

Illness Writing and Moral Criticism in Ian McEwan's Amsterdam

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Abstract: Guided by the theory of illness writing and Susan Sontag's viewpoints in her work *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, this paper explores the relationships between illness and existence predicament, between illness and gender anxiety, as well as between illness and moral dilemma through the delicate arrangement of plot and characters, elaborating on the metaphorical meaning of illness and the complexity of illness functioning on the main characters which accounts for their severe existential angst, intense gender anxiety. Pathological symptoms and morbid psychology of main characters reveal their distorted individual values and innuendo the social moral degradation from the perspective of moral criticism, thus offering a brand-new angle to studies on Ian McEwan's novel *Amsterdam*.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Introduction of Ian McEwan and *Amsterdam*

Ian McEwan, a respected British writer in contemporary days, is known as "the National Writer". He was nominated six times for prestigious Booker Prize for *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Black Dogs*, *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *On Chesil Beach* and ultimately clinched the honor with the novel *Amsterdam* in 1998.

Amsterdam, different from his early works, is characterized by black humor comedy with a unique satirical tone. However, opinions are apparently divided towards this work. Supporters are staunchly in favor of the compact and intense arrangement of the novel, with parallel narrative structure and sardonic style. Meanwhile, some critics strongly oppose it. Stuart Burrows contended that McEwan's failings include his weakness for melodrama. "Other failings surface repeatedly in his new work: events are recorded in the manner of a historical book; crude biographical summaries pass themselves off as characterization"^[1].

Most scholars explore the theme of *Amsterdam*-ethical dilemma from the perspective of intertextuality and irony^[9], professional sociology of "imagined communities"^[2], ethical literary criticism^[10], narrative ethics^[11], and so on. So far, there have not been any domestic or international studies carried out to offer systematic analysis from the perspective of illness writing and the relationship between illness and characters' existential predicament, gender anxiety and moral dilemma. Illness writing had been widely explored in McEwan's other works, involving *Saturday*, *Atonement*, *On Chesil Beach*, and *Enduring Love*. But relevant studies on the novel *Amsterdam*

have been overlooked. The major characters in the novel are more or less tormented by physical or mental illness, worthwhile to be further analyzed and be linked to their moral dilemma.

1.2 Illness Writing

Illness, a universal and special life experience of human beings, accompanies the development of human history and the progress of human civilization, which may plague those diseased both in terms of physical and mental health. Even though some of illnesses have been treated with modern advanced technology, the mental trauma cast on humans could not be neglected. Literature, as a type of arts that deal with the actual human conditions and yield spiritual consolation and reassurance to humans, facilitates the development of illness writing which has been widely applied by scholars to interpret literature works both at home and abroad. Additionally, in literary works, illness always contains extended meanings or metaphorical connotations to reveal the inner alienation of characters and to criticize the human depravity engendered by the social environment. The representatives of illness writing, such as Susan Sontag and Clare Barker, shift their attention from the illness itself to its metaphorical meaning for the suffering subject in identity, trauma, and culture.

1.3 Illness as Metaphor

The metaphor of illness widely alludes to individual disorder and social chaos. Starting from the direct effect of physical illness, relevant studies put the emphasis on the metaphorical meanings underlying the illness, and how it casts mental trauma on people and then on the whole society. Accordingly, illness as metaphor provides a fresh perspective and opportunity for later literature criticism and interpretation.

Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors, a medical classic composed by the American scholar Susan Sontag, examines in more general than personal terms how society regards illness and being ill, in particular the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation. At the very beginning of the book, Sontag mentioned that “illness is the night-side of life and a more onerous citizenship”^[8]. In addition to the pain caused by illness itself, patients have to put up with the pressure imposed on the illness, especially those related to moral criticism. At the end of the book, Sontag proposed that it needs to expose, criticize, study, and exhaust itself instead of avoiding the metaphors of illness to get rid of these metaphors^[8]. A thought-provoking point in her book is that people’s values about the dysfunction of body part determine their fear towards illness. Anyway, moral judgments associated with illness are often linked to the aesthetic judgments of beauty and ugliness, cleanliness and dirtiness, and familiarity and mystery.

She also pointed out that illness is often used as a figure of speech and metaphor to symbolize the disorder of social order at the political level, which is often to alert rulers to implement rational policies. *Amsterdam*, boasts its ironic ending of euthanasia as a metaphor for the chaotic ethical order in the corrupt system of the city Amsterdam, and presents the external environmental factors that distort the protagonist’s pursuit of receiving “euthanasia” to die in dignity and generate anxiety in all aspects from a panoramic perspective, finally delivering the appeal for the return of humanity and the reconstruction of social order.

2. Illness and Existential Predicament

When there is a conflict between human’s self-survival instinct and social reality, someone will inadvertently form a psychological state mixed with anxiety, tension, fear, etc. In 1980s, with the booming of the economy and the prevalence of consumerism, egoism and utilitarianism have

prevailed over British society under the neo-liberalism ideology, for which people are desperately thwarted by the spiritual sterility and existential predicament while relishing the pleasure of abundant material things. Rollo May points out “a conflict characterized in its subjective aspect by anxiety and in its objective aspect by illness”^[5]. Emotional disorder and existential anxiety are shown to the fullest extent in the two male protagonists in the novel: Clive Linley, a composer presumably suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder which metaphorically delivers his trepidation of illness and death, and Vernon Halliday, editor-in-chief undergoing the disorder of derealization that interprets his nonentity and void of life. Illness turns out to be the consequence of their existential anxiety as well as their approach to overcoming their apprehension about death.

2.1 OCD: Trepidation of Illness and Death

Clive Linley, one of Molly Lane’s ex-lovers, attended her funeral at the opening chapter. He was very sorry about Molly’s sudden death - presumably from rapidly progressive dementia with variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease^[7]. Given that Molly was a vigorous, passionate, respected woman with open mind and independent thinking, Clive was assured that instead of dying for unascertained reason with suspicion and humiliation, she would rather die off with dignity. Returning to home, he imagined the scene of conducting euthanasia for Molly, exactly after which his fear of illness and death surged rapidly.

Dignified and esteemed as Clive appeared to be, commissioned to compose a symphony for the millennium, his inner self was particularly vulnerable and sensitive, struggling with identity crisis as arduously as the lower class. Tortured by the pressure from loaded work and shadow from Molly’s death, he underwent immense mental disorder. With his feet icy and his arms and chest burning hot, his fear towards death and illness emerged naturally.

Anxieties about work transmuted into the baser metal of simple night fear: illness and death, abstractions that soon found their focus in the sensation he still felt in his left hand. It was cold and inflexible and prickly, as though he had been sitting on it for half an hour^[6].

Both the physical discomfort and mental disorder implied the invincible power of pathological anxiety, to cast a shadow on patients’ mind. To alleviate it, he swallowed several sleeping pills and kept suggesting to himself that “his proper business of his life was work, to finish a symphony by finding its lyrical summit”^[6]. Unbearable and anguished, he embarked on his journey to Lake District which boasted absolute tranquility and enchanting natural scenery and where he was longing for energy and inspiration to galvanize his composition in addition to alleviating physical symptoms. Virtually, Clive’s obsessive thoughts about the meaninglessness of life are a symptom of the obsessive-compulsive disorder that often afflicts people with “obsessive-compulsive neuroticism”^[4]. On the way to seek for inspiration, he had been caught up in the moral choice-whether to rescue a woman from getting raped or to just proceed his creation. Sad is the fact that he attempted to reconcentrate on his composition disregard of the tragedy falling on the woman and even justified for himself impudently later. Ironically, such mental affliction lasted continuously for the rest of his life, badgering him frequently even at the very moment before his death that Molly, playing the role as the victimized woman, came to question him for not saving her.

Exactly, his fear and anxiety towards physical health degeneration exposed his severe existential angst, and specified by his obsessive-compulsive disorder, the fear of undignified death lingered on his mind and nearly suffocated him. Thus OCD here carries on the metaphorical meaning of Clive’s inner alienation, failing to confront the conflict between his inner conscience and outer material things which derive from the materialist society fraught with individual value distortions and social corruptions.

2.2 Derealization: Nonentity and Void of Life

Vernon Halliday, likewise, fell victim to the rampant consumerism and blatant materialist values. He experienced struggle towards his survival plight as well. Vernon was depicted as the figure that “widely known as a man without edges, without faults or virtues, as a man who did not fully exist. Within his profession Vernon was revered as a nonentity”^[6]. Similar to Clive, Vernon was aware of his physical unease and illness symptoms after attending Molly’s funeral. The physical symptom “involved the whole of the right side of his head, both skull and brain somehow, a sensation for which there was simply no word”^[6]. And through several days of observation, he realized that “perhaps the word was dead; his right hemisphere had died”^[6]. The problem with his brain had reoccurred several times in the following text. When Vernon trailed his finger across his scalp, “he could identify the border, the demarcation line where feeling on the left side became not quite its opposite but its shadow, or its ghost”^[6]. It is conspicuously presented that Vernon had presumably developed psychological disorder of derealization owing much to the fact the right side of the head refers to emotional intelligence.

His derealization can be further elucidated in his nonentity and void of life. Though he was designated as the chief editor in the *Judge*, and occupied with all of his works dealing with the papers, journal and other affairs. Such workaholic performance neither promoted him nor established his reputation and authority as he had always expected to.

Literally, Vernon seemed to be profit-driven and seeking for interests all the time, showing little concern about surroundings, except for his potential rival, the deputy foreigner Frank Dibben. During the work meeting, Vernon bluntly reproached Dibben’s proposals. In every single way, he attacked the standpoint of Dibben, aggressively and ruthlessly. Among these trenchant words were a sign of his abhorrence of his rival Dibben who was always ready to take his position covetously and of Garmony who was the last lover of Molly as well.

Generally speaking, friends and family are supposed to be the warm harbor for Vernon to seek for pleasure and reassurance. However, his attitudes towards them determined his tragic ending. As his best friend, Clive scarcely received the care and attention from Vernon whom Clive had ever provided much material preparations for. What disappointed and discouraged Clive much was not only Vernon’s nonchalance towards him-Vernon rarely offer emotional as well as financial support for Clive and even not willing to sacrifice his work time to visit Clive when he accidentally broke his ankle, but also his selfishness and hypocrisy when Vernon insisted on exposing Garmony’s transvestic pictures at the cost of Molly’s reputation. The imbalanced and distorted friendship between Vernon and Clive is bound to be shattered.

As for Vernon, pursuing identity equals to achieving fame and wealth. During his working process, Vernon lost both for his only pursuit of getting ahead of others by putting them down^[3]. He made every attempt to get rid of his anxiety and horror against illness and death, but unconsciously stuck in the mental disorder- derealization, walking the street like a puppet, merely subservient to the society at that age characterized by the raging deformed values and corrupted humanities. His derealization demonstrates to be the consequence of his excessive anxiety over existentialism, which also detached him from the warmth and kindness delivered by his friends and families in the reality.

3. Illness and Gender Anxiety

Since ancient times, women have always been disdained as the “clowns” under the pen of male writers, usually in a state of aphasia or insanity. The marginalization and stigmatization of females was an entrenched tradition in literature. Subsequently, with the awakening of female consciousness, more and more female characters rise to prominence, but female anxiety still pervaded with the

domineering male gaze and masculinity. According to Susan Sontag, “Disease is what speaks through the body, a language for dramatizing the mental: a form of self-expression”^[6]. Through suffering rapidly progress dementia, the heroine Molly with rebellious spirit indicates how vulnerable females are to counterbalance the male power; while tolerance and obedience turn out to be the best approach to protecting women as represented by Rose who submits to the authority of her husband. Garmony, the representative of absolute male authority, however, develops propensity of transvestism, as a way to ease his anxiety over competing with his rivals and elevating his political status.

3.1 Dementia: Fatal for rebellious woman

Ian McEwan describes few female roles in *Amsterdam*, among which the absent heroine Molly became the “moral core”^[9] of the story, related closely to the fate of the male characters. Obviously, compared with the traditional female image featured by marginalized and prejudiced position, thwarted self-competence as well as lack of subjectivity, Molly, appeared to be an independent woman with open mind and fortitude, practicing multiple roles as “restaurant critic, gorgeous wit, and photographer, the daring gardener, who had been loved by the foreign secretary and could still turn a perfect cartwheel at the age of forty-six”^[6]. She set aside the secular opinion and pursued for her own freedom, let alone play a dominant role in the relationships with all her lovers. Much evidence had been showcased for Molly’s morality rather than trapped in immoral extramarital issues. For example, Molly was rational and considerate enough to reject Clive’s proposal for the reason that marriage life would interfere with his composing career, while contributing a rich source of inspiration to his musical composition. And she was empathetic enough to penetrate Garmony’s outer social role to open his inner self, his hidden and complex feelings and his propensity of transvestism, respectfully keeping the lid down. If it were not for the lapse of her consciousness before death, Garmony’s private photos would never have been leaked or exposed.

In terms of Molly’s romantic affairs, it turns out to be the subversion of tradition or social conventions, for she had remained extramarital relationship with Vernon and Garmony disregard of the bond with his husband George, which deprived him of his dignity and respect as an arrogant man. Someone may bitterly comment on this unethical behavior, but evidences could be discovered to justify her seemingly ridiculous decision. From the third-person narrative, George demonstrated to be “morose, possessive husband”^[6] and was to blame for Molly’s death though in outsiders’ eyes. Out of the bondage of miserable marriage life, Molly turned to others for romance and passion, which could also be regarded as the declaration of Molly that nothing could prevent her from pursuing personal happiness and the emancipation of women. To some degree, from the perspective of female power, Molly tried to reverse such stark binary opposition that women were primarily perceived as sexual objects and expected to remain within male dominated ideologies such as homemaker, career and nurturer taking second place of “the Other” after men, so to achieve self-salvation and to construct female discourse by subverting gender norms.

Ironically, the only woman with awakening of female consciousness in the novel had been diagnosed with rapidly progressive dementia which deprived her consciousness and degenerated her brain without any signs. Undoubtedly, through such tragic outcome, the author reluctantly reveals the harsh reality facing those women who tried to challenge the authority of man and to elucidate that female-dominated relationship between gender relations could be merely an ephemeral condition, deviant and unstable, giving rise to some unethical behaviors. Here, illness devitalizes Molly and ultimately deprives her life, meanwhile ends her gender anxiety, declaring that her battle against traditional values imputed on women is doomed to fail.

3.2 Fitness: The Disguise of Kindness and Obedience

Rose Garmony, the angle-like female character in the novel, was the wife of Garmony. Her appearance as a trustworthy doctor had laid a foundation for her image as an intellectual woman with great virtues. But when hearing of his husband Garmony's scandal, instead of imputing the blame on him and ending her marriage with him, she took the initiative to defend Garmony when she came out of the operation room and justified for his husband with composure. Despite something in her hand, she not read from it because "she was confident enough to speak without notes, and she paused to ensure she had everyone's full attention"^[6]. Evidently, the notes in her hand were probably drafted by the ruling party which provides the optimal way for her to respond to the media. With tactful public speech skills, she won people's trust by emphasizing that "love was a greater force than spite"^[6]. In a world where the media has developed to such an extent, pleasing people in the media had become the primary goal of politicians in some countries. Rose concealed her true feelings almost seamlessly, a big traitor exactly in the disguise of "angle."^[3] Agitated by Rose's discourse strategy, people ran counter to their original purpose to criticize Garmony and instead attacked against Vernon who intended to get promotion through such appalling news. However, the plan backfired and forced him to resign from his position. He was excluded by the society in disgrace, also too old to retrain.

Anyway, Rose's defense for his husband who was struck by the extramarital affair had changed the life trace of two men, Garmony and Vernon. On the one hand, it was beyond dispute that her husband's extramarital affair must have caused a certain trauma to her soul and mind, but she chose to remain silent, even to understand her husband's mistakes, which epitomizes the cowardice and humble position in this relationship with women's endurance against men's mistakes and relatively humble female voice pushing them to compromise. But on the other hand, in the public place, Rose appeared to be respectable, intelligent and elegant, skillfully rehabilitated her husband's reputation, which can be explained as the elevation of female social status and the broaden space for them to voice their opinion. Both two sides of interpretation are not contradictory but supplementary, accounting for both the plight and progress of women and society when females strive to cope with their gender anxiety.

Woman with rebellious spirits against patriarchal force ended in miserable death while woman in good health with the mask of hypocrisy garnered popularity in the public, which undoubtedly satirized the corruption of British society under the manipulation of the villains and unreliable media as well as ingrained patriarchal ideologies.

3.3 Transvestism: Subvert of Masculinity

The climax of the story demonstrates to be the debate over private photos that disclose Garmony's transvestism through his daring dressing like a woman, which challenged the chivalry spirits of traditional British society and tremendously downplayed male masculinity. Such propensity, on top of unmasking the hypocrisy of Garmony who tried to conceal his transvestite tendencies in the name of the Conservative Party, reflected his tough situation as an important male figure. It was due to the narrowed public space where he always orchestrated to align his actions with his political leanings that stifled his personal desire and propelled him to generate reverse psychology, to challenge the authority in the private space and to subvert the domineering power of masculinity, so as to reassure himself from the strangled social environment.

Julian Garmony, the husband of Rose, held utterly different images in public and in privacy respectively. Under the supervision of the public, "he had made a life in the political marketplace with an unexceptional stall of xenophobic and punitive opinions"^[6]. He took advantage of every occasion to shape and maintain his reputation and high position. In Molly's funeral, Garmony

showed up and maintained a high profile. To construct his conservative public image, he even requested his subordinate to invite the prestigious composer Clive Linley to prop him up for the public display, during which Garmony introduced his wife Rose to Clive and boasted that his career had promoted Rose's choice to be a doctor, putting people's interests at the top priority. Hypocritically, he eulogized Clive's composition in public to exhibit his appreciation and support for arts and humanity while returning to the private communication, he took off the disguise, straightforwardly blistered Clive with stinging words. He applied foul language to criticize his competitor to show off his masculinity, to infuriate Clive by saying that "the very last time I saw Molly she told me you were impotent and always had been"^[6]. It could be a means for Garmony to lift himself up among the lovers of Molly, and for Garmony to diminish his male anxiety.

Beyond expectation, Garmony's transvestite pictures shot by Molly had been disclosed, which severely threatened his approaching election and even future political career. As is elaborated in the novel, the first photo put Garmony in a "plain three-quarter-length dress, posing catwalk style, with arms pushing away a little from his body and one foot set in front of the other, knees slightly crooked"^[6]; the second showed that "Garmony's dress was more silkily feminine"^[6] and "the effect was less successful, unmasking completely the lurking masculinity and revealing the pathos, the impossible hopes of his confounded identity"^[6]; while in the third picture, "he wore a boxy Chanel jacket and his gaze was turned downward; on some mental screen of selfhood he was a demure and feasible woman, but to an outsider what showed was evasion"^[6]. Obviously, in his private space, subversive to his outer self in the public circumstances, he tended to be more feminine, soft and resilient. "This was what had drawn her to Garmony—the secret life, his vulnerability, the trust that must have bound them closer"^[6]. It could be analyzed that under the high-stressed and suffocating supervision of the public society, he kept wary of public opinion all the time for his high position had always been coveted by both politicians and others. So anxious and stifling was his living environment that he sought for queer pleasure and thrill in his private space, in which he may obtain a fleeting moment to play a role as female, relatively domesticated and comfortable. It could be understandable that in that patriarchal society, men especially those boasting their decent occupation may shoulder more burdens, and they were longing for someone or some place to vent their emotion, to escape temporarily from secular world, thus reinvigorating their enterprises in career. In their subconsciousness, they were eager to demonstrate themselves and sustain the family life stereotyped by gender prejudice. So the way Garmony performed abnormally may be the excuse for him to overcome his male anxiety generated by the society.

4. Illness and Moral Criticism

In the book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag elucidated that "nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one"^[8]. Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance^[8]. In the novel, it is salient that Clive's OCD and Vernon's derealization appearing after attending Molly's funeral are somewhat elusive and obscure, but function as the key roles in contributing to their deliberate murder to each other in the name of euthanasia, deriving from their distorted humanity. Meanwhile, individual tragedies are inseparable from social backgrounds, specifically in the form of public corruption and social moral degradation.

4.1 Distorted Individual Values

Admittedly, there seems to be nothing laudable about Vernon. On the pretext of debasing Garmony that the election of him as prime minister would lead to severe poverty, more homeless people, more crime, higher crime rate and more riots, on account of the fact that "he'd rather please

his business friends than sign the accords on global warming”^[6] which would bring about economic catastrophe, the truth of such plot subtly hid his intention to increase the circulation number of the *Judge* and reinforced his power through promotion.

Through vehement dispute with Clive over the disclosure of Garmony’s transvestism and the detailed description of his psychology, it can be inferred that he tended to lift his own position and prosper his career at the expense of Garmony’s career, exploiting the overwhelming power of public sentiment. And ironically is Vernon’s statement that “now his purpose and being filled him to his fingertips. The story was alive, and so was he”^[6]. Contrary to previous days when he had been “afflicted by a numbness of the scalp and a sense of not existing that had provoked in him fears of madness and death”^[6], he recovered from derealization just due to the initial triumph against the argument whether to publish the picture, which cast a vivid contrast to his tragic ending. The recovery from illness, however, accelerated his moral degeneration and distorted values.

Garmony’s moral plight could be embodied in his attitude towards the minority group including the one he also got involved in: transvestites. However, Garmony never hesitated to stand for traditional family values punishing immigrants, asylum seekers, travelers, marginal people. He would rather sacrifice these vulnerable groups than undermine his own political career^[3]. But sarcastically it was those two thousand members of the Transvestite Pink Alliance who “marched on Judge House in their high heels, holding aloft copies of the disgraced front page and chanting in derisive falsetto”^[6], which partly helped him get through the career crisis. His self-interest dramatically saved him from ill-repute, which could speak for the sorrow of the time during which people’s numbness bred ground for distorted individual values and moral decay.

Vernon, Garmony, coupled with Clive who sacrificed a woman’s chastity for his musical composition, all share the similarity of not violating the law, which means that their behaviors are legally allowed but should bear moral criticism. Their endings, good or bad, all reveal the depravity of humanity, the distortion of their individual morality, which may be partly ascribed to the corrupted social environment.

4.2 Corrupted Public Morality

Beyond controversy, individual depravity will inevitably give rise to the corruption of the public morality, for individuals constitute the body of the whole society. In the very beginning of the novel, many people seemed to attend Molly’s funeral to show mournfulness to her death. However, the fact was that her funeral became an observatory place where other mourners watched merrily how the love enemies of Molly confront each other. They gossiped with each other who had ever developed certain relationship with Molly, with the sarcastic tone, ruthlessly humiliating the poor Molly. Without exception, Vernon and Clive talked about such sex things of Molly’s bygone days. When arguing with Hart Pullman who ever had sex with Molly, he attacked him bitterly, “you never fucked her, you lying reptile. She wouldn’t have stooped to it”^[6]. The mourning occasion turned to be the battlefield of masculinity. Though Clive asserted that he was the only one who really missed Molly, but instead of reminiscing about her beauty, independence and personal charm, he memorized her sexual performance, even in urgent need of demonstrating his possession of Molly and his masculinity over other males. The objectification and stigmatization towards women added the tragic color to that age. Garmony, likewise, in addition to belittling his rivalry Clive, he seized such golden opportunity to preach his political views and to consolidate his public image as a conservative who underscored the arts and humanity.

Another disillusionary thing is that the public opinion was manipulated by certain groups of individuals and the media always spoke or acted on hearsay evidence. Media workers abandoned their principles and responsibilities as social workers, just capitalizing on the argument, which made

the truth confusing and murky. To people's disappointment, the truth was depended on the way how to design the statement, rather than the value judgment of the matter itself. The reversed outcome of Garmony's transvestite event is a typical example. In this case, Garmony was expected to be sacked from his position for the exposure of his transvestism. But due to his wife's well-planned TV program together with his party, he successfully turned the table. The media showed no suspicion of such dramatic performance and quickly steered their attention to attack Vernon, with the audiences jumping to the bandwagon to change the public opinion. But precisely, it was just the distortion of the truth and the examination of human nature. Conspicuously, public opinions swayed in the wind while the public morality cannot withstand a single blow, which mirrored Clive's comment on his piece of music that "this irresistible melody would remain as the dead century's elegy" [6].

5. Conclusion

Guided by the theory of illness writing and Susan Sontag's viewpoints in her work *Illness of Metaphor*, this paper analyzes the relationships between illness and existential predicament, between illness and gender anxiety, between illness and moral dilemma through the meticulous arrangement of plot and characters, then explore the inevitability of the distortion of individual values and the corruption of public morality in McEwan's Booker award-winning novel *Amsterdam*.

The main characters, more or less, have undergone physical health or mental trauma or morbid psychology. According to the novel, it is the undignified death of heroine Molly that triggers off the physical unease and illness of her ex-lovers Clive and Vernon, engendering their existential angst over their living. Illness, as the form of self-expression, manifests itself in Clive's tortured inner world imposed by his oppressive compulsive disorder, metaphorically revealing his ugliness and egotism when facing the choice between personal interest and moral responsibility. While Vernon failed to pursue his identity and perceived himself as nonentity, with disorder of derealization, metaphorically showing his numbness and survival predicament in the materialistic utilitarian society. Ironically, in order to relieve such pressure and existential anxiety over the life and work, they promised that either each of them could not live with dignity, and the other was obliged to send him to Amsterdam for euthanasia. However, such method was eventually executed by plotting when the conflict between them was greatly intensified by violating each other's interests. Euthanasia, in disguise of peaceful death with dignity, was abused by Clive and Vernon to end their existential predicament.

In terms of the relationship between illness and gender anxiety, this paper explores both female anxiety and male anxiety. Molly, an independent, subversive woman in the novel, pursuing freedom and love, ended in rapidly progressive dementia, dying with humiliation, which carried on the implication that any rebellion or resistance to social conventions and patriarchal authority will be punished and even eradicated, while Rose, a typical submissive figure, turned out to be widely welcomed. Respectful and graceful as she appeared to be, she endured Garmony's affair and even maintained his image in public, submitting to the male authority. Their responses to the society hinged on their ways to cope with their gender anxiety, but satire is the fact that Molly with rebellious spirit ended tragically while Rose of obedient temperament garnered the public's support. Garmony, burdened by the political matters in public and comparison with Molly's ex-lovers, pursued transvestism in secrecy to alleviate his gender anxiety but dared not to openly admit, for it may challenge the marital fidelity and conventional male image, thus impeding his political career.

In fact, the ruthless capitalist society and rampant consumerism should be accountable for the tragic fate of the protagonists and the abuse of euthanasia. On the one hand, illness carries its metaphorical meaning to reveal the distortion of individual values, embodied in Clive's choice to pursue inspiration for music composition rather than save a woman at risk of rape, in Vernon's plot

of ruining Garmony's political career by exposing his crossing-dress photographs and to secure his chief-editor position, vividly demonstrating the selfishness in human nature and their estrangement and hatred towards each other. On the other hand, according to Susan Sontag, illness discloses the disorder of social order at the public and political level. Attendees of Molly's funeral regarded it as the occasion for socializing; and journalists, unprincipled, altered their opinions at will, easily manipulated by certain groups. Human depravity and moral corruption are ubiquitous in the public activities in the novel. Therefore, illness as metaphor, functioning as the blade of moral criticism, invites readers to enter the inner world of characters from a new perspective and meanwhile to deepen their insight into the distortion of human morality and the corruption of British society at that time.

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