls colluding in their downfall as if to suggest that they *subject themselves* to their fate. In both stories, the

narrator's (in both cases the perpetrator's) perspective is the only one. There is no attempt to represent the thoughts and feelings of the child as, for example, John Fowles succeeds in doing in his story of kidnap and murder, *The Collector*. This notion of the child's guilt is portrayed in the story of 'Butterflies'. The little girl, Jane, in 'Butterflies' is less fortunate than Connie in 'Homemade'—she does not emerge from her ordeal alive. As with Connie, Jane's innocence is not pristine. Jane is shown to know the rules by which she should live, though she does not necessarily realise that breaking them will lead to her death. She has certainly been taught not to talk to strangers nor to follow them as the narrator notices: 'She ... walked a little behind me as if waiting for me to tell her to turn back' (*FLLR*: 65). She knows not to go near the canal: 'I'm not allowed by the canal. ... You won't tell on me if I come, will you?' (*FLLR*: 69). Nevertheless, the lure which the man uses to entice her to the canal with him appeals not to her self-centred desire for possessions (like the doll she has discarded, or the ice cream which she has eaten) but to her innocent appreciation of beauty—the prospect of seeing coloured butterflies in such a drab urban setting. Jane is killed because she knows that what happens to her subsequently is wrong and that she might testify to her abuse. Although she is shown to be innocent of the purpose of touching the man, the danger she faces when he chases after her is clearly greater than being caught by her parents in a forbidden place. The narrator's specious reasoning recognises this point: 'I could not let her run home now, not after this. I would have to go after her' (*FLLR*: 73). The only apparent saving grace in the depiction of her

murder is that she is unconscious as the final violence takes place. Here, the gentleness of the murderer as he 'eases' her into the canal is repellent, for it subverts the protectiveness an adult normally learns to show towards a child.

In 'Butterflies', the man is portrayed at first as resisting the approach of the little girl: 'I avoid talking to children, I find it hard to get the right tone with them. And their directness bothers me, it cramps me' (*FLLR*: 65).

McEwan gives Jane the initiative, motivated as it is by the prospect of material gain. Even the socially inept narrator is shown to perceive that her motivation is more self-interest than genuine interest in social contact with another human being; for example he refers to her 'greedy little dance on the pavement' (*FLLR*: 68) at the prospect of having something bought for her. This degree of insight into the motivation of the girl is not accorded to the narrator's self-motivation.

Indeed, the murderer's actions are not represented at all as deliberately evil but as a response to his feeling of rejection and alienation. His words and actions, rather, are shown as a loss of control: "'Butterflies.'" The word was out before I could retrieve it' (*FLLR*: 69). The more possessive of Jane he feels, the more he removes her from other people and from familiar surroundings. The more he holds the civilising forces of society at bay, the more Jane is forced to submit to him. Whereas in her own street she runs after the man, nearer the canal he has to carry and drag her out of sight. The more physical contact he has with the little girl, the more his sexual desire is roused, and it is portrayed as a physical compulsion over which he has no control: the

'cold thrill' (68) he is described as feeling at the outset develops into a painful pleasure which rises 'from his groin to his chest and lodged itself there, like a fist pushing at his ribs' (*FLLR*: 70). The perverse logic of this compulsion leads him to use Jane for his sexual gratification. The narrator is shown to realise that her knowledge of the event must be erased and it is simply achieved by slipping the unconscious child into the canal. McEwan again implies Jane's collusion in her demise with the narrator's parting words: 'Silly girl, ... no butterflies' (*FLLR*: 73).

McEwan recognises that the story is particularly frightening and admits that he frightened himself writing it. Perhaps the story gains much of its disconcerting nature from McEwan's ability to explore the thought patterns of a psychopath in a way which enables readers to interpret his actions sympathetically, or at the very least, to understand the position of the perpetrator of such an appalling crime. The story is particularly chilling since McEwan does not seem to offer any moral judgment on the narrator. As Lindman-Strafford (1983) acknowledges, McEwan 'rarely lets his characters discuss or contemplate the motivation behind their acts' (17), but in this story there is absolutely no acknowledgment of guilt or shame. We might therefore see McEwan as evading the moral issues of right and wrong. Readers are simply left to make their own interpretation without authorial intervention.

The Domination of Childhood

Having considered the various ways individual children have been subjected to various forms of ill-treatment and abuse, in this section of the

thesis, the generic domination of childhood is discussed. In *The Child in Time* McEwan explores the nature of childhood from various perspectives—those of parents, a writer, a publisher, a political regime—and at different times including the time before birth. The novel represents different constructs of childhood which have varied over time. McEwan represents childhood as a time of perceived freedom, yet he also shows how childhood can be exploited and abused. Childhood is a perfect vehicle for McEwan's exploration of the theme of domination and subordination for it is at once a time of absolute freedom and yet of great mental, physical and political vulnerability. The main theme of the book is the effect of the loss of an individual child, but the novel also explores the broader issue of the social domination of childhood. McEwan also explores the negative personal consequences of repressing childhood. In the optimistic conclusion to the book he also proposes the Lacanian theory that all desire is rooted in a feeling of primordial loss.

The social and political domination of childhood is the backdrop for the novel. The novel is written in criticism of the individualistic, consumerist society of 1980s Britain though the political critique is subtle rather than overt; and in keeping with McEwan's belief that novels are most effective as offering resistance to political systems, rather than promoting them or proposing alternatives: 'The successful or memorable novels we think of as 'political' are written *against* a politics' (*AMA*: xi). The repressive policies of the contemporary government in *The Child in Time* are enshrined in the fictional *Authorised Childcare Handbook*. In creating the committee which thinks it is

producing the required advice for the government, McEwan carefully satirises the democratic rhetoric of contemporary society. In so doing, he draws upon current sociological theory to point up that childhood is merely a social construction as quoted above (p. 33). This is true. It is not so long ago that children could be convicted for crimes on the same basis as adults; and still comparatively recently, they had to work alongside adults and sleep with them. They were often used sexually, there being no concept of an age of consent to sexual experience. Today, children are accorded protection from exploitation and abuse. In the society of the near future portrayed in *The Child in Time*, the repressive, right-wing government is intent upon tightening control over the populace and it begins with the management of childhood. The extracts from the *Authorised Childcare Handbook* which McEwan uses as an epigraph to each of the nine chapters of the novel present a regressive regime of control and management for profit. Childhood is characterised as a disease to be cured in order to produce the right kind of citizen. The committee on which the fictional children's author sits, for example, deliberates upon child development theory, but it is frustrated by the conservative commonsense exemplified by the saying: 'boys will be boys' (11); in considering the introduction of a phonetic alphabet which would make teaching reading easier, they are stopped by the appropriately named Tessa Spankey, who promotes the virtues of difficulty, hard work and discipline in learning in the traditional way. The 'right kind of citizens' are not to be free spirits. The progressive educationists, and psychologists such as Rousseau, Spock, and Vygotsky are all rejected.

Children are a resource for capitalism, to be exploited, like coal or nuclear power (205). They are cast as consumers, a valuable market for children's authors, baby-milk manufacturers, the sugar industry, fast-food outlets and toy-makers (9). Children are to be taught harsh moral lessons, accept parental authority without question, and endure physical punishment as some of the reactionary chapter titles for the '*Handbook*' which McEwan creates show: "The Disciplined Mind, Adolescence Overcome, Security in Obedience, Boys and Girls—vive la différence, A Sound Smack Saves Nine" (161). The kind of intimate father-child relationship depicted between Stephen and Kate is just what the government of the day counsels against, as the following extract from the manual shows:

The child who feels himself to be loved by a father who strikes the proper balance between affection and distance is well on the way to being prepared emotionally for the separations to come, separations which are an inevitable part of all growing up. (49)

This counsel is more in keeping with Victorian family values than with contemporary values of close emotional bonding between father and child.

In Charles Darke, a secondary character in the novel, McEwan explores the idea of repression and denial of the child within, which he shows to have tragic consequences. Darke's characterisation is paradoxical, in that he is shown to be the instrument of opportunity for the author, Stephen Lewis, while undermining him by representing his novel as a children's book. The idea that the book is hailed as a success may be interpreted as much as a testimony to the power of marketing as to the correctness of Darke's

judgement. Darke's hidden agenda is most clearly revealed by the fact that at the same time as he is lauding '*Lemonade*', he is writing a right-wing manual of oppression and of exploitation of children for parents on behalf of the government. Darke's misconstruction of Stephen's book as a book for children is therefore seen to be consonant with the government's regressive reconstruction of childhood. The explanation for Darke's interpretation is clearly intended to be ironic, for Darke is portrayed as suffering a regression to childhood as a consequence of the repression of his own repressed childhood. Darke explains his decision to publish Lewis's novel as a children's book as that the sophistication of the greatest writers belies a child-like simplicity of approach which strikes a chord with both children and adults and shapes the future self: 'the incipient adult within the child, ...the forgotten child within the adult' (31). Instead, McEwan wants readers to believe that it is Darke's repressed ten-year-old self to whom the novel speaks, for this is the stage to which Darke regresses in order to escape from the pressures of government.

Like all good writers, you wrote *Lemonade* for yourself. And this is my point. It was your ten-year-old self you addressed. This book is not for children, it's for a child, and that child is you. *Lemonade* is a message from you to a previous self which will never cease to exist...This is a book for children through the eyes of an adult. (33)

The re-casting of the novel as a cautionary tale is consonant with the values of the society which McEwan creates as the context for *The Child in Time*. In turn it reflects the Thatcherite politics of the time at which *The Child in Time* was written: childhood is the time to create the right kind of people, the time

to teach children to prepare for adulthood, through hardship and stern lessons if necessary. The freedom of the child is to be dominated and curbed. Darke, portrayed as an ambitious, opportunistic politician of the right, is the mouthpiece through which McEwan extrapolates the contemporary political correctness in *Lemonade*. McEwan emphasises the nihilism of the message by linguistic playfulness on the surname of the little girl who responds so appropriately. Her name, in French would be 'nothing':

the message is bitter. That is what makes it such a disturbing book to read. When Mandy Rien's daughter read it she wept, bitter tears, but useful tears...Other kids have reacted in the same way. You've spoken directly to children. Whether you wanted to or not, you've communicated with them across the abyss that separates the child from the adult and you've given them a first, ghostly intimation of their mortality. Reading you, they get wind of the idea that they are finite as children. Instead of just being told, they really understand that it won't last, it can't last, that sooner or later they're finished, done for, that their childhood is not for ever. You put over to them something shocking and sad about grown-ups, about those who have ceased to be children. Something dried up, powerless, a boredom, a taking for granted. (33)

McEwan does portray Stephen's opposition to the publication of *Lemonade* as a children's book, and supports his position with an 'impassioned' yet ineffectual academic warning that the book could be 'destabilising' for children. He also builds up the irony of the book's being a success while Stephen's personal life begins to crumble subsequent to the loss of his daughter. Equally ironically, McEwan represents Darke, having attempted to suppress the child in everyone else, re-discovering a second childhood by allowing the child psychologically to dominate the adult.

However, the escape route he constructs is portrayed as a psychosis and is in any case insufficient to prevent Darke's suicide in order to reject the adult world altogether. This motif of infantilism is a familiar one in McEwan's early work, where characters are shown to resist the strictures of the adult world, and to try to reclaim the freedom of their childhood. For example, David, the central character in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*,⁴ regresses to infancy when he jumps back in the cot to be mothered by his girlfriend, Ruth; the young boy, Tom, in *The Cement Garden* goes back to sleeping in his cot after the death of his parents, encouraged by his sisters; and the implied sex offender in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man' retreats to his womb-like cupboard with a pram blanket as a comforter.

McEwan explores the theme of the vulnerability of children to domination by adults in two specific episodes in *The Child in Time*: the disappearance of Kate, and the pre-birth experience of Stephen and his mother. Central to the plot of the novel is the loss of the child, Kate, Stephen and Julie's daughter, in a supermarket.

The idea of childhood as a transitory state is manipulated by McEwan to the position where the child, Kate, is only permitted a brief and elusive presence in the novel. She is notable therefore by her absence in the text as she is from her fictional parents' lives. Her disappearance, during the banal ordinariness of a trip to the supermarket with her father, is a moment of profound emotional violence for the fictional parents, and, readers imagine, for

⁴ In *The Imitation Game*, 1981, 19-42.

herself, although the third person narration tells the story exclusively from her father's point of view. Kate's disappearance is an extremely disconcerting moment for readers, too, since Kate, who has been drawn as such a warm and loving child, 'quaintly protective' of her father (14), is abruptly written out of the story, although her spiritual presence suffuses the novel. The child is effectively frozen in time, not allowed to develop or grow. Nor do readers have any resolution of the event, in the way in which McEwan had so brutally provided in 'Butterflies'. The loss of the child in *The Child in Time* is a permanent nightmare which dominates the consciousness of her father and leads him into a period of instability.

McEwan's treatment of Stephen's response is a study in denial, repression of feelings and depression. At the moment when McEwan depicts Stephen's confession to his wife, he distances the character from powerful emotions by representing an out-of-body sensation, Stephen soaring above the trauma of the situation. The detachment it indicates heralds the subsequent detachment from his wife and his grip on grounded reality. The incident catapults Stephen into a state of masculine depression of a kind which is seldom depicted in contemporary fiction. Interestingly, instead of allowing the character to confront and cope with his loss, as McEwan shows Julie to do, Stephen's response is to theorise the possible explanations as an alternative to accepting the truth. McEwan describes these as 'an anaesthetic' (23). The character's only attempt to deal with his loss is to refuse to acknowledge her disappearance: he buys Kate birthday presents as if in so doing he might

magically conjure her back (130); and he literally conjures up his daughter in the shape of another child in the local school (153). His only real plan is represented as revenge, he ‘was going to find his daughter and murder her abductor’ (24).

McEwan also explores the idea of the child in control of its life in a passage in the novel in which the logic of time within the novel is disturbed. Stephen’s experience of being a child *before birth* is presented in a way which suggests that time is as much a construction which can be manipulated as childhood is. Beginning with the fantasy of riding pillion on his father’s bicycle (47), Stephen is depicted as actually seeing his mother and father in the countryside inn to which they have cycled, discussing whether he should be allowed to be born or not. He relives the sensations of being a foetus:

His eyes grew large and round and lidless with desperate, protesting innocence, his knees rose under him and touched his chin, his fingers were scaly flippers, gills beat time...(60)⁵

McEwan lends emphasis to the possibility that the foetus might be presented as a wilful creature as he depicts Stephen’s mother recalling this moment of decision, where she, too, witnesses the presence of her unborn son:

There was a face at the window, the face of a child, sort of floating there. It was staring into the pub. It had a kind of pleading look, and it was so white, white as an aspirin. It was staring right at me...I was convinced, I just *knew* that I was looking at my own child. (175)

⁵ A similar fantasy appears in ‘First Love, Last Rites’ where the narrator imagines the ‘creatures’ he feeds in his partner’s womb: ‘I was inside my fantasy, there could be no separation now of my mushrooming sensations from my knowledge that we could make a creature grow in Sissel’s belly. I had no wish to be a father, that was not in it at all. It was eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws...’ (*FLLR*: 90).

The scene takes place, significantly, while Stephen is on his way to visit his wife, Julie, who, like his mother, becomes pregnant. Here McEwan suggests that instead of a child being helpless and vulnerable, totally subjected to the will of its parents, it is on the other hand purposeful and capable of resisting domination by its own agency. That is, that it has free will and is not totally subject to its parents' desires indeed, actively resisting their intentions. This imaginative construction provides an effective opposition to the way in which McEwan has depicted the vulnerability of children to dominative practices elsewhere in his work. Here, an unborn child has power for self-determination which McEwan denied many of his child characters in earlier work. *The Child in Time* therefore marks a turning point in McEwan's fiction. It is clear that his writing has been influenced by his own experience of fatherhood: indeed one of the influences on the plot of the novel, especially the delivery of his Stephen's second child, was McEwan's own experience of delivering his own second son himself (Bailey 1987: 96).

McEwan's unsettling of the logic of who is in control and who is subject to that control in the relationship between parent and child, as discussed above, mirrors what he has done with the relationship between author and text. He depicts Stephen Lewis, the author, as being at the mercy of his text instead of the other way around. McEwan deconstructs the idea of an author's intention by depicting Lewis's plan to write a lurid alternative novel based on a 'hashish-befuddled tour of Turkey, Afghanistan and the North-west Frontier Province' (28), no doubt based on McEwan's own similar

journey undertaken with the proceeds from the sale of his first short-story (Hamilton 1978: 16). Instead, Lewis writes a novel entirely devoted to the childhood of the principal character which is based on his own:

the opening chapter stubbornly refused to end. It took on a life of its own, and this was how Stephen came to write a novel based on a summer holiday he had spent in his eleventh year with two girl cousins, a novel of short trousers and short hair for the boys, and Alice bands and frocks tucked into knickers for the girls, with unspoken yearnings, coyly interlacing fingers in place of crazed sex, bicycles with wicker hampers instead of day-glo Volkswagen buses, and set not in Jalalabad but just outside Reading. (29)

While McEwan might not subscribe to the Barthesian view that ‘the author is dead’, in this representation, he has certainly attested to the author’s subjection to his material. In the second essay in which he discusses the origins of *The Child in Time*, McEwan writes that imaginative freedom is as much a question of the author being invited to write about something: ‘you are being offered something’ (*AMA*: viii), or that novels might even write themselves, as if they ‘arrive virtually intact’ (ix). He consistently describes his writing this way in his introductions. In the Introduction to *or Shall We Die?*, he writes: ‘The subject matter of this oratorio seemed more of an inevitability than a choice’ (*AMA*: 3). In addition, in an interview in which he talked about his early writing, he uses the expression: ‘the material ... forced itself upon me’ (González 1992: 44).

Childhood as Freedom from Subjection

Although McEwan portrays children as subject to a variety of dominative practices, he also portrays reversion to childhood or infancy as an

escape from mental and social repression. In so doing, he points up the tensions and conflicts inherent in life: the father may engender the child but the child is also father of the man. McEwan portrays four characters in a state of regression to childhood, in a play, a short story and in two novels. In the play, *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*, David, the writer who is supposedly writing a book modelled on his own life to parody the events depicted in the play, has chosen to be treated like a baby. His behaviour is represented partly as a punishment of his mother for the two main features of the play are her humiliation and a demonstration to her that she has been completely supplanted in his affections by his lover. In the play, both the writer's mother and his lover molly-coddle and spoon-feed him while they vie for him to be dependent on herself. McEwan depicts the extent of David's infantilism as bizarre, hinting that he is incontinent and breast-feeds, and describes him as sleeping in a cot. The character of David suggests through his parodic reading of a non-existent playscript that he has jumped from the frying pan into the fire: as described in scene 18, Jack Flea 'run[s] away from home to escape his ineffectual father and the stifling, sinister attentions of his mother... Out of the frying-pan though, for he finds himself living with Hermione, a woman nearly twice his age [who] decides to make Jack Flea her child' (*IG*: 33). However, David is clearly content with the role he finds himself in and is adept at slipping from dependence to independence. McEwan portrays David as the writer of the play, in which he himself is a character, placing a sheet in his typewriter to type 'Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration' just as McEwan could have done as the

real writer, and thereafter waiting for the drama he has intended to unfold in scenes 8–10:

we hear...Ruth calling up to David with increasing irritation...He pays no attention...David remains perfectly still...At the sound of his parents' voices David smiles faintly but does not move...He is listening to the conversation with horror and pleasure. (IG: 22–4)

In the scene where his cufflinks are put on David moves from willing subjection to the attentions of, and rivalry between, his lover and his mother before he assumes adult responsibility as the host in scene 15: 'Another drink? Dad, a Scotch? Good. Mum, rum? Then we can start on the wine' (IG: 30). This is followed closely by a resumption of his child role for his lover: '*Ruth, standing up now, tousles David's hair. He inclines a little towards Ruth's breasts and for a brief moment rests his forehead there*' (IG: 30). His sexual relationship is therefore confused with the maternal/filial one, which is symbolised in the final scene when he shares a deep kiss with Ruth before she 'shushes him' and bids him sleep before sliding up the side of his cot in scene 26 (IG: 42).

What McEwan depicts in the play is a mockery of the possessiveness of the mother and her jealousy at her son's taking a lover, while depicting the son's enjoyment of dependence which has been taken to an extreme. Despite the callousness of setting up the mother and lover in a set piece which is bound to result in the mother's humiliation, the outcome of the plot is relatively benign. There are several hints that at home the father is treated as a child

substitute by his wife: she is very domineering and on one occasion Mrs Lee strokes her husband's head while it rests child-like on her lap in scene 20 (*IG*: 36). Furthermore the father and mother characters fuelled by copious amounts of alcohol are seen to believe that what they have witnessed is all a joke; David has enjoyed the parody and explained to himself why his life is as it is; and Ruth has her child substitute to herself. The escapism is complete all round and McEwan has once again commented darkly on what goes on in the narrow and claustrophobic space behind the closed doors of the family home. The other two cases of infantilism in McEwan's writing, which will be discussed below, have more sinister fictional consequences.

A secondary aspect of *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration* is the exploration of the relationship of the writer to his material—a theme McEwan explores in several of his works which portray writers. The narrator of the imaginary novel which David 'reads' explains that he decides to write a novel about himself in scene 18: 'to get a clearer perspective on it all' (*IG*: 33–4), as if the writer is subject to his material rather than the other way around. This is a common theme to which McEwan returns in his fiction, as well as in his interviews about his own writing, as discussed above. Not that he is a slave to his text, as in his depiction of Sally Klee, the author with writer's block portrayed in 'Reflections of a Kept Ape', who is condemned to re-write her first novel page for page. Further, McEwan engages with the connection between authors' work and their real lives, in depicting David in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*. Earlier in the play, in scene 17, David corrects his

mother who wants to hear the 'bits with me in it' ... 'You don't put people *in* novels, you draw on your [experience?]' (*IG*: 33). This statement certainly draws on McEwan's attested experience as a writer. He wrote early in his career about adolescence, for example, out of his insight into being an adolescent:

When I first started writing I was interested a great deal in adolescence—that was the little sea I had just crossed. I would start writing and a little voice would be speaking and I realised that this had the innocence of a child and the savagery of an adolescent. And so that just had to be followed. (Stephen 1987: 36–8)

Further, he explains that displaced representations of his experience shaped his writing:

I feel I was waking from a long semi-sleep, a time of barely consciously recognised repression in my own life. It was like a cork flying out of a bottle. All sorts of strange and unpredictable things started happening on the page. It is only now that I can explain a lot of them as highly displaced representations of all kinds of conflict. Some of them are about being sent to boarding school, and missing my mother, and being cut off from meaningful relationships or not having proper connections with people, which I felt keenly as a teenager. All the people in *First Love Last Rites* feel the lack of any profound emotional connections. They were stories that just had to emerge for me to exist more fully, and I take fairly strong psychoanalytical view of them these days. (Billen 1992: 29–30)

Nevertheless, on occasion he has drawn substantially upon a friend for one of his characters, and also his parents. In 1978, for example, he talks about the characterisation in *The Cement Garden*:

Here I had characters who meant something to each other. That made them more real. And, for the first time, I was basing them, in a displaced way, on people I knew. The conventional

approach, but a departure for me. The characters in my stories have been completely imaginary beings who owed their existence to my total experience of other people. There's one friend—I know her well enough, and know enough about her childhood, to use her, in a way, to make Julie. (Hayman 1978: 16)

McEwan admits that what compels him to write is 'not what is nice and easy and pleasant and somehow affirming, but somehow what is bad and difficult and unsettling' (Ricks 1982: 13). Conflict, he believes, is central to novelists' art: 'No novelists in Paradise, that's for sure. ... You need beasts as well as angels' (O'Donnell, 1997). His work, however, has helped him to explore his own 'psychic puzzling' which was born of repression and lack of communication:

I remember having the sense that everyone seems to know something that you don't, and they won't tell you—they won't even talk about it to each other—so you'll never find out. ... Something's being said that you can't hear. (Leith 1990: 9)

This view of writing as a search for understanding is similar to the way McEwan understands the motivation of Milan Kundera, a writer whom he greatly admires:

I suppose I agree with the Czech writer Kundera, in that fiction writing is an incredible form of investigation, either of yourself or the outer world, which cannot really be rivalled by any other art form. If you ask me what it's for, then I would say it's a kind of investigation of understanding. There's also simply the pleasure of setting out to give unarticulated feelings and thoughts a shape which can then live and exist independently of yourself. (Danziger 1987: 13)

Although McEwan acknowledges that his life experience has been formative for his writing he does not regard himself as a particularly autobiographical writer. He uses his own 'conflicts, wish-fulfillments, dreads' (ibid.) and sometimes models his plot and character on his own life. For example, the characters of Stephen and Stephen's parents in *The Child in Time*, especially in the scene where Stephen as a child is depicted returning to school in England from Tripoli (73, 74–5), are clearly based on his own experience, which he says in his interview with McFerran (1989: 14), as are the descriptions of Stephen and his close relationship to his own mother to which McEwan attests in the interview with Hamilton (1978:10). McEwan's earliest impression of his father is that at weekends he interrupted the idyll of having his mother to himself:

One of my earliest memories is of seeing this figure in the rain, pushing his bicycle past the prefab window; when I saw him, I'd run behind the settee and call to my mother to send him away. As far as I was concerned, he was an intruder into my rather intense, pleasant relationship with my mother. (Hamilton 1978: 9–10)

This illustrates a classic Freudian construct of early mother-child relationships. By contrast to his own life, McEwan depicts many mother-son relationships as difficult or distorted.

A less than benign representation of a mother-son relationship appears in one of McEwan's early short stories, 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man', where the mother irreparably damages her son's psyche, by turns infantilising him then rejecting him in favour of her new husband. McEwan grants his

narrator, who has perhaps exposed himself to a girl in the street (what actually prompts the social worker's visit is never made explicit in the story), a rare degree of insight into his own psyche. In his confessional narrative to a social worker, he portrays himself as the victim of his mother's cruelty:

I never saw my father because he died before I was born. I think problems started right there—it was my mother who brought me up and no one else. ...She was twisted up, you know, that's where I got it from. ...She tried to stop me growing up and for a long time she succeeded. Do you know, I didn't learn to speak properly till I was eighteen. I got no schooling... She had her arms round me day and night. She didn't like it when I got too big for my cot so she went out and bought a crib bed from a hospital auction. (*FLLR*: 75) etc.

Like the representation of Ruth, the frustrated, childless woman in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*, who infantilises her lover to compensate for the children she never had, the man's mother infantilises her only son because her husband dies before the birth of their first child: 'I had to be all the children she had ever wanted' (*FLLR*: 75). Like the character, David, in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*, McEwan shows the man in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man' not to object to his treatment, although in this case it is out of innocence of any other life until social convention intervenes: 'I wasn't unhappy until I found out what other people thought about me. I suppose I could have spent the whole of my life living my first two years over and over again' (*FLLR*: 76). Indeed, McEwan shows that the man's escape from rejection by his mother is to return to the womb for which the oven, the prison and the cupboard, in each of which he finds himself, are all substitutes. Although his latest crime is apparently relatively minor, certainly compared to

the vicious revenge he took on the chef who closed him in the oven and switched it on, it is clear that the man's psyche is seriously flawed and a lost cause: 'I want to be one year old again. But it won't happen. I know it won't' (*FLLR*: 87). These kinds of imaginative consequences of parental rejection are frequently explored in McEwan's work, affirming his interest in the family as a source of emotional and social stability.

The family, for instance, is the main locus of action in *The Cement Garden* and again, McEwan uses the motif of infantilism both as sublimation for the individual and fulfilment for the woman who sees herself as mother substitute to the family. In this case, the character who jumps back into the cot is the younger brother who is failing to cope with the repressive life in the family after the death of his father and his mother, and the bullying he experiences at school. His older brother does the same just before he climbs into bed with his sister:

the last time I had slept here everything had been watched over and arranged. ...Lying in it now was familiar to me—its salty, clammy smell, the arrangement of the bars, an enveloping pleasure in being tenderly imprisoned. (*The Cement Garden*: 121)

McEwan further complicates the theme by including Tom's rejection of his gender as well, subjecting himself to his sisters' desire to treat him as a girl.

There are explicit sexual overtones in all of McEwan's representations of infantilisation: David and Ruth in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration* 'kiss deeply' before Ruth raises the side of his cot to leave him to sleep (*IG*: 42); the man in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man' masturbates in his cupboard

(*FLLR*: 75); Darke in *The Child in Time* 'wore his short trousers and had his bottom smacked by a prostitute pretending to be a governess' (200). Sexual undertones in the representation of a child reverting to infancy in *The Cement Garden* are no exception to this portrayal, although here McEwan preserves the little boy's innocence in the face of his brother's prurient interest in the child's sexuality. Equally, for the female characters in the novel, there is a degree of frustration to be alleviated by infantilising their brother. Julie, the older sister, is shown to have the ambition to be mother to the family and infantilising her younger brother is one way of demonstrating that status. McEwan's treatment of the theme of infantilism in *The Cement Garden* shows no negative consequences for the little boy, Tom, unlike his treatment of the mature man in *The Child in Time*.

While the character in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man' is clearly depicted as completely socially dysfunctional, the later imaginative representation of infantilism in McEwan's work, in *The Child in Time*, concerns a cabinet minister, Charles Darke, whose public and personal life betrays no sign of his affliction. McEwan varies the theme, however, to show how a retreat into infantilism, and ultimately suicide, is an escape from a public life in which politics, deceit and repression hold sway. Interestingly, the mother/wife figure is also represented in this case, as in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*. Thelma, however, in *The Child in Time* is a more benign influence in her relationship, allowing Charles to resolve his Oedipus complex. This reflects the extent to which *The Child in Time* may be regarded as a

turning point in McEwan's fiction, in that the female characters are portrayed not only as strong but also as positively supportive towards their partners. The aptly named Darke embodies much that McEwan portrays as corrupt in the politics of the day, which are closely modelled on the Thatcherite politics of the recent past. Darke is depicted as a publisher turned politician, close to the right-wing androgynous prime minister who appears to be a parody of Margaret Thatcher (Harris 1990: H3). As a publisher, he is shown to misinterpret Stephen Lewis's novel as a book for children which will teach them to limit their aspirations, in keeping with the repressive, consumerist politics of the society into which they have been born. The childcare handbook, which Darke writes at the behest of the Prime Minister, articulates these repressive policies for the family as well as the wider society. McEwan's lack of sympathy with such a view results in him showing Darke's breakdown and retreat into infantilism becoming so complete that he leaves public life and eventually abandons life altogether by committing suicide, providing a scathing commentary on the dangers of repression and the concealment of dark secrets of those in public life—a theme to which McEwan returns in *Amsterdam*.

Thelma, the wife Darke leaves behind, offers an explanation in *The Child in Time* for Darke's escape into childhood:

He wanted to be famous, and have people tell him that one day he would be Prime Minister, and he wanted to be the little boy without a care in the world, with no responsibility, no knowledge of the world outside. ...He wanted the security of childhood, the powerlessness, the obedience, and also the freedom that goes with it, freedom from money, decisions, plans, demands. (200–1)

This explanation, offered through a character whose role it is to mediate the alternative realities McEwan depicts within the novel—such as holism and quantum mechanics—represents the conflicts McEwan shows us throughout in his treatment of childhood: it is at one and the same time a period of subjection, while at the same time freedom from responsibility. Not surprisingly for an author who has depicted childhood as far from a safe place to be, McEwan does not permit Darke, like the other regressive adults, to find his happiness in his second childhood.

Adolescence as Resistance to Domination

McEwan also portrays adolescence, like childhood, as a time of relative freedom, although it is equally fraught with conflict. McEwan writes frequently about the special place that adolescents occupy in his fiction. Because he began writing in his early twenties material about adolescence was an obvious source of inspiration: ‘the material that forced itself upon me was my own recent past’ (Casademont 1992: 44). McEwan also found that adolescence provided innovative writing opportunities as he attested in an interview with Christopher Ricks (1978):

I have written about adolescence because it does provide me with a fairly unique rhetorical standpoint. That is, adolescents are an extraordinary, special case of people; they’re close to childhood, and yet they are constantly baffled and irritated by the initiations into what’s on the other side—the shadow line, as it were. They are perfect outsiders, in a sense, and fiction—especially short stories, and especially first-person narratives—can thrive on a point of view which is somehow dislocated, removed. (526)

Adolescence may also be perceived as a period during which individuals rebel against the authority of their family and deliberately flout the conventions and strictures of their society. McEwan imaginatively tests the logical consequences of this position in *The Cement Garden* when the conventional bounds of parental authority and society are held at bay and the family exploits the brief period of freedom their concealment of their mother's death grants them. The plot originates from one of McEwan's boyhood daydreams:

that of a world in which I would wake up to find that all adults had mysteriously evaporated. They had to evaporate, so that I wouldn't have the guilt of seeing them killed or anything like that. I had daydreams of me and my friends—my friends' sisters in particular—making out in a world bereft of grown-ups. (Hayman 1978: 15)

Such scenarios are thoroughly explored in *The Cement Garden*.

McEwan also gives the quality of 'outsider' to many of his adolescent characters, signifying their otherness from the conventional patterns of behaviour, such as the youngsters practising communal living in 'Last Day of Summer', the young couple in 'First Love, Last Rites', the sibling lovers in *The Cement Garden*, and Jeremy in *Black Dogs*. Again this appears to arise out of McEwan's early fascination with large families:

As an only child I was struck by the degree of interesting neglect that was possible with large families. The children weren't *always* being loved, always being tended to. When I went to stay with friends from large families, there was always this heady sense that anything could happen, and the parents were remote. ...I was struck by a sense of animal freedom when I went to stay with a family of five or six children. (Hamilton 1978: 20)

'First Love Last Rites' and 'Last Day of Summer' allow McEwan to show the idyll of young love: the first blighted by tragedy; the second, while unconventional and existing outside the conventions of social life, wholly harmonious. In *The Cement Garden*, case McEwan depicts incest which, while a taboo subject, is represented as relatively harmless. In *Black Dogs*, the outsider, Jeremy, recuperates his alien status in a kind of parasitism on other families.

'Last Day of Summer' is McEwan's first foray into pastoral writing which, typically, is ruined by tragedy (he later employs a similar rural idyllic setting as the backdrop for the tragic ballooning accident in *Enduring Love*). The story depends for its impact on the fact that multiple freedoms apply: in the absence of parents; the commune with its liberal sexual freedom; in the fact that the story is set in the summer holidays; in the joy of young love. Yet the fundamental rules are lacking. In the boating accident, for example, the rule—don't rock the boat—is ignored with tragic consequences. In this story, the perspective of the young boy is innocent as he teeters on the brink of adolescence. For example, the narrator observes the fluidity of his housemates' relationships without the benefit of sexual awareness on his own part: Kate and Sam, he observes, never look at each other, even though he discovered them in bed asleep the previous year:

It was like some secret I'd found out. It seems pretty strange to me that they were lying there like that and now they don't even look at each other. That wouldn't happen with me if I was lying on some girl's arm. (*FLLR*: 43)

The observation is followed by a comment about Kate not liking cooking, as if not liking cooking were much the same as no longer liking José. Similarly, the boy observing Alice express breast milk into a bottle for her child comments that: 'we are just animals with clothes on doing very peculiar things' (*FLLR*: 53). Clearly, his relationship with Jenny is part puppy-love, part filial—Jenny has already become more of a mother to the baby Alice than Kate is (*FLLR*: 51–2), and it is Jenny who clears his room, takes him to town for a haircut and buys his school clothes (*FLLR*: 52). McEwan counterpoints innocence and ignorance here in a tragic manner. Innocence is not safe either.

Similarly, McEwan portrays the young lovers in 'First Love, Last Rites' blissfully, carefree, living in contentedness despite the vermin in their skirting boards, and yet without any human tragedy. Instead, McEwan creates a distant sense of nihilism. Even the couple's room is portrayed as a place of solace for Sissel's disturbed younger brother, estranged from the family home. The only victim in this story is the pregnant rat, which is gruesomely slaughtered, spilling its unborn offspring onto the floor. It is killed not for any malicious purpose, such as the cat which is tortured by the children in 'Butterflies' (*FLLR*: 17), but only because it threatened the couple:

At that moment the rat ran out through the gap in the books, it ran straight at us and I thought I saw its teeth bared and ready. ...The frenzied rat was running through the gap, it was running at my feet to take its revenge. Like the ghost rat its teeth were bared. (*FLLR*: 97)

By contrast, the eel the boy has caught earlier in the day is gently returned to the water. The story could be read as a cautionary tale for the young man who fantasises about begetting his own child, but there is little sense in reading it other than as a celebration of freedom. However, readers gain the impression that the romance between the couple has waned with the end of the summer. Instead of the wanton bliss of frequent love-making and the fantasy of imminent wealth from eel-catching, (McEwan's first job after university in Sussex was as an eel farmer), all Sissel craves at the end of the story is a long walk along the river.

A rather more distorted idyll is depicted in *The Cement Garden*. In this novel, McEwan explores the consequences for a family who are left to fend for themselves after the death of their parents. As Golding did in *Lord of the Flies*, McEwan casts the children adrift outside the conventional boundaries of society into a freedom which adolescents often seek though seldom enjoy. McEwan shows that it is indeed a doubtful privilege. As in the *Lord of the Flies*, the children's innocence is brought into question, even although the outcome is no fault of their own. From the beginning of the novel, the adolescent boy is portrayed as somewhat stupid and antisocial—the opening gambit of the narration of *The Cement Garden* mimics the classically odious Oedipal crime of parricide: 'I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way' (9), an opening which Sampson finds 'shockingly banal' (1984: 68). The boy is made to appear even more objectionable in diminishing his father's death: it 'seemed insignificant' (9). The narrator only

recounts the 'little story of his death' to explain how the family were eventually able to bury their mother under a load of cement (ibid.). Although McEwan portrays the boy's conflicts with his father as comic, it is also clear that there is no intention of depicting any kind of filial or paternal love: the father and son are locked into a cycle of oppression and resistance. Typical of McEwan's anguished adolescents, the boy is no exception in his wishing to be respected as an adult, being frustrated at his lack of authority, and vying with his sisters for his mother's attention. He is also jealous of his sister's boyfriend. All this is richly comical in the novel, but the darker side of the children's antics takes over for the freedoms the children enjoy are bought at a price. Their mother's death is concealed from the world for fear that the family will be split up; her body must be hidden and prevented from decomposing; the little brother must be silenced; and Derek, who threatens to expose their secrets, must be kept out. Their refusal to follow the usual social conventions is so extreme that the situation inevitably comes to light. Insofar as the characters are caught out in all of these respects, McEwan can be seen as a writer with a moral message. Nevertheless, the moral imperatives are not restored until after they have tried to bury their mother in the cellar, nor until the younger brother is infantilised and confused about his sexuality, nor until after the older siblings commit incest. For his perceived failure to provide clear moral guidance, McEwan has been much criticised: Ronald Hayman's essay on *The Cement Garden* (1978), for example, is entitled 'Ian McEwan's Moral Anarchy'. However McEwan himself claims that he does try to convey an unconventional morality, as he

explains in his interview with Christopher Ricks (1979: 526–7), as quoted above (pp. 2–3).

It is certainly not new in literature to portray incest amongst children, or indeed between brother and sister. The ancient Greek myth of Daphnis and Chlōe, for example, was widely regarded as pornographic because it described sexual intercourse between children, although not, as McEwan does, between brother and sister. Evidence of the temptation and taboos of brother-sister incest, also lies elsewhere in folk culture and literature. Two examples may be cited. ‘Sheath and Knife’, a traditional Scottish ballad, testifies to the romantic, though ultimately tragic, bond between brother and sister: the analogy central to the ballad is that both sheath and knife are made for each other, fashioned by the same craftsman, and they complement each other perfectly, like brother and sister. Similarly, the writer Carlo Gébler, the son of Edna O’Brien, uses his own intriguing family history of close family associations, and his interest in brother-sister attraction, as the starting point for his novel *Malachy and His Family* (1990). Iris Murdoch also explores the taboo of incest between half-brother and half-sister in *A Severed Head* (1961) and in *The Time of the Angels* (1966) incest between father and daughter—a scenario never permitted in McEwan’s work

Indeed, compared to several of the earlier short stories, where there is a marked absence of authorial comment, *The Cement Garden* appears to be a cautionary tale: one cannot bury one’s mother in a trunk, even if it is encased in cement, because the truth will out; one cannot make love to one’s sister

without her boyfriend being suspicious; one can't prevent a child from growing up; the police will turn up eventually even if it is in the dying moments of the novel. Thus, the freedom McEwan grants his characters in this novel to explore unconventional domestic, emotional and sexual patterns is short-lived and doomed to failure. Whereas the children attempt to keep the family together through Oedipal, sacrilegious and incestuous bonds, none of these are sufficient to keep convention at bay. McEwan grants them only a temporary reprieve from the dominant precepts of society.

Not that McEwan's treatment of adult relationships reveals much unalloyed joy either. If his early work may be characterised by a procession of children and adolescents subjected to the vagaries of conflicting desires and dominating practices, so too does McEwan depict adult relations, especially sexual relationships, as fraught with struggles for mastery. These sexual conflicts are discussed in Chapter III.

Chapter III: SEXUAL DOMINATION AND SUBJECTION

Introduction

The theme of sexual domination and subjection has been a rich one for McEwan to explore and he has interrogated its representation in human behaviour extensively. His early work contained a number of extreme examples of sexual sado-masochism, in which the sadistic role was taken by characters of each sex. Some of the early work also explores imaginatively various sexual taboos such as anthropomorphic sex in 'Dead As They Come',¹ bestiality in 'Reflections of a Kept Ape', and incest in 'In Between the Sheets' and *The Cement Garden*. Later treatments of sexual relationships depict rather more conventional and harmonious relationships. In the later work, however, the harmony of more mature adult relationships is disrupted by forces outside the relationships, including the intervention of a kidnapper, such as in *The Child in Time*, a violent ex-husband as in *The Innocent*, and the unwelcome attentions of a stalker in *Enduring Love*. In addition, the development of McEwan's work also shows a shift from relationships depicted in isolation, more fitting to the short story form, towards relationships intersected with the wider society, which are more appropriately developed in the novel form.

McEwan depicts an uneven distribution of power in sexual relationships in most of his early work. A writer of his time, he vacillates between depicting stereotypical patriarchal power relationships and other more progressive

¹ In *In Between the Sheets*, Jonathan Cape, 1978. Edition used, Pan 1979, 61–77.

representations. In a very early story published in 1976, for example, he depicts a relatively repellent sexual fantasy of a woman who wishes to enslave her lover. The story relates her plan to castrate and otherwise physically incapacitate her lover to ensure his sexual fidelity to her, and she engages professional medical help in order to accomplish her desire. McEwan also explores imaginatively such an extreme form of sexual domination in subsequent work, particularly in 'Pornography' and *The Comfort of Strangers*. These are all considered in this chapter.

Early Representations of Sexual Domination and Subjection

McEwan represents many bizarre examples of sexual sadism in his fiction. In 'Pornography' the castration of a faithless lover is planned by his two partners as revenge for his philandering and his infecting them with venereal disease. The protagonist of the story, O'Byrne, is depicted as a thoroughly objectionable character who despises his older brother, even though he employs him in his sex shop. Readers feel little sympathy for O'Byrne as the women's clinically precise plan for revenge is revealed. McEwan fully exploits his characterisation of the two girlfriends as nurses with their implied access to sterilizers and surgical instruments. The final act of castration is, however, only one variation on sadism in the story. McEwan represents the relationship O'Byrne has with his second lover, Lucy, in sado-masochistic terms, with the woman as the dominant partner, and O'Byrne reluctantly beginning to relish his subordinate position. Indeed, it is his willingness to re-

enact his earlier act of submission that enables the women to render him powerless. The planned removal of the phallus from their relationship renders their power complete.

In the rather more subtle and inexplicit story, 'Deep Sleep, Light Sleeper',² McEwan begins to trace some of the themes of sex and violence which are elaborated in later work. The first person narrator's confessional explanation for his mental illness relates sexual tension in the family and obsession with music, and with a woman. Such tension between an authoritarian father and son is more fully developed in *The Cement Garden*, as is the sexual tension between brother and sister in the same novel; the jealous attraction to a mother which is alluded to in 'Deep Sleep, Light Sleeper' is also revisited in *The Comfort of Strangers*; as is implicit violence: 'There was sadism in the air' (83), is a statement which aptly encapsulates the plot of the novel. The sexual repression of the narrator of 'Deep Sleep, Light Sleeper' is attributed to the young man's recollection of his father's violent reaction to his daughter's menarche, signified by the 'thin red line of blood, exactly straight, moving down her inside leg' (ibid.), which provokes her father's fury: '[he] leaned forward and hit Diane across the face with his open hand' (ibid.). This incident leads to the narrator's inability to relate well to women and to his subsequent breakdown. Such fear of women's sexuality, which renders them more powerful than men owing to their power over reproduction, and to the

² In *Harpers and Queen*, August 1977, 82-5.

representation of menstruation as mysterious, different, even decadent, is also the basis for the plot of 'Solid Geometry' and 'In Between the Sheets'.

In 'Reflections of a Kept Ape' McEwan parodies both conventional human heterosexual relations and forces us to confront our similarity to our closest mammalian cousins. The narrator of the story is represented as an ape, whom McEwan casts as the spurned lover of the fictional writer Sally Klee. This close genetic and behavioural link between humans and apes is alluded to again by McEwan in *The Child in Time*, where an expert on childcare is described as having 'the saddened, honest appearance of a chimpanzee' (75); and twice in *The Comfort of Strangers* where Robert is described as hirsute, with arms which are 'exceptionally long and muscular' (26), while a youth on the beach is described as an 'ape-like figure' (98). Indeed, McEwan likens 'Reflections of a Kept Ape' to Kafka's 'Lecture to an Academy' (Casademont 1992: 41), which is narrated by an ape. McEwan's imagined ape appears to be a particularly cultured individual, referring to his readings of the *Times Literary Supplement* and to Balzac's prolific literary output. McEwan's representation of conventional heterosexual relationships is deconstructed in the course of the story. For example, he interjects a fictional quotation from a feminist magazine, '*Refractory Girl*', which comments on the use of patronising and sexist references in Sally Klee's first novel, the opening of which shows how the 'pale Moira Sillito rose screaming from her bed'... only to be 'sleeping like a little child in the young man's [her husband's] strong arms' by the foot of page two (*IBS*: 31). The fictional ape's fantasy about his promotion from pet

to lover, and his ambition to become Sally Klee's husband, reveals a mockery of connubial existence:

Yes, I saw myself, expensive fountain pen in hand, signing hire purchase agreements for my pretty wife. I would teach myself to hold a pen. I would be man-about-the-house, scaling drainpipes with uxorious ease to investigate the roof-gutters, suspending myself from light fittings to redecorate the ceiling. Down to the pub in the evening with my husband credentials to make new friends, invent a name for myself in order to bestow it on my wife, take up wearing slippers about the house, and perhaps even socks and shoes outside. Of genetic rules and regulations I knew too little to reflect on the possibility of progeny, but I was determined to consult medical authorities who would in turn inform Sally Klee of her fate. (*IBS*: 32)

The sexual relationship McEwan describes in the story also mocks human behaviour. The ape describes the 'face to face' arrangement of bodies as 'too fraught with communications, a little too "intellectual"' (*IBS*: 33). The differences between their bodies is also at first portrayed as sexually intriguing, then physically irritating to the woman. What is striking about the story is that McEwan endows the ape with insight and knowledge about his own, and his partner's motivations, while she shows no self-awareness. Interestingly, for all his insight, McEwan does not overtly describe the ape as superior to Sally Klee, though this interpretation is implied. The fictional writer is portrayed as weak and inadequate both as a writer and as a woman: not only does she fail in writing a second novel, she deludes herself that she is creative by re-writing her first novel over again. She does not even have a human mate.

Whereas the ape story is touching in its depiction of a lover who seems genuinely to care for his partner, much of this early work depicts women and

girls as objects of men's often destructive desire. Few of the female characters are well rounded and seldom are their feelings alluded to. For instance, McEwan represents Connie, the little girl who is raped by her brother in 'Homemade' as crying only in indignation; and he gives no insight into the mind of Jane, the little girl who is abducted and molested in 'Butterflies'. The most extreme representation of 'woman as object' appears in 'Dead As They Come' which is a parody of male power. Absurd and playful though the story is, it presents an extreme form of patriarchal abuse of power—a theme to which McEwan returns in more animate form in *The Comfort of Strangers*. In 'Dead As They Come', the 'woman' in the story is a shop window dummy with whom a conspicuously rich businessman becomes obsessed. McEwan names her Helen as if to invoke that other mythic object of desire, Helen of Troy. Playing upon the notion that women may be treated as commodities under patriarchy, McEwan portrays the businessman quite literally prepared to buy her, in order, literally, to consume her: 'I wished to possess her. And to possess her it seemed I would have to buy her ... I loved her completely and wished to possess her, own her, absorb her, eat her' (*IBS*: 62–3). Although the narrator at the outset of the story is given to denying traditional patriarchal views: 'I remember seeing her in that tired, dejected passivity which fools mistake for femininity' (*IBS*: 61), it is her silence and submissiveness which make her an ideal partner:

What passed that evening was quite certainly the most civilized few hours I have ever shared with a woman or, for that matter, with another person. ... With Helen I could converse ideally, I

could talk to her ... Helen and I lived in perfect harmony which nothing could disturb ... I talked, Helen listened. (*IBS*: 69–71)

This passiveness is a quality the narrator is also shown to value in his chauffeur, showing his class superiority: 'Brian was the perfect chauffeur. He did not speak unless spoken to, and then only to concur' (*IBS*: 71). His 'faceless obsequiousness' (*IBS*: 75) is portrayed as his most positive quality.

To add savour to the deluded businessman's power over his 'mistress', in his fantasy she is also a 'virgin', pure and untouched by any other man. McEwan exploits this notion that the man is the only one to possess her by the intervention of jealousy where the man suspects his Helen of having an affair with his chauffeur, a state of affairs which renders Helen resistant to him and therefore no longer subordinate. Instead it is he who is subordinated: 'In short, I understood myself to be in Helen's power' (*IBS*: 73). Contrarily, the dummy's silent failure to rebut the narrator's accusations of infidelity provide the motivation for his 'murdering' her in an excess of sexual jealousy. The narrator confesses: 'I conceived in that frenzied instant two savage and related desires. To rape and destroy her' (*IBS*: 76). Furthermore, McEwan shows the narrator's pleasure in her death 'I came as she died' (*IBS*: 76), and 'It was a transfiguration' (*IBS*: 77). He is also convinced that: 'her death was a moment of intense pleasure to her' (*ibid.*). Earlier in the story McEwan had equated sex and death in terms of Helen's elusive orgasm as her 'for ever teetering on the edge of that cliff, release in that most gentle death' (*IBS*: 67), evoking the common French representation of orgasm as 'the little death'. Sex and death

here are equated with ultimate pleasure and domination, yet the character McEwan represents in this story has no real power, for the object of his desire is not a real woman, merely an inanimate object. McEwan more fully explores the intersection of sex and death, the ultimate end of sado-masochistic desire, to reveal further dimensions of sexual domination and subordination in 'Solid Geometry', *The Comfort of Strangers*, and also in *The Innocent*.

In 'Solid Geometry' he begins to develop his work thematically in terms of domination and subordination which is returned to in later work, the polarisation of the female with holistic, mystical and sensual realms of experience, and the male with the scientific, logical and cerebral. This positioning of masculine and feminine is returned to in *The Child in Time*, *or Shall We Die?* and *Enduring Love*. McEwan never resolves this archetypal conflict between what Jung calls the 'anima/animus quarrel', except in his plea for 'womanly times' in his oratorio. In the short story 'Solid Geometry', McEwan depicts the male protagonist's desire for supremacy as fatal for his wife. His sexuality is shown to be physically in decline, exclusively cerebral and of interest only in the research he undertakes on his grandfather's sexual and scatological theories. By contrast, his wife, Maisie's, sexuality is overt and corporeal: one of her nightmares features heaps of naked babies (*FLLR*: 26) and, to emphasise her physicality, in the course of the story she announces that her period has started (*FLLR*: 28). McEwan often emphasises the special relationship women have with their bodies, as celebrated in the writings of Hélène Cixous. Other earth mother figures, such as Julie in *The Child in Time*

(60) and June in *Black Dogs* (113), leave impressions of their bodies in their physical surroundings even in their absence. In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir recognised the traditional identification of women with the flesh:

The uncleanness of birth is reflected upon the mother... And if the little boy remains in early childhood sensually attached to the maternal flesh, when he grows older, becomes socialised, and takes note of his individual existence, this same flesh frightens him...calls him back from those realms of immanence whence he would fly. (de Beauvoir [1949] 1988: 136)

Men, on the other hand, associate themselves with the mind or spirit, and construct women, and the body, as the Other.

The man in 'Solid Geometry' also chronicles the conflicts and conversations he has with his wife in order to render them logical, controlled. To symbolise the lack of physical, especially sexual, connection with his wife, McEwan depicts his most treasured possession to be a preserved penis in a bottle, which effectively epitomises his own sexual state. As McEwan explains, 'his own penis is bottled up' (Haffenden 1985: 170). It also suggests a state of arrested psycho-sexual development at what Freud identified as the oral stage, and at what Melanie Klein calls the first stage of attachment, which is only to part-objects. The man is fixated upon parts, and stays apart physically and mentally from his wife, while she symbolises wholeness in both her body and in her metaphysical explorations. Ironically, her husband silences Maisie using the two things she desires most, sex and mysticism—he pretends to seduce her but deploys a pseudo-scientific alternative geometry, similar to those to be found in H. G. Wells's science fiction, to make her disappear.

Throughout most of this early work, then, women appear as weak and submissive, to the point of destruction. The two stories, 'Untitled' and 'Pornography', where the female characters subordinate their male partners to their desires, show that McEwan does not, however, believe that male sexual superiority should go unchallenged, although in these two stories the women characters are as guilty of extreme dominative practices as any of the destructive male characters. He develops these ideas more constructively in his subsequent work.

McEwan goes on to explore consistently a theme of masculine anguish in subsequent novels such as *The Cement Garden*, *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*. Just as he has done in his fictional work, the portrayal of male characters equally as problematic as the female ones is explored in the thesis. In her essay on feminism and Marxism, Catherine McKinnon (1982) refers to Elaine Showalter's point that feminist critics were focused upon an analysis of men's writing as a gendered literary discourse. Following this a few male theorists showed an interest in feminist criticism but most failed to perceive masculinity as opposed to femininity as a subject for analysis. Masculinity, unlike femininity 'seemed natural, transparent, and unproblematic' (Showalter quoted in McKinnon 1982: 537).

In 'In Between the Sheets' McEwan deconstructs the patriarchal order of male sexual dominance in favour of women's sexual superiority, that of a frustrated wife and a sexually maturing daughter. However, the story's central sexual relationship is a potentially incestuous one between father and daughter.

'In Between the Sheets' begins uncompromisingly with a report of Stephen Cooke's wet dream, an experience related wanly at first but returned to in ever increasing detail as the sexual tension between father and daughter develops throughout the story. Although the subject of the dream is said at first to be related to his meeting that afternoon with his hostile, estranged wife and is about 'the café, the girl and the coffee machine' (*IBS*: 80), the narration renders the associations depicted which encompass the narrator's daughter in the fantasy problematic. The girl who serves in the café is only nine or ten years old, a little younger than the man's daughter of thirteen, and invites comparison with her; the subject of conversation between himself and his wife has been his wish to see his daughter; he contemplates the semen stain left from his nocturnal emission immediately after setting aside the presents he buys for his daughter: 'he took off his shoes and socks, lay down on his unmade bed, examined with his finger the colourless stain that had hardened on the sheet, and then slept till it was dark' (*IBS*: 82). McEwan tempts readers sexually to associate father and daughter by invoking the image of his daughter in her own bed in the very next sentence: 'Naked from the waist Miranda Cooke lay across her bed' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the paragraph in which Cooke reads about the meaning of dreams culminates in 'An orgasm cannot lie' (*IBS*: 85), and is also immediately followed by Miranda's 'Hello, Daddy' (*ibid.*). The collocation of the two characters in the text mirrors their proximity in the father's sexual imaginings. McEwan also invokes the sexual connection between father and daughter through details of the dream which Cooke later

recalls, casting himself as the coffee machine ejaculating, as it were, into the cup held out to him: 'His wife was in the café. It was for her that he was buying coffee. A young girl took a cup and held it to the machine. But now *he* was the machine, now *he* filled the cup' (*IBS*: 87). The daughter is strongly associated with this waitress, for Miranda is later depicted as playing the role of waitress to her father later when she brings him coffee at home: 'Miranda brought him coffee. She set it down on the table with the mock deference of a waitress. "Coffee, sir?"' (*IBS*: 89). The scene proceeds to describe the daughter as a sensuous woman, depicted tenderly and romantically in the text:

Stephen moved over in his chair and she sat in close beside him. She moved easily between woman and child. She drew her legs up like before and pressed herself against her large shaggy father. She had unloosened her plaits and her hair spread across Stephen's chest, golden in the electric light. (*IBS*: 90)

Cooke is also given to observe his daughter's developing body:

'Miranda's T-shirt did not reach her waist by several inches and her growing breasts lifted the edge of the shirt clear of her belly' (*IBS*: 86). As Miranda opens her birthday presents, Cooke's thoughts are of his own sexual failure with his wife: 'I never satisfied my wife in marriage, you see. Her orgasms terrified me' (*IBS*: 86). However, the sexually suggestive exchange with his daughter suggests that he has succeeded in satisfying her, at least materially:

Miranda had discovered her present. With a little cry she left her chair, cradled his head between her hands and stooping down kissed his ear.

‘Thank you,’ she murmured hotly and loudly, ‘thank you, thank you.’ (IBS: 86)

Although McEwan shows the father to be aware of the sensuality of contact with his daughter, as ‘he felt the warmth of Miranda’s body on his neck’ (IBS: 86), he is also aware of the sexual potential of contact with her: ‘He lifted his arm round his daughter’s shoulder, careful not to touch her breasts, and hugged her to him’ (IBS: 87). It appears that he broaches the subject of boyfriends with his daughter more as a jealous lover would rather than as a doting father. Furthermore, Stephen associates his daughter with his wife: ‘Never had the resemblance between his wife and daughter seemed so strong. She glared at him’ (IBS: 90). The hostility Miranda shows towards her father and her tendency to despise the male sex, further, invites recognition of the resemblance. Likewise, his hearing his daughter’s orgasm recalls his vulnerability in the face of his wife’s dissatisfaction with him and the fact that he was afraid of her sexuality. This anxiety is played upon substantially in the story—the ineffectuality or inexperience of the men, the demanding nature of the women, and is a theme which is revisited to a certain extent in *The Imitation Game*, *The Innocent* and in *Black Dogs*.

The sexual impulse the father feels is further stimulated on contact with Miranda as she says good night, though he is ‘horrified at his erection’ (IBS: 91). His erection appears to be just as involuntary as the wet dream with which the story begins. Though Cooke articulates a sexual desire for his daughter and never does pursue incestuous contact with her, McEwan

suggests that the motivation is not necessarily intrinsic, for the character of the daughter's friend, Charmian, is consistently present in these encounters.

McEwan even interposes her physically between daughter and father.

Charmian is also depicted in much more sensual, if not sexual, contact with Miranda. For instance, as her father calls to visit Miranda in her mother's house, Miranda and Charmian are depicted naked on a bed together, Miranda enjoying a promised massage for her birthday; and in the embrace quoted above, where Miranda 'cradles [her father's] head in her hands' (*IBS*: 86), Charmian approaches and 'almost stand[s] between [the father's] open knees' (*ibid.*). Finally, the father is given inconclusively to suspect Charmian of a sexual relationship with his daughter as they sleep together in his former marital bed, where there had been so little sexual satisfaction for his wife who 'hated him...for all the wasted hours between the sheets' (*IBS*: 88). These are the very same 'deep red ... wedding present' sheets (*IBS*: 90) between which his daughter and her friend sleep.

The masculine anguish McEwan explores in this story is more than that of a rejected husband, for the experience of sexual failure in the face of a more 'vigorous' and imaginative lover, whom his wife now enjoys, is but one facet of his perceived failure. It also concerns the man's desire to be a father to his daughter—a theme also represented in 'Two Fragments: March 199—', and more substantially developed in *The Child in Time*. In 'In Between the Sheets' there is also some anguish attributed to the father that his daughter's love appears to be a commodity which may be bought. Her two-sentence letter to

him, 'Dear Daddy, are you looking after yourself? Can I have twenty-five pounds please to buy a record-player?' (*IBS*: 80) contains some affection, although the concern the daughter expresses is couched in terms of individual self-reliance 'are *you* looking after *yourself*' [emphasis added], rather than expressing mutual concern. McEwan also emphasises the financial rather than emotional nature of the transaction in Cooke's providing not only what she asks but also an 'extra five' (*IBS*: 81), and the thank-you letter the daughter returns includes scarcely any display of the earlier concern for his well-being. In addition, Cooke's indulgence of presents for his daughter's birthday appears as futile as a gesture as the father's in *The Child in Time* (126–30), and he is granted the insight to loathe them for 'their sickly excess and condescension' (*IBS*: 82).

McEwan depicts the man as feeling sexually as inferior to his daughter and her friend as he had been with his wife. Miranda is also shown to include her father in her 'furious imitation' of the vanity and stupidity of the boys at her school: 'they're so *stupid*, they're such show-offs. ... She included him with the boys at school' (*IBS*: 90); and although she is shown to recover the situation by explicitly distancing her view of her father from the other examples of his sex, remarking '*You're* not a show-off' (*IBS*: 91), he remains on the edge of her affection. Charmian is given a closer physical proximity to Miranda than is allowed to her father throughout the story. Charmian is written interestingly as a diminutive figure, 'a dwarf', yet mature and wise, heavy for her size and certainly dominant—she shuts Cooke out of his own

house (*IBS*: 88), much as his wife is reported to have done. The girls are clearly self-sufficient, not needing him nor his sex, deconstructing the patriarchal assignment of dominance to the man. This is emphasised in the scene where Cooke believes he hears his daughter's orgasm at the end of the story. McEwan does not make it clear whether it is his daughter or her friend he hears, nor whether they are sexually complicit. The point McEwan makes is that the man feels at the mercy of his daughter's maturing sexuality as much as he had been of his wife's. Though the conclusion of the story, which uses the metaphor of Cooke deliberately resisting despoiling the virgin snow of his memory, implies his will not to have sex with his daughter, McEwan's implication that Charmian's presence proscribes incest suggests that the absence of Charmian might have led to a different conclusion.

A man's sexual inadequacy is also a feature in *The Imitation Game*, although the outcome is very different. In this play, while McEwan tries to show a woman prepared to take on the patriarchal establishment, even the intellectually, politically and sexually inept male characters are shown to retain their positions of dominance. The political aspects of the play will be considered more fully in Chapter IV; here the main subject of concern is the sexual representation of dominance and subjection. *The Imitation Game* is based upon the real-life code-breaking enterprise, code-named Ultra, which took place during the second world war. The characterisation of Turner invites comparison with one of the central characters in the intelligence

operation, Alan Turing, an academic mathematician recruited to the Intelligence Service.

McEwan's main character in *The Imitation Game*, Cathy, is one of the most rounded characterisations of a woman to be found in the early work.

Cathy's spirited insistence on doing something meaningful for the war effort first brings her into conflict with her family and boyfriend, as McEwan shows her joining the Auxiliary Territorial Service, or the ATS as they were known.

Arguably this was the lowest status branch of the army open to women.

Although most of the girls who joined the auxiliary services as volunteers came mainly from better-off families, as Angus Calder describes in his study of the impact of the Second World War on the British people, entitled *The People's War*, they all had a reputation for impropriety (Calder 1992: 54, 268).

McEwan represents Cathy's mother and boyfriend as believing that the ATS renders women unfeminine, even subhuman, in scene 14:

TONY: ...I've seen them in town, rowdy [...] Awfully aggressive in fact, not like women at all ... And those dreadful uniforms. There's something horrible about seeing a whole lot of women in uniform, something sinister. They don't look like women at all, they're more like ...like ...

CATHY: Men?

TONY: No, ants. They're just like ants. (97–8)

The women soldiers in the play are also shown to be vilified as loose women, as recognised in their own conversation and in the behaviour of men

towards them. In scene 38, Cathy's conversation with her colleague in the pub recognises the sexual politics of their situation:

CATHY: That's the trouble, you say no to them and they're miserable about it, and make you feel it's all your fault. Or you're friendly towards them right from the start and they think you're loose and disgusting.

MARY: Exactly my way of thinking, Cath.

CATHY: What they want is for you to say no for a bit and then say yes so they can think they've won you over. (115)

McEwan also depicts the publican in scene 38 attempting to throw the two women out, alluding to his belief that they are no better than prostitutes: 'This is a respectable pub, not a place where you can hang around and wait to be picked up' (117). McEwan also comments on the inadmissibility of resistance to male dominance when Cathy's uncompromising response to the publican's slap on the face, a 'well aimed blow [to the groin] that connects with a sickening thud' (ibid.), is disproportionately compared in scene 39 by the commanding officer who disciplines her for the incident said to be 'more serious than rape' (118). This simultaneously undermines Cathy's motive to resist wrongful expulsion and also diminishes the serious sexual crime of rape.

McEwan shows Cathy's disciplinary posting to Bletchley as fulfilling her curiosity about the intelligence operation in which she is peripherally involved but it also brings her into association with Turner, cast as one of the Cambridge boffins working at the top level of secrecy. Cathy is not portrayed as wilfully seeking intimacy with Turner in order to satisfy her curiosity,

although she is accused of it in scene 60: 'Turner's report ... says you used your charms to wheedle information out of him' (142). Indeed, McEwan shows that Turner is just as sexist as any of the other male characters in the play, for he also talks about women as sex objects in scene 54: 'The idea of women at the front lines or up in airplanes shooting each other's pretty legs off is appalling, don't you think?' (134).

McEwan also shows Cathy to be quite uncertain about joining him in his rooms at first, though McEwan does not write her in as the tease which he alluded to earlier in scene 38. The relationship in which McEwan places Cathy with Turner also means that she transgresses the code which does not permit a woman to be sexually more confident than her partner. Cathy's willingness to go to bed with Turner, set against Turner's sexual inexperience and inadequacy, is symbolic of her resistance to the balance of power under patriarchy. Turner is depicted as interpreting her self-confidence as sexual knowledge, no doubt coloured by the reputation which ATS girls have for brazen sexuality. This is certainly implied by the speech in scene 55 where he says that his mother would be 'outraged beyond belief' if she knew he were drinking tea with a private from the ATS' (136). McEwan further represents Turner in scene 56 as implying that Cathy is not in fact a virgin, believing that she would be just as likely to lie about sexual experience as he had been (138), and that she deliberately seduced him in order to humiliate him, in scene 57: 'Your first time! You must be enjoying this... You wanted to humiliate me and

you succeeded' (139). On the contrary, McEwan shows Turner's inadequacy as regarded favourably by Cathy in scene 60:

When we went to bed, it didn't matter that he couldn't ... I didn't care, I really didn't care. I liked him. He didn't have to be efficient and brilliant at everything ... I like him more ... But he couldn't bear to appear weak before me. (143)

The characterisation of sexual failure on the part of Turner prompted criticism that McEwan was homophobic, itself perhaps a comment on the dominance of the view that men's sexual prowess should be unquestioned, and that it is more adequately explained away by allusions to homosexuality than to inexperience. McEwan denies that Turner is written as a homosexual:

[T]he dispatch rider tells Cathy that Bletchley is full of homosexuals, and there is also Turner's descriptions of his dominating mother, so that some gays thought I was saying he couldn't make it and was vicious because he was homosexual. This was a false trail I had made here, one that was not relevant to the argument of the play. (Haffenden 1985: 177)

Turner's fictional characterisation certainly appears to be based substantially on Alan Turing, the brilliant mathematician who was central to the real-life Ultra project. Turing was a homosexual who suffered prosecution for it and was punished by chemical castration. He apparently committed suicide in 1954 (Hodges 1983: 488). The 'imitation game' of the title of McEwan's play was the subject of a paper written by Turing in 1950 which explores the idea of artificial intelligence using the analogy of a game in which the gender of the players is central. The 'imitation game' was proposed by Alan Turing as an operational procedure for approaching the question 'can machines think?'

(Turing 1950: 433). The Turner/Turing character is the one whom McEwan chooses to be represented as sexually inadequate. The similarities between the fictional John Turner and the real-life Alan Turing are many. Turner's provenance is given as King's College, Cambridge, where Turing became a fellow in 1935; the representation of the Ultra project, where Turing was chief analyst in 1942; the depiction of the over-bearing and snobbish mother alluded to by Turner is mirrored in Turing's real-life mother; and the fact that Turing was playing his own imitation game, breaking the sexual code of his day which forbade homosexuality (Hodges 1983).

Code-breaking of several sorts, in addition to sexual codes of behaviour, provides the controlling imagery for *The Imitation Game*. The central motif of the play is the breaking of the German Enigma code at Bletchley Park during the Second World War. The activities surrounding the code-breaking are used to explore the parallel secrecy and exclusivity of the patriarchal society. A series of interrelated codes can be distinguished in the play: the German Enigma codes; language, both foreign languages and the encoding of gender as exemplified in the 'imitation game'; music, in its written form a kind of code; and the patriarchal code which dominates society. The central character, Cathy, is shown to come close to breaking each of these codes during the play, but finally it is she who is broken.

In his introduction to *The Imitation Game*, McEwan explains how he saw Ultra, the scheme for deciphering German coded signals, as 'a microcosm, not only of the war but of a whole society' (17), in which women are kept

from power, while men hold the key positions. As in *Ultra*, McEwan suggests, the key to power is secrecy, which is the exclusive preserve of men. *Ultra* is organised on the 'need to know' basis as a set of concentric rings: 'The closer you moved to the centre, the more men you found; the further you moved to the periphery, the more women' (ibid.).

In the play, Cathy is portrayed presenting a challenge to all of the codes. The first code she challenges is language. She is attributed with competence in foreign languages which in a man would be considered a positive attribute for the war effort, as her boyfriend, Tony, recognises in scene 3: 'they're looking for people who are good at modern languages' (84). In contrast to the men in the play she is shown to be articulate and spirited, prepared to reason for herself. A discussion in scene 11 in which Cathy takes issue with her father implies that any view which counters his own fascist sympathies is not rational illustrates this: 'If you don't want to discuss this sensibly, Cathy, you may as well leave the room' (92). Similarly, her boyfriend, Tony, fails to engage with her in reasonable discussion. A good example is the point when Tony tells Cathy that he is joining the Intelligence Service at Senate House, the Intelligence Headquarters in London; Cathy sarcastically points out that she has all the skills for the job which he lacks, yet Tony fails completely to perceive what she is talking about. Instead he prefers in scene 3 to believe that she is distressed at the prospect of being without him (84). None of the male characters in the play is at all fully drawn, representing little more than two-dimensional caricatures of masculine bigotry. Tony, in

particular, is portrayed as singularly lacking the gift of self-awareness or insight. He is a particularly blinkered specimen of male prejudice, as is demonstrated by his attitude towards the ATS girls in scene 14 (97).

Language is a code which also transmits gender differences. The 'imitation game' which Turner describes in scene 45 is not only used to query whether a machine can think, but whether it can distinguish gender linguistically as successfully as a man or a woman can (125–6).

The second code is music. Cathy is portrayed as obsessed with mastering a particular piece of music, Mozart's Fantasia in C minor, K475, which permeates the play in the same way as does David Hare's *leitmotif* of Chopin's Waltz no. 3 in A minor in the play *Licking Hitler*. Cathy practises it constantly and the play ends with a flawless professional rendition of it. McEwan explains in his Introduction that it is a piece of music with which he himself was obsessed and he had first planned a novel in which a man polishes his performance of the same piece (15). In *The Imitation Game* it becomes a sign of Cathy's struggle for mastery. She plays it when her boyfriend comes to visit, as if to exclude him, a point not lost on Tony in scene 11: 'I get the impression you are more interested in practising the piano than in anything else. I mean, you've hardly spoken a word to me all afternoon' (89). McEwan shows Cathy in scene 27 playing the piece just after she has defiantly expressed her intention to become a 'special operator' at the end of her training (106). The music is conspicuous by its absence from the time she spends at the interception station, where music as an accompaniment to the action is

replaced instead by the dissonance of the radio signals. Once Cathy is posted to Bletchley, however, the music features again. In scene 50 she plays her music on the grand piano in the officers' mess at Bletchley, once again to symbolise her challenge to the subordinate position she finds herself in (129). Finally, a copy of the score is sent to her by Turner as she languishes in prison. We can interpret his gesture as one of apology or sympathy but also as a symbol of the fact that she can read the musical code as she had done the Enigma messages, but cannot now master it. As with the Enigma code, it is tantalisingly out of her reach because of the system which excludes her because, McEwan suggests, she is a woman.

Cathy is also portrayed as resisting the social code which determines that, as a woman, she should only fulfil a subordinate role in the war effort. Her political status as a woman is shown by contrast to her boyfriend's: whereas she is expected to work in the local munitions factory, her boyfriend, Tony, is shown drafted into Intelligence. Ironically, Cathy already possesses all the skills—office skills, foreign languages—which he will need to learn to do his job properly.

McEwan shows that Cathy is mocked throughout the play for her intellectual analysis of the war and her desired role in it. In an exchange with her bigoted father shows this also to be a characteristic of her father who castigates her for her behaviour in coming home late, in defiance of his authority and for daring to analyse the implications of the war for herself,

something he implies in scene 7 that only the (all male) politicians should be doing:

MR RAINÉ ...you are not [going to bed], young lady. Not until I've heard what you were doing out alone in the dark.

CATHY I was thinking.

MR RAINÉ Thinking? What about?

CATHY About myself, and about the war.

MR RAINÉ Her! Planning it all out were you?

CATHY That's right, Dad. Trying to plan it out for myself.

MR RAINÉ She'll be telephoning the Prime Minister in the morning to tell him what to do.

CATHY (*deliberately*) I said, I was trying to plan it out for myself.

...

MR RAINÉ And will you be doing any more 'thinking' in the near future? (87)

McEwan clearly portrays her father as not believing that women should be thinking at all, a view McEwan suggests is endemic amongst men for it is reiterated later in the play in scene 45 by one of the boffins at Bletchley who crystallises male prejudice against women by querying whether a woman *can* think (126). Unthinking compliance is expected of Cathy from the army, too.

One prominent example is in scene 9 where one of the expected aspects of the demeanour of recruits is offered at the point where Cathy signs up:

CLERK ... Now sign these where I've marked a cross. You don't need to read them, you know.

CATHY I want to know what I'm signing.

CLERK It is simply an acceptance of the conditions of your employment. There really isn't time.

CATHY If there isn't time then I won't sign.

CLERK (*standing*) Very well. Take the papers. Read them, sign them and join the end of the queue. Next girl, please. (88)

McEwan shows that Cathy's perfectly reasonable wish to know what she is contracting herself into is not only despised by the clerk but is also punished by her being made to wait twice as long as necessary to complete the process. It also seems that none of the other girls waiting in line to sign up has asked or is likely to read her contract. However, unfairness in the way Cathy is treated here is not an experience unique to a woman. The military services treat men and women in the same way, expecting just as much unchallenged compliance from men as from women. Furthermore, the fact that only Cathy is depicted as wanting to read the agreement suggests that McEwan is not really showing that all women are treated harshly—he suggests they don't want to know what they are signing.

Cathy chose to join the ATS as they were known. They were employed mainly as domestic and clerical functionaries. Her own mother, in scene 12, sees it as less than respectable and quotes the view of servicemen she overhears to emphasise its general low esteem:

MRS RAINE ... Last week I was at the bus station sitting across from three or four soldiers, nicely turned out boys. Two ATS came by and just smiled right at those young boys, bold as anything. And when they'd gone do you know what the soldiers called them? 'Scum of the earth,' that's what they said. 'There goes the scum of the earth.' (94-5)

Cathy, by contrast, clearly articulates her desire to have a positive role in the war instead of the menial role she is assigned as a woman in the previous scene (11):

CATHY I want to be *doing* something. I want to be in a room with charts and maps where decisions are made, I want to hold in my hand lists of how many lorries and tanks we've got, or fly a plane or fire a gun. (90)

Her decision to join the army provokes her mother's and her boyfriend's prejudice, as articulated in scene 12, that decent girls should not, (94-5). Although most of the girls who joined the auxiliary services as volunteers came mainly from better-off families, as cited above (p. 118), they all had a bad reputation.

Cathy is depicted as doubly subordinated. Not only is her war work considered to be beneath her dignity, but as a woman she is accorded little dignity within it. Her father, in scene 42, also ridicules her maintaining silence under the Official Secrets Act:

MR RAINÉ ... How exactly are you helping to defeat the wicked Germans? ... What does that badge mean? ...

CATHY It means I'm in Signals. I'm a wireless operator, or at least ... I was.

TONY That's interesting. Have they trained you to send Morse code?

CATHY: I'm not allowed to say.

MR RAINÉ: Not allowed! That's a good one.

CATHY: I've signed the Official Secrets Act. I can't tell you what I do ... what I've been doing ... without breaking the law.

MR RAINÉ: She's back here a couple of hours and she's already at her airs and graces. You're that important already are you, *Private* Rainé, that they've given you secret work to do.

CATHY: That's right, Dad, most secret. (121–2)

Although Cathy is shown to assert her ownership of secrets, the secrets she knows are meaningless, so it seems a double condemnation that she is ridiculed here. McEwan represents secrecy as a symbol of patriarchal power. In *The Imitation Game*, the men are shown in possession of secrets, the women excluded either actively by the men, as in the case of Cathy, or they exclude themselves as in the cases of the other women in the play. This is a theme to which McEwan returns more explicitly in *or Shall We Die?* In the oratorio, he gives the Man's voice these words:

Secrecy is essential when decisions
weigh heavily on the men of state.
The weak-hearted, the effeminate, the disloyal
must know nothing. (*AMA*: 20)

The oratorio, together with other treatments of military domination, will be considered more fully in Chapter IV.

In *The Imitation Game*, Cathy's sarcastic treatment by her father is emphasised by his tolerance of her boyfriend talking about his work in Intelligence. Tony does talk about it, reversing the expected roles. Whereas he had expected not to be able to talk about his work as he points out in scene 3, because of his signing the Official Secrets Act (84), it is in fact only the loyal Cathy who feels bound by it. Indeed, Tony is represented as most forthcoming in his description of his involvement. Though the subsequent scene portrays Tony's description of the poster he helped to write as ludicrously wordy, McEwan has copied the text word for word from a real Ministry of Aircraft poster published during the War. (A reproduction of the poster appears in Calder's history (1992: 19)). Even within the ATS, Cathy is not allowed much dignity. Her job as 'Special Operator', McEwan shows, turns out to be merely a transcriber of coded radio messages at an interception station. Cathy has already been shown to possess code-breaking skills, in music and language, but she is not permitted to try to *understand* these codes which she has to transcribe. Cathy's frustration is understandable, as articulated in scene 35: 'they should tell us more about what we're doing. Copying down those letters eight hours a day ...' (111). McEwan unequivocally depicts the men with the power to convert the women's work into usable messages, thereby affording them access to knowledge denied to the women.

He uses the Enigma messages to signify Cathy's second obsession.

Enigma was the key to all German communications and was therefore essential to the success of the war. She is posted tantalisingly close to the centre of the decoding operation at Bletchley Park, where the officers and boffins from Cambridge, all men, decode the signals. Characteristically, however, Cathy is still portrayed on the periphery, engaged upon menial duties such as are assigned to women, as she says in scene 54, doing one of the 'simple repetitive jobs backing up the men' (134). (This formulation of women's subordinate role recurs in *The Comfort of Strangers*, a novel which also deals with sexual dominance, as Caroline describes her and her mother's role as ambassador's daughter and wife, 'backing up the ambassador' (108)).

Turner's petulant departure from Cathy's company provides the final temptation for Cathy. McEwan allows her to come dangerously close to discovering the secret of Ultra when she picks up Turner's abandoned 'Top Secret' file. Her interest in the project, together with her knowledge of German and experience of Germany, are attributes which would have been positive in a man. In Cathy, a woman, McEwan suggests, they are not interpreted as being patriotic but instead as treasonous. Clearly, the justice which is meted out to Cathy is on the basis of her having stepped out of her assigned role *as a woman*. She poses a threat not only to the war effort (as the officers see it) but to the men themselves (as Turner sees it) and therefore she must be annihilated. She stands accused not only of undermining a man but with him the whole intelligence project. Indeed, the bars which imprison her at

the end of the play are only the physical manifestation of the limits to her freedom she has been subject to all along.

Women's unthinking compliance is necessary for all the personal and public projects of men in the play. Throughout, women in general and Cathy in particular are cast as essential, personally, to men, such as in scene 3: 'TONY'S MOTHER ... There isn't a girl in town who isn't going to be working in that [munitions] factory. I don't know what the boys are going to do if it blows up with you all inside it' (83). When Cathy talks of joining the army, Tony's egocentric concern is that she will no longer be available *to him*, as he betrays in scene 13: 'the chances of us getting leave at the same time are pretty slim. Who knows where you'll be posted' (96). McEwan also demonstrates that women are essential in the public domain to run both the Ultra project and to wage the war. For Ultra to work at all, large numbers of women are vital to do domestic duties, transcribe the coded messages and, in their thousands, to run the Bletchley Park decoding machines; they are also essential morally to sustain the war effort as the patronising voice on the radio in scene 43 illustrates:

WIRELESS ... we are desperately short of man-power. In modern warfare an enormous non-combatant force is needed to maintain men in the front line. In the British army for example, as in the German army, one-third of the men spend their time supplying, repairing and administering the other two-thirds. Now a lot of this administrative work can't be done by women, but an awful lot can! ... Henceforward, as our colossal war machine gets under way, no skilled person is to do what can be done by an unskilled person, and no man is to do what can be done by a woman ... (123-4)

Cathy's challenge to the moral code, which serves to justify war in terms of women, yet denies them any significant place within it, is summed up in her speech to the Colonel in scene 60:

CATHY...if women generals planned the battles ... then the men would feel there was no ...morality to war, they would have no one to fight for, nowhere to leave their ... consciences ... war would appear to them as savage and as pointless as it really is. The men want the women to stay out of the fighting so they can give it meaning. As long as we're on the outside and give our support and don't kill, women make the war just possible. ... something the men can feel tough about. (142)

This challenge is articulated in what amounts to a polemic in favour of pacifism as well as feminism, McEwan's central argument, but set as it is at the point in the play where Cathy has already been neutralised, it has a hollow ring. *The Imitation Game* propounds the central injustice of our patriarchal society, that women are an essential part of social and political systems in which men hold power, yet are denied any power themselves. Since the spirited Cathy is placed centrally in the play, in contrast to weak women and in relationship with egoistic or ineffectual men, McEwan clearly intends the audience's sympathy to lie with her, and to share the challenge to the dominative establishment values she embodies.

The play is unique in McEwan's work in that it seeks to present the world through the eyes and mind of a woman, but it leads to a simplistic polarisation of the problems she experiences. The intellectual and highly individual character who is Cathy would be equally awkward in the army were she a man, and her fascist father would be just as authoritarian with a son.

McEwan's portrayal of a woman's experience in this way owes much to Virginia Woolf, as Hermione Lee points out: 'Cathy is not intended as a heroine for liberationists. Rather, it is as if one of Virginia Woolf's intelligent discontented middle-class girls had been embodied as a Second World War army recruit' (Lee 1980: 467). Indeed, Richard Eyre, who directed the film, refers to the similarity by having Cathy reading Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* at the beginning of the play, where the script merely specifies 'a book' (81, scene 1). McEwan himself acknowledges the importance of *Three Guineas* on his own thinking in a review of books entitled, 'In absentia: some books of the year' (1979c: 1413), and avers that *The Imitation Game* 'draws something' from *Three Guineas* (Haffenden 1985: 175). Certainly McEwan employs many of the ideas from *Three Guineas* in his portrayal of Cathy, though it is difficult to guess which of Virginia Woolf's 'intelligent discontented middle-class' girls Lee would have us believe would enlist. David Hare's *Plenty* provides a useful contrast to McEwan's treatment of Cathy. In *Plenty*, Hare shows that the war permits his heroine, Susan Traherne, the opportunity for excitement, independence and personal fulfilment which is subsequently denied to her in marriage after the war. McEwan recognises himself that his portrayal of Cathy is less than successful, merely an attempt to 'appropriate a woman's voice' (Bailey 1987: 96), and that he would be 'better writing about the problems of men' (ibid.). This he does to greater effect in the subsequent novels, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, and *Enduring Love*.

McEwan represents in *The Imitation Game* a young woman's attempts to enjoy the kind of 'guiltless freedom from the strictures of family life' which he describes in the introduction to the play (17), that he found being expressed by the women he interviewed as he researched the play. He creates a similar kind of context for the protagonists in his novel, *The Cement Garden*. Likewise, the children are given to enjoy freedom from normal family controls, and the novel is an exploration of the way they exploit this licence. The way in which the power play between the two older children is acted out has already been considered in the thesis (see Chapter II); in this chapter the focus will be exclusively on McEwan's treatment of sexual domination and subjection in *The Cement Garden*.

The struggle for power in the family in *The Cement Garden* is resolved when the two older children incestuously make love. Prior to that, there are three other alliances: those of the two older children subordinating their sister; the older sisters liaising over Julie's boyfriend to render her older brother inferior; and the two sisters subordinating their brothers. The first alliance may be read as a precursor to the final incestuous scene. The earlier incident is also explicitly sexual in nature, centred upon the younger sister, Sue, although McEwan makes it clear that the older brother is as much fascinated by his older sister as he is interested in the examination of Sue's sexual anatomy. While Julie and her brother remove Sue's pants, the narration from the boy's point of view notes that 'our hands touched' (11), and although the focus of the game is to examine the younger sister as if she is an alien from outer space, the boy

subjects his older sister to his own gaze; he notes, for example, the ‘high ridge of cheekbone beneath her eyes which gave her the deep look of some rare wild animal’ (ibid.), rendering her almost equally alien to himself as the notion of his other sister as an extra-terrestrial alien. The boy’s visual examination of Julie proceeds sensually to note that her ‘eyes were black and big’ (ibid.), a sign commonly recognised as conveying sexual attractiveness; her mouth is described as ‘a soft line’ (ibid.); while her lips form a ‘pout’ (ibid.). McEwan makes the point that the older sister is the unattainable object of desire: ‘I longed to examine my older sister but the game did not allow for that’ (ibid.), at least not until their relationship has assumed a more sexually sophisticated level. Indeed, the innocence of their behaviour is emphasised, even as they physically touch Sue’s genitals, for McEwan shows the pretence of sophistication masking child-like innocence: ‘Julie and I looked at each other knowingly, knowing nothing’ (ibid.). The whole scene in which the two subject Sue to examination is written as a game of ‘doctors and nurses’. However, the innocence is not complete, at least not on the part of the younger sister, just as McEwan had suggested for the albeit incomplete knowledge on the part of the about-to-be-raped younger sister in ‘Homemade’ as discussed in Chapter II.

In *The Cement Garden*, McEwan depicts Sue ‘beg[ging] us to go on ... plead[ing] with us’ (11). Furthermore, it is the recollection of ‘Julie’s pale-brown fingers between Sue’s legs’ that stimulates the boy’s subsequent onanistic pleasure. That the characters pose as doctors, superior to the prone body of their sister, conjures up McEwan’s liking for depicting domination,

especially sexual domination, with a clinical edge. In 'Untitled', the woman consults a surgeon to castrate her lover and amputate his limbs; the nurses in 'Pornography' exploit their clinical skills to castrate their unfaithful boyfriend; in *The Comfort of Strangers*, Caroline dons white like a doctor before administering drugs to Mary and torturing Colin; and McEwan evokes a similar scene with two people working over a prone body in the dissection scene in *The Innocent*, where again, clinical precision is harnessed to a dark purpose. Also invoking the idea of torture, McEwan invents for the children 'clipped Germanic voices' (11) as if they are Nazi doctors experimenting on prisoners. The rules of the game are the same: the 'doctors and nurses' assume power over their 'patient' and, usually one of the pair asserts more power than the other. In this scene in *The Cement Garden*, Julie, the older sister, dictates the rule: that she is never to be the subject of examination.

McEwan shows that Jack is not to succeed in gaining sexual power over his older sister in another game, a tickling game, which is evocative of rape. This connection between tickling and sex is clearly indicated in McEwan's introduction to the scene: Jack retaliates to Julie's taunts over his lack of personal hygiene with 'Fuck you,' ... and goes for her ankles, 'determined to tickle her until she died of exhaustion' (28). The tickling game that goes wrong is the last that Jack is permitted, for it clearly goes too far. McEwan suggests that Jack's intentions are to establish masculine rule over his sister by association with his authoritarian father in the form of the 'huge, filthy gardening gloves' (29) which he dons. McEwan writes the scene as suggestive

of rape, using the language of violence, resistance and dominance interspersed with the giggles and laughter of the game: the sight of the gloves 'advancing on her made her [Julie] weak' (ibid.); she tries to resist, but falls back; she writhes in her chair, squealing her protest; she lay with her knees drawn up, her hands raised to protect her throat' (ibid.) in defence of the attack; 'Julie ... fought for air' (ibid.); and 'there was an edge of panic in her thrashing about' (ibid.). In turn, the boy is shown to be deliberately and enjoyably aroused by overpowering her: 'I dragged her by the arm on to her bed ... I laughed too, delighted with my power ... in my exhilaration I could not stop' (ibid.); and 'I moved forward to be in a better position to hold her down...' (ibid.). McEwan also suggests rape at the conclusion of the boy's assault, as his excitement causes him to urinate—suggestive here of ejaculation. McEwan emphasises the dual reading of the game by the boy's admission that it was an 'assault on her' (30) and that he feels 'too shamed' (ibid.) to resist her subsequent assertion of superiority.

McEwan also shows how the alliance of the sisters with Julie's boyfriend, Derek, also conspires to belittle Jack's aspiration to dominance. Derek's power is written not so much as sexual power but as economical: he buys Julie clothes, runs a car, and is a professional snooker player. The girls admire his age and status, which their brother cannot emulate. In contrast to Derek, Jack appears petulant and silly. Unlike Jack and Julie together, who are shown 'knowing nothing' (11), Derek is shown 'understanding everything' (85). Jack's attempt to belittle Derek—'He's not so strong ... and he's pretty

thick' (85)—is countered by his younger sister's disparaging comment: 'He could beat you up with his little finger' (*ibid.*), and McEwan shows that Derek can defeat Jack even without a fight for he brings him to tears in a verbal spat' (97). However, McEwan defies the logic of the boyfriend's position by casting Jack as sexually superior to Derek, for Jack succeeds in consummating a sexual relationship with his sister, whereas Derek has never been allowed to do so: 'All those times ... you never even let me come near you' (124).

McEwan works through other rules of the gender power game, and deconstructs them in this story set in the context of a household remote from the normal structures of the family. McEwan shows the boy speculating as to why his sisters do not help with the physical work of spreading cement (17), and therefore perhaps helping to head off their father's heart attack. On the death of his father, it is his mother, then his sister who assume the role of head of the household—not Jack. The girls also spell out to him the rules of the patriarchal order while they conspire to resist them. Julie rejects the book whose hero Jack emulates, and sits on it, humiliating Jack by implication (Sampson 1984: 76); then McEwan also has her take over the role of the Commander, which Jack has frequently done in his fantasy life, and attacks Jack (78), particularly targetting his groin, the symbolic seat of his masculine power and the focus of much of his own interest throughout the narrative as quoted above (p. 66).

The most compelling deconstruction of the male gender role, however, lies in McEwan's depiction of the two girls' transvestite treatment of their

brothers, although in the case of the older brother, Jack, the treatment is only brief because he resists them; their younger brother's subjection is more sustained. At first McEwan presents the girls' dressing their little brother as a girl in response to his request in order to avoid being beaten up at school. There is a flawed logic here that girls are less likely to be the victims of assault: statistics show that young males are more likely to suffer from violence from other young males, while at the same time girls are also more likely to suffer violence at the hands of their male counterparts. McEwan shows the child's innocent understanding of sexual role identity by having the little boy represent the differences between boys and girls asexually; a difference residing only in clothes and behaviour (43), a notion McEwan had already explored in 'Disguises'. However, McEwan negates this simplistic idea effectively in the text as the sister exclaims: 'You think it's humiliating to look like a girl, because you think it's humiliating to *be* a girl' (44). The theoretical basis of dominative structures in cross-dressing is explored further (43–4), as quoted above (p. 49). Despite Jack's depiction of protest at this point in the novel, McEwan eventually shows that Jack is prepared to subscribe to the feminisation of the household, and indeed succumbs to it himself (71–2) in order to enjoy proximity to his older sister; and he retorts to Derek, 'What's wrong about that?' when he questions Tom's cross-dressing (104).

McEwan's conclusion of the struggle for sexual dominance in the novel is achieved in the incestuous scene between brother and sister towards which the novel has been moving from the outset. It shows the older boy and girl in

almost equally powerful positions although Julie takes the lead in the sexual encounter: it is she who ‘caught [Jack] by the arm and steered [him] to the bed’ (122), ‘She moved a little closer to me ... and locked her fingers into mine’ (ibid.), and finally she initiates their intercourse. McEwan also shows that the siblings’ sexual relationship is a direct resistance to the aspirations of Derek to be the dominant male in the household: ‘he wants to be one of the family, you know, big smart daddy’ (122); and ‘He wants to take charge of everything’ (ibid.). Indeed, Derek is depicted as thoroughly defeated on witnessing the brother and sister in bed together:

his voice retreated across the [bed]room ... the ... door slammed shut.

Julie sprang off the bed, locked the door and leaned against it.
(124)

McEwan portrays the incest as an attempt by the brother and sister to maintain their family unit, and, unlike the brother and sister coupling McEwan portrayed in ‘Homemade’, it is relatively harmless. The scene McEwan depicts here with the boy and girl together in bed, with their infantilised brother asleep in a cot in their room, recreates the image of a conventional couple with their baby. The forces of convention, however, in the form of ‘the revolving blue light’ (127) which penetrates their defences, are set to overcome them.

Sado-masochism

Not all of McEwan’s sexual power struggles are resolved so benignly.

The Comfort of Strangers contains the most extensive consideration of sexual

domination and subjection. In this novel McEwan presents an imaginary set of relationships which represent the most extreme forms of sexual subordination and domination in his work. The plot and characterisation, in portraying the unremitting nature of patriarchal domination, convey the proposition that it is ubiquitous even amongst individuals who would not subscribe to patriarchy. In this novel, McEwan portrays the victims as a feminist, Mary, and a 'new man', Colin.

Although the novel is narrated from the point of view of Colin and Mary, the depiction of the relationship between Caroline and Robert is central to McEwan's plot. A discussion of the relationship between Caroline and Robert will therefore precede the consideration of that of Robert and Colin, Mary and Colin, and Caroline and Mary. Through the characters of Caroline and Robert, McEwan explores the central idea of sado-masochism as the ultimate goal of sexual relationships. This representation draws upon Freudian theory, which depicts women essentially as masochists, men as sadists whose method of control is repression. This representation is suggested as being structurally complementary in that the desire of the dominant partner is ideally satisfied by the compliance of the subject, as Lawrence and Plomer also suggested, see above (pp. 28–9). Throughout *The Comfort of Strangers*, many representations of the complementarity of activity and passivity are portrayed, such as the roles of master and slave, doctor and patient, host and guest. Nevertheless, such a depiction is not without its problems and McEwan is open to criticism for the portrayal of unthinking subservience in the character

of Caroline. However, McEwan does problematise the apparent balance of the equation in depicting the predatory extension of the chief antagonist, Robert, on to Colin and Mary, where McEwan shows them to be unwilling, if peculiarly unresisting, victims. McEwan suggests, however, that Colin and Mary invite their treatment through an unconscious desire to be subordinated, as well as through being disoriented and indecisive, which renders them vulnerable.

McEwan seldom portrays Caroline and Robert together in the novel, preventing readers, or the fictional Colin and Mary, from inferring the nature of their hosts' relationship. Instead he has Robert and Caroline separately describe their relationship to Colin and Mary. This fragmented description, just like 'the mosaic' of fragments of photographs the narrator refers to (122), keeps the nature of the relationship a mystery until it is fully pieced together in Caroline's confessional monologue (116–9). McEwan writes most of Caroline's behaviour as deeply passive, waiting for Robert, or waiting upon him. When they are depicted together, McEwan banishes Caroline from the room, mainly to the kitchen; and the smack which would enable Colin and Mary to confirm the violence in the relationship is ambiguous: the 'sharp sound ... could as easily have been an object dropped as a face slapped' (80). The violence in the relationship between the host couple is not witnessed at first hand, only reported, yet it is the most powerful undercurrent running through the novel. When it overwhelms Colin, Mary witnesses it through a drug-induced haze and

even then she has to infer what is going on. The uncertainty which these once-removed events confer contributes to the nightmare quality of the novel.

Domination and subjection within Robert and Caroline's relationship is fundamental to the plot of *The Comfort of Strangers*. Inside the relationship, the characterisation of Robert explicitly invites the Freudian interpretation that he is fixated in the anal phase, which is expressed in sadism. He tells the story of a scatological practical joke his sisters play on him which brings the wrath of his father down on him in the form of beatings and emotional rejection: 'he beat me every night for three days and for many months he did not speak kindly to me' (39). The resultant anal fixation is also demonstrated in the obsessive neatness of his display of his father's personal possessions on the sideboard. The sideboard itself McEwan describes as a 'monstrosity of reflecting surfaces' (60) presaging Robert's fell purpose. The 'cut-throat razors' (62) also ominously signify the monstrosity of the act which they will be used to perform when Colin's wrists are slashed open (129). True to Tolstoy's adage that the gun on the wall should not be described if it is not to be used in the plot, McEwan gives further proof of the nature of Robert's dominating character. The symbolic domination of women is even subtly suggested in his description of the handles on Robert's sideboard 'whose every drawer had a brass knob in the shape of a woman's head' (ibid.). This signifies a general objectification of women. It also conjures up the image of Robert's hands around Caroline's neck and prefigures Caroline's testimony about his stranglehold about her neck in her account to Mary (118) of Robert's

sadistically breaking her spine. McEwan also describes Robert's close relationship with his mother: 'Whenever my father was away I slept in her bed, until I was ten years old' (39). This suggests that, contrary to his assertion that men knew where they stood in his day (72), his own father had been usurped by Robert's Oedipal desire for his mother. Indeed, the argument that McEwan expounds through the character of Robert, that women treat men like children 'because they can't take them seriously' (72), is ironic given that Robert reported that, even when he was married, he continued to act like a child towards his mother and on leaving home he still took his shirts to his mother for washing (39). McEwan's portrayal of Robert's closeness to his mother, his victimisation by his sisters, the authoritarian father who is nevertheless his role model, are all offered as indicators of his emotional imbalance. Indeed, by having Robert recount his psychological history at some length to complete strangers, Colin and Mary, as if to a therapist, McEwan suggests that the failure of Robert's socialisation to curb his destructive sexual urge is, in Freudian terms, a failure of his father to assert the law of the father and prohibit his love for his mother.

Robert cannot tolerate Colin because he fails to uphold patriarchy. As Heidi Hartmann points out, patriarchy may be defined as: 'relations between men, which have a material base, and which, through hierarchy, establish and create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women' (Hartmann 1981: 14). This theory of patriarchy is expounded through the character of Robert:

My father and his father understood themselves clearly. They were men, and they were proud of their sex. Women understood them too....There was no confusion. ...Now men doubt themselves, they hate themselves, even more than they hate each other. (75–6)

But McEwan's representation of Robert's theorising of the compliance of women, with its suggestion of rote learning, also reveals his rationale for sadism:

'[Women] love men. 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. ...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.' ...Robert's voice now had something of the quality of recital, like a child at its multiplication tables. 'It is the world that shapes people's minds. It is men who have shaped the world. So women's minds are shaped by men. From earliest childhood, the world they see is made by men.' (76)

This last sentiment is contrarily cited in McEwan's quotation from the feminist critic and poet, Adrienne Rich, in an epigraph to the novel:³

how we dwelt in two worlds
the daughters and the mothers
in the kingdom of the sons

From the perspective of McEwan's characterisation of Robert, Colin is seen to allow himself to be dominated by women because he does not seek power over them. Robert also criticises Colin for being indecisive and not standing up for himself. McEwan demonstrates Robert's pleasure in violence and his contempt for Colin in the inverted humour of the 'relaxed, easy blow'

³ From 'Sibling Mysteries', in *Dream of a Common Language*. New York: Norton, 1978, 33–49. The fragment McEwan quotes is on p. 49.

(77) to Colin's stomach, which might have appeared 'playful' (ibid.)—

McEwan describes the 'laughing noises' (ibid.) in Colin's throat as he lay on the floor, gasping for air. The fact that Robert winks as he leaves the room, leaves readers in no doubt that Robert is a sinister, violent character, without conscience. McEwan demonstrates Robert's contempt for Colin's failure to defend himself by his allusions to Hamlet when Colin is unable to act or stand up for himself. Robert's gaze is firmly on Colin as he toasts his new manager whom he commends as someone who: 'knows how to deal with trouble. He knows when to act. He doesn't let people take advantage of him' (74), in contrast to Colin who has failed to act against Robert's violence towards him. Indeed, it is Colin and Mary's failure to act in their own self-interest, or even to talk about their experiences which is shown to be their downfall. McEwan emphasises his allusion to Hamlet as Colin recounts that his father died and his mother remarried. McEwan indeed invites a further inter-textual reference to *Hamlet* in Mary's recounting of her acting in an 'all-woman Hamlet' (72).

Robert ultimately dominates Colin in the extreme by murdering him. However, McEwan invites readers to consider Colin to have subjected himself to such treatment by his failure to perceive what is happening, or even to tell his partner about Robert's initial violence. Furthermore, McEwan portrays Colin as not defending himself and allowing himself to be manipulated. The title, *The Comfort of Strangers*, suggests another Shakespearean motif, Macbeth's betrayal of trust as a host. Caroline bears some resemblance to Lady Macbeth, since she is implicated in the entrapment. However, a feminist

reading of Caroline's role in the plot reveals her to be not a perpetrator of violence, but a victim of Robert's violence. Indeed, McEwan seems to invite such a reading of the novel by quoting from Adrienne Rich in the novel's epigraph, though it could be argued that the conclusion of the novel betrays its feminist promise. At the end Mary is given to theorise 'how 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' (134). Her internalisation of such a theory, in much the same way as Caroline is portrayed as having internalised her subjection, runs counter to any feminist interpretation of such an extreme form of domination. Simone de Beauvoir explores a similar idea in *The Second Sex*: 'along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing' (de Beauvoir [1949] 1988: 21). However, as Toril Moi points out, the internalisation of such a view does not exonerate the injustice of a system of ideas which constructs it: 'The fact that women often enact the roles patriarchy has prescribed for them does not prove that the patriarchal analysis is right' (Moi 1985: 92). Adrienne Rich in her 'The Kingdom of the Fathers'⁴ also comments on the dynamics of men's power and women's subordination in this respect:

⁴ In 'The Kingdom of the Fathers'. *Partisan Review*, 43, 1976, 17-37. With some revisions, this essay appears as the third chapter of *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1976.

Like other dominated people, we [women] have learned to manipulate and seduce, or to internalize men's will and make it ours, and men have sometimes characterized this as 'power' in us; but it is nothing more than the child's or courtesan's 'power' to wheedle and the dependent's 'power' to disguise her feelings—even from herself—in order to obtain favours or literally, to survive... (22–3)

McEwan's portrayal of the relationship between Robert and Caroline is overtly sado-masochistic. Caroline is portrayed as a woman who has been inculcated gradually into her subjection. Her childhood is described as helping her mother to look after her father 'backing up the ambassador'(108), and bolstering up Robert in the face of his embarrassment caused, once again, by his vengeful sisters. Caroline is defined as an object in the novel purely in terms of the men around her. Robert, for example, speaks only about her in terms of his dominant father (30). Caroline herself is presented as seeing women only in terms of men. In the discussion between her and Mary about a women-only theatre group, she articulates the view that whatever women may be acting out together, there must be a man waiting in the wings: 'A play with only women? I don't understand how that could work. I mean what could happen?' (71). The analogy with their current situation, 'two women who have only just met sitting on a balcony talking' (ibid.) is seen to be lost on her, but her response, 'They're probably waiting for a man... When he arrives...[s]omething will happen' (ibid.), is just what McEwan proceeds to represent—the women are waiting to be joined by Robert and Colin, and when Robert does arrive, the violent plot against Colin unfolds.

Caroline is portrayed as a mental and physical prisoner of Robert. Her first appearance in the novel is as a ghostly, pale, disembodied face (63). The ethereal quality of her presence is sustained by the observation that she 'stared at Mary as if she herself could not be seen' (64). The sense of her not being corporeal is emphasised by her staring at her hand in her lap 'as though it were no longer her own' (70). Her appearance is described as 'featureless ... innocent of expression, without age' (ibid.). McEwan employs the analogy of a face designed by committee, a stereotype of faceless bureaucracy, to a specification which met 'the barest requirements of feasibility' (ibid.). But Caroline's corporeality is all too painful to her. Even her hair is described as tied back 'severely' (63), she walks stiffly (ibid.), rises painfully (64), and turns awkwardly (65). Her demeanour is one of abject subjection: in her first conversation with Mary her tone is described as 'forced', she struggles to speak, starts nervously; anxiety and tension mark her conversation. The context of violence in which she lives is sketched in gradually by McEwan, and there are numerous allusions to latent violence. The splay-footed furniture and the legs of the horses in the pictures, 'their ... legs splayed' in the gallery of the house (62), presage the vision of Colin's legs 'splayed' helplessly before him (129); the sky is described as being the colour of 'bruised' pastels (63); the perfume of flowers is 'sickly' (ibid.); and when Caroline admits that she looked in on the sleeping couple, her face is described as tensed 'as though she expected at any moment a loud explosion' (65).

More emblematic of Caroline's total subjection is the manner in which McEwan has Caroline define 'in love' as doing anything for another person and letting them do anything to you: 'if you are in love with someone, you would even be prepared to let them kill you, if necessary' (66). McEwan returns to an exploration of this idea of a pact for mutual killing as evidence of friendship in his later novel, *Amsterdam*. This mirrors the death wish of the masochist as expressed in the story of the original, 'Venus in Furs', where Severin (von Sacher Masoch himself) signs a contract at his mistress's request, which effectively consents to Wanda killing him, if she wishes, for her own amusement: 'I hereby voluntarily put an end to my existence, in which I take no further interest' (quoted in Cleugh, 1972: 187–8). Martin Amis uses a similar characterisation in *Success*, where one of his male characters, Gregory, refers to a girl of fifteen as one to whom 'you can do whatever the hell you like (you can kill her if you like—it wouldn't bother her)' (Amis 1978: 151). Significantly, though, for the characterisation of Caroline, the expression of this sentiment by her about herself, is gendered: in response to Mary's query about whether such a compact would be reciprocal, Caroline will only admit to being prepared to kill the person she was in love with if she were a man, though the original sentiment (quoted above) is expressed by an ungendered 'you' and 'someone'. Although McEwan tempers this extreme view of subjection with Mary's more liberal cynicism, he made clear in an interview that at the time of writing *The Comfort of Strangers* he believed in the sustaining myth of patriarchy, that women enjoy being dominated: '[The

Comfort of Strangers] seemed to be saying something either true or so true that it was banal' (Haffenden 1985: 178). His attempt to analyse motives in a psychological way was a move away from the presentation of rational behaviour to explore the more nebulous emotional world where 'there might be desires—masochism in women, sadism in men—which act out the oppression of women or patriarchal societies but which have actually become related to sources of pleasure' (ibid.). Furthermore, McEwan proposes that women probably do have masochistic fantasies and that many men probably have sadistic fantasies, which may be acted out in private, and that it is better to acknowledge it than deny it: 'true freedom would be for such women to recognise their masochism and to understand how it had become related to sexual pleasure' (ibid.).

However, writing Caroline's compliance in this manner as a source of pleasure, her subjugation as a necessary complement to her husband's desire, negates the inequality of the relationship. Lawrence's image of the 'trembling instability of the balance' and 'the thumb in the scale' is relevant in considering the author's purpose:

Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality. (Lawrence 1956: 110)

In *The Comfort of Strangers* McEwan has portrayed Caroline as an object to her husband, confined to her apartment, and tortured within it—her every move is painful witness to her husband's destructive treatment of her.

Caroline is depicted as though she does not have an independent existence. She is imprisoned in her home by her husband's physical and mental cruelty, both by the fact that he broke her back (118) and that on her recovery he failed to help her to return to the apartment when she went out:

When I came home I discovered that I couldn't get up the stairs. ...I waited out in the courtyard for Robert to come home. When he did, he said it was my own fault for leaving the apartment without his permission. He spoke to me like a small child. He wouldn't help me up the stairs, and he wouldn't let any of the neighbours come near me either. ...I had to stay out all night. (119)

However, it is the mental imprisonment that McEwan depicts that is most problematic. Significantly, the only two features of *Hamlet* which Caroline recalls in her conversation with Mary are that it has 'someone locked up in a convent' and that it is 'the one with the ghost' (72), both features of Caroline's fictional life with which a character such as she would identify.

McEwan explains Robert's emotional pathology in Freudian psychoanalytic terms, attributed to his family background of the authoritarian father, his Oedipus complex and his persecution by his castrating sisters, as has been discussed above, but also through his inability to father children. Indeed, McEwan explicitly links Robert's infertility with the onset of sado-masochism in Robert and Caroline's relationship. Caroline narrates that Robert was 'desperate to have sons' (116), but that there was 'something wrong with his sperm' (ibid.), and that 'he's very sensitive about it' (ibid.). Robert's domination of Caroline is represented therefore also as sublimation of the desire for fatherhood; instead of being able to dominate sons as he had been

dominated as a child by his father, it is suggested that he subjects his wife to violence in pursuit of a desire for mastery.

What is difficult to accept as a reader is McEwan's crude representation of Caroline's compliance in her treatment. Whereas McEwan admitted a challenge through Mary to Caroline's views of women's total subjection to their husband's will in the form of self-sacrifice, when he portrays Caroline's description of how she came to this utterly nihilistic view, her story is told in a monologue to a drugged Mary, thereby permitting the justification to proceed unchecked. The story is one of overt sado-masochism, pleasure not in the pain but in the fact of the pain, 'of being helpless before it and being reduced to nothing by it...being punished and therefore being guilty' (117). The depth of degradation and self-loathing suggested by McEwan gains force since it is narrated by Caroline herself. The sexual context of the violence is explicit, leading some to call McEwan a pornographer (Byrnes 1995a: 320). Yet the emotional subjection is equally repellent. Caroline is depicted as betraying a degree of self-knowledge which defies belief: 'I was ashamed of myself, and before I knew it, my shame too was a source of pleasure'; 'I wanted it more and more. I needed it'; 'I was terrified, but the terror and the pleasure were all one'; 'though I was sick with humiliation, I thrilled to the point of passing out'; 'I didn't doubt Robert's hatred for me...He made love to me out of deep loathing, and I couldn't resist. I loved being punished' (117). McEwan writes Caroline as accepting her treatment as 'inevitable' and 'logical', and that she even initiates the violence against her: 'Quite often I was

the one to initiate it, and that was never difficult. Robert was longing to pound my body to a pulp' (117–8).

Despite McEwan's treatise in the novel that Caroline desires to be annihilated, Caroline's involvement in the murder of Colin is depicted as the logical extension of the sado-masochistic relationship she finds herself in. It is as if Caroline recognises that the extent of her debasement is complete, and her willingness to die for the satisfaction of Robert's desire negates her usefulness to him. The only option is to help him to procure an unwilling victim.

The trajectory of the violence is traced beyond Caroline's near-death to lead towards Colin's demise. Whereas the *idea* of death is portrayed as having become an essential part of Caroline and Robert's sexual fantasies, the death of a third party can just as easily fulfil the fantasy. It is here that McEwan's portrayal of Caroline and Robert reaches an untenable position. Caroline is represented as complicit in Colin's murder, yet it is impossible to accept that a character who has been virtually annihilated, to the extent of accepting the 'inevitability' of her own self-sacrifice, could summon enough free will to resist her husband's sadistic intentions towards another person. The portrayal of Caroline is therefore more a product of male sexual fantasy than a believable characterisation.

Robert's characterisation is perhaps more believable, though particularly repellent. In discussing Robert's characterisation, McEwan has diminished his seriousness by portraying him as a mere caricature, 'a cartoon figure of extreme patriarchal domination' (Haffenden 1985: 180), part of the

'drawing of a relationship of domination' (179). In this, perhaps McEwan sought to replicate the parodic portrayal of the businessman who procures then 'rapes' a shop-window mannequin in 'Dead As They Come'—a comparison invited in *The Comfort of Strangers* by the scene which depicts Colin and Mary outside a shop-window display which features two androgynous mannequins. Unlike the relatively harmless outcome of 'Dead As They Come', where readers know that no harm is implied for a woman character, in *The Comfort of Strangers* the outcome is tragic, not comic or benign. A crime is committed and the culprits escape with little prospect of justice. Moreover, McEwan belittles the crime by writing in the police officer's statement that crimes such as these are 'obscene excesses' which are 'wearyingly common... belonging in a well-established category. This particular department had dealt with several such crimes, differing in details of course, in the past ten years' (132).

McEwan does however allow the possibility of justice in that the police officer is certain of catching the criminals, for they have been 'wilfully clumsy ... like leaving the razor behind, booking flights, travelling on legitimate passports ... it was as if being caught and punished was as important as the crime itself' (ibid.). In this way he achieves some of the moral balance that a writer such as John Fowles does in his story of kidnap and torture, *The Collector*, where the story is also told from the point of view of the victim. However, McEwan tries to represent the victims in this story as complicit, unresisting and internalising their oppressor's desires.

The Ubiquity of Sexual Domination and Subjection

The theme of subjection and domination in the portrayal of the English couple who are the main focus of the novel is worked out in a pair of characters who have apparently achieved equality in their relationship. McEwan, moreover, describes the couple as 'feminist': '[Colin] being a mild feminist, [Mary] rather a rather stronger one' (Haffenden 1985: 179). *The Comfort of Strangers* is not, however, an attempt to write a novel that is sympathetic to feminism. However, McEwan presents an argument in the novel that the feminist sympathies of his main characters in fact repress their desire to dominate or be dominated. The fact that McEwan portrays Colin and Mary's relationship as stale suggests that it is lacking some essential dynamic. What McEwan represents in this novel as the missing dynamic, is sexual sadism and slavery. As the English characters are increasingly drawn into the ambit of Robert and Caroline, they are portrayed as embracing a similar set of principles in their sexual fantasy life as the Italian couple espouse in their 'real' life. This theme has also interested other contemporary authors. In *The Collector*, John Fowles represents the objectification and kidnap of a young woman for the gratification of her abductor who negates her humanity and treats her like a thing—a butterfly to be collected. In Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*, a novel Auberon Waugh (1978) believed to be very similar to *The Comfort of Strangers*, there is an equivalent element of sexual exploitation and slavery in the plot. Waugh suggested in an article that the plot of *The Comfort of Strangers* bore more than a passing resemblance to Bowles's novel.

In McEwan's novel, however, it is the man who is enslaved, not the woman, as in Bowles's novel. Despite this, a number of elements of *The Comfort of Strangers* resonate with *The Sheltering Sky*: A couple are on holiday in a foreign country; unbearable heat features in the story; an intruder comes into their relationship; and sexual slavery is the outcome.⁵

The Comfort of Strangers is told from the perspective of Colin and Mary, who are on holiday in Venice in an attempt to rejuvenate their relationship. McEwan never names the city, perhaps to imply that it could be anywhere, and to imply that danger is implicit in unfamiliar surroundings. McEwan invites this interpretation by quoting the unconscious pact that travellers make when they leave home by quoting Cesar Pavese in the second epigraph: 'Travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and lose sight of all the familiar comfort of home and friends' (8). He also develops the idea in the novel that, although the characters' desire is to lose some of the structure in their lives that being 'on holiday' implies, that does not mean that the structures, such as the patriarchal one, which his characters would seek to deny or escape, do not still have a powerful influence upon their lives. Readers are also therefore asked to examine how these structures impinge upon their own life. The setting of the novel could therefore be anywhere since it is

⁵ McEwan was unfortunate to have suffered another accusation of plagiarism. When his novel *The Cement Garden* was published, Julian Gloag complained that he saw a resemblance to his own novel, *Our Mother's House* (1963). McEwan denied the charge on the grounds that he had not read the book (Hamilton 1985: 20) and challenged Gloag to 'make straight accusations and produce some textual similarities'. D'Elia and Williams (1986), in their study of McEwan's work, did track a small number of similarities (163–6), though they are not significant. Gloag's response was to write a novel called *Lost and Found* (1981) in which a young novelist wins the Goncourt prize with a brilliant novel written by another author (Amos 1985: 362).

implied that people internalise their structures and carry them around with them. Although the city is never named, McEwan makes so many implicit and intertextual references to Venice that it is impossible to believe that it is anywhere else, and sophisticated readers would recognise it straight away: the hotel has a 'cafe pontoon' (15); there are 'canal bridges' (12); the characters watch the 'water bus[es] ply their trade' (48), and they watch Robert's departure from the waterfront on the 'teeming lagoon' (56); the description of the unnamed St. Mark's Square is introduced as one of the 'great tourist attractions of the world' (48). In her article on the novel, Judith Seaboyer (1999) makes numerous, more specific connections between the locations of the novel's action in Venice, and the real city. Further, as d'Elia and Williams point out (1986: 233–6), McEwan makes close intertextual reference to Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* in describing it:

the roofline of the cathedral, where, it had once been written, the crests of the arches, as if in ecstasy, broke into marble foam and tossed themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculptured spray, as if breakers on a shore had been frost-bound before they fell. (50–1)

John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* reads as follows:

as if in ecstasy, the crests of the arches break into a marble foam, and toss themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculptured spray, as if the breakers on the Lido shore had been frost-bound before they fell. (Ruskin 1884: 1003.)

McEwan uses Ruskin's words here to suggest to readers that the novel is set in Venice without stating it explicitly, which helps to create in readers a sense of uncertainty about the distinction between 'reality' and 'fantasy'. This

uncertainty is shared with the principal characters, whose conscious experiences and perceptions are confused, unarticulated and unexamined in the course of the novel (e.g. 20–3). By contrast, their unconscious, represented in their dreams, representing their unconscious desires, are. The unspoken name of the city may also be read as a metaphor for the unspoken name of the danger that Colin and Mary find themselves in, for they never confront the concerns they have about their hosts or discuss the nature of the relationship they suspect between Caroline and Robert (e.g. 83). McEwan suggests, however, that even language would be insufficient to articulate their confusion: Robert describes English as ‘full of misunderstandings’ (27). However, it also reads as a playful device, to render readers and author complicit in the secret, as indeed McEwan suggests the order of things renders people complicit in patriarchy, the ‘principle of organization ... shaping institutions and individual lives’ (84).

By setting the novel in Venice McEwan is also able to exploit the well-known fact that the city can have a disorienting effect on visitors and render them vulnerable. This is done in two ways in the novel: both physical and mental. Mary and Colin frequently get physically lost, which renders them vulnerable to the ‘help’ offered them by Robert. In parallel, they have lost their way in their relationship, McEwan implies, equally rendering them vulnerable to the guidance of Robert in this respect—he not only shows them the way to his home, but also to his sadistic way of life; just as Mary and Colin follow him through the streets, so they follow his lead in introducing sadistic

fantasy into their own lives. McEwan describes the characteristics of the city in mental terms:

It was the total absence of traffic in the city that allowed visitors the freedom to become so easily lost. They crossed streets without looking and, on impulse, plunged down narrower ones because they curved tantalizingly into darkness ... There were no signs. Without a specific destination, the visitors chose routes as they might choose a colour, and even the precise manner in which they became lost expressed their cumulative choices, their will. And when there were two together making choices? (21)

Indeed, McEwan intended the city to be read as a state of mind (Haffenden 1985: 177). McEwan problematises the issue of free will and choice here. On the one hand, the city's structure is beguiling; and the lack of structure to the tourists' days—they are 'on holiday' as the couple remind each other constantly—means that they have the time to explore, and the inclination to be tempted. Even tourists crave a sense of structure, however, as the commercial availability of tourist maps testifies to, although McEwan ironically describes these as 'easily missed' (18). The available maps of the city are, moreover, described as useless, over-large and flimsy, fragmented or incomplete (19–20). Notwithstanding the inadequacy of the maps, they are redundant to the characters, for they leave them behind, making it certain that the pair will become lost:

Colin remembered that they should have brought the maps.
Without them they were certain to get lost.

However, he said nothing. (20)

Even this insight on the part of Colin goes unarticulated and unshared with his partner, the first of many failures to discuss the implications of their actions for themselves, which ultimately leads to their doom.

The passage in which McEwan refers to the city's ensnaring qualities (20), quoted above, also holds the psychological clue to the apparent 'choice' Colin and Mary make to return to Robert and Caroline's apartment. They do not discuss why they are going back. Their action may be interpreted as an obligation to help Caroline. But they have been shown to have read the signs in their most recent conversation, and they have recognised and shared the danger signals. McEwan therefore implies that it is paradoxically their free will to become trapped. In a similar vein, McEwan ponders the nature of choice and obligation just before Colin finally succumbs to his fate:

A narrow commercial street, barely more than an alley, broke the line of weatherbeaten houses. It wound under shop awnings and under washing hung like bunting from tiny wrought-iron balconies, and vanished enticingly into shadow. It asked to be explored, but explored alone, without consultations with, or obligations towards, a companion. To step down there now as if completely free, to be released from the arduous states of play of psychological condition, to have leisure to be open and attentive to perception, to the world whose breathtaking, incessant cascade against the senses was so easily and habitually ignored, dinned out, in the interests of unexamined ideals of personal responsibility, efficiency, citizenship, to step down there now, just walk away, melt into the shadow, would be so very easy. (112)

Although Colin is at this point physically free, McEwan's representation of Colin's awareness of how 'so very easy' it would be to escape 'as if completely free, to be released from the arduous states of play of psychological condition',

all evoke his obligations to Mary, and his psychological subjection before Robert.

The setting in Venice also invites a comparison of plot and characterisation with Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now*, which under Nicolas Roeg's direction was filmed in 1973 in a wintry and forbidding Venice, though McEwan says that he had not seen the film before he wrote his novel (Haffenden 1985: 177). In *Don't Look Now*, too, a couple visit Venice to revitalise their relationship (after the tragic death of their daughter); they are befriended by two locals and the man is led into a trap and murdered. McEwan also evokes a sense of sexual intrigue, secrecy and even decadence in setting the novel in Venice. For example, according to her biographer, Daphne du Maurier's family code word for lesbian was 'Venetian' (Foster 1993: 28). Sacher-Masoch's original study of sado-masochism, *Venus in Furs*, was completed in Venice. In another set of connections McEwan's novel also contains intertextual references to another study of unspoken sexual desires, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. McEwan's description of the music in Robert's bar (29–30), for example, reminds readers of the music of Mann's decadent Venice which, in turn, brings the evocation of Aschenbach struggling with homosexuality. The song which McEwan describes being played repeatedly in the bar as: 'sentimental ... the frequent chorus ... featured a sardonic "ha ha ha"' is strongly reminiscent of a specific song which Aschenbach hears. Mann describes the song as having a 'laughing refrain' which rang with a mocking note (Mann 1912; transl. [1966] 1971: 65). In

Death in Venice, Mann also portrays Aschenbach becoming obsessed with a young man, in much the same way as McEwan depicts Robert and Caroline becoming obsessed with Colin. Judith Seaboyer (1999: 963) further establishes that Colin and Mary's 'self-obsessed' grooming (*The Comfort of Strangers*: 13) mirrors Aschenbach's (Mann 1971: 73); the hotel barber's daubing 'the colour of ripe strawberries' (Mann 1971: 74) on Aschenbach's lips is likened to Robert's smearing blood on Colin's (128); and the fight between Mann's Tadzio and Jaschiu (78) is likened to the youths' antics on the beach in *The Comfort of Strangers* (98).

In using Venice in this way, McEwan is drawing upon a rich tradition of depicting Venice as a European city of decadence. Shakespeare had used its reputation when he subtitled his sexual tragedy *Othello* as '*the Moor of Venice*'. It is an equally ideal setting for this modern decadent sexual tragedy. The setting of the novel in Venice, Italy, was actually inspired by a visit that McEwan and his then wife, Penny Allen, made in 1978: 'something of our visit found its way into the book' (Haffenden 1985: 177).

In McEwan's tragedy, the subjection of Colin and Mary to hideous violence—Colin fatally, Mary vicariously—is the eventual outcome of the novel, but McEwan's argument in the book is not simply that two strangers become victims of the evil desires of two unbalanced individuals. McEwan wishes readers to believe that desires for domination and subjection also legitimately underlie the English couple's relationship, and that they are the key to their pleasure once they have been exposed to the latent violence in their

host's relationship. In the beginning it is the city which oppresses them, as McEwan describes 'the city in terms of a state of mind, and vice versa' (Haffenden 1985: 177). However, as contact with Caroline and Robert grows, fantasies of domination and subjection appear in their own relationship, as if, McEwan suggests, they have merely been repressed. The oppression which Colin and Mary are shown to feel between them at the beginning of the novel is represented as having grown out of a boredom with their intimacy in a stagnant relationship. This is adequately symbolised by the setting of the novel in a city synonymous with stagnation, an effect compounded by its oppressive heat, but also by the fact that they are claustrophobically depicted in most of the novel in bed (both at their hotel and at their hosts' apartment) or in their room. Even when they are out of doors, the limitations of the city environment appear to confine them: 'You know this place can be terribly suffocating sometimes...It's like a prison here' (51). McEwan describes their confinement as being both mental and financial: on the one hand he depicts Mary as resenting Colin's apathy to their predicament; together with the fact that: 'It had been his idea to come' (52). Colin's Hamlet-like inability to act to ameliorate their situation adds to Mary's resentment. On the other hand it is recognised that their 'flight is paid for and it doesn't leave for ten days' (ibid.). Their confinement, in the city, in their room and in their bed, is a mirror image of Caroline's confinement in her own apartment. In this way, McEwan connects Colin and Mary's fate to Caroline's—for Caroline is oppressed in and confined to her apartment by the same individual character. The obligations

they feel towards their hosts (who are portrayed as betraying the trust placed in them and therefore not deserving of Colin and Mary's sense of obligation) and their sheer passivity also limits their capacity for resistance: they know what they 'should do': 'We should send those cards' (51), 'We should have brought [the children] with us' (52); 'We should have gone to the hotel... We should turn our faces' (54); 'We should have brought our street maps' (55). What they 'can do' or 'could do' either remains unacknowledged or equally confining: 'We could get the train' (52), 'We can have a shower, and sit on our balcony and have anything we want brought up to us ... We can get into bed ... we'll close the shutters' (53). These choices remain unmade. However, it seems that what draws them back to Caroline and Robert's apartment is an acceptance of their fate, as if, McEwan suggests, this is the logical conclusion to their confusion. McEwan suggests this in writing the inevitable moment at which Colin and Mary's demise is affirmed in the most indeterminate exchange between the pair: 'Perhaps we should get off at the next stop' ... 'Perhaps' (104). No matter what the limitations and confines represented in their relationship, the intrusive effects of the city and its denizens prove even more limiting and constraining.

The novel opens with a scene of confinement which portrays Mary and Colin in bed, their dark green shutters closed but failing to keep out the noises of the city in the 'clouded, late afternoon heat' (9). The oppressive heat is mentioned again and again in the novel (e.g. 10, 12, 93, 102, 103) to symbolise the suffocation they each feel in each other's company and the stifling effect on

their independent action: the heat makes them 'incapable of looking after one another' (12) or even themselves. McEwan represents the obligations they feel for each other as 'excess baggage', weighing each other down needlessly (13). This aspect of the stultifying nature of their intimacy is expressed in terms such as 'clums[y] ... lugubrious' and 'cloying' (13), all synonymous with the effects of suffocation, heat and oppression. Silence rather than confrontation characterises their interaction (e.g. 17, 20), they even 'conducted their arguments in silence' (17). The important sense of invasion of their privacy is signalled from the outset: the voices of the people outside 'filled the darkened hotel room' (9), encroaching on their peace and privacy in the same way that Caroline and Robert are set to do. Indeed, McEwan implies that Mary and Colin have no free will and no chance for survival, for the presence of Robert and Caroline is effectively evoked at this point in the novel, where the narrator describes how the couple prepare themselves to go out 'as though somewhere among the thousands they were soon to join, there waited someone who cared deeply how they appeared' (11), which indeed is the case. The photographs Robert collects testify to the point, and Robert later describes Colin as looking 'well ... [l]ike an angel' (73).

McEwan illustrates the stagnation of Colin and Mary's relationship effectively by their not being on speaking terms for 'reasons they could no longer define clearly' (9), their sleeping in separate beds, their avoidance of eye contact and their inability to 'look [...] after one another' (12), an inability which recurs, with dire consequences, later in the novel. It is the burden of

knowing each other too well which brings about obligations which stifle their individuality—a condition evocative of Caroline’s relationship with Robert which brought about her dire injury, and her complicity in Colin’s murder. McEwan emphasises this parallel between the two couples by his choice of words which describe the constraint of the bond between them: ‘the city would recede as they locked tighter into each other’s presence’ (13), just as their destiny would become locked into that of their hosts. The lock metaphor is also evocative of Caroline’s own description of herself as ‘a virtual prisoner’ (119), and prefigures the vision Mary has of Robert and Caroline’s figures ‘locked and turning at her feet’ (130) in a pool of Colin’s blood.

McEwan depicts Colin and Mary’s seven-year-old relationship as mature and stable. It is marked by equality rather than domination by one over the other. In various respects the relationship appears to be one of compromise and familiarity, developed in the same way as McEwan portrays Stephen and Julie in *The Child in Time*. Indeed, in various ways we might see Colin and Mary as prototypes for the more rounded characters of Stephen and Julie in the later novel. In Colin and Mary’s relationship, however, the familiarity is represented as an uncomfortable limit on their freedom. McEwan suggests that they encumber each other psychologically: ‘they knew one another much as they knew themselves, and their intimacy, rather like too many suitcases, was a matter of perpetual concern’ (13). These psychological limits are not as confining or limiting as violence is in the Italian couple’s relationship, but, McEwan would have readers believe, they are just as

regressive. It is the obligation each feels for the other, however, which is their ultimate undoing, the lack of freedom in the relationship, as if they agree to be entrapped by the couple, as they have allowed themselves to be by the city.

Mary feels it as a prison; and there are numerous references to death: Mary is described 'like an apparition' (21); she talks of capital punishment, 'a life for a life' (24); the view from the quayside 'was dominated by a low, walled island, half a mile out, which was completely given over to a cemetery ... the bright mausoleums and headstones presented the appearance of an overdeveloped city of the future' (45); and there are many further references to the cemetery island (46, 63, 73, 103). They also talk of their own deaths (84, 86).

McEwan provides sufficient clues to read the relationship between Colin and Mary as Oedipal, a theme he had earlier explored in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*, where the female partner of the protagonist is a mother substitute. He also portrays elements of Colin and Mary's relationship to be like that of siblings, evoking the portrayal of brother/sister incest in *The Cement Garden*, where the brother and sister eventually acknowledge the similarities between them rather than their differences. McEwan uses both of these variations on the conventional sexual partnership to suggest vulnerability and weakness, especially in the face of the desires of the extremely patriarchal and dominating character of Robert. McEwan suggests the mother/son relationship in the portrayal of Mary and Colin at the start of the novel. Mary's 'noisy, argumentative dreams ... numbed her waking hours' (10), confusing the subject of her dreams, her children, with her interaction with her

partner. The noise and confusion of the dreams are therefore compared to the stability and silence which characterise her partnership with Colin. McEwan represents most of her dreams as ‘depict[ing] her children in danger and she is too incompetent or muddled to help’ (10). This proves to be a powerful commentary on the situation the characters are portrayed in: for they are in danger and too incompetent in reading the signs to act. McEwan suggests that she confuses Colin with a child, for her dream shows her children, instead of Colin, in bed with her. In describing Colin and Mary’s first sexual encounter in the novel, McEwan describes Mary’s attention to Colin as ‘tender, motherly’ (17). There is also an element of infantilism which McEwan had already explored more explicitly in his play, *Jack Flea’s Birthday Celebration*. From Mary’s perspective, Colin’s arms are described as crossed ‘foetally’ (58), his feet and buttocks are ‘small and firm, like a child’s’, his hair is ‘like a baby’s’ (59). Although McEwan suggests that the couple take turns at looking after each other (46), it seems that they each fail miserably and the portrayal of Mary as more maternal towards Colin than he paternal towards her, suggests that Colin’s responsibility is not fulfilled in this respect. Had McEwan portrayed them successfully taking turns at looking after each other, it would have been a powerful vindication of the equality of their relationship—recognising each other’s vulnerability and power in turn, negating the stereotypical dominance of the man over the woman in patriarchy.

McEwan’s portrayal of Colin’s sexuality is important in the novel, for the outcome of the narrative binds Colin sexually and physically to Robert’s

desire. McEwan includes a homosocial element in the novel as part of the male culture of Italy. For example, in St Mark's Square Colin and Mary witness, 'Two men holding hands, in search of somewhere to sit, stood pressed against their table' (51), and more explicitly, McEwan explains Robert and Colin's hand-holding matter-of-factly, for '[i]t was customary here for men to walk in public hand in hand, or arm in arm' (108), although it is not innocent: 'Robert held Colin's hand tightly, the fingers interlocking and exerting a constant pressure' (108). McEwan does not suggest that Colin's orientation is other than heterosexual. Indeed, McEwan portrays Colin resisting the idea of wearing women's clothing, the night-dress left by Caroline for one of them (60). Mary, on the other hand, is depicted as finding his wearing the night-dress arousing:

She pulled his curls free of the frilled collar, and felt for his body beneath the fabric. 'You look like a god. I think I'll have to take you to bed' ... 'You've no idea how good you look in it.' (60-1)

McEwan, however, depicts Colin's refusal to keep it on as absolute, for the narrator explains that Mary makes Colin wait for a full fifteen minutes before she retrieves it to go out to find their own clothes.

At the beginning of the novel, McEwan describes Mary and Colin's sexual relationship as routine and rather dull: it is 'friendl[y] ... familiar... ritual... secure... comfortable... generous and leisurely' (17). McEwan describes the two in ways which suggest they might be siblings, rather than lovers, noting their sameness rather than their differences, as he depicts the

brother and sister doing in *The Cement Garden*. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, Colin and Mary acknowledge this: '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' (17). Caroline is also given to comment on their bodies as 'both so finely built, almost like twins' (70). The androgynous quality of their relationship is effectively suggested by the tableau which they view in a shop-window featuring a bed on which a couple of mannequins are arranged. The dummies themselves are androgynous clones, distinguished as a man and woman only by their highly stereotypical clothing and the accoutrements of femininity and masculinity—on the one hand make-up, domesticity and motherhood signified by the internal nursery intercom; and on the other, masculinity, control and external communications signified by the clock, telephone and radio (21–2). The model couple are incongruously laid on their backs whereas their bodies are posed clearly to be displayed face to face. The device of using a shop-window dummy as an object of desire was earlier used by McEwan to represent the object of seduction and murder, in 'Dead As They Come', where he parodied men's dangerous sexual power-play. Robert is written just as parodically, though the imaginative outcome in *The Comfort of Strangers* is more ferocious than the earlier short story where the 'murdered' character is not human.

McEwan uses the tableau to parody a stereotypical order, especially the role of men in relation to power and control, including economic control. He establishes a number of implicit connections between the tableau in the shop

window and Colin and Mary's previous and subsequent behaviour. Like the shop-window dummies, Colin and Mary spend most of their time in bed. The two dummies are virtually identical, in the same way as McEwan represents Colin and Mary. Significantly, however, McEwan also has Colin and Mary view the same scene separately; they do not share what they think about it in the same way as they fatally fail to talk about Robert and Caroline's relationship and the way it is affecting them, in what amounts to a conspiracy of silence. Finally, the words used to describe the position of the dummies' legs, 'their arms and legs raised uselessly, like insects surprised by poison' (22), portends the circumstances of Colin's death: Mary is depicted as drugged by Caroline at the time, her legs are paralysed, and she can only watch helplessly. Colin himself is 'surprised by violence', and dies with 'his legs splayed before him' (129–30).

Whereas Mary and Colin's sexual relationship is portrayed by McEwan at the outset as familiar and somewhat dull, after they meet Robert and Caroline he shows their sexual relationship to be more vital and pleasurable, inviting readers to believe that the missing dynamic has been revealed to them. Immediately after their encounter with the Italian couple, and even although they have not discussed their perceptions and insights into the nature of their relationship, McEwan shows that the nature of their intimacy changes. They are portrayed as sleeping together in the same bed whereas before they had slept separately. More significantly, their lovemaking is described in terms which also suggests that sado-masochism is at the root of their desire—they

experience 'sharp, almost painful, thrills' (81). That the revived excitement of their relationship is described as 'startling' and 'surprising' implies the lack of control they are supposed to feel over their sensations and also the lack of conscious will in the situation in which they find themselves. Whereas it appears to represent a benign rejuvenation of first love, readers become aware that the turn their relationship is taking has sinister overtones. Although they discuss memories, mutual friends and delight in their new-found pleasure in each other, they singularly avoid discussion of the turning point in their experience—the 'chance' meeting with Robert. The discussion of the nature of the change in their relationship, however, ominously turns to the inevitability of death (84). Their not discussing their mutual fears creates, as McEwan acknowledges, 'a sense in which Colin and Mary had agreed about what was going to happen to them' (Haffenden 1985: 181). 'The course', like that of the boat in which they set out on their way to their inevitable fate, 'was set' (103).

The effect of meeting the other couple not only affects their love-making, but also their equitable relationship. Never is Colin depicted as authoritarian, in contrast to Robert, although, immediately after the two men's first encounter, Colin does assume a 'rough, distant authority' which McEwan describes as 'quite untypical' (44), and as they articulate their realisation about Caroline's sadistic treatment Colin is said to use a 'vehemence [which] surprised them both' (97).

McEwan makes explicit the pivot for what he calls the 'renewal' of their relationship: 'a sudden intruder in a novel' (84), implicitly Robert. The

'idyll' they experience is a false one, short-lived and lasting only so long as they remain apart from Robert and Caroline. The nature of the sojourn is not, of course, entirely benign, because what they enact alone together is a mirror-image of Caroline and Robert's relationship, which includes 'consent to a lifetime of subjection and humiliation' (86) where Colin's role in Mary's fantasy is feminine and masochistic prefiguring his victim status in the future. Perhaps the most vicious part of the fantasy is expressed through the character of Mary, that of 'hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin's arms and legs' (86), an extreme physical expression of domination and subjection which McEwan first proposed in one of his earliest short stories, 'Untitled'.

Although Mary is depicted as a feminist, there is little evidence of feminism in her behaviour with Colin except in so far as they take it in turns to 'look after one another'. Mary's self-description of her enterprise as part of an all-woman theatre group is also portrayed as a failure. Colin is also parodied in his unheroic attempt to rescue Mary when she is not even in difficulties while swimming, deconstructing the erotic fantasy of heroic rescue. The intertextual reference inverts the too-late warning in Stevie Smith's poem: Mary is waving, not drowning, but the pair of them are getting out of their depth in their involvement with Robert and Caroline. Neither of them is capable, at the end of the novel, of looking after the other, as they articulate their intention to do (46); both are helpless by the time they try to put the other's safety before their own (124–30). The significance of the gaze which, throughout the novel, has enabled Robert as voyeur to be in control, is reversed in the ending of the

novel, where Mary is against her will turned into a voyeur of the obscene domination of Colin. All that unites them is their shared gaze, an unspoken and powerless communication in the face of extreme physical violence.

Together Mary and Colin achieve a rather undynamic accommodation in the sexual politics of their lives. It is not as if McEwan avoids the matter of sexual politics. Rather he weaves it into the conversations Colin and Mary have about feminists (23–4), patriarchy (84) and sexual domination (96), but only in the abstract and general, not in relation to themselves. Significantly, in one of these conversations, McEwan sows a clue to Colin's failure to react to the danger he finds himself in with Robert. Colin argues with Mary that 'class dominance' (84) is a more fundamental explanation for the organisation of society than patriarchy. Perhaps McEwan wishes to suggest that Colin's downfall is due as much to the class dominance of Robert as to his exercise of extreme patriarchal domination. McEwan occasionally brings the issue of class dominance into his writing. Here, and in *Black Dogs*, the matter is referred to explicitly. In *Black Dogs* the subtext is of the Marxist sympathies of Bernard and June and it appears explicitly in Bernard's conversation with the taxi driver, the token working-class character in the novel (72) with whom Bernard confesses he cannot engage: 'I felt awkward with working class people' (78). In *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan depicts Robert clearly as class superior: his father was a diplomat who 'for many years ... lived in ... Knightsbridge' (32), and Robert had inherited a Venetian house large enough to be 'divided ... into five luxury flats' which provides his income (73); in addition, he is

portrayed as an individual of note for whose custom the local boatmen 'compete... ferociously' (56); furthermore, Robert is described as displaying a 'proprietary' demeanour towards Colin (103), suggesting the economic power to commodify the object of his desire. However, McEwan ascribes a mainly patriarchal motivation to Robert in the scene where he delivers the almost 'playful' punch to Colin (77), for it is preceded by Robert's diatribe on the rights of men to dominate women, and the unconscious desire of women to be dominated (76).

Interestingly, McEwan attests to his identification with Colin in the novel. In his interview with Haffenden he says that he found the novel painful to write: 'I felt very strongly identified with Colin, as if I was writing my own death in some strange way. I felt terribly sickened by it' (Haffenden 1985: 183). Which particular aspect of Colin's characterisation McEwan identifies with is a matter of speculation, whether it is the weak feminism, the vulnerability to sadistic treatment, or the ineffectual protector, for McEwan had in his writing up to this point indicated feminist sympathies. *The Imitation Game*, in which he depicts a strong-willed woman challenging the establishment, had been completed the year before *The Comfort of Strangers*. In later work, a procession of other weak and ineffectual men are portrayed: Leonard in *The Innocent*, Stephen in *The Child in Time*, and Joe in *Enduring Love*. A fuller examination of Colin's characterisation is the subject of the following section, which also considers the character of Robert in comparison, in more depth.

Domination and Resistance

The feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, in her essay 'Critical Cross-dressing' (1983), argues that the portrayal of men is just as problematic for critics as the portrayal of women. All too often, feminist analysis will consider the treatment of female characters by male writers and compare it with the portrayal of women by female writers. Showalter's point is that the portrayal of men should equally be subject to analysis. The way in which men are portrayed in an unquestioned dominant role, for example, is an obvious focus of interest in the work of many writers whom feminist critics would wish to examine. McEwan's portrayal of male characters may usefully be criticised in this way, although in the past he has earned the title of 'feminist writer' on the basis of *The Imitation Game*, which was discussed earlier in the chapter. In that play his portrayal of Cathy, who is destroyed by the misogynist male characters for questioning their power base, is said to be sympathetic. McEwan's plot in *The Comfort of Strangers*, which he wrote immediately following *The Imitation Game* also allows him to develop a feminist theme. He depicts Mary as a feminist, and Colin with feminist sympathies, but the novel fails to deliver any convincing feminist message. Furthermore it could be argued that the portrayal of the character of Robert and his successful sadistic project undermines the feminist promise of the McEwan who wrote *The Imitation Game*. Responding to Showalter's plea that the portrayal of men should be scrutinised, in this section of thesis the treatment of the two principal male characters will be examined.

There is a certain curiosity in McEwan's portrayal of Colin as the subject of Robert's extremes of sexual domination. In the present tense narrative it is Colin who is punched, humiliated, subjected to unwanted sexual advances, tortured and murdered. The character of Caroline reports her earlier suffering, which stopped only just short of death, and the way that McEwan describes her physical pain and the stiffness and pain she suffers testify to her continuing persecution. But there is a suggestion of continuing domestic violence—as in the real world—behind closed doors. Mary, too, would have been a more conventional victim. In portraying Colin's demise, McEwan forces readers to confront the issue that extreme forms of patriarchy are just as damaging to men as to women. Further, he problematises relationships amongst men: a theme to which he returns in *Enduring Love* and *Amsterdam*.

McEwan portrays Colin as the focus, literally, of Robert's gaze from the moment he arrives in Venice. Caroline reports that: 'Robert saw you both, quite by chance, the day you first arrived' (121). What the author means by 'quite by chance' in Caroline's speech seems to imply that the idea of victimising Colin grew unintentionally as more and more photographs are brought home (and, by implication, the more Robert stalks Colin, for Caroline is confined to the apartment). This portrayal of a man stalking another man is one to which the novelist returns in *Enduring Love*. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, however, McEwan attempts to convince us that Caroline is fully implicated in Colin's murder by showing her to be involved in the planning—taking the initiative in displaying the photographs on the wall by their bed,

where she and her husband 'would lie ... into the early morning making plans' (122). The connection between Colin's subjection, Robert's sadism, Caroline's masochism and the murder are crystallised in this image, for the bed is established as the site of Robert's sexual brutality in Caroline's story of her own treatment, and each aspect of the plot may be read as associated with Robert's sexual desire. At no point is Caroline herself written as a sadist. Her collusion with Robert, rather, can be read as an indicator of her complete mental subjection just as much as her broken back is a sign of her physical subjection.

To emphasise the point that Colin alone is the subject of Robert's attention, McEwan presents readers with objective evidence in the form of photographs. Colin alone appears in all of the photographs McEwan describes (121–2), and McEwan is meticulous in showing how, even when Mary is present in a scene or her presence is implied, the enlargements are cropped to excise her. That Colin is the focus of sexual attention in particular is signified in the picture of him naked on a bed. Readers must imagine that either Robert has spied on him in his hotel room, or that Caroline did so when she came into her guests' room while they were sleeping. It is also significant that the prints are all either enlargements from black and white film or Polaroid photographs, both forms of obtaining home-made prints which ensure privacy and guard against the possibility of censorship or witnesses. In turn, the various pictures provide evidence of the extent of Robert's surveillance: the pictures of Colin on his hotel balcony and entering the hotel confirm that Robert has spied on

Colin at his hotel; the picture of Colin and Mary crossing a deserted square with a dog in the foreground confirms that the man they glimpse, other than the one stacking chairs (21), was Robert, who was even then stalking them. It also confirms that meeting him at the point they do (25) is far from accidental.

Robert is portrayed as an adversary not to be underestimated especially in comparison to Colin. Robert is described in terms which leave no doubt as to his physical power. McEwan represents him as ape-like—a quality he attributes to a youth on the beach in a later scene (98–101), and reminiscent of the ape-lover of Sally Klee in his short-story ‘Reflections of a Kept Ape’. The allusion at once represents Robert as a primitive throw-back, but it also alludes to his physical power: Robert’s ‘arms were exceptionally long and muscular’, his hands are ‘large, the backs covered with matted hair’, his chest is a ‘thick pelt’ upon which McEwan places the menacing icon of a ‘gold imitation razor-blade’ (26)—an image which he evokes again in the form of the cut-throat razor which becomes the murder weapon. While Robert is described as particularly hirsute, Colin by contrast is described as a complete opposite. In a minute description of Colin McEwan portrays him as having ‘hairless legs’, on his back grows ‘a fine down’, his eyebrows are no more than ‘thick pencil lines’, his hair is ‘unnaturally fine, like a baby’s’ and ‘fell in curls on to his slender womanly neck’ (56). In contrast to Colin’s fineness and slenderness, Robert’s shoulders are ‘massive’ (32); Robert lifts a leaden model effortlessly while Colin has to use two hands to hold it (71); and Robert’s hand is described as ‘enormous’ (128) as it is shown around Colin’s neck.

From the first encounter, McEwan begins to trace the remorseless escalation of violence, made all the more menacing because of the apparent beneficence with which the guests are treated, their innocent trust and their failure to read warning signs or communicate them to each other. McEwan makes Robert's physical contact first apparently friendly, then coercive. At the first contact, Robert 'caught [Colin] cordially by the wrist' (26) in a grip which is 'loose but unremitting' (26), yet McEwan transfers the awareness of latent violence to Colin, as he tries to release himself 'without appearing violent'. There is a similar hint of latent violence in Robert's actions when McEwan represents Robert closing Mary's fingers around a match box and squeezing (42). McEwan also implies the force of Robert's insistence as he 'pull[s] them ... down the street', when it takes 'much effort' (27) to stop him. McEwan makes it clear to readers from the outset that Robert's intention is to dominate Colin but not Mary, in that, although Robert drops his hold on Mary when she resists him, Colin has to 'jerk his hand free' (27). McEwan portrays Robert's consistent policy of seeking physical contact with Colin, as by 'sliding his arm around Colin's shoulder', and his deliberate exclusion of Mary by turning his back on her, separating Colin from his partner; he also 'steered' Colin towards Caroline, and kept his hand on Colin's shoulder (107-8). Robert is always in control, always separating Colin from Mary, not least to take him away to his bar in preparation for the final act of total domination.

While the early contacts may be interpreted as friendly, they should also be interpreted as over-familiar and may increasingly be regarded as sexually

provocative. For example, Robert ruffles Colin's hair while he is slumped asleep over the table (42), and winks at Colin to invite him to conspire with him (29). The wink which Robert directs at Colin after he has punched him in the stomach might also be interpreted as inviting him to share a joke—McEwan has after all suggested that the punch is almost playful. It is interpreted not as a joke, however, but rather as the assertion of Robert's authority over Colin, like that of a violent husband or of a brutal father. Furthermore, the act of cutting Colin's wrist is also described by McEwan as 'almost playful' (129). McEwan characteristically portrays brutal violence in an apparently benign fashion: readers are reminded of the child molester who 'gently' lifts his victim into the canal in 'Butterflies'. The playfulness, like the gentleness, hides a darker purpose, with which it is shockingly juxtaposed.

McEwan twice portrays Robert with his physical grasp on Colin—resting his hand on his forearm as if to pin him down—while failing to grasp Mary (26). Mary simply evades him by defensively folding her arms. This presages Robert's forearm on Colin's chest as he begins his torture. There are many such indications of inappropriate familiarity giving way to overt dominance. McEwan shows Robert leading Colin by the elbow, not quite letting go, and standing over Colin, who has to twist awkwardly, effectively evoking the image of Caroline (75), who is described as sitting and wincing painfully because of her back injury. The hand which Robert momentarily rests on Colin's shoulder (76) soon begins to massage it while he recites his litany of patriarchy about powerful men and their attractiveness to women and, by

association, to men. In retrospect readers re-interpret what might appear as overt homosocial behaviour as a homosexual statement, as Robert prosecutes his advances towards Colin. McEwan soon transforms the hand which massages Colin's shoulder into a fist which strikes him in the stomach with 'a relaxed easy blow' (77). Here, again, McEwan toys with readers' perceptions, not only writing the violence as apparently playful, but also describing the consequent effects of Colin fighting for breath as 'laughing noises' (ibid.).

McEwan portrays Colin's capacity for resistance as limited by his position as a stranger and as a guest, as if conventional manners are more important than safety and as if to mock the misplaced trust that he shows. Nevertheless, McEwan does portray Colin as attempting to resist Robert's insistence. For example, he cautions Mary that 'We don't have to explain ourselves' (26) on their first encounter with Robert; and it is Mary who concedes that Robert can guide them to a restaurant, while McEwan portrays Colin as prepared to challenge Robert's treatise on feminism (28). Likewise, McEwan portrays Mary rather than Colin as the first to concede to Robert's imperatives on their second meeting despite Colin's protestation:

'You will accept my hospitality.' ...

Robert pushed his chair in to allow Mary to pass.

Colin tugged at her skirt, 'Wait a minute though ...' ... Colin stood too, ... 'Wait ...'

But Robert was handing Mary through the space between the tables. Her movements had the slow automation of a sleep-walker. Robert turned and called impatiently to Colin. 'We'll take a taxi.' (55-6)

However, McEwan shows that it is Colin who makes the final, fatal though banal suggestion that brings their path back into proximity with Caroline and Robert: 'Perhaps we should get off at the next stop and walk through. It will be quicker than going right round the harbour' (104).

A bisexual element in Robert and Colin's portrayal is overt, almost to suggest that gender is irrelevant in sexual relations, in much the same way as he portrays the same-sex attraction without comment in *Enduring Love*. Colin had earlier confessed to a degree of femininity in his sexual desire:

Colin 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. (83)

Although McEwan attempts to explain in the novel that it is normal for men to hold hands or link arms as they walk in public, it is clear that he is not only depicting what J. R. Banks in his critical article, 'A Gondola Named Desire', describes as part of the Mediterranean culture. Furthermore, McEwan narrates that the pressure Robert exerts in holding Colin's hand is particularly tight suggesting coercion rather than seduction, so that, if Colin wanted to withdraw, he would require some force, which would be interpreted as insulting. In addition, the route the characters take seems designed to afford maximum display of Colin with Robert. Indeed, Colin is the focus of Robert's conversations on the journey and one man is described as pinching Colin's bottom hard (108), a form of unwanted sexual attention frequently attributed to Italian men towards women, and to be read here as further evidence of the growing escalation of violence which McEwan is portraying.

The nature of the bar which McEwan attributes to Robert's ownership is also ambivalent. Typically in British culture and tradition a bar is where men come to drink together to reinforce their masculinity. McEwan's description of the music in the bar reminds readers of the music played in Thomas Mann's decadent Venice, a similarity which in turn conjures up the image of Aschenbach struggling with his homosexual desire for a young boy (Mann 1971, 4), as referred to above (p. 163–4). Ironically, it is only in the bar that Colin is portrayed resisting Robert at all effectively, although all he refuses from him is a cigarette (110); perhaps, more importantly, his attempt at extracting an explanation about the grainy photograph of himself on the balcony which Mary noticed is not insistent enough (111). Robert's cryptic explanation of his actions in telling his friends that Colin is his lover does not arouse in Colin any real concern; instead McEwan has Colin hesitate to question Robert's motive. McEwan therefore produces a poignant moment when Colin perceives the possibility of escape (112), as quoted above (p. 162), because by then it is too late and his free-will has been stripped away. What keeps Colin with Robert, McEwan suggests, are the unexpressed, perhaps inappropriate psychological responsibilities and obligations—the obligation of the politeness of a tourist towards a local, of a failed musician towards a wealthy business man, of a guest towards his host, of a tourist 'gratified to be talking at last to an authentic citizen' (30). These are mirrored in the relationship between Colin and Mary, where similar unacknowledged and unspoken obligations and responsibilities are portrayed. In not allowing

Colin the physical and psychological opportunity to challenge his companion, to perceive the danger he is in, and escape, McEwan seals Colin's fate.

Interestingly, the fact that Mary is effectively being held hostage to ensure Colin's return is not an explicit part of the narrative at this point, making the interplay between the two male characters the sole focus of explanation and interest. Significantly, Colin is written as if he allows himself to be dominated just as McEwan invites us to believe that Caroline submits to Robert willingly. It is difficult, nevertheless, to imagine how a character might guess at the evil intent of a character like Robert. McEwan, however, was aware of the extent to which he had written Colin's collusion in his fate:

What is interesting is the extent to which people will collude in their own subjection, which is true not only of Caroline in relation to Robert but also of Colin. There is something about Colin's behaviour 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. (Haffenden 1985: 181)

It is this quality which makes Colin at once loathed by the dominant Robert and attractive to him as a victim. Robert's speech about his new bar manager compares Colin unfavourably with the manager as proactive, not submissive (79). The point is not lost on Colin for it follows upon the scene where Robert punches Colin in the stomach. And Robert's repetition of Mary's 'just your man' (*ibid.*) applies equally to Colin as to the bar manager, for Colin has been chosen by Robert as just his man to be the object of his sadistic desire.

Even as McEwan evokes the menace of Robert and Caroline's final approach towards Colin, he portrays Colin's misplaced responsibility of politeness as a guest, which requires him to pick up an overturned bottle of champagne rather than escape. When Robert and Caroline do close in on him and begin their obscene seduction, McEwan depicts him as 'paralysed by sheer incomprehension' (127), just as surely as Mary is paralysed by drugs. Uncharacteristically, the first overtly violent action which McEwan describes is Colin's when he attempts escape from Robert and Caroline—cutting Caroline's lip and delivering a blow to Robert's shoulder (128). McEwan depicts Colin's qualified surrender, the first part of which—'I'll do whatever you want' (129)—echoes Caroline's chant of subjection, 'You'd do anything for the one you love—even let them kill you' (66). The 'rope of blood' released by Robert's slash at Colin's wrists, which McEwan sickeningly describes as 'almost playful' (129) in much the same way as he described Robert's punch to Colin's stomach, is a compelling image which at once evokes the notion of bondage signified by Robert and Caroline's reality, Colin and Mary's recent bondage fantasies and the bond between Colin and Mary. The 'rope' significantly falls just short of uniting the two of them, or affording them a means of escape. With both protagonists helpless, the one drugged, the other bleeding to death, Colin's bargaining power is nullified.

McEwan suggests that Colin is victimised because he does not uphold the patriarchal values which Robert professes. As Hartmann (1981) argues, as quoted above (p. 145), patriarchy is a network of men who conspire together

to dominate women. Clearly, as the analysis of the relationship between Colin and Mary reveals, Colin does not subscribe to this view. He invites his own destruction at Robert's hand because he is not in patriarchal collusion with Robert—worse, he is portrayed as in collusion with 'the feminists' in the person of Mary. However, Kiernan Ryan also suggests that Robert, whom he calls 'a closet homosexual' (Ryan 1994: 36), exacts the death penalty from Colin to expiate his own 'guilty loathing' at his own betrayal of his father's authoritarian masculinity through his erotic fixation upon Colin (Ryan 1994: 34). There is only one point in the novel where Robert is portrayed as even remotely sympathetic, where there is a 'trace of regret in his voice' (113), and McEwan ensures that readers are convinced that Robert has allowed himself to be caught out.

McEwan clearly wishes readers' sympathy to lie with Colin and Mary although he affords his characters little opportunity to survive, since he suggests that they contribute to their own downfall. In the Haffenden interview (1985: 181), McEwan attests to belief in the Foucauldian theory that structurally there exist oppressors on the one hand, and those who desire to be oppressed, or at least, those who are powerless to resist, on the other. Graham Greene, whose studies of human and political exploitation mirror some of McEwan's own concerns, exposes a similar social collusion in *Our Man in Havana*. Vacuum-cleaner salesman and suspected British spy Wormold is interviewed by the friendly but suspicious Police Captain Segura:

'How are you so certain that Cifuentes is not my agent?'

‘By the way you play checkers, Mr. Wormold, and because I interrogated Cifuentes.’

‘Did you torture him?’

Captain Segura laughed. ‘No. He doesn’t belong to the torturable class.’

‘I didn’t know there were class-distinctions in torture.’

‘Dear Mr. Wormold, surely you realise there are people who expect to be tortured and others who would be outraged by the idea. One never tortures except by a kind of mutual agreement...Dr Hasselbacher [a suspected German agent] does not belong to the torturable class.’

‘Who does?’

‘The poor in my own country, in any Latin American country. The poor of Central Europe and the Orient. Of course, in your welfare states you have no poor, so you are untorturable. In Cuba the police can deal as harshly as they like with émigrés from Latin America and the Baltic States, but not with visitors from our country of Scandinavia. It is an instinctive matter on both sides. Catholics are more torturable than Protestants, just as they are more criminal...’ (Graham Greene 1958: 164)

This theory of collusion is also depicted in the relationship between Robert and Caroline in *The Comfort of Strangers*. It is when the couples’ two worlds intersect that the negativity of this power relation is fully realised, and this will be considered next.

Collusion in Oppression

The power relation depicted between Robert and Caroline is one of total dominion and submission. This appears not only in the subjection of

Caroline to domestic violence, which is no less brutal for being described from the point of view of Caroline herself as a source of pleasure, but also in the negative way in which Caroline's actions are harnessed to the subjection of another human being. Indeed, McEwan also suggests that Mary herself is equally culpable simply by witnessing the murder of Colin: she is described as being treated by the policemen 'as though tainted by what the assistant commissioner himself had called "these obscene excesses"'. Behind their questions was an assumption ... that she was the kind of person they could reasonably expect to be present at such a crime' (132). McEwan also suggests that this is not completely fantastic, for he has already represented Mary's imagination to be capable of 'obscene excesses' (86).

The two couples are depicted together only in four short episodes in the novel (74, 77–80, 106–7, 124–30), most of which are centred upon Colin. In each, the submission of Caroline to her husband is made plain. Caroline's implied threat to her guests, that she would keep their clothes from them if they did not stay, is after all portrayed as an order from her husband: 'he told me not to let you have your clothes until you'd agreed ... Robert insisted' (67). McEwan clearly implies the gravity of threat that Caroline is responding to: 'If you don't stay Robert will blame me. ... Please!' (68); and the implied internalisation of violence on the part of Caroline is signified in the 'ferocity' of her voice (*ibid.*). The harshness with which Robert summons Caroline to drink a toast to their guests also signifies his dominance, while Caroline's obvious lack of enjoyment in her drink and her rapid exit testify to the

discomfort she is portrayed as feeling in his presence. In addition, Caroline herself is physically injured by Colin as he attempts to reach Mary (128).

However, in the final scene of sexual domination over Colin, Caroline appears to have been liberated, almost transfigured by her joint subjugation of another person. McEwan's representation of Caroline in this way suggests that Caroline as a desire-free masochist can derive pleasure from the torture of another person by allowing herself to be used as bait to lure another victim in. In addition, she is shown to find Colin sexually attractive herself, suggesting that, as an act of submission, she is prepared to sacrifice the object of her desire to her oppressor. In so doing, McEwan suggests that the struggle for power is capable of corrupting all human relations.

Complicity

Caroline seems an unlikely character to cast in a dominating role, yet McEwan does seek to represent her as such. He gives readers enough evidence of Caroline's treatment by her husband to interpret her behaviour as another aspect of her subjection. Nevertheless, McEwan does show Caroline in a dominating role, exerting a considerable degree of control over Mary. He thus paints the character of Mary in a poor light, showing up her failure to perceive her predicament, a characteristic shared with Colin, treating the situation she finds herself in with Caroline only as a theoretical problem, not one in which she is engaged. Like Colin, Mary is constrained by her status as

visitor and guest, made gullible by her sense of 'ordinariness', and by her sense of distance from her hosts' troubled existence.

At the outset Mary is portrayed as the antithesis of Caroline, though McEwan presents the case that they are both subject to the same patriarchal order of things which neither of them has the power to resist. Physically, Mary is agile, performing her yoga exercises elegantly and effortlessly compared to Caroline's stiff disability. Politically, Mary is apparently 'liberated', with feminist sympathies: she was once a member of an all-female theatre group, whereas Caroline is incredulous about the feasibility of women's independence from men. Mary is divorced and independently chooses not to live with her partner; Caroline is physically and mentally dependent on her husband, and is confined to her apartment by his physical and emotional cruelty.

Caroline is sketched in bare outline—scarcely there at all. Indeed, in the first glimpse Mary catches of her she is described as: 'disembodied', 'small' and 'pale' (63), a face looking through glass doors from the outside balcony. Caroline's propensity for looking without being seen, as she admits she has watched the sleeping couple (63), and the way she examines Mary 'as though she herself could not be seen' (64), implies the insubstantiality of her body. Caroline is represented as virtually disowning her body, negating its corporeality: 'Caroline had withdrawn her hand and stared at where it lay in her lap as though it were no longer her own' (70). This implies an internalisation of a view of her as a part-object, not a whole being. Indeed, McEwan describes her in scarcely human terms—her face is 'so geometrically

oval' that it is 'featureless in its regularity'. To emphasise the anonymity, her features are described as if they 'might have been designed in committee to meet the barest requirements of feasibility'; her mouth is 'no more than the word suggested, a moving, lipped slit beneath her nose' (70), her smile is 'a horizontal line' (106). McEwan changes these neutral features to show how she becomes animated when her conversation turns to total subjection as an affirmation of 'love'. Whereas she is at one point described as 'without age' (70), she appears 'suddenly younger...like an embarrassed teenager' (65); then 'more child than teenager' (66), as she becomes excited by her discussion of the extent of her capacity for self-sacrifice. At the prospect of Colin's imminent subordination, her appearance changes to the extent that: 'Out of context, it might have been difficult to recognise Caroline' (113). Sensuality, 'dignity' and sympathy all appear in the description of her transformed features, though her skin remained 'a toneless grey' (114), ominously portending her role as the angel of death. Though she had also first appeared to Mary severely dressed, as the denouement approaches, she is described in dress which is self-consciously clinical, 'like a ward-sister', 'more efficient in white' (113), signalling her sinister role in drugging Mary.

When Caroline and Mary are depicted alone, Caroline is in apparent control of the proceedings. This is not surprising in the normal context of hostess and guest, but the motivation for her control is not benign courtesy, but manipulative coercion. She does not only look in on her guests to assure herself of their comfort but remains watching them for half an hour to observe

them, and she tells Mary what she did not to be 'fair' (65), as the sprig of honesty in the guest room implies (85), but to disconcert her guest. McEwan also portrays her not only laundering her guests' clothes, but locking them in the bathroom cupboard until they promise to stay for dinner. This coercion, stepping over the boundaries of what is acceptable in attending to the comfort of strangers, should have been enough to alert Mary to the perverseness of the situation. Mary fatally fails to perceive the danger. McEwan depicts Mary as a witness to Caroline's nihilistic demeanour and shows her listening to Caroline's account of the sadistic nature of the relationship between herself and her husband without comment. As Caroline recounts her capacity for total subjection as if it is a romantic idyll, equating masochistic female acquiescence with 'love', McEwan forestalls Mary's opportunity to challenge Caroline's acceptance of the sadistic nature of men by re-introducing Colin into the picture, demurely covering his nakedness with 'a small white hand towel' (66). Here Mary's experience of her more equal relationship with her partner implies her negation of the premise of female subordination, but, crucially, she does not confront Caroline with her opposing views.

Nevertheless, McEwan represents Mary in a more favourable light when he suggests that she is motivated by genuine feminist sympathy for a woman whom she suspects is the victim of abuse. By contrast, he portrays Caroline unsympathetically using emotional blackmail to secure Mary's co-operation. Caroline uses her status as a victim to coerce Mary and Colin, first to stay for dinner: 'If you don't stay Robert will blame me', accentuated by

'ferocity' in her entreaty (68), then to visit again since she 'can't walk downstairs' and 'can't get out' (80).

Caroline is portrayed as appearing nervous and uncomfortable in Mary's company, in constant fear of Robert's reprisals even in his absence since she has internalised his surveillance of her, which, as Foucault would suggest, is the ultimate sign of the absolute power of the oppressor. McEwan even casts Caroline in a subordinate role to Mary where Caroline's response is to 'wheedle for praise' (69). Certainly, Mary is portrayed as more assertive than Caroline or Colin. McEwan traces these nuances delicately. Mary is less easily blackmailed over the return of their clothes than Colin, who concedes that he would rather eat than argue about it, despite his obvious embarrassment (67), whereas Mary attempts to negotiate; and she folds her arms defiantly in responding to Caroline's intrusive questioning about her relationship with Colin (70).

The implication that Colin and Mary return to Caroline and Robert's flat out of concern for Caroline's well-being is clear from Mary's explanation to Caroline for their return: 'I wanted to talk to you' (114). McEwan also implies that it was a mutual decision on the part of Colin and herself, following the brief and inconclusive discussion they have about the possibility that Caroline is being beaten by her husband (96). They do not take a decision openly, but drift apparently aimlessly in the direction of the apartment. Once alone with Caroline, Mary insists upon questioning Caroline in the same way that she had persisted in questioning Mary about Colin. McEwan presents

readers with Caroline's catalogue of abuse and torture in a long monologue, uninterrupted by any potentially balancing comment by Mary. Caroline's story is told, partly as a confession, but also as an essential part of the mental torture which Caroline is intent on inflicting upon Mary. However, Mary's response to Caroline's careful explanation represents a misunderstanding of Caroline's position. Mary is shown to believe that Caroline's planned journey is as a kind of escape from her husband in order to achieve independence, in the same way that McEwan implies other 'ordinary people' (120) might. Mary's concern is depicted as that of a feminist for a sister, a guest for her hostess whom she has pressed on personal matters, ignorant of the truth. The trust which she has placed in Caroline, and the liberal belief that any ordinary woman would wish to escape domination, is betrayed. Her well-meaning feminist project of rescuing Caroline, like her attempt at the all-female theatre group, therefore fails, as much because of Mary's lack of perception as her ineffectuality in the face of brutal misogyny. Richard Brown (1994) therefore characterises Mary as just another of McEwan's 'poignantly futile feminist heroines' (105).

McEwan's depiction of Mary's innocence, ordinariness and goodness in the face of corruption invites a simple comparison between good and evil, but readers find it difficult to accept a simple portrayal of Caroline as evil. If she is destructive, it is because her will has been subordinated to her husband's; her capacity for distinguishing between good and evil is subverted. Yet McEwan portrays Caroline's involvement in the final denouement without sympathy. Caroline shows Mary the evidence of her obsession with Colin like

a child showing new toys to a friend. McEwan even has Caroline invoke divine providence in bringing the English couple to the flat: 'it was as if God was in on our plan' (123). In a particularly brutal turn of the plot, Caroline obliges Mary to witness Colin's murder as if the act itself is insufficient to fulfil their desires, without its confirmation by a witness. In so doing, Mary is forced to recognise the absolute power of Robert, not as Caroline does, as a desire-free masochist, but as an involved onlooker rendered helpless by drugs.

A character such as Caroline is unable to resist her husband's power. Rather than regard her as responsible for her actions, readers see her as as much a victim as Colin is. We realise that her subjection is complete when she consents to her husband's killing her. In the story Caroline recounts to Mary, after Robert's failure to kill her (or her failure to die), he makes no further attempt, even though we might imagine it is easier to kill a willing and vulnerable wife than to stalk, entrap and murder a stranger. Once Caroline's ultimate sacrifice has been demanded and consented to, no further recognition of Robert's power can be exacted. The sadist needs to find a new way of achieving recognition of his domination, and the use of his totally acquiescent wife to procure victims renders a further, and renewable, source of satisfaction. Rather than sacrificing her own life, her husband therefore demands her collusion in effecting another's death, preferably someone's with whom she can identify—not independent and forceful Mary, but polite, deferential Colin, who will not even defend himself when arbitrarily punched in the stomach. This solution also invokes Caroline's humiliation at seeing her husband become

obsessed with another 'lover', and the negation of her unique relationship with him as she enables Robert to possess him.

The lack of emotion McEwan accords to Caroline before the murder is mirrored in the way he depicts Mary after Colin's death. Like Caroline, emotion in Mary was 'simply unavailable to her' (131), and, in a phrase with which McEwan evokes Caroline's physical degradation, 'pity would have broken her' (*ibid.*). McEwan thus establishes a series of similarities between the two women: their respective presence is required at the scene of the crime; they exhibit a lack of normal emotional response; Mary's need to stop and rest en route to the hospital is reminiscent of Caroline's painful walking; and Mary's 'wheedling' for affection (133) echoes the way Caroline had 'wheedle[d] for praise' (69). The nihilism which Mary feels at the end of the novel appears to mirror Caroline's wish for annihilation. In this way, McEwan suggests that what unites the two women is more than what sets them apart. They are both subject to the same patriarchal order, both victims of it. McEwan suggests that it is by no means a simple matter to negate it. At the end of the novel, McEwan shows Mary, the arch-feminist, and witness to the horrendous murder of her partner, beginning to accept the sado-masochistic premise of patriarchal sexual relations as 'a powerful single organizing principle which distorted all relations' (134).

Rape

McEwan depicts rape as an extreme form of sexual domination in two of his novels: *Black Dogs* and *The Innocent*. In both novels, he represents it in the context of military oppression and domination. This potent mixture of sex and violence in a military context implies a critique of war as a manifestation of patriarchy that echoes his argument in *The Imitation Game*. This is repeated in a rather more abstract form in *or Shall We Die?* None of these depictions of rape are unproblematic. In *Black Dogs*, the portrayal of rape signifies brutal oppression and maximum humiliation because, in the account of the Maire, albeit disputed, the woman is 'raped' by a Gestapo dog. However, the Maire's story is never fully articulated in the novel and it is never resolved. McEwan shows that his story is contested throughout, interrupted and rebutted by Madame Auriac, whom Bernard is inclined to believe rather than June who believes the Maire (163). Madame Auriac instead condemns the story of the bestial nature of the rape as a further attempt to humiliate the victim in revenge for her not having responded to the men of the village. In one sense McEwan subordinates the fact of the woman's rape to the question of whether she was raped by a dog or a man, negating the subjective experience of the fictional woman. McEwan emphasises the fictional nature of the incident in an epilogue to the novel in which he denies any historical basis for the Maire's story. In the novel itself, the Maire offers as evidence of the veracity of his report the idea that such methods were also used in the 'interrogation centres of Lyon and Paris'. Such evidence was a feature of the

real-life gathering of information about Gestapo torture in the aftermath of the war, evidence that Lord Russell of Liverpool (1954) used to argue that the systematic nature of the torture in different places was evidence that it was planned and ordered from the centre. In fact, Lord Russell's account of the atrocities conducted by the Gestapo in France do include accounts of dogs being used to terrorise prisoners (Russell 1954: 207), though none of dogs being trained to rape. However, such sexual fantasies have been recorded elsewhere (e.g. Friday 1975: 69, 87, 300). Nevertheless, McEwan emphatically notes in a postscript to *Black Dogs* that the Maire's story is fictional (176).

In the first rape scene in *The Innocent*, McEwan depicts the classic relation of domination between a soldier and woman civilian. The rape is particularly callous since the victim is depicted as having been shot in both legs: her capacity to resist is nil. Unusually in McEwan's fiction, the atrocity is summararily punished by the soldier's superior (84). The execution is salutary, although it appears as rough justice and therefore equally wrong. The incident is recounted through Maria's memory, indicating her first-hand experience of the injustice inherent in military oppression.

McEwan seeks to portray Leonard's attempted rape of Maria as a game gone wrong. He says that he tried to show it as a 'colossal misunderstanding' (Leith 1990: 9), although it reads in the novel as a male sexual fantasy of domination and submission, acted out for the gratification of

the perpetrator. McEwan also invites readers to imagine that his partner will enjoy the experience:

‘Take off your clothes ... Do as I tell you and you’ll be all right... Take it all off or I’ll do it for you’. She pressed herself against the wall. She shook her head. ...He thought this might be the first indication of success. When she began to obey she would understand that this pantomime was all for pleasure, hers as well as his. (81)

This theory of masochism, echoing the dummy’s imagined pleasure in dying in ‘Dead as They Come’, and Caroline’s masochism in *The Comfort of Strangers*, is resisted in this novel, for Maria is portrayed as acting differently from the earlier characters. The scene is all the more powerful in that it turns the secret idyll that Leonard and Maria share, where Maria has been the sexual guide and mentor, into a reflection of the military power exercised by the allies, and the submission of a defeated nation. Maria is also portrayed in a position of relative power in the relationship. Maria’s sexual authority is established at the beginning, while Leonard is the eponymous innocent of the title, ready to be educated in sexual manners: ‘They ... lay with their arms round each other in the way she had prescribed’ (57); ‘Maria taught Leonard to be an energetic and considerate lover’ (77). The relationship allows Maria a sense of control and self-empowerment that had not been part of her experience before: ‘How wonderful it was, not to be frightened of a man. It gave her a chance to like him, to have desires which were not simply reactions to his’ (56). Despite the position of authority Maria holds in the relationship, McEwan writes into her characterisation many infantile qualities. Leonard, for instance, is depicted as

viewing Maria sleeping like a child: 'He studied her face ...and he thought what it would be like to have a child, a daughter who might sleep on him like this' (53). Physical descriptions of Maria combine womanliness and childishness:

The jaw was both delicate and forceful ...The hair itself was particularly fine, like a baby's, and often worked free of the childish clasps women wore then ...One could read womanly power into her silent abstraction, or find a childlike dependency in her quiet attentiveness. On the other hand, it was possible she actually embodied these contradictions. For example, her hands were small, and she cut her fingernails short, like a child's, and never painted them. But she did take care to paint her toenails a lurid red or orange. (44)

Again, 'the baby hair fell back in loose curls and straggles' (56).

Maria retains her capacity for initiative throughout the novel. The childish quality in Maria's character accords with Leonard's own portrayal as a young and naïve innocent at the beginning of the novel. In the rest of the novel, however, McEwan emphasises Maria's 'otherness' in counterpoint to Leonard: she is at home in Berlin, experienced sexually and is socially independent, whereas Leonard is a foreigner, a virgin and socially inept. Maria is five years his senior, a brutalised victim of the violence of war and of her husband, Otto; Leonard is freshly arrived to his posting abroad from his parental home. Maria therefore represents a threat to his assumed superior manly position. First, she usurps his traditional role of male sexual superiority by making the first move towards him, invoking some amusement from Leonard's companions. Then he is shown to feel humiliation when he admits his virginity: 'it was a remarkable thing for a man to confess. He regretted it

immediately ...he knew that with his confession he had made a humiliating tactical error' (54–5). This error is redressed, McEwan suggests, as his confidence in the sexual relationship is established, and his assumption of dominance and pre-dilection for military and political violence is unleashed upon her in attempted rape.

The attempted rape is also depicted as an allegory for the rape and destruction of Germany. McEwan portrays Leonard's rape fantasy explicitly as one of domination over her as a defeated German, his prisoner. Leonard himself is cast as a soldier. The way in which McEwan represents Leonard's inability to talk to her about his fantasy, with the opportunity that its destructive potential could be defused, echoes the depiction of Colin and Mary's conspiracy of silence in *The Comfort of Strangers*. The attempted rape is therefore represented as a logical consequence of Leonard's fantasy. He is shown to recognise that the private fantasy is no longer sufficient to fulfil his desire. Furthermore, his wish is that his dominant position will be acknowledged: 'He wanted his power recognised', but more than that, he needed Maria to 'suffer from it, just a bit, in the most pleasurable way' (79–80). The perverse logic of equating 'suffering' with 'pleasure' in this way is also reminiscent of McEwan's earlier representation of sado-masochism as the inevitable trajectory of sexual pleasure in *The Comfort of Strangers*. Also, like the narrator of 'Butterflies', there is, in Leonard's portrayal, a sense of surrender to compulsion outside the control of the individual: 'He thought all this, and knew it was bound to happen' (80). Perhaps McEwan's

representation of the thought processes of a prospective rapist are meant to confirm his 'innocence'; yet it is clear that the drive being described is one of power and control over his partner, not the pursuit of her pleasure.

The emotional misunderstanding between the pair is symbolised by the imagery Leonard evokes to control his emotions, and to understand Maria: mechanical or electronic imagery. In this, McEwan mirrors Thomas Pynchon's implied criticism in *V.* of the mindset promoted by contemporary technological society: 'Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman ... Any problem with her, you could look it up in the maintenance manual' (385). McEwan has Leonard imagine that Maria's forgiveness for his attempted rape could be achieved by his drawing 'an emotional circuit diagram for her' (95).

Whilst at the start of the novel Leonard is portrayed sympathetically in contrast to the brutish Otto, the attempted rape demonstrates a parallel capacity for brutality in the 'innocent' Leonard. Significantly, it is when Otto and Leonard are depicted together, that Leonard's masculinity is shown to be an issue for Maria. Earlier in the novel, however, Maria is shown to find Leonard's hesitancy attractive. In Leonard's response to Otto's threat, she finds the same uncertainty unappealing:

You want to throw him in the street, why don't you just do that? Do it! Why can't you just act? Why do you have to stand around and wait for me to tell you what to do. You want to throw him out, you're a man, throw him out. (141)

As Maria is given to perceive, 'you want to be jealous and scream and hit and rape like [Otto] and all the rest' (141). McEwan therefore gives more

credence to Maria's interpretation of Leonard as a stereotypical man, driven by desire for power over her, in patriarchal terms.

Maria's portrayal, however, shows her to be far from defeated, either by Leonard or by her husband. It is she whom McEwan depicts delivering the fatal blow to Otto's head; and it is she who completes the butchery of Otto's body, achieving the most extreme form of control over any body in McEwan's fiction: the amputations, castration and murder of earlier work have merely been precursors to this grisly episode. Maria is a survivor, resisting domination, and refusing to submit. Only one other of McEwan's strong women characters, Julie, in his novel *The Child in Time*, is permitted to reverse the dominative structures of human relations in this way.

McEwan's treatment of domination and mastery within sexual relationships may therefore be read as a microcosm of the power relations elsewhere in society. Only in his more mature novels, *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*, are sexual relations depicted as capable of resistance to domination, with varying degrees of success. It is his exploration of social and political domination that is considered next.

Chapter IV: SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DOMINATION AND SUBJECTION

Introduction

Margaret Thatcher, whose government McEwan criticises by implication in *The Child in Time*¹ and in *The Ploughman's Lunch*², famously said in an interview for *Woman's Own* (31 October 1987), that 'there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families' (10). What she was arguing for was not unfettered individualism or state control, but that society should be constituted on a voluntary basis rather than directed by the state. In this chapter, the various ways in which McEwan investigates how the state exerts power over the family and the individual are explored. McEwan's depiction of the society of the near future in *The Child in Time*, for example, does depict a government which is prepared to manipulate and control its people. McEwan himself is not particularly politically active as a public figure. He is a signatory to Charter 88, and was a member of Harold Pinter's think-tank: 'Writers Against Thatcher'. He was also prominent in his defence of Salman Rushdie in his campaign for imaginative freedom. McEwan prefers to examine social and political issues through his imaginative work. There are two main foci in McEwan's work in this respect: the state's internal

¹ Margaret Thatcher herself appears to be the real-life model for the authoritarian and abrasive Prime Minister McEwan depicts in the novel, as Amos (1985) avers in his study of real-life and fictional counterparts.

² Margaret Thatcher is quoted in *The Ploughman's Lunch* (33, Scenes 95–6) speaking at the Tory Party Conference.

exercise of power in political activity; and its external exercise of power in military activities, through which it controls both its own people and exerts power over other peoples.

In a review of David Hare's *Licking Hitler*, McEwan applauds the playwright for his insistence that private relationships are not distinct from political relationships (1980a: 87). McEwan's plays in particular deal substantially with political issues. *The Imitation Game*, *The Ploughman's Lunch* and the oratorio *or Shall We Die?* all have the personal and political consequences of war at their heart. Although the play form may be more conducive to such political explorations, McEwan also develops such a theme in his novels. However, he rejects the label of 'political writer' of the left, and most of his significant works depict political matters represented through the medium of private relationships. McEwan is not unique in this. Graham Greene, for instance, in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), shows his 'whisky priest' defying the state in order to offer spiritual support to men and women who were being oppressed; and in *The Human Factor* (1978), published two years after McEwan's first book of short stories, *Castle*, Greene's protagonist, protects his relationship with his wife at the expense of his loyalty to his country. Perhaps the most interesting contemporary novel written in this vein is Brian Moore's *No Other Life* (1993) in which the conflicting forces of revolution and of peace and piety tear apart the young priest, Jeannot, who becomes president of his Caribbean island for a short time. McEwan, however, argues in his introductory essay to his *A Move Abroad*, that 'the successful or

memorable novels we think of as ‘political’ are always written *against* a politics’ (xi). Furthermore, he argues that the imagination of novelists is not to be confused with political polemic. Instead, he says:

what novelists can pit against the overbearing State, the organisation or the bureaucracy are the values of the individual attempting, for example, to retain his or her identity, remaining or failing to remain loyal to friends, discovering the ascendancy of love or being crushed in the attempt. (*AMA*: xii)

None of McEwan’s works loses sight of this personal dimension and through it he offers critiques of various modern political systems: Thatcher’s Britain in *The Child in Time* and *The Ploughman’s Lunch*; totalitarianism in *Black Dogs*; the Cold War in *The Innocent*; and the patriarchal justification of war in *The Imitation Game* and in *or Shall We Die?*

The manner in which politics affects the lives of families and individuals is also explored in *Black Dogs*, where the politics highlighted are those of fascism, communism and neo-fascism. In this novel the politics of the post-war era impinge upon the lives of a family with equally disintegrating results. War is a powerful background presence in *Black Dogs*, with domination and subjection the explicit objective, and McEwan explores the relationship between the brutality of war and its expression in violence by and towards individuals. McEwan frequently uses war as the backdrop for his work, for example, in *The Imitation Game*, *The Ploughman’s Lunch*, *or Shall We Die?* and *The Innocent*. In each of these works, the impact of war on individuals is exposed and the apparatus of the state is revealed. For example, in *The Imitation Game*, there is in McEwan’s treatment of Turner’s homosexuality an

allusion which mirrors the real-life treatment of Alan Turing, on whom Turner is based. As discussed above (pp. 121–2), Turing was crushed by the state's intolerance of homosexuality, perceiving it as a security risk. In *The Ploughman's Lunch*, McEwan exposes the dominative practices of the state and shows how they are reflected in private relationships, suggesting in so doing that there is at least in part a sexual motivation behind the drive for mastery, and that sexual domination and political oppression are two sides of the same coin. In *or Shall We Die?* the focus shifts to the awesome prospect of nuclear war, where science and technology are harnessed by man to dominate Nature, a vision which McEwan also depicts in *The Child in Time*. In *The Innocent*, McEwan uses individuals' physical and psychological violence towards each other as a metaphor for the struggle for domination between countries. McEwan's treatment of war is a subject turned to in the second section of this chapter. First, the way in which the author represents how the state dominates its own people will be considered.

The Domineering State

The earliest story which features such a political aspect is 'Two Fragments, March 199–'. The context is London of the near future, a society which is suffering the repression of an authoritarian government and the blight of extreme poverty. The similarities between this society and the society in which *The Child in Time* is set are notable, and to a considerable degree echo Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The faceless bureaucracy of the state is effectively evoked in both pieces. In 'Two Fragments, March 199–' for

example, Henry is shown working in a nameless ministry where he types letters written by ‘some higher official’, passing them on ‘to someone without seeing who it was who took them’. In *The Child in Time*, Stephen is depicted sitting through interminable and futile committee meetings to produce a report which has already been written. The fabric of society has broken down: in ‘Two Fragments, March 199–’, thousands walk to work through London and people collect rain-water in the street to drink; in *The Child in Time*, the right-wing government has also effectively killed public transport:

Subsidising public transport had long been associated in the minds of both Government and the majority of its public with the denial of individual liberty. The various services collapsed twice a day at rush hour ...(7)

Even poverty has been bureaucratised—licensed beggars roam the streets with standard-issue begging bowls (9). Significantly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in ‘Two Fragments, March 199–’, and in *The Child in Time*, private sexual relationships are pitted against the oppressive force of the reactionary state. As in the room above Mr Charrington’s shop to which Winston and Julia repair to conduct their affair in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in ‘Two Fragments, March 199–’, Henry and his lover, Diane, meet in a room across town which is also filled with useless objects. Even then, the alienating effect of the political context is never excluded from their private congress:

On this day our lovemaking was long and poignantly unsuccessful. After, in a room of dusty sunshine and torn plastic furniture, we spoke of the old times. In a low voice Diane complained of emptiness and foreboding. She wondered which government and which set of illusions were to blame and how it could have been otherwise. Politically Diane was more sophisticated than I was. (*IBS*: 50)

At the end of *The Child in Time*, also true to the resistant spirit of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Stephen and Julie, like the rebellious Winston and Julia in their wood, make love in Julie's house in the wood. Like Winston and Julia, they are celebrating their humanity in the face of the stultifying bureaucracy of their own near-future society where even childhood is targeted for oppression.

In *The Child in Time* McEwan shows how the political doctrine of the government of the day reaches down into the family in an attempt to oppress its youngest members, an idea he first explored in 'Two Fragments: March 199-'. As in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, McEwan's novel is set in the society of the near future, though he is careful not to date his fictional period, unlike Orwell.

The Child in Time reminds us that the concept of childhood has varied over time and that it is a social construct and therefore subject to social, cultural and political influence. In Christina Hardyment's study of childcare practices, *Dream Babies* (1983), which McEwan includes in his acknowledgements as a source for *The Child in Time* (6), various medical and cultural beliefs are traced which have helped to inscribe practices of childcare up to the present day. Many, as she shows, were concerned with confining and controlling the anarchic tendencies of the child, such as swaddling to control movement, or feeding by the clock to control desire. In *The Child in Time*, McEwan, for his part, depicts a repressive right-wing government regime which seeks to exercise tight control over the citizenry beginning with the

management of childhood through a handbook for parents. *'The Authorised Childcare Handbook'*, extracts of which appear as an epigraph to each of the nine chapters of *The Child in Time*, advises parents in what McEwan describes as a 'judicious' and 'authoritarian' way (155) to keep strict discipline over their children. Rigid time-keeping is as the *'Handbook'* states 'incontestable' (27); at the same time, gendered differentiation of work outside and inside the home is reinforced: 'it is time ... for Daddy to go to work, for Mummy to attend to her duties' (ibid.); the role of the father as authority figure is emphasised, and the resultant distancing of the father from his children is valued as emotional preparation 'for the separations ... which are an inevitable part of all growing up' (49); childhood is a privilege granted to children by parents in terms of personal and financial costs: 'at their own expense' (93); bribes, called 'incentives' and 'rewards' are advocated as a useful preparation for the fragmentation of family relations in adulthood, a dislocation which McEwan characterises as necessary for participating in the capitalist economic structure that is the context for the novel (123); selfishness is valued as necessary for survival (ibid.); childhood itself is represented as a disease, as the *'Handbook'* states: 'from which growing up is ... recovery' (179); and children are represented as metaphorical fuel for the nation (205). Thus the repression of children by their own parents is seen to be functional for the authoritarian, patriarchal, capitalist order of the novel's contemporary society to prosper.

In the deliberations of the Commission which is purported to be writing the *'Handbook'*, the pretence of which McEwan uses to mock government

commissions of enquiry everywhere, further attributes of good child-rearing based upon the subjection of the child are revealed. For example, a consideration of progressive child development theory is curtailed by the conservative commonsense of the Commission chair expressing biological determinism: ‘boys will be boys’ (11); they consider the introduction of a phonetic alphabet hailed as a breakthrough in teaching reading, which is successfully argued against by the appropriately named Tessa Spankey, a character who promotes the virtues of difficulty, hard work and discipline in learning the traditional way; they scorn the professor who pleads that children should not be taught to read until eleven or twelve so that they may retain their childhood innocence and creativity, which he calls their: ‘empathic and magical participation in creation’ (76). Children, in this regime, are a resource to be exploited, like coal or nuclear power (205). Indeed, in keeping with the principles of the capitalist consumer society, children are represented in the *‘Handbook’* as the ideal consumers, a valuable market for children’s authors like Stephen, who is consulted along with ‘baby-milk manufacturers, the sugar industry, fast food outlets and toy-makers’ (9). In order to be constituted adequately as subjects, children are to be taught harsh moral lessons, submit to parental authority and the patriarchal order without question and endure physical punishment as some of the titles which McEwan creates for the *‘Handbook’*, quoted above (p. 76), display.

The government’s strictures are contrary to the view of childhood and child-rearing which are prevalent in contemporary society. Since the

progressive philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau took root, the concept of child-centredness has guided contemporary thinking. Child-centredness permits children to discover the world for themselves and to enjoy the freedom of childhood. This is not the kind of approach which the government the author depicts in *The Child in Time* is given to favour. Instead, the child is expected to be forced into submission at an early age as a useful preparation for adult life. Childhood is the time to create the right kind of people, the time to teach children to be adult, through hardship and stern treatment if necessary. The officially sanctioned demeanour is passive pessimism—a suitable preparation for what is called: ‘dried up, powerless’ adult life’ (33). The message which must be sent to children is a bitter one, just as Darke’s re-interpretation of the fictional Stephen’s novel illustrates: *Lemonade* is a ‘ghostly intimation of their mortality ... they are finite as children ... they’re finished, done for’ (33).

By including authors as an interest group along with commercial producers, McEwan problematises the aesthetic endeavours of writers as masters of their own work. Here writing is cast as a business like any other: the book is just another marketable and consumable product under capitalism. Even, in this case, its content can be re-interpreted and re-packaged, to conform to the dominant political purpose of oppressing the people. McEwan, on the other hand, would seem to favour the subversive capacity for literature to resist such political domination, though in the case of Stephen’s novel, the fictional author’s resistance is not particularly committed. The book is just

another commodity with a commercial exchange value. The author is also depicted as earning handsomely from the rewards:

Lemonade sold a quarter of a million copies in hardback, and eventually several million around the world. Stephen gave up his job, bought a fast car and a cavernous, high-ceilinged flat in South London, and generated a tax bill that two years later made it a virtual necessity to publish his second novel as a children's book too. (34)

McEwan clearly wishes to distance himself from these values for he writes a substantial measure of deceit and hypocrisy into the fictional government's agenda as well. For example, the consultative processes and representative constitution of the Commission which they set up to write '*The Authorised Childcare Handbook*' is a sham: the book itself is written by a mentally unstable career politician who has no children. The '*Handbook*', therefore, is political propaganda, not based on research, consensus, or experience. McEwan thus problematises the status of authorship and the interpretation of 'authorised' and exposes the manipulative nature of the dominating practices of the government. The characterisation of the government and the politics of the time appear to be an imaginative extension of the Conservative government's regime under Margaret Thatcher. The government is set on holding the individual responsible for his or her own well-being while favouring the rich. For example, Darke delivers his exposition of licensed begging as a considerable saving in social security while at the same time encouraging independence and entrepreneurship in the beggars, from a room in his own home which is evidence of his wealth and status, described by

McEwan as a 'magnificent drawing room at Eaton Square' (39). Furthermore, the dire consequences of the state's disdain for the poor are revealed in the course of the novel as Stephen finds dead in a railway station (192) the adolescent beggar girl he had encountered at the outset (8–9).

The depiction of the government's favoured dominant-submissive father-child relationship is perhaps drawn from McEwan's own experience of military life: 'Children had to know their place and submit, as their parents did, to the demands and limitations of military life' (73), and indeed it is clear that some of *The Child in Time* is autobiographical.³ The military services are, in fact, prime examples of domination and unquestioning submission to authority and McEwan draws upon a military context in several of his works through which to explore the idea of subjection and domination.

Espionage

The context of *The Innocent* is the Cold War in Berlin in the aftermath of the Second World War and the so-called 'special relationship' between the British and American authorities. Based upon a real-life spying operation, Operation Gold, and a real-life spy, George Blake, this novel is concerned with the exercise of power, and secrecy, deceit, betrayal and violence are pervasive at individual and state levels: the individuals suffer, the state seems to prosper. McEwan creates multi-layered levels of secrecy and deceit throughout the

³ McEwan's father, an army major, acknowledged the autobiographical significance of the passage (74–5) which narrates Stephen's leaving for boarding school in England (McFerran, 1989). His father describes McEwan's departure for the second term from Tripoli on board a plane from the English airport there as being much more traumatic because he knew what to expect. He was crying, steaming up the porthole and wiping away the condensation, but his parents thought only that he was waving. Indeed, his father did not realise the significance of his 'waving' until he read *The Child in Time*.

novel. Leonard, the anti-hero, is part of a secret spying operation against the Russian forces in Berlin. The Berlin Tunnel, which actually existed, was intended to allow the British and Americans to tap into information sent from Moscow to Berlin. In the novel, the most junior individuals (like Leonard) are misled into believing their work to be other than it is, and are only allowed access to further (and more truthful) information on a 'need to know' basis, itself suggestive of a powerful, controlling elite. This kind of control over people by the military through secrecy and partial access to truths is also a feature of McEwan's play, *The Imitation Game*, whose depiction of patriarchal military oppression was studied in Chapter III. It is, McEwan illustrates, an effective way of maintaining power at the centre and rendering submissive the majority of personnel.

Like *The Imitation Game*, which McEwan based upon the real-life spying operation centred on Bletchley Park, *The Innocent* is also based upon real-life spying. McEwan uses the basic spy story to explore a struggle for domination and power between nations, mirrored by layers of distrust and betrayal at both personal and political levels. At the personal level, Leonard, the anti-hero and his American counterpart, Glass, achieve a measure of personal friendship, only for it to be tainted and eventually destroyed by personal distrust and jealousy, and the requirements of the spying operation. Like the 'special relationship' at the political level between the two nations, the relationship between the two men is shown to be just as elusive, subject to political expedient in the struggle for dominance, rather than trust and

openness. At the personal level, the two men, Bob Glass, the American, and Leonard Marnham, the Englishman, strike up a friendship which proves in the course of the novel to be genuine. On the other hand, the chimera of a political alliance between the two countries is revealed slowly by McEwan in the course of the novel. Through Glass, for example, the author explains the American point of view that the Americans are quite capable of conducting a spying operation independently and that the British contribution is minimal. The British are grudgingly acknowledged, but not for any unique expertise. They are said to have made only a what is called a: 'useful contribution ... with the vertical tunnelling', and more disparagingly, for doing little more than providing low-technology equipment such as 'supplying the light bulbs' (22–3). McEwan shows the British interpretation of the 'special relationship' to be equally cynical. Lofting, the British lieutenant who welcomes Leonard to Berlin, delivers a damning indictment of the ignorance and intransigence of the Americans in similar terms to Glass: 'It's not the Germans or the Russians who are the problem here. It isn't even the French. It's the Americans. They don't know a thing. What's worse, they won't learn, they won't be told. It's just how they are' (1). More sinisterly, McEwan illustrates through the character of MacNamee how the 'special relationship' could also be abused by both sides, to spy on and exploit the other. While McEwan casts the Americans as having been hiding secrets from the British under the guise of co-operation, the British, in turn, are shown exploiting the Americans' involvement in the project. Even as they are jointly spying on the Russians, the

Americans are shown to be hiding secrets from the British, and the British are spying on the Americans (70–1). Indeed, McEwan portrays the lack of complete trust between the British and the Americans in the representation of MacNamee's recruiting Leonard to spy on the Americans for him.

McEwan creates, at the centre of the plot, a secret emotional and sexual relationship between Leonard Marnham and Maria Eckdorf, a relationship which is also prone to personal and political power struggles, and which is almost ruined by Leonard's pursuit of personal domination, as was discussed in Chapter III. Secrecy and collusion are central to all of the personal and political projects depicted in the novel, and the dependence on mutual lying and deceit, which make the trust required for a political alliance, a genuine friendship or a sexual relationship, fragile. In this respect, *The Innocent* may be compared to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* in which Pyle begins as an innocent and betrays all sorts of trusts both personal and political, in the course of the novel.

In *The Innocent*, McEwan's quiet Englishman is depicted as having been drafted from his Post Office job to assist the Americans tapping of Russian telephone lines in Berlin. At the time in which the novel is set, the city is divided into zones of occupation, and between Soviet and Western political systems. As such, it is a perfect setting for the dominative practices which McEwan explores. Leonard is portrayed as an innocent abroad both in terms of the political environment and in terms of his personal relationships. Politically, he finds himself handed over to work with the Americans, a

prospect personally daunting, since his only knowledge of them has been through the fictional world of the cinema. As McEwan ironically puts it: 'he had never actually met an American to talk to, but he had studied them in depth at his local Odeon' (1).

McEwan depicts the Englishman and the American as polar opposites in terms of demeanour. Glass is masterful and spontaneous while Marnham is timid and reticent. The author shows in their first meeting that Glass's physical presence dominates: he is never still, never quiet. On Leonard's entrance, Glass welcomes him loudly, clapping his knee ostentatiously as he sits down. The vocabulary used to describe him is commanding and in contrast to the passives used to describe Leonard: Glass 'struck the map', 'bounced up, kicked the door shut ... snatched the receiver' (8–9). In contrast, Leonard is described in nouns and adjectives which suggest inertness and submissiveness. He is 'an employee' and a 'young civilian' (1), and often his character or attitudes are established by negatives: 'He was disappointed' (3), he 'felt foolish' (4), 'approached helplessly' (*ibid.*), he 'said nothing' (9).

McEwan shows the aptly-named Glass making his feelings transparent, unlike the character of Leonard. An early exchange shows the gulf between the two in this respect. When Glass has inspected Leonard's relatively comfortable apartment, for example, he challenges openly the injustice of his own modest accommodation: 'How does a fucking technical assistant at the Post Office get a place like this?' Leonard has no appropriate response to the insult: He 'was nice to people, and they were generally nice back to him'. All

he can do is apologise: 'I expect it was a mistake' (22–3). The two men are clearly unequal in personal power, and McEwan also exploits this masculine power deficit in terms of sexual jealousy. At the moment when Glass insists on vetting Maria for security, Leonard's repressed jealousy is unleashed in a private fantasy of violence. He sees himself: 'seizing Glass's beard .. ripping it off .. stamping on it' (91). The sheer violence of the emotion expressed here, and the gruesome imagery in which McEwan couches it, are a premonition of the violence which follows when Leonard is depicted dealing with a genuine intruder into his relationship, Maria's estranged husband, Otto:

he bit deep into Otto's face. ...He let him go and spat out something of the consistency of a half eaten orange. ...Otto was howling. Through his cheek you could see a yellow molar. And blood, who would have thought there was so much blood in a face? (147)

The plot of *The Innocent* turns upon the nature of secrecy in the pursuit of mastery dependant as much upon violence—essential for the exercise of unequal power relations—as Leonard's failure to distinguish between secrecy, betrayal and trust. Even within the same side in the spying operation, McEwan depicts layers of secrecy. Glass, ever the explainer in the novel, is shown to describe these different levels to Leonard, that each person thinks that his level of secrecy is the top until he is about to be initiated into the next (13), a concept which McEwan exploits for the character of Leonard to use *against* Glass to good effect (191–2). This is the only success which McEwan permits for his protagonist. Most of his exploits in the novel are unsuccessful, especially the bungled attempt to betray the existence of the tunnel to the

Russians in order to delay the discovery of Otto's dismembered corpse. The convolutions of the plot (as in the real-life episode) are such that the Russians knew about the spy tunnel from the outset.⁴

McEwan also shows how the personal relationship between Leonard and Maria represents a potential threat to security and to Leonard himself. Even as he fantasises about her the day after their first meeting, he is shown to recognise the consequences. Leonard acknowledges these: 'the absurdity, the shame, the security implications' (41), indicative of the castrating potential of Maria's power over him in terms of his job, as well as his personal life. His job, by contrast, is to undermine the power of the Russians by penetrating underneath their defences. Indeed, Maria is depicted as usurping the patriarchal order of things which propose that men should take the lead in sexual relationships. On their meeting, it is Maria who approaches Leonard (36–7). Some of the frustration from this encounter is enacted by Leonard in a scene which suggests a virginal rape, although these are inanimate objects which are ravished. Leonard opens the first of a series of boxes:

With a moan, he put the scrap [of paper on which Maria had written her address] away and reached for a box on top of the pile and heaved it to the floor. He drew the hunting knife from its sheath and plunged it in. The cardboard yielded easily, like flesh, and he felt and heard something brittle shatter at the knife's tip. He experienced a thrill of panic. (41)

The scene does in fact presage his fantasy of raping Maria, in which his desire is to render her as inanimate and passive as the boxes. However, Maria

⁴ The author notes in a postscript that the real George Blake had probably betrayed the secret of the tunnel at the planning stage, two years earlier (231).

is written as resistant to such patriarchal domination because of her own experience. Instead, Maria is depicted as the sexual master (or, rather, mistress) in Leonard's seduction, despite his awareness that he is thereby humiliated. For example, he acknowledges that he is a virgin:

It was not so extraordinary a thing in nineteen fifty-five for a man of Leonard's background and temperament to have had no sexual experience by the end of his twenty-fifth year. But it was a remarkable thing for a man to confess. He regretted it immediately. (54)

Maria herself is also shown to be aware of her own capacity for superiority in the circumstance: 'She would not have to adopt a conventional role ...she had him first, she would have him all to herself' (54-5). The parallels between his sexual life and his working life are apparent. Beyond the obvious correlation of the tunnel itself and Maria's vagina, Leonard is also described as having 'to learn stealth to burrow down' (73) under the bedcovers for fear of displacing them; the bed is 'a closed and clotted space' (74) like the stifling environment of the tunnel, Maria is said to indulge 'these excavations' (74) which Leonard enacts in the exploration of her body. Not only does Leonard have to keep Maria secret from his workmates and parents, he also harbours a terrible personal secret from Maria, his fantasy of domination over her as a defeated German, his prisoner. The way in which McEwan represents Leonard's inability to talk to her about his fantasy, and potentially defuse the danger, permits a comparison with Colin and Mary's silence in *The Comfort of Strangers*. In *The Innocent*, however, McEwan's conclusion permits the

possibility of a reprise of their relationship, in contrast to the bleak nihilism in the conclusion of *The Comfort of Strangers*.

Indeed, McEwan also portrays Leonard as a fairly pathetic character—a character whose imaginative roots lay in what McEwan himself describes in his introduction to *A Move Abroad* as ‘a man ... a version of yourself ... manipulable and socially inept, someone you might have become if your luck had been really atrocious’ (viii). In this later novel, the moral weight of Maria’s reaction provides a sense of balance absent from the earlier short story. Furthermore, when the character of Leonard does act out his private fantasy, he is shown to fail, and a chain of events is commenced which leads to Glass’s intervention and his ultimately usurping Leonard’s position with Maria. This episode, rather than Otto’s death, provides the turning point for Leonard and Maria’s relationship in the novel. Leonard’s betrayal of Maria’s trust, the one character whose integrity is never questioned, is decisive. From that point, Leonard is shown to find it impossible to fulfil his fantasy of mastery in either of his two secret worlds.

The fictional Leonard’s public and private lives are shown to collide dangerously when he and Maria kill and carve up Otto. Maria and Leonard are here cast as symbols of the powers that divided Berlin. Glass, for example, presages this symbolic function in his address at their engagement party:

We all of us in this room, German, British, American, in our different kinds of work, have committed ourselves to building a new Berlin. A new Germany. A new Europe. ...Leonard and Maria belong to countries that ten years ago were at war. By engaging to be married they are bringing their own peace, in their own way, to their nations.

Their marriage, and all others like it, bind countries tighter than any treaty can. (126–7)

In a similar way, McEwan makes clear the symbolic function of Otto as the embodiment of Berlin, torn apart by competing factions, for Otto is explicitly described as being a representation of the city, laid out in front of Maria and Leonard, ready to be divided up:

What was on the table now was no one at all. It was the field of operations, it was a city far below [Leonard] had been ordered to destroy. (169)

The casting of Leonard here as a bomber pilot mirrors his fantasy of being a soldier in which he overcomes and rapes Maria as the embodiment of her people (79–80), and it is foiled by her act of will. Leonard is equally incompetent in his desire for mastery over Otto, for he is defeated here by his own revulsion at the tangible carnality of Otto's body.

The depictions of the killing and, especially, the dismemberment of Otto are brutally realistic, engendering a deep revulsion in readers, such that the scene overwhelms the balance of the plot. The details are, however, only a product of McEwan's imagination. Interviewed by Mark Lawson (1990), he reports that although he had arranged to watch an autopsy for his research, he eventually evaded it. Instead he sent a copy of his description to a pathologist at Merton College, Oxford. The pathologist commended him for the accuracy of his work but for a few minor amendments (Lawson 1990: 44, 46).

McEwan's realism serves to remind readers that the destruction of a human being is neither routine nor heroic, as might be depicted in the fantasy world of

the cinema. Moreover, this killing, set in the shadow of the Second World War, in which millions of people were slaughtered, personalises the issue of death. Furthermore, Otto's body is not easily conquered even when dissected, bound up and divided between two suitcases. As McEwan has shown before, in *The Cement Garden*, the mastery of a corpse is not assured even when it is encased in concrete. Like the smell of Mother's body in *The Cement Garden*, the odour of Otto's body leaches from its concealment, and attracts a dog in a scene which McEwan's black humour lifts from lurid drama to high comedy: 'Through the fogs of species memory it recognised a chance of a lifetime, to devour a human with impunity and avenge the wolf ancestors for ten thousand years of subjugation' (177).

In *The Innocent*, McEwan presents a cynical view of most of the political relationships between states and between individuals which are based on a struggle for power over each other. The ending of the novel, however, is co-terminous with the era of the division of Berlin, written as it was just before the people's dismantling of the Berlin Wall. The demise of the Wall, for long a symbol of the oppression of a people, signalled a new hope for a more democratic future. McEwan himself travelled to Berlin to experience the moment, and was gratified to see his photograph in the crowd in the cover story of *Time* (20 November 1989: 13). McEwan acknowledges the event's symbolic power for renewal by featuring it again in *Black Dogs*, a novel which also uses the context of the Second World War in which to reflect upon the military struggle for domination in the twentieth century.

Military Domination

The most potent expression of social and political domination and subjection is provided in the waging of war and McEwan often represents war in his plays and novels. This appears to reflect McEwan's life experience: his father was a soldier and the family was often posted to war zones. To reflect this in his fiction, he does not foreground war, rather it provides the backdrop to the personal relationships and events he depicts. To fulfil the thesis, he expounds from the point of view of Bernard in *Black Dogs*, 'war [is] not ... a historical, geopolitical fact but [is] a multiplicity, a near-infinity of private sorrows' (164–5).

A haunting reminder of the reality of the oppression the Third Reich visited upon people is the expedition that the young couple in *Black Dogs* make to the death camp at Majdanek. The denial of the contemporary people (as well as historical citizenry) of the reality of the holocaust is eloquently testified to in the absence of the word 'Jew' in the commemorative sign at the gate. The couple's mute witness to the horror of the camp's purpose is set alongside their growing love for each other, yet the picture McEwan paints in the novel is of a haunting and continuing nightmare. The couple's acknowledgement of the history of the place is presented by McEwan as resistance, in the same way as Milan Kundera asserts in a passage McEwan quotes in *The Ploughman's Lunch* in scene 47: 'the struggle of man against tyranny is the struggle of memory against forgetting' (18).⁵ This motif is also

⁵ The original appeared in Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, New York: Knopf, 1980, p. 3.

employed by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in his depiction of Winston's struggling to remember the words of a nursery rhyme as an act of futile defiance. The other episode which provides an instance of the continuing dominance of the Gestapo over the minds of the populace is the story of Mme Bertrand's rape. It is as much about tyranny by intimidation as it is about a personal humiliation. The fact that the dogs at the centre of the incident roam the countryside, only temporarily at bay, is crucial for the sense of threat which McEwan wishes to convey. Though the enemy is subdued, a reminder of its presence inhabits the environs of the village, and it still haunts the boundaries of people's consciousness.

In *The Imitation Game*, which was discussed at length above in Chapter III (pp. 118–35), McEwan illustrates both personal and family divisions and separations in the context of the Second World War. The Raine family is shown to be torn apart by Cathy's involvement in the war, and she is alienated from her boyfriend. At the same time, on a wider scale, McEwan explores the exclusions and denials of patriarchy. McEwan exploits the irony of the position in which the men in political and military control justify their action in the name of the whole society, indeed depend upon participation of women in the war effort, yet deny them power. This is an argument to which McEwan returns in *or Shall We Die?* In *The Imitation Game*, the ability Cathy is shown to demonstrate to break codes—language, music, social, sexual, Ultra—all testify to her moral authority and the injustice of her exclusion. McEwan portrays Cathy's fight for the right to be more intelligently involved

in the war, and she is shown to sympathise with its cause, unlike her father (*IG*: 91–2, scene 11). Yet at the end of the play, her disillusionment is forthright, and for her resistance to being the subject of the dominative practices both of patriarchy and the military, she is charged with treason.

Like *The Innocent* and *Black Dogs*, *The Ploughman's Lunch* has war in the background, in this case the Suez Crisis of 1952 and the Falklands War of 1982. As in *Black Dogs*, the manipulation of political and historical truth is a focus for the plot. The central theme of the play is articulated through the character of Ann Barrington. Through the play, McEwan explores two sets of ideas: that there are parallels between political actions and private emotions; and parallels between military oppression and sexual exploitation. Since McEwan's introduction to the play proposes the same case as does the voice of the lecturer, that is, that Britain's response to Suez was emotional rather than rational, we may read the lecturer's words as the authorial voice of McEwan in scenes 29, 31 and 51:

LECTURER ...I shall be considering the extent to which the behaviour of nation states or governments may be judged by the moral criteria we normally apply to individuals. (12)

...

Using the language of private behaviour you could say that [Suez] was an affair of the heart. (Ibid.)

...

There was a real desire on the British part to appear virtuous while behaving aggressively, and the pursuit of virtue led to many lies being told. ...Perhaps we should reverse the question and ask ourselves to what extent individuals behave like governments, who are bound to act in the national interest which in turn is rarely separable from the government's interest, or that of the class it represents. (19)

The play depicts James Penfield's twin projects, Suez and Susan. The Suez project is concerned with re-interpreting the history of the Suez crisis for it to appear credible, in keeping with the resurgence of patriotism surrounding the political and military build-up to the Falklands War. McEwan also depicts James re-writing his own private history, to conceal his working-class origins to make himself more acceptable to his new middle-class colleagues. Both of these revisionist strategies are symbolised in the metaphor of the title: the 'ploughman's lunch' was, as explained in scene 82, a marketing fiction designed to mythologise England's past and encourage people to eat in pubs (29–30). Likewise, James is depicted in scene 12 rewriting the Suez crisis in order to market its history in a more palatable form:

The way I'd see it is this: the British Empire was an ideal. It may have become totally obsolete by the middle of this century, but it wasn't totally dishonourable to try and defend its remains and try and salvage some self-respect ... I mean, if you're about to attack one country, it makes sense to encourage neighbouring countries to attack it too. (6)

The Suez crisis was important to Britain's imperialist tradition both in terms of history and for the contemporary military campaign in the Falklands. Whereas after Suez, as after the Second World War, Britain's supremacy was compromised by its dependence on the power of the United States, Britain

had re-asserted itself as capable of independent action: 'Now it's as if we've discovered ourselves again ... after Suez we couldn't lift a finger without the Americans' (ibid.). In the 1956 crisis, Egypt had nationalised a strategic waterway which ran through its country in which Britain had a substantial stake. Despite American attempts at conciliation, Britain acted decisively. In the 1982 crisis, Britain acted to protect territory claimed less legitimately by Argentina but which Britain had been trying to lose for many years. American influence was minimal. McEwan was criticised by Peter Ackroyd (1983) for the fragility of the connections between the two crises: 'certain parallels are made between the Suez crisis and the Falklands conflict, which, because they were simplistic, are unsatisfactory. And yet it was precisely upon this point that the moral weight of the film is supposed to bear'. However, this is too crude a criticism of the play, for the second dimension, that of the parallel between military and sexual coercion, is a significant element.

The Suez/Susan project that James pursues is twofold: to have his work on Suez published in Susan Barrington's lucrative current affairs project for schools on world history; and to seduce her. The twin aims of economic and sexual gain are complementary. McEwan ensures that James is a deeply unsympathetic character. The strategy he plans to employ—to inveigle his way into Susan's family home—compromises the woman's mother, herself portrayed as a historian, whom James is set to contradict. The connection between the historical military objective, and James's sexual one, is put crudely in scene 26 by his friend: 'Your way into the daughter's pants is through the

mother, up the Suez Canal...' (11). James's sexual campaign is also portrayed as equally frustrating for him as Suez was for the British. Indeed, he is depicted being sexually exploited by Susan's mother, and also by his friend, who desires Susan as his own conquest. Ann's seduction of James is also strongly suggestive of incest, since he is portrayed in scene 75 as resembling her brother (28), whom she had earlier described in scene 73 as having 'hero-worshipped' (27). In this way, Ann is seen to recuperate an unfulfilled desire for her brother as well as to gain revenge on her faithless husband, described in scene 23 as 'the scandalous Matthew Bird the acclaimed sack-artist' (10). James offers no resistance to her, perhaps to suggest that any sexual encounter is better than none. Nevertheless, Ann retains a residual attraction as a character. She is portrayed as an intellectual, a socialist, a mature woman whom we might perceive as a forerunner of the mature, intellectual women like Thelma in *The Child in Time* and June in *Black Dogs*. Ann, like both Thelma and June, seems true to herself and her political beliefs, whereas the people around her are the victims of self-delusion. The way in which McEwan describes how he intended Ann to be read as a character could equally apply to

June:

For me she expresses something very honourable about the educated English middle class, which doesn't go to Tory Party Conferences and bray for more punishment. She does have a sense of history, but she can no longer make an opposition to this prevailing spirit because she herself is tired; the time, she says is past, so there's no hope to be had. She has a great deal of decency and compassion, but no position of strength. (Haffenden 1985: 188)

Ann is not the only character to manipulate James. Jeremy, who had advised James on strategy for seducing Susan, omitted to tell him that Susan and he were 'old allies', inviting the parallel between sexual and wartime collusion. James is therefore revealed as his rival, not his ally. James's campaign for mastery of Susan is defeated just as Britain's was over Suez. He is left with nothing other than the somewhat embarrassing and humiliating one-night stand with a mature woman, just as Britain was left humiliated with her old ally the United States, without Suez.

Within the play, McEwan includes a short interlude which features the Women's Peace Camp (in real life, the one at Greenham Common). Unsurprisingly, the playwright shows James conducting himself there in a totally selfish and uninterested way. Yet the camp and its occupants, with their plea for recognition from 'a man from the BBC', are a potent element of the play. In it McEwan finds a powerful symbol of human (especially women's) resistance against the tyranny of the technologies of modern warfare. This celebration of women's resistance is consistent with the earlier representation of it in *or Shall We Die?* The relative insignificance of the scene in relation to the play as a whole itself testifies to the seeming insignificance of the real-life camp in the face of military might, yet its moral and political power were to emerge in subsequent years. As McEwan writes the scene, the women, and the one man, are earnest though understated: they are only referred to by their first names and not dignified by any identifying characteristics, representing their status as the 'common man' or 'common woman'. Their futile plea in

scene 54 to James's common humanity: 'Ordinary people everywhere are saying "No, we don't want these terrible weapons!" *That's news!*' (21), falls on deaf ears. He scarcely accords them the courtesy of thanks for the loan of a jack for his car and cannot escape quickly enough. In contrast, the sacrifice that the campaigners have made to publicise their opposition to the global tyranny of weapons of mass destruction, is highlighted. McEwan makes more explicit his call for resistance to the nuclear threat in *The Child in Time* as he had done in the preceding oratorio, *or Shall We Die?*

Nuclear War

The concerns for the safety of the world in the face of nuclear war are rehearsed fictionally in *The Child in Time*. The escalation of violence which Stephen witnesses from the safety of his living room through the medium of the television is a far cry from the actuality of a real-life victim, Mrs Tomoyasu's, testimony which McEwan used.⁶ Her words, which form the text of section one of the oratorio are quoted verbatim. Ironically, in *The Child in Time*, McEwan depicts the escalation towards nuclear war arising out of the Olympic Games, otherwise seen as a substitute for wars. Furthermore, the events are described in little more than two pages of the book (34–6). In this way, McEwan mirrors how rapid the escalation of hostility and readiness to launch nuclear weapons could become, representing only one day's events in the context of the novel. As with James Penfield in *The Ploughman's Lunch*,

⁶ McEwan based the woman's voice on the testimony of Mrs Tomoyasu, a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing, who told her story to Jonathan Dimpleby for his documentary film *In Evidence: the Bomb*, (AMA: 7).

Stephen Lewis is depicted in *The Child in Time* as singularly disengaged from the prospect of global extinction, watching the drama unfold on television: ‘Stephen...did not much care either way’ (34); even when the crisis is defused, the character is divorced from any involvement: ‘Stephen honestly didn’t mind that life on earth was to continue’ (26). Indeed, his viewing of the drama is depicted in much the same way as his viewing of the inane game shows to which he becomes addicted (124–5). The disengagement of the central character here can be seen to encapsulate McEwan’s critique of society as a whole. By default, he implies, people are likely to be blinded to the true consequences of nuclear warfare. By contrast, the minor character of Morley had been much more involved, because, McEwan represents, he had a stake in the future because of his children:

During the height of the Olympic Games crisis he and his wife had lain awake all night, speechless with fear for the boys, horrified by their own helplessness to keep them from harm. (163)

McEwan himself has been much exercised by the prospect of the global tyranny of nuclear armament. His ‘moral revulsion’ is testified to the introduction to *A Move Abroad*. However, as he describes, it would have made a hopeless novel:

Armed to the teeth with my facts and figures, histories, moral revulsion and precarious moral hopes, desperate to engage and persuade everybody in what I took to be the single most important issue to face humankind, I was all set to write the worst novel imaginable. (xx)

Instead, he wrote the oratorio, *or Shall We Die?*

Kiernan Ryan (1999: 208) points out that there is a moral compulsion on opponents of nuclear weapons to make conscious opposition to them.

Ryan quotes this point as it is made in Martin Amis's novel, *Einstein's Monsters* (1988):

If you give no thought to nuclear weapons, if you give no thought to the most momentous development in the history of the species, then what *are* you giving them? In that case the process, the seepage, is perhaps preconceptual, physiological, glandular. The man with the cocked gun in his mouth may boast that he never thinks about the cocked gun. But he tastes it, all the time. (5)

Perhaps the most compelling of McEwan's critiques of military domination is his oratorio. In it, he explores, much more explicitly, the nightmare of nuclear war by focussing upon its effect on an individual woman. It is intentional that he focuses upon a woman and her daughter, rather than a son, for he wishes to polarise the argument into masculine and feminine principles: the masculine principles are portrayed as a destructive force of domination, the feminine principles as a constructive force, on the ascendant. In the oratorio, McEwan develops an argument begun in *The Imitation Game*, that war oppresses women while using them as a justification for it. Just as Cathy's freedom of mind is destroyed by patriarchal domination in *The Imitation Game*, so is the woman's in *or Shall We Die?*

The mother and child imagery also, as McEwan acknowledges in his introductory essay to the re-published piece as part of a collection (*AMA*: 7), evokes the religious symbolism of Madonna and child, with a girl child to replace the infant Christ. Interestingly, of the few constructive mother-child

relationships which McEwan depicts in his work, only one is of mother and son, in *The Cement Garden*, and even that is short-lived in the duration of the novel. The other mother-son relationships are emphatically dislocated: Jeremy in *The Ploughman's Lunch* is much loved by his mother, though he remains remote, absent at her death, 'expressionless' and distracted at her funeral. There preceded in McEwan's work a series of dysfunctional men and their mothers; in 'Butterflies', the man at the centre of the story 'stayed away [from his mother's funeral], from indifference' (*FLLR*: 63); the man in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man' whose development was stunted by his mother's perverse love, rejected her in death, 'I spit on the memory of my mother' (*FLLR*: 76); in *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration*, the man equates his mother's attentiveness to a fictitious mother's 'stifling, sinister attentions' (*IG*: 33). This imaginative representation of dislocation between mother and son may be drawn from McEwan's own experience. In the interview with Hamilton (1978: 10), quoted above (p. 89), he tells graphically of the sense of possessiveness over his mother he experienced and the sense of intrusion which his father engendered when he returned on leave. Furthermore, in an article in *The Observer* (1982a: 40) he testifies to the sense of isolation and abandonment he experienced when he was sent to boarding school. McEwan based section five of the libretto of *or Shall We Die?* on the verbatim testimony of a survivor of Hiroshima—a fact which makes the text utterly compelling because it is not fiction. The words convey in simple, stark terms the real human consequences of the first nuclear strike which contrasts with the

more common popular image, the burgeoning mushroom cloud viewed objectively from a position of military supremacy, from above or from a safe distance. The emotional distance in the lines spoken by the bomber crew, despite the references to compassion or guilt of the 'outstretched hand' as if in supplication, or the implication of imperialistic domination in his use of the word 'burden', implying 'the white man's burden':

The city below, its river and its tributaries
resembled an outstretched hand.
We shed our burden, our heavy burden,
and turned for home (*AMA*: 19)

From the perspective of the subjugated woman and child beneath, the experience was that of personal pain and loss:

My child was completely burnt.
The skin had come off her head,
leaving a knot of twisted hair.
...
My daughter said, ...[i]t hurts, it hurts.
...There was nothing I could do. (*AMA*: 21)

Foucault's imagery of surveillance and punishment is implied by McEwan's lexical choices. The young men 'wait at their instruments and watch' (*AMA*: 17), servants of the state which acts as 'jailor to [their] nation's mind' (*AMA*: 22). Forty years on, the technological capability for warfare strikes fear into McEwan, motivating his writing of the oratorio. It is clear that McEwan sees the individual woman and the feminine principle which she represents as hope for a future. The lyrical passage in which McEwan depicts the woman's unity with Nature and her maternal impulse, depicted in her enjoyment and naming of stars, 'the Kids' (*AMA*: 17), listening to the nightjar,

enjoying the breeze and the grass, at one with the night, stands in sharp contrast to the men he depicts. The image McEwan creates of 'sleepless men', watching their instruments, and indistinguishable from their enemy, is deliberately disturbing. Harbingers of death and destruction, equally subjected under the military regime, the men already occupy 'buried places', their faces 'deathmasks in the greenish light'. Yet McEwan casts them, too, as strangely innocent, 'male virgins', fearful of 'penetration', enslaved, in turn, by their 'masters'. They are instruments of the state, said to: 'helplessly construct the means of their destruction'. Nevertheless, McEwan holds them guilty, too, of constraining and destroying the lives of everyone else. McEwan makes it clear in this that the power of men is self-destructive. Placing men far down the natural order: 'lesser forms, intent on conquest,' (*AMA*: 18), a sentiment which runs contrary to the prevailing 'Darwinian' hypothesis which venerates the survival of the fittest, shows McEwan to be deeply critical of their delusions of superiority. He casts in a disparaging light the self-styled leaders and lawmakers who despise and distrust the 'weak-hearted, the effeminate', the feminine principle which McEwan holds here in such high esteem.

Also in this oratorio, McEwan returns to the idea of secrecy as an instrument of power and domination which he explored in *The Imitation Game*, and further develops in *The Innocent*. In *or Shall We Die?*, 'secrecy is essential when decisions/weigh heavy on the men of State'. The secrecy is necessary for a crucial pre-emptive strike. In *The Imitation Game*, the same secrecy excludes women (Cathy) and as it did in real life the 'effeminate'

Turner (Turing); in *The Innocent*, the secrecy veils espionage and counter-espionage under the guise of a hollow ‘special relationship’.

McEwan’s argument in the oratorio is that the state numbs its citizens in futile competition. The rhetoric of domination is plain: the leaders have ‘taken into custody’ (*AMA*: 17) the lives of the people, the nation is ‘jailor’ of their minds (*AMA*: 21). The sexual metaphors of domination and lust abound: not only do the watching men fear ‘penetration’, but the ‘metaphor of rape’ is summoned up to describe the destruction of the earth. Foucault’s twin analyses of the state’s disciplinary control over its citizens in *Discipline and Punish*, together with the mechanisms and, networks of sexual power in his *History of Sexuality*, are brought together.

The principal voices in the oratorio are those of a man and a woman, suggesting and encapsulating the simple opposition of men’s and women’s worlds. The woman is associated with earth and feeling, her view of the universe is presented holistically. Her song links her effortlessly together with the stars, her child and the earth:

What stars!...
 ...In the house below
 my daughter slept. By her window was a tree.
 ...My joy
 engulfed the house, the land on which it lay,
 the dome of infinite stars. (*AMA*: 17)

By contrast, the man is driven by science and might. His song sets him outside nature, objectively studying it:

...intelligent life
 evolves, observes and measures the universe,
 and discovers ...
 by theory and by observation the power
 that causes suns to burn ... (*AMA*: 18)

The imaginative inclusion of quotations from Blake's 'The Tyger', 'A Divine Image' and 'The Divine Image' in the oratorio also serve to ground McEwan in the tradition of resistance against the destructive principle in Newtonian science, which asserts the objectivity of man as against the subjectivity of woman, and the next section of the thesis will consider man's struggle for domination over Nature through science and its technologies, and its gendered construction.

Scientific Domination

McEwan writes consistently on science in his fiction, and also in some of his more recent journalism. Although McEwan specialised in arts subjects at school, it has been a source of some disquiet to him on reflection. He talks of having been 'excluded from science at school', since when 'it has always been rather alluring, like eroticism' (Davies 1990: 59). Also, interviewed by Kam Patel (1998: 7) on the occasion of his appointment as the chair of the panel of judges for the Rhône-Poulenc science writing prize, McEwan declares that he is a 'voracious reader of science'. Melvyn Bragg (1999), commenting on C. P. Snow's lecture on 'the two cultures' of science and arts, suggests that the dichotomisation of science and literature as cultural realms has become blurred, even if it had been intellectually defensible at the outset. Bragg cites examples of writers from both camps who problematise the boundaries: for

example, scientists who marry the two forms, such as Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker and Susan Greenfield, as well as writers such as Ian McEwan and Douglas Adams. Throughout his work, McEwan has conducted a debate which is centred on the competing claims of rationality over spirituality (e.g. *Solid Geometry*, *Black Dogs*), science over Nature (e.g. *Black Dogs*), and more recently, science and religion (e.g. *Enduring Love*). The oratorio *or Shall We Die?* encapsulates this dialectic and brings into focus the gendered nature of McEwan's dichotomy which has underpinned much of the work. In particular, McEwan has associated holism with the feminine principle, objectivity with the masculine principle.

The conflict between Maisie and her husband in *Solid Geometry* is an early illustration of a dangerous polarisation between what McEwan depicts as rational masculine principles, and non-rational feminine principles. Maisie, in this play, represents the mystical, sensual female; and her husband represents the scientific, logical male. Maisie asserts that all knowledge is contained in the Tarot cards, an idea which her husband finds ludicrous, since knowledge for him consists of scientific theories or matters of fact. McEwan pokes fun at Albert's 'science', however: his scatological and sexual calculations are potentially just as ludicrous as Maisie's belief system, though they are cast in the light of continuing the 'research' of his grandfather, preserving the patriarchal tradition; and his 'scientifically preserved' penis in the bottle has more value as titillation than as science. Markedly, also, McEwan describes in the first scene how the equivalent part of 'Lady Barrymore' (*IG*: 46–7) has

deteriorated: science had been incapable of, or inept at, preventing the decay of the female equivalent. Maisie is also implied to be as decadent as Lady Barrymore. The onset of Maisie's menstruation, often associated with 'uncleanness' and decay, is explicitly depicted in the play. Maisie's sexuality is at the root of the conflict between the pair, for her desire for her husband is met with sexual coldness. His desire is sublimated in his grandfather's and his own diaries, and his sexual state is suspended, much as symbolised by the appearance of Captain Nicholls's penis.

McEwan's use of the preserved penis gave rise to such controversy that the BBC halted production of *Solid Geometry* on 2 March 1979, four days before it was to be filmed. Specific objections were not articulated at the time but the ban referred to 'grotesque and bizarre sexual elements in the play'. McEwan interpreted this in a preface to publication of the playscript in *The New Statesman* (1979d: 446) as referring to the presence of the pickled penis. Twenty years later, a senior executive was quoted as having said: 'Margaret Thatcher is going to be elected and we were about to transmit a play about a fucking 14-inch cock in a bottle' (Lawson 1999). In the same article, Lawson corrects a matter of detail: the pickled penis to be depicted was 'a foot-long' one. There are several sexual elements in the play, not only the pickled genitals: Maisie's menstruation, her initiation of sex, and the final disappearing act in the course of lovemaking. It is possible that the BBC held the play to be 'untransmittable' for the mere presence of the penis. Perhaps it was the symbolism of Maisie's destruction of the penis which was at root offensive.

Sex and murder are frequently depicted on television, and were in the seventies, but never at that time a naked penis. It is an aspect of patriarchal protection of the male body that it is seen to be sacrosanct, although the female body is not. The very thought of a penis (albeit dead) being destroyed by a woman, might also be anathema. Margaret Walters (1978), in a study of the portrayal of nudity in men, considers that the phallus, which the penis represents in the play, is rich in symbolism and ‘almost by definition political’ (8). Any representation of it, and any censorship of its depiction, may also therefore be regarded as a political act. Walters refers to the campaign launched by Anita Steckel in 1973 in the United States, to protest against the double standard of American museums in permitting the depiction of female nudity, whereas male nudity only if covered by a decent fig-leaf (316). Perhaps most compelling for this discussion, is Robert Melville’s observation, quoted by Walters, that the ‘contemporary artist put[s] the female body through the most fearful and drastic distortions, [but] they tend to treat their own organs conservatively—gently, protectively’ (270). The modern prudery about depicting the penis, not even an erect one, which is still forbidden by law, seems to lie in the protection of the male from objectification in a patriarchal society. In *Solid Geometry*, the penis might not represent the potency that patriarchal society needs to affirm.

Ironically, Albert’s reversion to the irrational, in this case, a geometry based upon the premise of alternative realities, makes Maisie disappear, suggesting that the irrational is indeed more powerful than science. Despite

this, the patriarchal order is preserved, since it is Maisie who is depicted as destroyed; Albert survives.

McEwan conducts a more sustained debate about modern science's challenge to traditional science in *The Child in Time*, through the character of Thelma, the theoretical physicist. Thelma expounds how science might be revised along more feminine lines: 'quantum mechanics would feminise physics, all science, make it softer, less arrogantly detached, more receptive to participating in the world it wanted to describe' (43). This view of science, which recognises that the scientist is at one with the world, implies a social responsibility that critics of Newtonian science have begun to subscribe to; amongst other things, it recognises what Hilary Rose (1994) in her critical study of masculinist science calls science's 'collusive relationship to militarism' (ix), a point which McEwan makes effectively in his oratorio. Furthermore, feminist reconceptualisations of rationality and science in standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983), hold that the view from a position of subjugation is more accurate and inclusive than that from a position of power, since the dominant view is exclusive of the subordinate view. McEwan illustrates this by example in the oratorio, where he prefers the woman survivor's point of view over that of the men of science.

In *The Child in Time*, McEwan explores aspects of the new physics in several respects: relativity theory, the possibility of time travel and quantum mechanics. McEwan uses relativity theory—the faster one travels, the slower time passes—to narrate the narrowly avoided car accident which Stephen

experiences. The avoidance of the accident is attributed to ‘the slowing of time’ (*The Child in Time*: 93), despite the fact that he needed split-second reactions: ‘time was short, less than half a second ... the whole experience had lasted no longer than five seconds’ (95). This slowing of time in the face of impending disaster is contrasted with the escalation of activity in just a day in the nuclear crisis later in the novel. Time is, indeed, relative, but it is also relative. As Thelma explains: ‘There’s no absolute, generally recognised “now”’ (118). The out-of-time experience of Stephen, as he envisions his mother before his birth debating whether he shall be born, whilst, at the same time, his mother has a vision of him after birth (58–60), is premised upon the possibility of time-travel. Had his mother denied the possibility of his birth, he would not have been able to have the before-birth experience, nor, incidentally, would the central tragedy of the novel have taken place. Birth is a significant element of the novel—especially the birth of the new child ‘in time’ to save the future for the couple in the story, but also the symbolic re-birth of the lorry-driver from his up-turned cab. Birth is therefore represented as both new life and renewal of life. In addition, one of the mind games of quantum mechanics is explicitly woven into the text. The tale of Schroedinger’s cat which Thelma relates to Stephen (43) is an effective metaphor for the existence or non-existence of the invisible child, Kate.⁷ Like Schroedinger’s cat, which is an

⁷ The problem of Schroedinger’s cat illustrates the randomness of effect, as proposed by quantum mechanics, as opposed to the certainties of classical science. The imaginative proposition is that a cat is hidden in a box with a radioactive atom which has a fifty percent chance of decay, and a Geiger counter which will trigger a switch that will shatter a flask of poison gas. The box is left for about an hour when it is estimated that the atom will have decayed by fifty per cent. The chances of the cat being alive are 50:50, and it is impossible to know, until the box is opened. According to quantum

imaginative experiment in quantum mechanics, Kate is neither alive nor dead, unless observed, for her parents. She lives only in probability, as Stephen's questing after her implies: for example, Stephen encounters an adolescent beggar girl at the beginning of the novel who could be Kate (8–9), and he believes that he has spotted her in a school playground (141–2). Stephen can neither accept the possibility of her life elsewhere, nor can he countenance her death. The schoolgirl at the beginning of the story could equally well be Kate as not-Kate, just as the schoolgirl Stephen spots could be.

In *Black Dogs*, McEwan depicts how June's pursuit of the spiritual life leads to withdrawal from human companionship in the form of a breakdown in her relationship with her scientist husband. This 'ideal', of the woman as whole unto herself, is an antithesis to woman as 'Other', defined mainly in terms of men, a concept explored extensively in feminist theory, first particularly in the work of the feminist, Simone de Beauvoir. McEwan portrays June's spiritual awakening in response to a vision of absolute evil, here in the form of two black dogs, which are, it is implied, the embodiment of the evil of the Gestapo.⁸ They are also identified with masculine oppression, which, McEwan implies, goes hand in hand with military oppression, for it is suggested that the dogs had been trained to rape (160–1). In response to the evil the dogs represent, June is depicted as finding the power of goodness

mechanics, during the period before the lid is lifted, the cat exists in two superposed states: both alive and dead.

⁸ There are numerous other allusions to the allegorical significance of the dogs: they are Cerberus's mythical gatekeepers, Dürer's black dog at the foot of 'Melancholia', Horace's reference to black dogs, or Johnson's and Churchill's black dog of depression.

within her. It is a spiritual revolution, set in contrast to the political revolution which had been a joint project with her husband, Bernard:

My own small discovery has been that this change is possible, it is within our power. Without revolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless. The work we have to do is with ourselves if we're ever going to be at peace with each other. (172)

In this respect, June appears to reiterate the holist conceptualisations McEwan attributed to Thelma in *The Child in Time*, and to Maisie in *Solid Geometry*. The moment McEwan describes is one of transcendence, very similar to the out-of-time experience of Stephen Lewis as his unborn self in *The Child in Time* (58–60). In *Black Dogs* the power of goodness in June is represented in metaphysical terms. McEwan depicts June's spirit leaving her body: 'She drifted apart from her body ... this detached self was prepared to watch with indifference' (147). The presence of God is also given a form which departs from her physical being: 'It seemed to lift and flow upwards and outwards, streaming suddenly into an oval penumbra many feet high, an envelope of rippling energy...coloured invisible light that surrounded and contained her' (149–50). However, not to give too much predominance to the metaphysical, McEwan presents this vision of God's intervention as both human and divine: 'If this was God, it was also, incontestably, herself' (150). Furthermore, McEwan balances June's mystical experience with the cynical perspective of Bernard, June's husband. Bernard, the epitome of rational man, ridicules June's transformation and her subsequent retreat into mysticism: 'This belief that life really does have rewards and punishments, that underneath

it all there's a deeper pattern of meaning beyond what we give it ourselves—that's all so much consoling magic' (80). Perhaps the failure in McEwan's depiction of June is that she is shown to achieve personal harmony only in isolation from society and from her husband and family. However, we can interpret this alienation in Virginia Woolf's terms, as an alienation from the masculine dominated institutions of society, such as the family, politics and the university, as she argued in *Three Guineas*.

McEwan aligns Bernard's rationalism with his masculine principles, and the dialectic between Bernard and June not only as one between science and mysticism, but, as in *Solid Geometry* and *or Shall We Die?*, between masculine and feminine principles. For example, Bernard is shown to articulate the connection: 'I tried hard to imagine what it would be like to believe, really to believe, that nature could take revenge on a foetus for the death of an insect. ... and honestly, I couldn't. ... Only ... I was beginning to understand something about women and men' (79–80).

Bernard's scepticism is also seen to prevent him from believing in June's spiritual presence, even when he had anticipated it. He explains to Jeremy that he searched for a reincarnation of June in the hope that she would communicate with him after her death:

through a girl who looked like her... And one of these girls would come to me with a message... Those girls who passed just now... The one on the left. Didn't you see? She's got June's mouth and something of her cheekbones. (84)

This implied reincarnation of June does intercede to save Bernard from attack by a pack of racists, whose similarity in description demands comparison with that of June's black dogs: 'they exuded runtish viciousness ... with their ... loose wet mouths. ... they were bunched in a pack, breathing heavily, heads and tongues lolling... the smallest of them, a pin-headed tyke' (96–8). In the same way, McEwan depicts June's spiritual presence as responsible for the intercession which saves Jeremy from being stung by a scorpion (117). However, Bernard is incapable of irrational belief, even as the character of Jeremy implores him to try, and the event is dismissed as 'Quite a coincidence' (100).

Further, McEwan aligns Bernard's scientific turn of mind with male values of patriarchal power, a power to control and destroy; whilst nature and mysticism are equated with female values and a power-that-does-not-destroy, what Claire Keyes calls 'power-to-transform'.⁹ The incident where McEwan describes the conflicting responses to finding a dragonfly illustrates this. Whereas June values the insect as part of the beauty of nature, Bernard's scientific curiosity drives him to kill it in order to study it. Narrated from the perspective of Bernard, but articulating June's point of view, the argument is cast in gendered terms:

My attitude to this poor creature was typical of my attitude to most other things, including herself. I was cold, theoretical, arrogant. I never showed any emotion, and I prevented her from showing it. She felt watched, analysed, she felt she was part of my insect collection. All I was interested in was

⁹ Attributed to Adrienne Rich by Claire Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power: the Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, 7, 132. McEwan shows his awareness of the work of the feminist critic and poet, Adrienne Rich, by quoting from her poem 'The Kingdom of the Fathers' in the epigraph to *The Comfort of Strangers*.

abstraction. I claimed to love ‘creation’, as she called it, but in fact I wanted to control it, choke the life out of it, label it, arrange it in rows. (77)

In her book *Love, Power and Knowledge*, Hilary Rose (1994) explores this idea of the gendered nature of science and its dichotomisation of knowledge and love, citing both the scientist Margaret Cavendish and Mary Shelley. Cavendish wrote a utopian novel, *The Description of the New World Called the Blazing World* (1688), in which she is shipwrecked on an island where she receives acknowledgement, and love, for her scientific work, which is denied to her in the world she left behind. Rose explains how in writing this novel, Mary Cavendish expiated her anger at the Royal Society which had rejected her as a member on grounds of gender despite her extensive scholarship, and its ‘founding project of the new masculine science which would conceptualise both women and nature as to be subdued’ in favour of ‘a new scientific community where love and the acquisition and production of knowledge are reconciled’ (210). Rose further argues that central to the dystopian vision Shelley creates, is the ‘Promethean myth’ of the separation between love and knowledge (ibid.). The idea that through science man could recover his rightful dominion over Nature (and woman), was being propounded at the time Cavendish was working. Francis Bacon evoked the idea with reference to Genesis. As Genevieve Lloyd points out, in her philosophy of science, Bacon, in his *The Masculine Birth of Time*, links the sexual and scientific projects together: ‘I am come in very truth leading to you

Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave' (Bacon 1653: 62 quoted in Lloyd 1984: 12).

Ironically, Bernard is shown later in the novel to recognise that science is not wholly objective and rational: 'Laboratory work teaches you better than anything how easy it is to bend a result to fit a theory' (89), implying his disillusionment with science as well as with politics.

McEwan further develops his exploration of the place of science in human life in *Enduring Love*. Like *Black Dogs*, this is another dialogic novel, in which science is set against religion, as well as emotion, as the site of struggle. In this novel, the psychological construction of the theme of subjection and domination is presented in a sophisticated pathological way. The novel may be seen as a synthesis of many of the issues McEwan has explored throughout his work. It goes beyond the simple sexual motivation of a child murderer or a sadist, to explore the obsession of a man suffering from a psychotic illness; not an evil motive, but a deluded religious one; not a heterosexual pursuit, but a sexless, homoerotic one. Through the central conflict between the two men, Jed Parry and Joe Rose,¹⁰ McEwan explores the complicity between oppressor and oppressed.

A significant dialogue in the novel is an argument between religion and science, two forces which have helped to shape the twentieth century. The two main characters are shown locked in a personal conflict—the one intent upon possession, the other freedom—although the quest for power is more a

¹⁰ Whereas most of the characters discussed in the thesis are identified by their first names, in this case Jed Parry is identified mainly by his last name, mirroring McEwan's usage.

possession of the mind than the body, as we have seen played out in earlier work. Iris Murdoch explores a similar theme of obsession and pursuit in *The Sea, The Sea*, where the protagonist pursues the object of his desire to distraction. As McEwan echoes in the naming of his characters, there is paradox and confusion in the points of view of the characters. Joe, as his metaphorical name suggests, is the object of Parry's desire, while Parry, whom we might expect from his name to be the defensive character, is the oppressor, though he is deluded into thinking otherwise. Questions of control and domination, of power and manipulation, of madness and rationality, suffuse the 'relationship' between the two men. The idea of a relationship as something not consciously willed by each partner, but that it might be imposed by one partner over another, is a structuralist concept which Joe resists, but to no avail. He is portrayed as being appalled at recognising it: 'I thought, I'm in a *relationship*' (73). Though the character of Joe is seen to represent his own position as being the victim of Parry's obsession, others see Joe to be potentially more in control of the situation and equally obsessive. Parry alludes to Joe's dominant position in his letters:

I stand before you naked, defenceless, dependent on your mercy, begging your forgiveness. For you knew our love from the very beginning. You recognised in that glance that passed between us, up there on the hill after he fell, all the charge and power and blessedness of love, while I was dull and stupid, denying it, trying to protect myself from it, trying to pretend that it wasn't happening, that it *couldn't* happen like this, and I ignored what you were telling me with your eyes and your every gesture. (94)

Clarissa and the police each also articulate the point—if only Joe had invited Parry in for a cup of tea, Parry’s delusion would not have become out of control (84, 157, 218). But the issue of being out of control is central to the novel—indeed a metaphor for the whole human condition—as the argument between science and rationality, and between spirituality and religion, unfolds. In *Enduring Love*, much as in *Solid Geometry*, *The Child in Time* and *Black Dogs*, the dialectic between science and spirituality proceeds between two individuals who have each adopted entrenched positions. The drift of McEwan’s argument about science may be traced throughout the novel. The principal character, Joe, is cast as ‘a well-known science writer’ (174), who is invited to judge a science prize (46), and whose journalism encompasses ‘beautifully illustrated hardback books, with TV documentary spin-offs’ (75), a review of ‘five books on consciousness’ (140), ‘thirty-five articles’ on science, test-driving an electric car (221), and a commentary on a conference about Mars (ibid.). Joe uses a combination of recovered memory and his scientific research skills to uncover the syndrome which Parry suffers from. By naming Parry’s syndrome, Joe is granted control over it:

De Clérambault’s syndrome. The name was like a fanfare, a clear trumpet sound recalling me to my own obsessions. There was research to follow through now and I knew exactly where to start. A syndrome was a framework of prediction and it offered a kind of comfort. (124)

Again, ‘[s]tudying Parry with reference to a syndrome I could tolerate, even relish’ (130). Joe thereby prepares himself to anticipate the escalation of violence, and thereby to resist it.

Joe is portrayed, however, as a failed scientist. There may be an autobiographical element in this depiction, for McEwan regards himself as a scientist manqué, as he suggests in an interview with Davies (1990: 59), quoted above (p. 242). Prior to the publication of *Enduring Love*, McEwan, like his main character Joe, had been writing scientific articles, and the fictional use he makes of his enterprise interestingly points up the tension between science and fiction writing. There are certain science fiction elements in McEwan's writing, similar to those of H. G. Wells, in *Solid Geometry* and in the science fiction book Jack reads in *The Cement Garden*. In *Enduring Love*, however, there is a different variation on the theme: here McEwan produces what might be called fictional science writing. The use to which McEwan puts his scientific interest is successfully exploited in his fictive 'evidence' for Parry's psychological condition in the form of an academic 'paper' as one of two appendices in the novel. McEwan admits in an interview with Oliver Burkeman (1999), that although he wrote the appendix as a fiction, he also submitted it to a real journal, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, as a hoax. It was not printed. McEwan admits that he 'was both disappointed and relieved when [his] submission was respectfully turned down. Had it been otherwise, [he was] not entirely sure [he] would have had the courage, or callousness, to proceed' (1999b). However, as Burkeman reports, *Enduring Love* was reviewed in the January 1999 *Psychiatric Bulletin* by Ronan McIvor, who accepted the appendix as 'a published case report' (McIvor 1999). After two

letters to the *Bulletin* in April (Granville-Grossman 1999 and McCreadie 1999), the author had to de-hoax the *Bulletin*:

I can confirm that Appendix I of *Enduring Love* is fictional ... based on the novel that precedes it rather than the other way around. At the end of a story about rationality, I wanted to produce an extreme example of a highly determined rational prose such as one might find in a psychiatric case study. ... If the monograph had been published, it would have seemed that my novel was based on a genuine case, my characters would have acquired an extra sheen of plausibility and the division between the real and the invented world would have become seamless. ... I would have enjoyed thanking the editors for permission to reprint the paper, assuming they granted it. (1999b)

The fictional authors of the paper, Wenn and Camia, are an anagram of the author's name. McEwan further justifies his position by suggesting that the line dividing science and fiction is not absolutely clear in the context of a psychiatric report:

Psychiatric case studies are like small novels... To base a psychiatric theory on what one person says she or he discovered of another person is fantastically unscientific and owes much to a certain kind of literary interpolation. So why not go the whole way? Why not subject the characters in your novel to psychiatric study? (Burkeman 1999: 8)

The technique McEwan adopts within the novel is not unique: Orwell, for example, used an appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to explain 'Newspeak'. In *Enduring Love*, the paper is part of the fiction and McEwan uses it to interpret some aspects of the novel for readers. The paper's construction is modelled closely on psychiatric reports and he adds, for authenticity, a list of references. By including this paper, he attempts to

undermine the close reader, and provide a 'scientific' explanation for the actions of the characters and adds further confirmation of Joe's explanation for Parry's behaviour. The technique is highly contrived and suggests to readers that McEwan wishes to permit no departure from his own writerly intentions.

The explanation for Parry's irrational behaviour is thus rendered rational for having been described and defined by science. However, the spoof paper does not achieve closure for the novel, for the threat posed by Jed Parry's obsession remains, contained, but not curtailed, by his incarceration. What McEwan achieves effectively is to exploit the scientific form of writing for a fictional purpose, which at the same time undermines the dominating power of science in the twentieth century and gives fiction an advantage. Fiction can masquerade as fact. Indeed, this is the conclusion we might reach from McEwan's having Joe reflect upon the nature of his 'science' writing—it is conjecture, journalism, argument based upon opinion rather than hard evidence. However, McEwan also advances an argument that science writing is narrative akin to the novel (48) and he finds an aesthetic quality in it (49). The idea of the perception of beauty in science is also developed. Einstein's General Theory is said to be 'too beautiful to resist' (*ibid.*), and this is echoed in the discussion of Rosalind Franklin's response to a model of the double helix: 'it was simply too beautiful not to be true' (165). This affective, aesthetic quality of science is also symbolised by the beauty of the brooch in the form of the double helix which Clarissa receives from her uncle (163). Given McEwan's earlier critique of science as being overly masculine in *or*

Shall We Die?, it is interesting that he should recognise in *Enduring Love* Rosalind Franklin's contribution to the discovery of DNA on a par with Wilkins, Crick and Watson (1965), for the misappropriation of Franklin's work, and the attempted erasure of her critical contribution, was a cause célèbre in the feminist critique of masculinist science.¹¹ McEwan illustrates his theory that someone needed to explain science in accessible, even beautiful, language when his protagonist explains the chemistry of the river, aptly one of Jung's archetypal symbols of rebirth and new beginnings, to Jean Logan's daughter:

Imagine the smallest possible bit of water that can exist. So tiny no one could ever see it ...Even a microscope wouldn't help you. It's almost nothing. Two atoms of hydrogen, one of oxygen, bound together by a mysterious powerful force. Now think of billions, trillions, of them, piled on top of each other in all directions, stretching almost to infinity. And now think of the river bed as a long shallow slide, like a winding muddy chute, that's a hundred miles long stretching to the sea... (225)

At the same time, McEwan, through Joe, pours scorn on the religious significance of the Bible, suggesting that it is a work of fiction, casting God as a literary character: 'A woman novelist dreamed up God!' (134), and Jesus Christ was also, he suggests: 'mostly made up by St Paul and "whoever" wrote the Gospel of St Mark' (ibid.).

The debate between science and religion, which is conducted through Joe and Parry, is heavily weighted on the side of science. The novel is laced with religious references, such as: the naming of Joe (a diminutive form of

¹¹ Rosalind Franklin, the crystallographer who worked with Maurice Wilkins at King's College, London, took the key photographs which indicated the helical form. Wilkins took the photographs to collaborators Crick and Watson at Cambridge, without Franklin's permission. The scandal was revealed in Anne Sayre's biography of Franklin published in 1975.

Joseph, 106); Logan's fall (see below p. 270); and Reid's naming of Christmas Common as his trysting place (228). However, Parry's deluded exploitation of religion for his own purpose—the pursuit of Joe—is not supported with as robust research as McEwan devotes to science. The references to science are precise and meticulously researched: e.g. Darwin (41, 47–8), Ekman (43), Einstein (49), the sympathetic nervous system (51); the Human Genome Project (164), the discovery of DNA (164–6), etc. Parry's religious references are dismissed by Joe as 'formulaic' (141); and he is castigated for not having 'read the primary material' (153). Further, his religious belief is equated with self-delusion and self-aggrandisement, and perhaps the most powerful delusion of domination—identification with God:

There were few biblical references in Parry's correspondence. His religion was dreamily vague on the specifics of doctrine, and he gave no impression of being attached to any particular church. His belief was a self-made affair, generally aligned to the culture of personal growth and fulfilment. There was a lot of talk of destiny, of his 'path' and how he would not be deterred from following it, and of fate—his and mine entwined. Often, God was a term interchangeable with self. ... God was undeniably 'within' rather than in his heaven, and believing in him was therefore a licence to respond to the calls of feeling or intuition. It was the perfect loose structure for a disturbed mind. There were no constraints of theological nicety or religious observance, no social sanction or congregational calling to account, none of the moral framework that made religions viable, however failed their cosmologies. Parry listened only to the inner voice of his private God. (152–3)

McEwan thereby suggests that Parry's religious beliefs are not well-founded but motivated by his search for power and domination over Joe: Parry's love is portrayed as oppressive, not nurturing. Through this, perhaps, McEwan

alludes to an argument that religions are used to privilege a few, and to oppress others.

McEwan also has his protagonist propose several rebuttals of religious belief: the exposure of the Turin shroud as a fraud (134); the chemical theories of the origins of life (135); and even the reference to the Hubble telescope (38), which seeks to serve scientifically man's understanding of 'our very own beginnings at the beginning of time' (39). Equally, Joe's attempt to structure an argument for a genetic basis for religious belief (159) serves to illustrate his preference for science over faith. In this latter example, McEwan refers to the power of religion to afford status to its priests: 'Suppose religion gave status, especially to its priest caste—plenty of social advantage in that' (159), providing a reminder of the power that organised religion confers on (mainly) men to control a people, and even to subjugate them: 'Uplifted by a crazed unity, armed with horrible certainty, you descend on the neighbouring tribe, beat and rape it senseless and come away burning with righteousness and drunk with the very victory your gods had promised' (159). The history of many organised religions provides such cases of oppression.

At the same time, there is contained in the novel an implied critique of scientists and science-writing. Principally, Joe Rose is characterised as a failed scientist, himself deluded that the answer to his own crisis is to 'get back into "real science"' (217). His failure so to do is explained in the rejection letter from his former professor:

my proposal for work on the virtual photon was redundant. '...the questions have been radically re-framed in the past five years. This re-definition appears to have passed you by. My advice to you, Joseph, would be to continue with the very successful career you already have.' (106)

Joe is portrayed as constantly self-critical of his position as a science writer:

I was a journalist, a commentator, an outsider to my own profession. ...No scientist, not even a lab technician or college porter, would ever take me seriously again. (77)

He further describes his position as being 'a parasite' (75), 'all the ideas I deal in are other people's' (70). Undoubtedly his career as a science writer is portrayed as a success: 'I've made a lot of money, swinging spider-monkey-style on the tallest trees of the science fashion jungle—dinosaurs, black holes, quantum magic, chaos, super strings, neuroscience, Darwin re-visited' (75); but it is dismissed as little more than 'armchair science' (104). As in *Black Dogs*, the qualities associated with science—objectivity, logic, proof—are debunked in this novel. Joe's reference to his 'laboratory days' (122) evokes Bernard's disillusionment about the objectivity in science in the earlier novel (89), and McEwan provides a number of tests of Joe's own objectivity in *Enduring Love*. Joe's failure accurately to remember the events in the restaurant is the perfect example:

I felt a familiar disappointment. No one could agree on anything. We lived in a mist of half-shared, unreliable perception, and our sense data came warped by a prism of desire and belief, which tilted our memories, too. We saw and remembered in our own favour and we persuaded ourselves along the way. Pitiless objectivity, especially about ourselves, was always a doomed social strategy. (180–1)

This subjectivity is summed up in opposition to the men of science's mantra: 'Believing is seeing' (181). The realisation provides the counterpoint to Joe's rational, logical self and contains the seed of his possible redemption. This is particularly the case in the relationship McEwan creates for Joe and Clarissa, in which he returns to the polarities of masculine and feminine, logic and emotion. Joe's mind is described as 'careful and precise' (83), his rationality and logic attractive to Clarissa, who is portrayed as having witnessed her father's mind's decay through Alzheimer's disease (83), a fate McEwan revisits in his later novel, *Amsterdam* in the demise of Molly Lane. On the other hand, Joe's logical turn of mind blocks the emotions, and desensitises him to the desires of his partner. Clarissa accuses him of reverting to logic, to defeat Jed Parry: 'You think you can read your way out of this' (148). That is precisely what Joe achieves, however, in researching the syndrome that Parry suffers from. Nevertheless, science is portrayed negatively in the relationship between Clarissa and Joe, as an escape from emotion. For example, Joe's pursuit of understanding Parry is cast, paradoxically, in terms of achieving a better understanding of his emotional bond with Clarissa: 'what could I learn about Parry that would restore me to Clarissa?' (128). This resonates with McEwan's own theory of achieving good out of evil: 'one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good. I used to play this game as a kid, and in some ways I still play it, trying to conjecture the worst' (Hamilton 1985: 20). From Clarissa's point of view, Joe's obsession with Parry is what is coming between them: 'You're always thinking about him. It

never stops' (148). It is an obsession that, she is shown to believe, is unfounded. This view, also paradoxically, is premised on the fact that this non-scientific character has seen no objective evidence for Parry's presence (148–9). Joe's failure, argues Clarissa in her letter (Chapter 23), is that he should have been more prepared to share his thoughts and feelings with her, rather than pursue his obsession with Parry. McEwan's protagonist is vindicated, however, in his success in resisting Parry through his own research, and the determination to overcome him; and his rebuttal of Clarissa's argument (222) is never challenged again. Unlike his treatment of the theme in *Black Dogs*, then, McEwan allows the science/emotion dialectic to be resolved in favour of science. Nevertheless, McEwan includes in the novel a short testimony to the power of love to render the rational irrational, in the touching cameo of the Professor of Logic, completely and foolishly in love with a girl student at the risk of his career and dignity (226–30).

It is significant that the novel portrays the male scientist in emotional conflict with a female literary scholar, once again aligning masculine and feminine principles respectively with science and sensitivity. Nevertheless, the depiction of the oppressor/oppressed relationship as same-gendered is unusual in McEwan's work. It is insisted upon in the novel that the Parry/Rose 'love' is asexual, both in the main text and also in the fictitious article by the psychiatrists, which is produced in 'Appendix I': it is entitled 'Homoerotic erotomania' (233), as distinct from their other article cited in the references, 'Homosexual erotomania'. The oppression is not therefore gendered as in

earlier work. It is clear that this is an issue which McEwan is keen to explore. Shortly after his reference in the novel to the real-life Rosalind Franklin, who was oppressed and excluded by her male peer, he includes a conversation about men being oppressed by other men: 'put down or otherwise blocked by older men, their fathers, teachers, mentors, or their idols' (167). This arose out of another case of oppression between male scientists, and is followed by a similar story about Wordsworth and Keats (167–9). Indeed, McEwan goes on to explore men's mutual oppression in his later novel, *Amsterdam*, where jealousy between two men leads to double murder. In this way, McEwan suggests that the struggle for dominance is not as gendered as he had portrayed in earlier work.

McEwan's use of an external force to subvert a relationship is familiar territory. In *Enduring Love* Clarissa writes to Joe: 'A stranger invaded our lives and the first thing that happened was that you became a stranger to me' (218). Jack in *The Cement Garden* could have written this to his sister on the appearance of Derek, as could Julie to Stephen of the unknown child abductor in *The Child in Time*; or Mary to Colin in *The Comfort of Strangers* about Robert; or in *The Innocent* by Maria to Leonard of her estranged husband. The creation of strangers provides McEwan with an unpredictable element which cannot be controlled by his characters and the outsiders are usually permitted to exert a dominant force upon the status quo. Joe, for example, asks himself, 'was I to be entirely subordinate to other people's obsessions?' (121). The answer, in McEwan's work, is mainly 'yes'. The principal actors

appear to lose their free will to these strangers. Unlike Clarissa, Joe shows no signs of resisting the obsessions, becoming obsessive in turn. Whereas Clarissa believes it might have been possible to resist or circumvent Parry's desires (Chapter 23), Joe is shown to entertain no such thoughts. In so doing, McEwan subjects the central relationships in his novels to external dominative forces which they cannot resist. In *Enduring Love*, issues of dominance and subjection within the central relationship are low key. They turn upon subtle dominating behaviours, such as intrusion of privacy, where, for example, Joe reads Clarissa's letters (105–6), rather than more overt forms of domination. An explicit sexual encounter between Joe and Clarissa, for example, shows Joe's initial resistance to her seduction in the triumph of his being able to read and to make love at the same time (160–1).

Compared to the relationship between the two men, McEwan represents one of relative harmony between the lovers, Joe and Clarissa. Like many of the mature relationships McEwan portrays, this one, too, is disrupted and destroyed by external forces. In *The Comfort of Strangers* and *The Cement Garden*, McEwan had created flawed relationships, so it was not unreasonable for them to be destroyed. In *The Child in Time*, the relationship between Julie and Stephen was portrayed as strong enough to heal the wounds imposed by malign influence of the loss of their child. From this point onwards, McEwan portrays relationships that are less able to endure difficulty. In *The Innocent* the consequences of Otto's death are personally and politically sufficient to cause a rupture in Maria and Leonard's union. In *Black Dogs*,

McEwan permits the intervention of evil to keep the partners permanently apart. The sexual relationship between June and Bernard, founded on a shared socialism, is divided by rationalism. Bernard remains true to science, June finds solace in ascetic spirituality. In *Enduring Love*, McEwan presents a bleak picture of love: no matter how much happiness a couple construct for themselves, something inevitably intervenes to destroy it. Nor does he portray love as a strong force to resist these external destructive influences. Joe and Clarissa are almost grudgingly reunited in the scope of the novel, but only in the dispassionate report of the psychiatrist's case study of Jed: 'in this case R and M [Joe Rose and Clarissa Mellon] were reconciled and later successfully adopted a child' (242). The fate of the majority of McEwan's characters' relationships seems increasingly to be negative. Perhaps in part this reflects the writer's life: in the introduction to *The Imitation Game* he testifies to his interest in anti-rationalist cultural icons in his early writing—those of 'Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, Ouspensky, of bits and pieces of Jung, of the I Ching and tarot cards and the effects of psychotropic drugs' (11). Furthermore, his marriage to Penny Allen, an alternative healer, and an apparent influence for the greater part of his writing life, and possibly also the inspiration for his dialectic between science and spirituality, foundered between the publication of *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*.

Enduring Love's pivotal point is a violent incident as brutal, unpredictable, and as destructive to the central relationships as ever McEwan has represented in previous work—such as the loss of a child in *The Child in*

Time, which throws Stephen into depression and his marriage into a temporary breakdown; the death and dissection of Otto in *The Innocent*, which brutalises Leonard and severs his connection to Maria; and the encounter with the Gestapo dogs in *Black Dogs*, which leads to the breakdown of Bernard and June's family. Balloon flight represents an early form of flight, and one of the least technologically sophisticated. As such, it is more prone to the forces of nature than later forms. Ballooning is associated with liberty and leisure. Its imagery is feminine rather than phallic. Yet the incident McEwan portrays undoes the lives of several men with at best violent and at worst fatal consequences. McEwan describes the unfortunate victim at the beginning of the novel in characteristically clinical and dispassionate a manner: he fell like 'a stiff little black stick' (16). The dispassionately inanimate imagery is repeated with the same clinical detachment when Joe confronts the corpse: 'The skeletal structure had collapsed internally to produce a head on a thickened stick' (23). The lack of control the pilot displays in the grip of a high wind mirrors the lack of control Joe experiences under Parry's obsession. Lack of control is also evident in three other violent scenes in the novel. First, there is the shooting in the restaurant, where Parry's paid assassins strike at the wrong man; second, the violence amongst the hippies who vie over the sale of the gun to Joe; finally the stand off between Joe and Parry, with Clarissa as hostage. Only in the last of these is Joe in control, and even then his demeanour is one of lack of trust in his aim, his amateurishness with the

technology of the gun—aptly testified to in his practice session in the wood with his coolly-named procurer, Johnny B. Well (206).

Religious allusions abound in the image of Logan's fall: Logan may be seen as a fallen angel, especially with the subsequent implication that he was committing adultery, which is subsequently disproven; the crucifixion is implied by his upright posture; and he lands in a field of sheep, inviting comparisons with Christ the shepherd as well as a lamb to the slaughter; furthermore, the landmarks of Joe's return to the scene of the accident is referred to as 'his stations of the cross' (127). Here, too, in the portrayal of Parry as a misunderstood outcast, is a collision of ordinariness and perversity. This is similar to earlier portrayals of characters where obsessional behaviour is born out of a normal need to be accepted, such as was felt by the man in 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man', who had been rejected by his mother; or like the need to be with their mother for the orphaned children in *The Cement Garden*; or like the man in *Conversation with a Cupboard Man* who had been infantilised and then spurned by his mother. The character of Parry may be a development of these earlier characters who suffer from arrested emotional development as a result of their deprivation of parental love. McEwan goes to some length to provide 'evidence' for Parry's state of mind, resulting from separation from his family and his isolation from normal society. As Parry explains: 'my mother ... died of cancer four years ago ... My father died when I was eight. I've an older sister in Australia, but we weren't able to track her down when my mother died' (95).

The motive for Parry's pursuit of Joe which is at the centre of *Enduring Love* is homoerotic rather than homo-sexual, similar to the way in which McEwan represented Robert's motivation in *The Comfort of Strangers*. However, although Robert's obsession with Colin does have a sexual manifestation, Parry's designs on Joe appear asexual, as seems confirmed in the first 'Appendix', where the author of the case study declares that 'P was evasive and even offended' at questions of sexual intimacy with his object of desire (240). The motive for Parry's actions is portrayed as neither sexual nor evil; rather they are more platonic and spiritual, much as McEwan portrays June's rejection of the sensual life in favour of the ascetic in *Black Dogs*. Nevertheless, like Robert, Parry pursues his quarry with what is obsessive and inevitably murderous intent. The threatening overtones of sadistic desire are evident in Parry's letter:

My love for you is hard and fierce, it won't take no for an answer, and it's moving steadily towards you, coming to claim you and deliver you. In other words, my love—which is also God's love—is your fate. ...It's only a matter of time, and you'll be grateful when the moment comes. (136)

Whereas the struggle between the two men in *The Comfort of Strangers* is fairly superficial, lending itself to a simple Freudian interpretation premised upon sado-masochism and appearing as an explicit explanation in the body of the novel, in *Enduring Love* McEwan constructs the motivation for the destructive domination of the hero by invoking a psychological disorder for the character, 'de Clérambault's syndrome', to explain Parry's behaviour.

Parry's pursuit of Joe is rooted in delusion and both 'partners' in the 'relationship' believe that they unfairly endure the consequences of their meeting. Joe's subjection to Parry's attention is enforced by the latter's obsessive behaviour; Parry equally believes that Joe has led him on (210). Readers are invited to sympathise with Joe, for the novel is mainly written from the point of view of Joe in the first person, McEwan's favoured perspective in most of his novels. However, there are also two other first persons narrating the novel, in that letters from Parry and Clarissa form whole separate chapters. This serves to shift the persona of the narrator, which enables McEwan to give us insights into the psyche and motivation of Parry, through his letters (Chapters 11, 16 and 'Appendix II'), and also of Clarissa in her letter to Joe (Chapter 23). In Chapter 9, in addition, the narrator adopts the point of view of Clarissa, and narrates the chapter referring to Joe in the third person. However, McEwan gives more prominence to Joe's perspective, since most of the novel is written from his point of view. For both of the main male characters their situation is unendurable but since we only seldom have any insight into Parry's perception of things, it is made more difficult to sympathise with him. In addition, the portrayal of Jed Parry as a diagnosed psychiatric 'case' throws him further from readers' sympathy. Even the distancing effect of narrating references to Parry mainly by his surname, whilst Joe is mainly referred to by his first name, serves to effect the distance readers are intended to feel. However, the choice of the surname for Parry, with its implication of defence, suggests that a more sympathetic reading is possible. The name Parry

also evokes the idea of sword-play, normally phallic, though McEwan has circumvented this connotation with the asexual nature of Parry's desire. The names given to the characters, Joe and Jed, similar in length and consisting of a single syllable, while also beginning with McEwan's most frequently-chosen consonant for names, suggests more similarities between the characters than differences, and since characters named with a 'J' are more likely to be portrayed sympathetically than the others, there is a suggestion that Jed is as much to be pitied as despised. Interestingly, in *Enduring Love*, McEwan uses the expression that a particular character was 'born under the sign of [a particular letter]' (184) as Joe searches his address book for a contact from whom he might buy a gun. The idea seems particularly apposite to McEwan's tendency to choose 'J' as the initial for his most sympathetic characters.¹² The close similarity between Joe and joy (and Jed) is also exemplified in the letter which McEwan writes from Parry after three years in a secure institution: there is frequent naming of Joe and the letter ends 'faith is joy. Jed' (245). In his list of 'References' in the academic paper in 'Appendix I', McEwan also playfully inserts a name which spell out Jed and Rose, 'ESQUIROL, J.E.D.' (243). It is quite possible that these letter games are intentional. Burkeman (1999), as

¹² A significant number of the names McEwan assigns to his fictional characters begin with 'J'. They include John and Joey in 'Intersection', Jenny in 'Last Day of Summer', Jack and Jasmin in 'Cocker at the Theatre', Jack and Julie in *The Cement Garden*, Julie in *The Child in Time*, James and Jeremy in *The Ploughman's Lunch*, June, Jeremy and Jenny in *Black Dogs*, and Julian in *Amsterdam*. It is probably a coincidence that the letter of the alphabet McEwan wrote under in his contribution to *Hockney's Alphabet* (1991), a publication which raised funds for an AIDS charity, was 'J', since the authors were assigned their letter. McEwan's piece in the *Alphabet*, 'Joy', recounts a moment on the beach at Tripoli where for the first time he felt independent, happy and free.

cited above (p.257), points out that the names of the fictional writers of the 'paper' spell out Ian McEwan; and in the interview with Hamilton (1978), McEwan talks of writing poems with the names of little boys spelled out in them (12). In the body of the novel, McEwan also has Jed allude to similarities between them (Jed and Joe) and Job, deliberately pointing up the connection in their names. Joe's partner is named Clarissa, evocative of Richardson's eponymous heroine who writes daily letters. Here, the motivation is transferred from the necessity to communicate of a woman confined to her home, to a deluded Parry who writes frequent letters to a man he has staked out in his own home. Finally, the parallels between Richardson's Clarissa and Parry are made stronger, for Parry's daily letters to Joe are written equally from his place of confinement. The point is the same. Richardson's Clarissa is dominated and ultimately violated by an outsider—and she writes to try to free herself. Parry, too, is portrayed as being controlled by the force of Joe's love. Parry writes to free himself from confinement and to free Joe from his imputed delusion of atheism.

Violence is an inevitable outcome of Parry's need to dominate Joe, in the same way that McEwan depicts the inexorable direction of Robert's obsession in *The Comfort of Strangers*. In *Enduring Love*, Parry's attempt on Joe's life, the truth of which remains ambiguous until Parry admits it (212), is the trigger for Joe, too, to resort to the most extreme form of domination, planning to kill his tormentor. The acquisition of the gun is clearly not for self-defence—his inability to articulate an assurance of self-defence when he buys

the gun (199) confirms this—and the escalation of violence is assured the moment he contacts a possible source: ‘I knew that one action, one event, would entail another, until the train was beyond my control’ (188). Indeed, this is a theme of the novel: the balloon is beyond the control of its passengers, and the heroic efforts of the rescuers are unable to bring it under their control; Parry’s obsession is also out of control, with violent consequences. The fact that McEwan portrays Parry’s contrived obsession with Joe as having the prospect of persisting, seems to show that it is only the intervention of science, in the form of psychiatry, which confines him in a mental hospital, that is capable of controlling the situation.

It is notable that it is in his later work McEwan is more concerned with the wider social, cultural and political picture than in his earlier work, which was mainly concerned with psychological studies of individual characters. Throughout his work, as this thesis has shown, unequal power relations are prevalent, and the struggle for domination is ubiquitous.

Chapter V: Conclusion

In conclusion, the thesis has sought to establish the prominence of the theme of domination and subjection in Ian McEwan's work, by providing substantial evidence of the primacy of the theme through many of the short stories, plays and novels. Throughout his work, individual characters have been shown as subject to powerful dominative forces which work to undermine the harmony which they seek in their private relationships. At the same time, evidence has been examined which helps in establishing the importance of the theme in a wider social and political context. This reflects McEwan's lived experience as a writer in the twentieth century, where totalitarianism, patriarchy, and the domination of science have all had a powerful influence on the personal and political dimensions of the human condition. McEwan's project has been to expose the ubiquity of dominative practices, thereby offering the prospect of resistance.

While detailed consideration of evidence in the thesis concluded in Chapter IV with evidence drawn from *Enduring Love*, McEwan has pursued this theme again in his latest novel, *Amsterdam*. Here, the struggle for domination combines sexual, social and scientific domination in a struggle for supremacy over sexual and political rivals, and over the ultimate leveller, death itself. The plot is played out amongst a group of men, all of them associated with a woman, Molly Lane. Her funeral opens the novel following her death by her husband's hand in euthanasia, since she was suffering from rapid-onset

Alzheimer's disease. The relegation of Molly from the present narrative of the novel suggests that McEwan sees male power struggles as more interesting now than those between men and women. This may be a logical conclusion of McEwan's portrayal of women: throughout his fiction, male characters are foregrounded and female characters have increasingly been forced into the background. That said, none of the characters in the novel are portrayed sympathetically. McEwan also treats the issue of sexuality in the novel as other than a binary opposition between male and female. The cross-dressing politician reminds readers of earlier characters such as the transvestite aunt in 'Disguises', and of the boy, Tom, far from a tomboy, dressed in girls' clothes in *The Cement Garden*. That McEwan chooses to represent the politician crossing the traditional boundaries of behaviour is also reminiscent of his portrayal of the 'sexless' Prime Minister and the puerile Darke in *The Child in Time*, and is perhaps also a comment on the problem of accepting the public face of politicians.

Beyond the drive for supremacy in sexual terms over the impossibly desired Molly Lane, all of the male characters are portrayed as engaged in a struggle to overcome their own inadequacies and failings. Most of their actions, as are the criticisms of them, are seen in terms of their performance, either sexual or professional, and are quite literally so in the case of the composer, Clive. All of them are in the public eye, but the politician, a foreign secretary, appears to be the most vulnerable. It is ironic, therefore, that he survives the murderous intensity of the struggle. McEwan portrays a scenario

that suggests this is because his self-revelation of his proclivities undermines the attempts of his rival to expose him. Equally, the moral failure of the composer to intervene to prevent the rape of a lone woman in the Lake District renders him incapable of mastering the composition of his millennial symphony. The loathing which each of the rivals has for the other procures each other's death, corrupting their pact to end the other's life in the case of terminal, mentally debilitating illness. Each triumphs in dominating the other but does not survive to enjoy his supremacy. However, McEwan invites us to imagine that the double murder has been consented to as a genuine mercy, saving each man from further public humiliation and defeat. As such, *Amsterdam* provides a difficult vision of human relationships, which is only what readers expect from a writer such as McEwan who has confronted difficult visions of perversion, evil and corruption in the drive for domination throughout his work. This is not to suggest that these are the only visions that McEwan can imagine. In counterpoint to these deleterious aspects, McEwan tries to portray what he calls in a radio interview (Lawley 2000) 'the precariousness of love'.

Another prominent dimension in McEwan's explorations of human relationships is sex and sexuality, aspects of which were considered in Chapter III. A number of writers have examined the treatment of sexuality and sexual politics in McEwan's work (such as Norton 1991, Byrnes 1995, and Ryan 1999). Various other themes remain to be examined in greater depth. For example, gender issues, discussed in relation to sexual domination (Chapter III) and developed in the polarisation of science and Nature (Chapter IV),

seem to provide a rich seam to explore in greater depth, including the idea of sexual ambiguity, perhaps from a feminist perspective. In particular, McEwan's treatment of wholeness, with the integration of masculine and feminine principles to allow more understanding and harmony, bears further exploration. Other researchers might further develop an analysis of the dilemmas of alienation and belonging, violence and death, truth and fiction, all of which McEwan exploits for his fiction.

In his introduction to *The Imitation Game* McEwan stated that his aim is to cause 'the viewer to regard the world afresh' (10). He also asks readers to examine whether they collude in the ideologies of domination. By exploring in this way the darker side of mastery and domination, McEwan proposes the more illuminating alternative of co-operation with, and respect for, the Other. By focussing so much upon subjection and domination, McEwan encourages readers to examine their own position and to consider whether these unequal power relations are the best way for humanity to advance. He therefore invites alternative conceptualisations which seek to resist dominative practices and allow the renewal of more benign equalities in human relations. In this respect, he may be seen as still playing the game which he played as a child, as he explained in an interview with Ian Hamilton (1978): 'one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good' (20).

Whether the theme of domination and subjection persists as central in McEwan's work as it has been from the beginning to the present, as has been

demonstrated in this thesis, remains to be seen, but it is likely that it will continue to be a prominent concern. Indeed, McEwan's statement in his radio interview (Lawley 2000) that he thinks that his next book is 'about atonement ... about a deed committed in the past and how it can be put right', seems to suggest that some wrongdoing will be central to the novel. McEwan published a short story, which is one chapter of the forthcoming novel due for completion at the end of 2000, in the first issue of a new arts magazine, *Areté* (1999a). In it, a 12 year-old girl, Briony, is driven by a 'controlling demon' (20) to script the course of the lives of her family by writing a play: '[t]he piece was intended to inspire ... terror, relief, instruction, in that order' (22). Control of her project is, however, contested by her older cousin, Lola, who assumes the authority that accompanies age and experience: '[t]he advance of Lola's dominion was merciless and made self-pity irrelevant' (28). And although Briony finds 'the strength to resist' (ibid.), her three cousins, with varying degrees of innocence, proceed in undermining her direction, 'steadily wrecking Briony's creation' (29). With the drive to mastery so much in evidence in his past work, and on the evidence of this latest short story, it is likely that domination and subjection will feature again, in new forms, in McEwan's fertile imagination.

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