

Ethical Reflections on Masculinity in Ian McEwan's "Solid Geometry"

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Abstract: Ian McEwan's debut collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), established his reputation as a "macabre writer". This paper argues that McEwan delves into the darker aspects of human nature through unsettling elements and unreliable narrators, thereby prompting ethical reflections from readers. Taking the short story "Solid Geometry" as a case in point, McEwan scrutinizes a form of masculinity that values rationality over emotions, demonstrating the detrimental effects this can have on intimate relationships. The phallus preserved in a glass jar and the diaries featured in the story are employed as metaphors for patriarchal heritage. These symbols not only reflect the narrator's admiration for masculinity but also underscore the inherent link between knowledge and power. As a writer who previously expressed interest in the Women's Movement, McEwan's early work exposes the control patriarchal culture wields over women's bodies and highlights the power dynamics underlying gender relations by depicting violence within the seemingly mundane setting of family life. In conclusion, through his intricate storytelling, McEwan compels readers to engage in profound contemplation on the constructs of masculinity and patriarchy.

1. Introduction

The debut collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), written by the renowned contemporary British author Ian McEwan, received an overwhelming amount of reviews upon publication and won the Somerset Maugham Award the following year. These stories established McEwan's reputation as a writer of macabre and shocking literature for dealing with sensitive and dark topics such as violence, murder, incest, rape, pedophilia, and transvestism. In the short story "Solid Geometry", the protagonist and narrator discovers a geometrical proof of "a plane without a surface" while reading his great-grandfather's journals. He then uses this theory to commit the unthinkable - the murder of his wife, Maisie. The story artfully combines various elements, including the gothic, the historical, the supernatural, and the metafictional, creating a suspenseful atmosphere akin to a Hitchcockian thriller. This paper argues that "Solid Geometry" presents McEwan's critique of masculine rationality. The phallus in the glass jar symbolizes the narrator's admiration of masculinity and male-dominated discourses. When Maisie shatters the glass jar, however, she challenges and defies the narrator's authority, leading to his discipline and punishment through a mathematical proof found in the journals. The mathematical proof represents an abstract

and theoretical form of knowledge, further emphasizing the power dynamics at play. By seamlessly intertwining the exploration of violence in everyday life with the art of storytelling, McEwan prompts readers to reflect ethically on masculinity and gender politics.

2. A Masculinity Associated with Extreme Rationality and Emotional Repression

The narrator in "Solid Geometry" is a rationalist who works from home, editing his great-grandfather's 45 volumes of diaries. While going through the journals, he discovers a geometric proof of "a plane without a surface" which allows him to make his wife disappear, as they are currently at odds with each other. Upon reading the story, the reader perceives the anonymous male narrator as highly rational, cruel, and indifferent, while his wife is depicted as emotional, intuitive, obsessed with mysticism, and connected to nature. The stark contrast between masculinity and femininity, a theme that resonates throughout McEwan's later works such as *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Black Dogs* (1992), is brought to the forefront. According to Australian sociologist R. W. Connell, masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts that are seen as opposites, with masculinity relying on the existence of femininity for contrast. In patriarchal cultures, masculinity is often valued more than femininity. This paper argues that McEwan's short story "Solid Geometry" illustrates how men's strong emphasis on rationality and suppression of emotions leads to the denial and devaluation of femininity, ultimately hindering the cultivation of healthy and fulfilling intimate relationships.

As McEwan notes, the narrator of the story is an "exaggerated representative" of "the highly rational and destructive"[1]. It is worth noting that rationality plays a central role in the construct of modern masculinity within patriarchal ideology. Cornell, in her insightful analysis, contends that there exists a deeply ingrained assumption in European philosophy that "men are rational while women are emotional"[2]. This association between masculinity and rationality can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment, a period in which rationality was expected to govern the irrational, much like culture was anticipated to triumph over nature. Seidler further expands on this concept, highlighting that "Within a secularized culture, scientific rationality assumed power in relation to nature, and progress came to be identified with the control and domination of nature. This was something that men could also exercise in relation to their inner natures, where they learned to identify masculinity with self-control"[3]. It is evident that since the Enlightenment, there has been a prevailing belief in the superiority of rationality, often leading to the undervaluing of emotions. This notion is exemplified in the narrator's attitude towards his wife, Maisie, when she suggests the possibility of gaining knowledge through tarot cards[4]. The narrator's unwavering faith in scientific rationalism becomes a barrier to his connection with Maisie, resulting in a failure to appreciate or comprehend her inner world. When Maisie urgently needs to use the bathroom during her period, the narrator, occupied with writing his own diary in the bathroom, completely disregards her request and remains inside until he has finished documenting his thoughts, justifying his actions by claiming that delaying would cause him to forget important details[4]. This instance highlights the narrator's self-absorption and lack of empathy towards Maisie's needs. Drawing a parallel to the spiders observed by the narrator in the bathroom, we see how he, too, becomes trapped in his own limited perspective, excessively consumed by his own thoughts and oblivious to his wife's voice. Furthermore, at the beginning of the story, when Maisie, plagued by a nightmare, implores the narrator to stay with her, he dismisses her plea by stating that he is already right beside her and closes his eyes[4]. The narrator mistakenly believes that his mere physical presence in bed with Maisie is enough to alleviate her solitude, yet he fails to recognize and address her emotional needs. Hence, despite sharing the same physical space, the narrator and his wife remain emotionally distant from one another.

Men often perceive emotion as a feminine trait and tend to reject their own emotions, feelings, and desires. This can result in a lack of ability to empathize with and understand the emotions and consciousness of others. In the story, the narrator dismisses his wife's anguish and obsession with

mysticism, disregarding her concerns as mere complaining. Maisie, feeling unheard, expresses her frustration by saying, "When you are talking...I can feel myself, you know, being screwed up like a piece of paper"[4]. The narrator, responding with sarcasm, suggests that they may be in a fiction seminar[4]. The use of simile by Maisie to describe the pain caused by the narrator's words and her own vulnerability and helplessness is met with mockery from the narrator. He sees her emotional expression as sentimental and constantly analyzes and criticizes her life, without showing any love or understanding. In another scene, when Maisie tells the narrator, "You don't speak to me any more...you play me like a pinball machine, for points", he responds with "Good morning, Hamlet"[4]. Once again, the narrator belittles Maisie for her sentimental nature, as if she were living in a novel. This interaction highlights the ongoing pattern of emotional detachment and insensitivity displayed by the narrator. It is important to note that the narrator's preference for reason and reality leads him to suppress his emotions to an extreme degree, causing him to be oblivious to the pain and sadness that his indifference brings to his wife. Michael Kaufman's concept of a "psychic armor" further emphasizes the emotional distance and fear of intimacy that men often develop. This emotional detachment can hinder their ability to empathize with others and understand the consequences of their actions[3]. By repressing his own feelings, the narrator denies himself the opportunity to experience and express his true emotions, creating a barrier to intimacy and preventing him from building a deeper connection with his wife.

In patriarchal societies, women are often perceived as being influenced and controlled by their emotions. This perception can lead to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and the suppression of women's autonomy. On the other hand, men are often expected to value rationality and suppress their own emotions, bodies, and desires. This societal expectation can create a narrow view of masculinity, where any display of emotion or vulnerability is seen as a threat to dominant masculinity. Consequently, many men may struggle with moral empathy and find it difficult to understand and connect with the emotions and experiences of others. This struggle can hinder the formation of intimate relationships, as empathy and emotional connection are essential for fostering intimacy and understanding between individuals.

3. The Penis in the Glass Jar and Great-Grandfather's Diaries: The Admiration of Masculinity and the Disciplinary Power in Knowledge

At the beginning of the story, the narrator reads his great-grandfather's diary while a twelve-inch glass jar holding Captain Nicholls' penis sits on the table. Both the phallus and the diary, as symbols of patriarchal heritage, serve crucial roles in the narrative: the former exposes the narrator's reasons for killing his wife, and the latter offers him the means to carry out the act.

The narrator's great-grandfather bought Captain Nicholls' penis at an auction in the nineteenth century and passed it down to the narrator. In many cultures, a large phallus is considered an important male sexual characteristic, symbolizing masculinity. According to post-structuralists, the phallus is associated with masculinity and represents symbolic authority. In the story, Captain Nicholls' phallus alludes to masculinity, symbolizing adventure, conquest, strength, and power.

The glass bottle containing the phallus, however, is eventually shattered by the narrator's wife, Maisie. Longing for affection, intimacy, and emotional connection from her husband, yet constantly met with cold rejection to her sexual invitations, Maisie reaches a breaking point and smashes the bottle in a fit of rage. The bottle, which symbolizes male superiority and dominance, is now a shattered mess: "Amid the broken glass and the rising stench of formaldehyde lay Capt. Nicholls, slouched across the leather covers of a volume of the diary, grey, limp and menacing, transformed from a treasured curiosity into a horrible obscenity"[4]. The act of breaking the jar not only exposes the fragility of masculinity and its vulnerability but also signifies the destruction of the bond between the great-grandfather and the narrator, both of whom share many similarities and mirror each other. Isolated from society and consumed with abstract ideas, the great-grandfather lives in a world of mathematics and theory, relying on his father's patents for income and never venturing

beyond his hometown. Similarly, the narrator's life revolves around organizing his great-grandfather's diary, spending his days in seclusion within his study or bathroom, with his wife being his only source of interaction. Their detachment, self-centeredness, and lack of empathy and sympathy have caused people close to them to disappear from their lives. From the narrator's perspective, Maisie's actions not only challenge his strength and dignity as a man but also trigger his deep-seated anxiety regarding gender identity and masculinity. While the phallus in the glass jar symbolizes the narrator's admiration for masculinity and male dominance, Maisie's act of breaking the bottle represents an invasion and threat of femininity. This incites a profound crisis of masculinity that leaves the narrator feeling completely powerless and uncertain about his own identity.

Finally, to assert his masculinity and demonstrate his power, the narrator pretends to make love to his wife but actually murders her through the mathematical proof he discovers in his great-grandfather's journals. The diaries in the story play a crucial role in constructing history and revealing the connection between power and knowledge. While the narrator's great-grandfather meticulously records his daily life in his diary, he intentionally hides the dark secret of taking the life of his best friend, M. This highlights the subjective nature of diary writing in constructing reality and shaping history.

In the short story, the narrator's use of a geometric proof to make his wife vanish signifies his utilization of knowledge to assert authority and discipline over others. The narrator recognizes that this geometric proof represents "a system of the highest, most terrifying form of knowledge, the mathematics of the Absolute"[4]. According to Foucault, knowledge is not purely objective but is intertwined with power: "The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power"[5]. In this story, the geometric principles documented in the narrator's great-grandfather's journals, instead of being used for the advancement of humanity, are reduced to a tool for committing murder without facing any consequences. The narrator utilizes this abstract geometric proof to punish and eliminate his wife, and similarly, his great-grandfather employs it to make his friend M disappear. Metaphorically speaking, this illustrates how they rely on knowledge to exert control and dominance over others. Neither the narrator nor his great-grandfather express any emotions such as guilt or remorse throughout the story.

In short, when Maisie shatters the glass jar holding the phallus, which represents the patriarchal legacy, she exposes the vulnerability of masculinity and thrusts the narrator into a state of uncertainty about his male identity. To assert the ideal of masculinity and his control in gender dynamics, the anonymous narrator utilizes the geometric proof in the diary to punish and discipline Maisie, highlighting the patriarchal society's control over the female body and the power dynamics inherent in gender relations.

4. Ethical Reflections on the Violence of Everyday Life

In the eyes of critics, McEwan's early short stories, including "Solid Geometry", suggest an "art of unease" that disturbs readers [6]. A critic argues that "What makes such narratives hard to swallow is not so much the author's soft spot for the gruesome as his seeming content to withhold moral appraisal, to let the monstrous smuggle itself out of his unconscious duty-free. The celebrated clinical precision of McEwan's style is crucial to this effect. The contained, impersonal prose, purged of emotive resonance, works hand in glove with the nerveless narrators it is so often conscripted to serve. Its detachment administers the anesthetic which allows the most loathsome acts to be probed without pain, in a context uninfected by sentiment or moralism"[6]. The reader is often left with the impression that McEwan may lack moral discernment and judgment of the horrifying events depicted in his novels due to his detached and emotionless writing style. Consequently, McEwan's early works are often perceived as macabre or shocking literature. This paper, however, argues that McEwan's early works are dedicated to stimulating readers to reflect

ethically on the dark aspects of human nature through depraved narrators and disturbing elements.

McEwan has expressed a keen interest in the Women's Movement, which had a profound impact on his later writing. According to McEwan, traditional English fiction tends to focus on the subtle distinctions between economic classes, while neglecting to address the power dynamics between genders, commonly known as patriarchy. It is within the realm of family that the effects of patriarchy become most evident and pronounced: "Patriarchy corrupts our most intimate relationships with comic and tragic consequences, and as a system it can be described in microcosm through its smallest and most potent unit, the family"[7]. In his work "Solid Geometry", McEwan delves into the detrimental consequences of an excessively rational masculinity through the portrayal of the intimate relationship between the narrator and his wife. In 1971, after reading Germaine Greer's influential book, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), McEwan found it to be a revelation as it resonated with certain issues in his family life, such as his father's dominance. This prompted him to create female characters who embodied qualities that men seemed to lack, with the ultimate goal of liberating his mother from all the constraints: "My female characters became the repository of all the goodness that men fell short of. In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set my mother free"[8]. Therefore, in McEwan's novels, women often embody the opposite traits of men: his male characters frequently exhibit aloofness and harshness, whereas his female characters are portrayed as nurturing and devoted. As readers, we are naturally drawn to empathize with the female characters within this dichotomy of good and evil, thereby reflecting on the pervasive influence of patriarchy.

At the end of "Solid Geometry," when the anonymous narrator uses the mathematical proof found in the diary to eliminate his wife, it becomes clear to the reader that the entire story is a chilling confession of a murderer. When Maisie witnesses her own body gradually fading away, she asks in confusion, "'What's happening?' and all that remained was the echo of her question above the deep blue sheets"[4]. It is at this moment that the reader recognizes that the narrator has skillfully concealed his true intentions from us all along - his hidden desire to rid himself of his wife. Through his masterful portrayal of the darker facets of human nature, McEwan compels the reader to confront the disturbing elements of violence and ugliness that often reside within the confines of ordinary family life. This exploration prompts a moral contemplation on the diseased minds influenced by patriarchal structures.

5. Conclusion

As stated by Cornell, "Everyday life is an arena of gender politics, not an escape from it"[2]. In line with this perspective, McEwan's exploration of patriarchy from a familial standpoint sheds light on the destructive impact of an excessively rational concept of masculinity on intimate relationships. Moreover, when traditional notions of masculinity are challenged, the female body becomes subject to discipline and denial. McEwan's portrayal of violence and murder in "Solid Geometry" goes beyond mere shock value. Instead, his intention is to stimulate readers to engage in deep reflection and heightened awareness of the intricate complexities surrounding masculinity.

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