

## **Masculinity versus Femininity: Constructions of Gender in Ian McEwan's Fiction**

Ian McEwan's writing polarizes in the sphere of gender and the male-female opposition is one of the key factors throughout McEwan's fiction. The gender issue and the need to identify with your own gender are clearly outlined from the very beginning of *The Cement Garden*. When Jack sees the workmen with the cement he takes the whole scene as "a wonderful male episode" (Malcolm: 2002: 58) in which he wants to take part, if only as an observer. The "community of work" (TCG, 10)<sup>1</sup> belongs solely to the male sphere, which is further proved by another scene in which Jack and his father are covering the garden with cement (16 – 17). Here, it is the male union that for a while brings them together.

The father figure, although despised and ridiculed, in the boy's eyes the embodiment of masculinity, strongly influences Jack's behaviour. The father stands for authority, harshness of manners and aggression. In the discussion with his wife he uses "a penknife to scrape black shards from the bowl of his pipe on to the food he had barely touched" (10) to show his dominance, and he interrupts his wife's sensible arguments by short "out of the question" (10), making the whole discussion pointless. He is also quite cruel to his children, especially to Tom with whom, according to Julie he has to "compete [...] for Mother's attention" (13). He is for order, "neatness and symmetry" both in his garden, where he "would have nothing that tangled" as ivy or roses (14) and at home, where he cannot stand "noise and chaos" nor "children milling around without purpose" (33).

Thus, masculinity for Jack and the rest of the children is inseparably connected with this strict, cold and bitter figure. With such an example it is not surprising that Jack, being also a representative of the male sphere, seems to be unable to avoid his influence. He apes his father's behaviour unaware it is bad. When he tickles Julie so long it stops to be funny, he is "delighted with his power" (29); when the father's garden falls into decay Jack is filled with "horror and delight" because of this disintegration (16) and the idea of covering the garden with concrete seems to him "a fascinating violation" (16). Also, he has no compassion for his father who is much weaker after the heart attack and deliberately makes him work longer and carry more. Surely the example of the father has had a great negative influence on the development of Jack's personality. Moreover, "Jack, to some extent – as David Malcolm notices

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*. London: Picador, 1978 (All quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition).

– plays his father’s role after his death. The reader observes his male aggression [...]” (2002: 60) towards Julie, Sue and Tom, and it is not a coincidence that it is especially the last one who suffers the most.

Apart from the problem of gender identification, the gender issue is also visible in the male-female tension between the characters which is often closely connected with the motifs of inclusion and exclusion. The tension is between the parents, the mother who is “a quiet sort of person” (10) and her violent and dominant husband. The father’s male sphere – work such as constructing rather than cultivating the garden (14) or mixing the cement – is separated from the female sphere belonging to the mother – housekeeping, cooking and caring about the children. On the one hand, there is a strict and demanding distant figure, on the other – affectionate and loving mother who does not hesitate to “smile briefly at Tom or tidy his hair with her fingers” (13). It is her, not her husband who tells Jack about the risk of masturbating and though it happens after the father’s death, they both know that he would never have talked about it to his son (27).

The male-female tension can also be noticed among the children, especially between Jack and Julie. “Julie herself is, on one level, the antithesis of Jack, beautiful where he is ugly, athletic where he is torpid” (Malcolm 2002: 58-59). She wears make up and carefully chosen clothes, often spends a whole day sunbathing, whereas Jack gives up caring about his appearance, such as washing himself, cutting his nails or changing clothes (20). He lacks motivation and is too stubborn to do anything around himself. Instead, he chooses to claim that appearance is unimportant. It is no wonder, therefore, that he is reproved by his mother and despised by his sisters who loathe him and are ashamed of showing themselves in his company. Sue is also an antithesis of Jack, but if Julie embodies all the physical differences, Sue stands for mental ones: she is the one in comparison to whom Jack can be seen as ignorant. She spends most of the time reading novels, or writing her diary. Jack is aware that she knows far more than he (31) but he still teases her and argues with her “not to let her win” (31). The motif of rivalry is obvious here.

The gender issue often results in the motif of exclusion. After the father’s death Julie spends hours with her mother but stops talking whenever Jack, Tom or Sue enter the kitchen (28). Julie, the oldest daughter, belongs to the female sphere occupied by her mother. Tom and Jack are naturally excluded because of their different sex. Sue enters the sphere only after the mother’s death – when Julie symbolically takes over the role of mother. When their mother dies, Sue and Julie comfort each other while Jack observes their union feeling utterly excluded. By joining in he would perhaps betray the male sphere and at the same time trespass on ‘the female land’. Similarly, Julie excludes Jack from her morning talks with Sue about her dates with Derek (91-92). The same motif appears after a quarrel between Jack and his sisters when, characteristically, he notices that “they became angry, which made [him] feel calm and intent on making them angrier” (101). Julie and Sue start a conversation which Jack perceives as “designed to exclude” him (101). Interestingly, “exclusion seems to be male-driven” (Malcolm 2002: 58). It is mostly male characters who are for different reasons excluded either because of their own attitude to others – the father who does not want to take part in Julie’s sport achievements or Jack with his deliberate violence, selfishness and untidiness – or because they do not fit into the “pattern”, that is the female sphere or, in the case of Derek – the family. Derek, although at first tolerated by Julie and admired by Sue is simply an intruder and ends up as such because of trying to play the role of a “big, smart daddy”(122).

Three main couples from the novels *The Child in Time*, *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love* are to some extent a continuation of McEwan's typical male-female opposition. The conflict of gender is not the only element common to all three novels; however, it seems to bind their various aspects. For instance, in each novel there is some tragic or unexpected event which forces the couples to reconsider their relationship. However, the way the characters deal with these problems also results from their world views and personalities – something that takes us back to the gender issue. And each time the process of dealing with a problem itself brings out the gender conflict or makes it more acute.

In *The Child in Time* all the problems start with the abduction of Stephen and Julie's daughter Kate. Stephen is in a state of shock. Although he searches everywhere, trying to see beyond kindly faces which are in fact nothing but impediments to his field of vision (TCHinT, 18)<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the truth comes to him with its full force: Kate is gone and he is the one to blame. In the years to come he would go back to this day over and over again analysing the whole situation. This "unspeakable experience of losing a child" (Malcolm 2002: 95) is an unimaginable tragedy for any parents, and it is not different with Stephen and Julie. At first, when there is still hope they unite in their pain. But after "the heartless accumulation of days" which clarifies the absolute bitter truth (23) the burden of guilt, the pain of such an enormous loss, the awareness of Kate's independent existence and development caused by "a biological clock, dispassionate in its unstoppable" (7), the overwhelming helplessness – all of that enters between Stephen and Julie changing totally the nature of their relationship.

Joe and Clarissa also experience something terrible together. The reader learns in advance, thanks to the carefully built suspense, that Joe is not to forget the event. It is to unhinge him (EL, 3)<sup>33</sup>, at that moment a whole stage of his life is to be closed (8). The tragedy has its effect not only on him but also on Clarissa. It brings unexpected consequences which greatly disturb their relationship. They witness the death of a man (John Logan) who tries to anchor a balloon drifting with a boy on board. Apart from this tragic accident, they also witness, though they are completely unaware of that, the birth of an obsession. When John Logan dies, there starts an everlasting attachment of Jed Parry for Joe. The couple is changed by the tragic event and even more by Jed's intrusion into the intimacy of their relationship. They have to face Jed who is insane, but, what is more important, they also need to rebuild their relationship.

The event that contributes to Bernard and June's "forty-year estrangement" (Malcolm 2002: 131) differs from that in *The Child in Time* or *Enduring Love*. There is nothing as tragic as a kidnapping or an accidental death. The tragic incident is potential rather than actual. Interestingly, throughout the novel we are constantly reminded about this event but it is only towards the end that we are told the whole story. McEwan uses his favourite narrative device: suspense; employed also in *The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love* but on a smaller scale. However, there is nothing extraordinary about the event itself, but it is June's way of dealing with it that attracts the reader's attention. While walking through the mountains, with her husband left behind her, June is attacked by two "black

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<sup>2</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*. London: Picador, 1987 (All quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition).

<sup>33</sup> Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*. London: Vintage, 1998 (All quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition).

dogs of an unnatural size” (BD, 119)<sup>4</sup>. Apart from fear – the dogs seem to be viciously aggressive – she also experiences a kind of revelation finding in herself a divine strength, “an extension of her own being” (125) that helps her to survive the attack. This very personal and intimate experience changes her so thoroughly that her own husband cannot comprehend it. Nor can he bring himself to treat her experience seriously. June’s metaphysical interpretation of the event strongly conflicts with Bernard’s rationalistic reading (Malcolm 2000: 176). Theirs is a truly tragic story of a missed opportunity in a love relationship.

Stephen and Julie react differently towards the loss of Kate. At the beginning they seem to unite in their shock and grief trying to push away the thoughts of the worst. Everything changes when one day Stephen finds Kate’s things packed as if in recognition of a bitter fact that Kate is lost for ever. That seems to define Julie’s way of looking at the situation, as from then on she falls into absolute torpor and resignation. She closes herself in her own thoughts and maternal pain which is so unbearable and personal that it apparently cannot be shared with anybody, not even with her husband. Stephen, however, continues his search. He anaesthetises himself with activity (23), observing the places where he went with Kate that day and knocking on people’s doors.

Stephen and Julie not only behave differently, but also fail to understand each other. They see each other in terms of gender stereotypes. Blinded by the pain of loss, they perceive each other’s reaction as directed against one another. Stephen is angry with Julie when he sees Kate’s things packed like something that is no longer needed. He takes it to be feminine self-destructiveness and wilful defeatism (24). He is disgusted by her inertia and collapse of will that undermine his efforts (24). On the other hand, Julie finds Stephen’s crazy searching “a typical masculine evasion, an attempt to mask feelings behind displays of competence and organisation and physical effort” (24). There is no longer one common loss, one pain they can share and try to deal with together. Instead, their sorrows are separate. The tragedy changes them, drives them “to the extremes of their personalities” (24). The intimacy as well as the sense of unity, of being “on the same side” (24) are gone. Their diametrically different reactions to shock (Piątek 1997: 210) and the fact that they cannot accept each other’s behaviour bring their marriage to the brink of collapse. While Stephen still looks for his daughter being “on the watch for children” (7), Julie cuts herself off from the world and other people, especially from Stephen who reminds her of the pain.

Stephen and Julie clearly maintain McEwan’s gender opposition. On the one hand, there is Stephen who even during the tragedy itself is able to make very male-like (in McEwan’s sense of the word) plans, being “detached in a [...] calculating way” and preparing himself for the worst by assuming that the tragedy “would have to be faced in a sensible, rational manner” (19). He is able to distance and judge himself as “a man under stress behaving with admirable self-control” (20). After that, as opposed to Julie who is completely motionless and lost in herself, he anaesthetises himself with activity (23) doing all the “sensible and rational” things a man should do being convinced that the success of the search depends on his own efficiency and determination. Julie, on the other hand, from the very beginning takes the loss of her daughter emotionally. She chooses her own feminine way

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<sup>4</sup>Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*. New York: Random House, 1999 (All quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition).

to mourn and to deal with all the consequences. She has to change, re-make herself, as Stephen puts it: to fulfil the idea of a feminine aspect of “endless mutability” (54). There is a clear clash between Stephen and Julie: rationality and control, on the one hand, and emotionalism, intuition and being rather than doing (55), on the other.

*Black Dogs* focuses on the male-female conflict, namely the rational, theoretical world (Bernard Tremaine) versus the mystical, practical one (June Tremaine) (Piątek 1997: 215). There is an important scene from Bernard and June’s past that deepens the reader’s knowledge about their different personalities. When they are waiting for a train somewhere in France (53), suddenly Bernard finds a rare butterfly. But when he is about to kill it and include it in his collection, June strongly protests and wants to set it free. There follows one of their first rows. June’s furious reaction to some extent can be justified. She has just discovered she is pregnant which makes her, as she explains it, feel responsible not only for the life inside her but life in general (56). Moreover, she is afraid that Bernard’s cruelty will bring upon them nature’s revenge, and as a result their baby might be in danger. Bernard cannot understand June’s irrational fear at all. She apparently takes the whole issue very seriously, whereas he can only treat it like “magical thinking” (57). The scene is important as regards the future events. As Bernard puts it bluntly, this were “the beginnings of the hocus-pocus that filled [June’s] life from then on” (58).

The incident with the black dogs which incites the conflict comes towards the end of the novel. June’s discovery starts already when she drifts “apart from her body” in order to analyse the situation from a distance, indifferently, through her “detached self” (123). When her despair begins to overwhelm her, she resorts to “her last and best chance” searching deep in herself, and to her own amazement and joy discovers “the presence of God” in the form of “coloured invisible light” (125). She is sure, however, that this light is not only God but also an “extension of her own being” (125). Thanks to this revelation, June is able to fight for her survival. She needs to live, not just for the sake of life, but also to have time to investigate the mysterious power she has just discovered (125). She also learns that she has courage through which she can “stand alone”; an important discovery indeed, though as she herself admits, perhaps a fateful and a disastrous one (35). After all, it gives her self-confidence and the sense of her own independence that will largely contribute to her separation from Bernard and, consequently, to her lonely death. Bernard’s superficiality clinging to “facts and figures” and “skidding around the surface” (BD, 20) is strongly contrasted in the novel with the depth and seriousness of June’s attitude to life, which is, surprisingly, exactly what Bernard misses most after her death:

She was one of the few people I know who saw her life as a project, an undertaking, something to take control of and direct toward – well, understanding, wisdom, on her particular terms. Most of us reserve our forward planning for money, careers, children, that sort of thing. June wanted to understand, God knows, herself, existence, “creation”. She was very impatient with the rest of us, drifting through, taking one thing after another, ‘sleepwalking’, she called it. I hated the nonsense she filled her head with, but I loved her seriousness. (70)

One should notice here the similarity between June and Julie. Life as a project with a clear, though not fixed aim, the effort to understand, the inevitable change and development, all of that constitutes the feminine “endless mutability” (TCHinT, 54) that clashes with male inflexibility and stagnation (“sleepwalking”).

Bernard and June clearly belong to mutually exclusive, “separate realms”(97): there is a clash of rational (Bernard’s) and “magical”, intuitive (June’s) way of thinking, theory (B) and practice (J), life as a schemata (B) or an individual project (J), materialist rationality versus metaphysics and religious belief (2002: 150). Finally, there is certainty of “no direction, no patterning in human affairs or fates other than that [...] imposed by human minds” and, on the other hand, the belief that “human life [has] a purpose and it [is] our interest to open ourselves to it “(BD, xxiv)<sup>5</sup>. Bernard and June are “extremities” (xxiii) and in our discussion an extreme example of the male-female opposition. Their relationship is much more complicated than that of Stephen and Julie who also go through a period of separation but are finally reconciled in the name of love. Here, these two people “can’t let each other alone” (35) nor can they live together.

*Enduring Love* is similar to *The Child in Time* and *Black Dogs* as regards the plot and the construction of the characters. On the plot level, it is also a story about the love-relationship between a man and a woman which is totally changed by some sudden tragic event. As for the characters, Joe and Clarissa present another variation on the male-female opposition which consists in the clash of world views (Malcolm 2002: 155). The differences between Joe and Clarissa, as in the case of Stephen and Julie, result mainly from an unexpected incident. The reader may notice these differences when he observes Joe and Clarissa during the accident and during the process of their gradual estrangement.

Joe is a deeply self-conscious type of man who never stops analysing himself (Malcolm 2002: 163-164) as well as the others around him even in the most extreme situations. His behaviour and reaction to all that happens strike the reader as at least very odd. He is able to distance himself: “I was in a soap opera. *Now he’s talking to his woman*” (21) and to describe in a scientific way such details as the position of the champagne bottle in his hand, the voice he suddenly hears, or the psychiatric state of the boy from the balloon (8). His cold and analytic reaction is clearly contrasted with Clarissa’s emotionalism. Later on, when he sets off to find Logan, his last hope is based solely on an unknown physical law or process that will permit Logan to survive (22).

Joe and Clarissa have to deal with what they have just experienced. Their reactions to the tragedy are different. Clarissa describes the moment of Logan’s death in literary terms referring to John Milton, which fact should be noticed as relevant for according to David Malcolm, “it is important [...] that she is involved with the humanities” (Malcolm 2002: 162), both for the emotionalism-rationalism clash as well as our male-female issue under discussion. They interpret Logan’s death in their own different way. Clarissa has no doubts about Logan’s being “a good man” (31) as he died in an attempt to rescue a child. According to Joe, her own childlessness, “the old sense of loss” (33) may greatly contribute to her emotional response. For Joe Logan’s death was just “pointless”. His effort was futile as the boy finally survived while Logan paid with his life. However, despite the conflict between Clarissa’s emotional and Joe’s analytical reactions, they cope with the experience very well, or so it

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<sup>5</sup>Roman numerals come from the first section of the novel and are the author’s original invention

seems to them as they have a real test of their love and the permanence of their relationship ahead. It is Jed Parry, his insane obsession with Joe and sudden intrusion in their life that brings many changes with which they finally have to deal. It is important to notice, however, that Parry himself is not a problem. It is their different reactions to the man that complicate their relationship. This time Joe and Clarissa do not try to solve the problem together. Instead, they gradually grow more and more apart until there seems to be nothing they can share. The situation resembles that in *The Child in Time*. In both novels the couples separate and the male characters are more active than the female ones. Joe behaves similarly to Stephen, they both “work” alone. However, there is a significant difference. Stephen is alone because Julie leaves him, whereas Joe chooses his loneliness the very moment he decides to lie to Clarissa.

What finally separates the couple is precisely the male-female conflict resulting from their different world views and personalities. Joe is annoyed at Clarissa for her belief that “her emotions [are] the appropriate guide, that she [can] feel her way to the truth” and that she has done “neither the research nor the thinking”, whereas he knows that the only way to get them out of the situation is “information, foresight and careful calculation” (150). The clash of world views is obvious, the communication seems to be impossible. When Joe finally classifies Jed within his theory of the condition known as ‘De Clérambault’s syndrome’, it is too late – Clarissa is too tired to listen to him. The important fact is that Joe’s attitude to the problem of Jed, his investigation results solely from his rationalism and scientific interests. Until he knows what is wrong with Jed, what to expect from him, he seems to be lost and confused. But from the very moment the truth dawns on him, everything changes. Firstly, from then on he becomes much more self-confident, assured of being “obviously, incontrovertibly right” (92). Secondly, the very fact of pinpointing the exact cause of Jed’s behaviour brings “a kind of comfort” (124) and consolation. Joe needs to analyse Jed the same way Bernard needs to pierce his insects. Once the object of the study has been examined, everything starts to make sense.

To conclude, knowing the features ascribed to a particular gender, it is possible in most cases to predict and understand the complications of the plot and the characters’ behaviour. However, there are figures who break with the usual male-female pattern. One should not be misled by this fact, though, as it only testifies to McEwan’s skill in creating characters who are true to life.

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