



## Corrupted Scenes From The Contaminated Earth: A Critical Analysis of Ian Mcewan's Short Stories

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**ABSTRACT:** My key concern is to present the various aspects of grotesque realism and its implications which have been efficiently utilized by Ian McEwan in his early short story collections of "First love, Last Rites" (1975) and "In Between the Sheets" (1978). The dominant themes and imageries of bizarre sexuality, sado-masochism, pedophilia, and incestuous relationships and fetishism have been represented in a gloomy, futile and dreary backdrop of the post-modern 20<sup>th</sup> century society in order to stirring up the unconscious mind of the readers and how a modern man's failure in forming a mutual relationship of togetherness and loss of regeneration, throws him into the pit of humiliation, mortification and erosion. I have tried to identify grotesque realism and its effect on individual by synthesizing Bakhtinian view on grotesque realism, Freud's concept of 'behavioral disorder', and John R. Clark's notion of modern satiric grotesque which contains horrific laughter and degeneration of the human being through the scatological imageries. This article has also explored McEwan's intention of shocking the readers by presenting the extreme form of violence which earns him the title of "Ian McAbre", in order to make them face the dreadful actuality of the post-war European society.

**KEYWORDS:** Grotesque Realism, Pedophilia, Loss of Regeneration, Behavioral Disorder

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Sexuality, incestuous relationships, obsessions, fetishes – these are certain issues which are considered as societal taboos, as behavioral aberrations and grotesque perversities, almost blasphemous to talk about in public. Yet, if keenly observed without value judgment, they often appear to be an integral part of the daily walk of human life. Ian McEwan with his penchant for the grotesque, lays bare the intriguing manifestations and play of all such taboos while exploring the bond between a ten-year-old sister and her teenage brother, the strange behavior of a husband towards his wife, the possessiveness of a father onto his daughter, in his short stories "First Love, Last Rites" (1975) and "In Between the Sheets" (1978). In his interview with Ian McEwan, Adam Begley notes that:

'Ian McEwan's early success comes hand in hand with a lurid reputation: his books were said to be twisted and dark. And in fact, his earlier works – two collections of short stories "First love, Last Rites" and "In Between the Sheets"; and two slim novels, "The Cement Garden" (1978) and "The Comfort of Strangers" (1981) – contain many painfully vivid, highly disturbing scenes, quite a few involving children'.

(Ian McEwan: The Art of Fiction". *The Paris Review*, no. 173, 2002).

These books earned him a nick name in the British Press – 'Ian McAbre'. His early works mainly deal with 'McEwan's signature style,'<sup>1</sup> which includes the gloomy atmosphere, tragic ending, employing subtle nuances of vulgar sexuality and a complete revelation of beastly self of humanity. John Walsh in his review of McEwan's writings appositely titles him to be an "anatomist of humanity's chilly soul"<sup>2</sup>. He truly elaborates the chilliness and anatomical insights into the atmosphere of his work, in order 'to shock and disgust his readers'.

<sup>1</sup> It has been regarded by Kiernan Ryan that McEwan's early works have a particular focus on vulgar sexuality and the distorted inner self of modern man

<sup>2</sup> John Walsh in his review of McEwan's "In Between the Sheets" states that he particularly aims to arouse a sense of shock, a practice that can be found in most of the works of late 20<sup>th</sup> century writers'.

Both of his collection of short stories features a bizarre cast of grotesque, through the disturbing tales of post-modern sexual aberrance, black comedy<sup>3</sup> and macabre obsession. In her book "Ian McEwan" Lyn Wells remarks: "McEwan was strongly influenced by the post-modernist techniques of contemporary novelists such as Iris Murdoch and John Fowles in England" (Wells 16).

McEwan is a self-claimed atheist. He denounces the preconceived notion of sex as has been delineated in The Bible. He puts to radical question, the fundamental concept such as identity, sex, incest, masochism and some other issues which used to be considered as taboos. He undertakes to show the perverse, absurd and degenerated 1970's post-truth generation for whom freedom comes from excessive indulgence in corruption, incestuous relationship, and immoral activities. The whole situation takes a terrible and ghastly form when love rolls with possessiveness, and authority. The unsettling desire of a teenage boy sets himself out to have sex with his ten-year-old sister who has been depicted, 'you could almost pass her off as plain' ("Homemade", 39) under the grotesque pretense of playing 'Mummies and Daddies'. The criticism of masculinity has been summed up in the narrator's thought:

"I felt proud, proud to be fucking, even if it were only Connie, my ten-year-old sister, even if it had been a crippled mountain goat ..."  
("Homemade", 38)

The sense of alienation from morality has been winded up with grotesquerie in "Butterflies", where a socially isolated man, while walking with a young girl in a deserted canal, harrowingly murders her, in charge of touching his penis, and the way he depicts the whole under doings, is somehow," the exploration of the marginalized aspects of life and marginalized elements of society" (John Lye, "Contemporary Criticism"). All the major themes that McEwan use in his early works, share a specific amount of bizarreness, presenting the characters in a situation that is 'either balancing or failing in the border of social acceptance. He unveils each and every fold of beastly psyche of human nature – rape, incest, violence, murders, pedophilia – in a society where these approaches would be accepted with a certain degree of disgust – in McEwan's works, they are simply stirring. His first short story collection "First love, Last Rites" (1975) procures the notion of psychological distortion, affected by the post-war society, that oppresses our views regarding the victim and sometimes it reverses in the process. "In Between the Sheets" is basically concerned with the 'revelation of the mundane horror spawned in between the sheets' ("Understanding Ian McEwan", 31).

In an interview in 1983 with John Haffenden, McEwan says, "I took the stories very seriously and worked on them very slowly, and I would always want to stand by them" ("Novelists in Interview", 137). His first collection of short stories "First Love, Last Rites" (1975), has brought him the Somerset Maugham Award in 1976.

The aim of the article is to throw a gulp of light onto the fictions of McEwan and the way it employs the theme of a synthesis of grotesque body and grotesque realism in the post-modern, disintegrated and dysfunctionalized society. I have tried to relate the concept of grotesque realism as proposed by Ruskin, Bakhtin, and Kayser with his collection of short stories, and more acutely, the psyche of his first-person narratives from Freudian psychoanalytic perspective. In the first chapter I have figured out of what grotesque realism actually is and how it has been considered as a major trope of writing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then various forms of grotesque realism in the works of Kafka, Marquez, Burroughs, Poe and some of the writers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have been discussed. In the next few chapters, I have pointed out various aspects of grotesque realism and its social, cultural and psychological impact on the modern individual as has been perceived in the works of Ian McEwan. Finally, I have concluded my article with an emphasis on the moral values and the veracity of the post-truth European society, as has been depicted by McEwan in his short stories in a very discreet and subtle manner.

## II. GROTESQUE REALISM

The term 'grotesque' is connected with the word 'grotto'. It has been derived from the Italian *pittura grottesca*, meaning a work or painting found in a grotto. It refers to the rooms in ancient buildings in Rome which were grubbed to reveal murals in a grotesque style. The grotto is more like a labyrinth, a threatening place that inflames anxiety and fear. It basically echoes the state of being confined within the physical limits of grotesque bodies. The very concept of grotesque comes into currency during the emerging period of empiricism and rationalism, when then Western Man is in search of his identity. However, for the modern, the term is something aberrant, situated in the realm of our unconscious, something unreal. Bernard McElroy in his *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* argues 'grotesque differentiates that which we want to have separated from our sense of reality, but still powerfully experienced as real' (36).

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<sup>3</sup> In Black Comedy Naïve and inept characters used to play out their role, in a nightmarish modern world. The events became highly horrifying and absurd.



The 'Sorcerer of Trois Frères'

"There is one thing I have learned since being paralyzed, and that is that in that in the absence of sensory information, *the imagination always tends to the grotesque....* The scene I construct will be one of venereal depravity; of sex.... This is what I mean when I speak of the grotesque – the fanciful, the bizarre, and the absurdly incongruous.

(Patrick McGrath, *The Grotesque*, 1989:69)

The appearance of the grotesque bodies that 'hurt the eyes' is meant to bring up the corrupted human behavior, in order to lay bare, the ethical disorder and the chaos of human McGrath's novel *The Grotesque* employs its title with a peculiar accuracy. If we consider the general meaning of grotesque then bizarre, perverse, odd, degenerate, absurd, all of these attributes can be attached. For Sir Hugo, the first-person narrator of McGrath's 1989 novel, these are the part of what he calls as grotesque. For Hugo the abnormal and peculiar thoughts are not just figments of imagination, rather it manifests in itself the corporeal, material world of physical body. In this particular novel Hugo cannot move his body parts; all he can do is to sit on a wheelchair with his bones atrophying. Here the grotesque is not something that can be observable at a distance or imagined at a moment of despair instead it defines the very essence of life, the identity of self:

"I have come to believe that to be a grotesque is my destiny. For a man who turns into a vegetable – isn't that a grotesque?"

(“Understanding Ian McEwan”, 67)

The concept of grotesque has aptly been introduced through the deformed, distorted, and deranged characters in Edgar Allan Poe's "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym". Sometimes a grotesque body puts forward the question of what it means to be human, a sense of instability and uncertainty come rushing to the mind. While going through a grotesque text, we embrace the uncertainty over certainty. The very physicality of grotesque bodies that 'hurt the eyes' is meant to bring up the corrupted human behavior, in order to lay bare, the ethical disorder and the chaos of human condition.

For John Ruskin, grotesque is distortion, depicting the gap between imagined possibility and reality. He coins the term 'symbolic grotesque'<sup>4</sup> where he states, 'series of symbols thrown together in a bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character. In "the Stones of Venice", he terms the later period of Venetian empire 'The Grotesque Renaissance'<sup>5</sup> with its ignoble grotesquerie of the Church of Santa Maria. For him, the

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<sup>4</sup> In chapter IV of "The Stones of Venice", Ruskin elaborated the idea of symbolic grotesque which arises," out of the use or fancy of tangible signs to set forth an otherwise less expressible truth".

<sup>5</sup> In chapter *iii* of "The Stones of Venice", Ruskin says that it is the time period when Venice's beautiful Gothic architectures have been corrupted. It is basically related with a wider corruption of Christian values.

symbolic grotesque points to a particular culture and society that enables us to attain a 'noble truth' that is beyond our human capacity.

On the other hand, both Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin differ from Ruskin's perspective. For Kayser, the grotesque is merely a game with the absurd, while Bakhtin locates the grotesque in the spirit of Carnival<sup>6</sup>. The source of grotesque in Kafka's work is more a comprehensive view of reality itself, which can be featured with the paranoid vision, as it shares the clinical descriptions of the world, experienced by the paranoia.

*The door opened and what entered the room, fat and succulent, its sides voluptuously swelling, footless, pushing itself along on its entire underside, was the green dragon. Formal salutation. I asked him to come right in. He regretted that he could not do that, as he was too long. This meant that the door had to remain open, which was rather awkward. He smiled, half in embarrassment, half cunningly, and began:*

*'Drawn hither by your longing, I come pushing myself from afar off, and underneath am now quite sore. But I am glad to do it; gladly do I offer myself to you.'*

(Kafka's Journals)

The outer appearance of the green dragon is very much uncanny and wacky for the readers. We can associate it with the distorted, mortified and deprived condition of the inner self of a modern individual. For both Flannery O'Connor and Nathanael West, 'the modern world' have gained a sense of alienation from religion and myth, which makes us unable to find any meaning or value of the present situation and finally that give rise to the grotesque. The grotesque as a crucial and powerful trope has always been used in the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, most notably in his "One Hundred Years of Solitude". Marquez tries to invent and disintegrate the culture itself. In this novel the sense of grotesque has been presented through the characters changing conditions and the process of change reiterated over and over. The grotesque is more like a natural principle in Macondo, 'always ready to emerge with the passage of time as the merciless jungle environment reduces all encroachments which the foreign culture has managed to make. Thomas Pynchon uses the grotesque as a manifestation of massive failure in the entire enterprise of culture itself. In "V" he points out the source of the quietus in 'atrophy of the emotions and the cultivation of illusion to mask the psyche from its own innate cruelty' ("The Fiction of the Modern Grotesque", 21).

### III. DYSFUNCTIONALITY OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

"Fiction was a part of genial explosion in my life, of a sense that with my formal education more or less over, I could do whatever I wanted" (*The Paris Review*, article 173). For McEwan, his fictions are synonymous with freedom. In an answer to the question of what purpose led him to write such "absurd sometimes immoral" fictions, he answers, 'Burroughs' "Naked Lunch" persuaded me that to write fiction was to be obliged to take the reader by the hand to the edge – and jump – the business was to find a boundary, then cross it' (*The Paris Review*, article 173). One of the basic themes that have a recurrent appearance in McEwan's stories is of course the dysfunctionality of family structure. During the 1970s, mostly in the post-apartheid era, people were very much engrossed in self-centered activities where you will become a man, when you can 'fuck' someone and it might be your ten-year-old sister.

In "Conversation with a Cupboard Man", McEwan presents a shocking picture of the role of mother and his son. The destructive force of mother's love and its dreadful consequences in the relationship of a mother and son makes the readers understand the fixation and regression of the narrator as it leads him to hide behind a cupboard, unable to live the life of an ordinary man. There is a sense of isolation. The protagonist wants to run away from his adulthood, from the responsibility as has been imposed by the oppressive society.

'How did I become an adult? I'll tell you. I never did learn. I have to pretend. All the things you take for granted I have to do it all consciously. I am always thinking about it, like I was on the stage'.

(*"Conversation with a Cupboard Man"*, 117)

In another short story "Solid Geometry", the readers are introduced with a person who is incisively obsessed with his great-grandfather's diary, and his mysterious friend named 'M'. The two friends bought in auction the penis of "Captain Nicholls who died in Horsemonger jail in 1873" and has been preserved in formaldehyde jar. He does not have any interest towards his wife Maisie's physical needs. There is a sense of alienation between them. When the story begins, the protagonist wants to get divorce from Maisie, in order to focus on his reading of the diary. But at the very end, he finds no use of that, as he has already found out to get rid of it. Here the penis is the original part object for the protagonist, which forces him to escape from the fear of

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<sup>6</sup> In "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics", Bakhtin states that Carnival has the potentiality to disrupt the social and political hierarchies by people's triumphant laughter.

mother's vagina. At the beginning of the play script version of "Solid Geometry", he states that it is important to establish the protagonist as an unsympathetic character. The usual love between a husband and wife, as encouraged by the society, is however, absent here. It is the psychological disorder of the character which enables him to function as a 'proper man' to his wife.

The unnamed teenager in "Homemade", schools in depravity by an older friend Raymond. In most of McEwan's stories the proper order of the family structure has been missing; sometimes both the parents are missing and more often it becomes the story of either two friends or two siblings in a fragmented relation. His stories are mostly the celebration of tattered relationships. The story begins with the narrator's recollection of the things he used to do together with Raymond – smoking, drinking, and shoplifting hurling rocks 'at the couples fucking in the arbor' (33). In the course of one evening, he plans to rape his ten-year-old sister, stimulated by the failure with other girls. As to the matter of recklessness with no regard to the safety of others, the character's actions in raping his sister with barely any regard to or the destructive influence it would have on her are self-evident', as has been viewed by Anastasiia Yanovska. According to Baxter, McEwan sets up an antidote to the conventional socio-cultural relations, by foregrounding the narrator's filial desire towards Connie.

Through the story "Last Day of Summer", McEwan has actually channeled a dreadful, traumatic childhood experience, when he was sent away to the boarding school. It is the story of a young orphan, who lives with his siblings Peter and Kate in a Hippie communal house. The relationship between Kate and his boyfriend Jose as well as with Alice does not match the society's expectations. Then Jenny comes in the story, an obese and anxious young woman, who becomes something like a surrogate mother figure to the narrator and little Alice. On one of their many journeys in the rowing boat on the Thames, Jenny and the little Alice drown and die. Finally, we hear no remorse, no moral judgment, only the narrator '...it goes over quickly like a camera shutter'. The story is at some length entwined with *Summer Nights, walking*<sup>7</sup> a book of photographs by Robert Adams where the haunting images of summer night has been represented. The mood in the house is fraught with adult tensions beyond the narrator's understanding. Cumulatively, the photographs feel a less claustrophobic than McEwan's taut narrative in which the focus is solely on the dysfunctionality of family union ship, which appears to the writer as 'closer to our actual experience of wonder, anxiety, and stillness'.

"Butterflies" is somehow the most repulsive story by McEwan as it discloses society's greatest taboos, pedophilia, with an absolutely strange narrator. The narrator's depth of isolation is deeper than most of the will experiences. He initially falls into the pit of self-gratification and perversion, because he wants to get accepted in the society but is past being able to do so. Finally in his mind, the necessity of making connection with human being 'becomes perverted into his desire for Jane' ("Ian McEwan" by Jack Slay Jr., 1996, pg-24).

In "Pornography", the disused church has been used as a pornographer's ware house, a completely different attitude towards religion. The protagonist O'Byrne is a two-timing lover, dating both a trainee nurse and a sister, in the same hospital, and knowingly infected them both with venereal disease. The sole pleasure of life for him is to get maximum pleasure by engaging in sexual affairs. He is not capable of doing anything for the well-being of society. McEwan's purpose is to expose the sexual politics of human relations. The famous critic of McEwan's early works Kiernan Ryan views the story as a tradition of 'simian literature,<sup>8</sup>' designed to defamiliarize the person from a society where, there is no function of a family; everywhere only prevails a gloom darkness of vulgarity that provides a sense of freedom.

Most shocking picture is, perhaps depicted in "Reflections of a Kept Ape", narrated from the point of view of an ape that has been in love with his keeper named Sally Klee. The significance of the story lies in the humanistic qualities as has been ascribed onto the ape. Ryan finds in the story a 'critique of stale sexual idioms and attitudes', while Malcolm considers the ape to be a creation of both 'satirizes and strips a layer of familiarity off human behavior'.

The dysfunctionality of family structure has been prevalent in most of McEwan's short stories, for instance the fractured relationship between siblings, sometimes between father and daughter can be found in "Two Fragments" and "In Between the Sheets". The broken family structure might be a reflection of the war torn, post-apartheid British society as has been explicitly presented in "The Westland" by T.S Eliot. In an interview to *The Guardian*, he says that, whatever has been presented in his early works of fiction, is however, more than the true self of the society and people have to face that boldly.

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<sup>7</sup> In "Summer Nights, Walking: Along the Colorado Front Range, 1976-1982", Robert Adams revisits the classic collection of nocturnal landscapes that he starts producing in the middle of 1970s near his previous home in Longmont, Colorado.

<sup>8</sup> "simian" is a metaphorical representation of a motivation for the use of simian characters, in order to ridicule human flawed perspectives, pretensions and criticize the society.

Vulgar Sexuality:

Sexuality is something that has always been considered as a stigma in a society. McEwan tries to represent sexuality with all its vulgarity, absurdity, in order to present the whole process of sexuality in a convincing way in front of the readers. He has presented each and every subtle nuance of sexual intercourse, from the individual experiences of the narrator.

Robert Towers classes his "First love, Last Rites" as 'possibly the most brilliantly perverse and sinister batch of short stories to come out of England since Angus Wilson's "The Wrong Set"'. McEwan provides an experience of horror and pervasion, which, often times enable the readers not to fantasize of. For Freud, the grotesque arises from a 'peculiar stance of mind toward the fearsome'. He talks about the phobias among children in terms of sexual symbols and father fears. Sometimes human beings go beyond any rational explanation of a particular situation and thus evoke a sense of uncanny<sup>9</sup>. Most of the stories deal with McEwan's signature theme of sado-masochism<sup>10</sup>. Adolescents and adults, who have often been regressed in their anal phase<sup>11</sup>, express their sexual desires by sado-masochistic practices. Sado-masochists start playing various sexual games as has been demonstrated by Mary in "Psychopolis", who wants to be tied to her bed for the whole weekend.

"I met her their lunchtime on my school day in Los Angeles. That same evening, we were lovers, and not so long after that, friends. The following Friday I chained her by the foot to my bed for the whole weekend... I remember her extracting ... my solemn promise that I would not listen if she demanded to be set free. "

("Psychopolis", 122)

In "Pornography", McEwan deals with the issues of sexual dysfunction in arousal, relationship and disease. He presents the classic heterosexual triangle between O'Byrne, Lucy and Pauline. Pauline, a trainee nurse, shy and submissive, wants nothing but his sexual companionship. She serves herself as warm stimuli to lie next to him at night. She allows herself to become a victim of his unresponsiveness. On the other hand, Sister Lucy Drew shows dominance over 'little Runt'. The story has been narrated by an omniscient narrator. The protagonist has been inclined to both sadism and masochism. He infects them with venereal disease. Finally, Lucy and Pauline decide to castrate him surgically. The pornographic imagination of the story allows the readers to have, degrades men and women, urinating on each other, literally and metaphorically. It inclines some sort of sadism in them. O'Byrne drops into a passive position by the writer as if he is enjoying the whole process, 'through his fear O'Byrne felt excitement':

'He was horrified, sickened, that he could enjoy being overwhelmed, like one of those cripples in his brother's magazines. . . O'Byrne one side of his face swollen and pin, departed sulking . . .' you dare move, Lucy hissed, and close her eyes. O'Byrne lay still. Above him Lucy swayed like a giant tree'.

("Pornography" 11- 12)

"Dead as They Come" is about a rich man and his obsession with a mannequin, and how he finally rapes and kills it. The whole story has been told by the unreliable protagonist, who believes the dummy as a human being. McEwan uses a certain tactful language to manipulate the reader, by distracting them from the real state of the narrator:

'At home I had everything prepared. I knew she would want to rest as soon as she comes in. I brought her into the bedroom, removed her boots and settled her down onto the crisp white bed linen. I kissed her softly on the cheek and before my eyes she fell into a deep slumber. For a couple of hours, I busied myself in the library, catching upon important business'.

("Dead As They Come", 64)

In "Reflections of a Kept Ape" the ape thinks of himself as, 'a little too squat to be taken seriously [...] with arms a little too long.' The story depicts the physical intimacy between Sally Klee and the ape. In *The Times*, Caroline Moorhead\*, aptly headlined her article, "Who Else But Ian McEwan Would Put a Lover in Ape's Clothing?" The bizarreness of sexuality has been narrated thus:

"[...] she delighted more in my unfamiliarity 'funny little black leathery penis', and she says, ' your saliva tastes like weak tea."

("Reflections of a Kept Ape", 96)

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<sup>9</sup> For Freud uncanny locates "the strangeness in the ordinary". The grotesque elements of weird fantasy sometimes evoke a sense of horrible disgust which arises from the conflict that one faces while encountering something bizarre and abnormal.

<sup>9</sup> It is the way of gratifying sexual needs by inflicting physical pain and humiliation.

<sup>11</sup> In Freudian psychology, during the anal stage of development a child fascinates in the erogenous zone of the anus.

It develops a sense of sadism, where instead of getting a human being as lover and companion, Sally tries to find humanistic traits within an ape, though their relationship does not stay long:

“We were lovers once, living almost as man and wife, happier than most wives and men. Then she wearying of my ways and I daily exacerbating her displeasure with my persistence, we now inhabit different rooms. Sally Klee does not look up as I enter the room, and I hover between her chair and mine, the plates and tins arranged before me.

(“Reflections of a Kept Ape”, 96-97)

The same theme has been reiterated in “Butterflies”, where the narrator fails to control his desires, thus forces the girl to touch his penis, a mere sexual satisfaction and momentary sense of regeneration from his ‘degraded societal position’. But this sense of pleasure has been thwarted immediately, as the short relief becomes over-burdened with the fear of the girl, spreading the news of his horrific act. Finally, he murders the girl drowns her into the canal. Thus, death replaces the chance of getting companionship. The grotesque imageries dominate the overall desolate and bleak atmosphere. It definitely echoes of what John R. Clark says, “images of body emission are more degrading than sensual ones” (“Modern Satiric Grotesque”, 134).

‘My mind was clear, my body was relaxed and I was thinking of nothing [...] I lifted her up gently, as gently as I could so as not to wake her, and eased her quietly into the canal’

(“Butterflies”, 104)

“Conversation with a Cupboard Man”, tells the story of a claustro-maniac<sup>12</sup>’s physical and intellectual growth has been impeded by his own eccentric mother, whose striving against his growing up is figuratively explicated as an attempt, ‘to push back up her womb’. In this particular story the victimization of the cruel manager might lead to sadistic empathy by the reader, when the narrator purposefully shuts him in the oven and almost burning him on purpose.

‘I let the oil fall right into his lap, and for the benefit of anyone watching I pretended to slip. Pus-face howled like a wild animal; I never heard a man make a noise like that. [...] He was screaming for twenty-five minutes before the doctor came and gave him morphine.

(“Conversation with a Cupboard Man”, 118)

“First love, Last Rites” depicts the love making story of Sissel and her boyfriend throughout a long summer. He acknowledges the immense gratification that he gets from the satisfaction of his instincts:

‘Sperms . . . inches from my cock’s end . . . the unstoppable chemistry of a creature growing out of dark red slime’.

(“First love, Last Rites”, 122)

He details their wallowing, animalistic temptation which has been personified by a giant pregnant rat. Its presence has been felt more and more, until it comes out of its den and get attacked, ‘he sees a translucent purple bag, and inside five pale crouching shapes’.

In “The Modern Satiric Grotesque”, John R. Clark defines grotesque, as an element, which involves grim laughter<sup>13</sup> and degradation, reinforced through scatological imageries. In almost all the stories of McEwan, there is a sense of failure in balancing the adult relationships; they are thematically concerned with both physicality and its grotesqueness and ‘an absence of a regenerative view of the material body’ (“Understanding Ian McEwan”, 112). Not only in his short stories, but also his novel, for instance, “The Comfort of Strangers” contains sadism and masochism, in its usage of prolepsis, when the omniscient narrator informs the readers about Colin’s death before it actually occurs. In another novel “The Cement Garden”, which is narrated by an adolescent, the theme of incest has been reiterated where Jack has some sexual intercourse with his sister Julie.

#### IV. SURREALISTIC PERSPECTIVES

Surrealist movement<sup>14</sup> was launched as a concerted artistic movement in France by Breton’s “Manifesto on surrealism” (1924). It aimed at destroying the false, imposed values of modern bourgeois society. The surrealists were mainly concerned with human desires with all its manifestations. For instance, if we consider the

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<sup>12</sup> It is basically an uncontrolled obsession with enclosed spaces.

<sup>13</sup> Clark associates his idea of ‘modern satiric grotesque’ with Bakhtin’s notion of Carnavalesque.

<sup>14</sup> Surrealist movement developed in British after the World War I. It emphasizes on the juxtaposition of distant realities in order to stimulate our unconscious mind through the help of imageries.

painting of Salvador Dali's "The Great Masturbator", or Andre Breton's claim of surrealism as, "pure psychic automatism"<sup>15</sup>, then it is obvious that, their focus is on the subversion of the established notion of the modern world as rational, ordered, logical and homogenous.

1970s war torn Britain with all its pain, trauma, immorality and irrationality has aptly been presented in the writings of George Bataille's 1928 novella "Story of the Eye", mainly deals with pedophilia, necrophilia and incestuous relationships, which obviously remind us of the short stories of McEwan. McEwan aims to explore the disturbing and conflicting state of human consciousness. Through his early fictions McEwan tries to create an abyss; now it's up to you whether you fall in his trap or try to reconcile with your own shifted responses towards his fictions, which eventually produce disgust, nausea, and waves of shock, in order to find a way out to the feelings of fascination, confusion and grim laughter. For Ryan, the unsettling aspect of reading of McEwan's short stories, oblige a sense of ambiguity which forces the readers to reflect a kind of mixed motives, towards the elaborated narrations of rape as has been presented in "Homemade", "Dead As They Come"; sado-masochism in "Pornography"; child abuse in "Disguises", "Butterflies", and "Conversation with a Cupboard Man"; and finally incestuous desire as has been pointed out in "Homemade" as well as in "The Cement Garden".

Surrealist art and literature mainly concern with Freudian theories of 'polymorphous perverse'<sup>16</sup>, like masturbation, incest etc. The readers often time come across with the violent, bizarre and disturbing imaginary scenarios of surrealistic texts. According to Roland Barthes, these obscene elements affect the readers' historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories'. McEwan acknowledges the literary influence of Kafka, William Burroughs and Jean Genet and their contribution of compelling him writing, 'somehow what is bad and difficult and unsettling' (Ricks 1979: 526). Through the below described points, McEwan's approach towards surrealism, in his early works, has been tried to be stated out. The creative and critical impulse behind his aesthetics can better be understood through "First love, Last Rites", "In Between the Sheets" and "The Cement Garden" where he has experimented with the form of dissident Surrealism. According to Jeannette Baxter, what the stories demand is not only of engrossing imaginatively in every disturbing texture of each narrative, but insists a sense of connectiveness, as if we actually present there physically; it almost insists the readers to engage into this continual process of self-reflection:

"Far from disguising the tainted pleasure they take in their more lurid themes; his best tales confess the ambiguity of their attitude and oblige us to reflect on the mixed motives governing our own responses as readers" (Kiernan Ryan, "The Modern Satiric Grotesque", 39)

## V. CONCLUSION

McEwan provides a materialistic approach in his presentation of both grotesque realism and grotesque body. For Clark the grotesque body of an individual contributes to the, 'degraded self-delusional contemporary man'. It reaffirms Bakhtinian concept of modern man whose aim is to consume maximum amount of physical and material pleasure. Most of the characters in McEwan's short stories have been isolated from the mutual life of togetherness, thus they become confided within their horrid, obnoxious and dreadful façade of flesh. Ultimately there is no sense of rejuvenation and buoyancy in this bleak and desolate wasteland. They are only concerned with gratifying their physical needs at any cost. For Bakhtin, the failure of the modern man in accepting the grotesque, bizarre, and anomalous reality of the social condition makes him imprisoned in his own egoistic, self-centered life. Thus, the grotesque realism lacks every kind of free laughter, and the sense of secret liberation. The protagonists of McEwan's early works feel a sense of menace in their personal life. Sometimes the cause is the failure in establishing familial bond, and often time it is because of the lack of a normal adolescent life which ultimately leads them towards a life of hopelessness and despair.

McEwan's short stories mainly deal with the children and adolescent characters. Most of them seem to be stucked in one of the phases of emotional development. Freud calls it a kind of 'psychological and behavioral disorder'. The anonymous narrator in "Conversation with a Cupboard Man", seems to be entrapped in the oral phase<sup>17</sup> of development, because of his mother's treatment makes him believe to be 'an eternal baby' which impedes him facing the reality. The protagonist of "Pornography" has been arrested in the anal stage which leads him towards a life of vulgarity and extreme physicality. The narrator in "Homemade" has been stucked in the phallic stage<sup>18</sup> which makes him irresistible of having sex with his own sister without feeling any repulsion.

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<sup>15</sup> In his 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, Breton states that, it is, 'the dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic concerns'.

<sup>16</sup> It is a generalized sexual desire that can be fulfilled in many distorted ways. Freud uses this term to depict the sexual disposition from infancy to about age five.

<sup>17</sup> In this psychosexual stage of development, a child derives pleasure from oral stimulation.

<sup>18</sup> In this stage an infant of three to six years, seeks pleasure from their genitalia as the erogenous zone.



The characters in McEwan's short stories oscillate between desire and fear, laughter and tears. McEwan's account of eroticism has been presented as an antidote to the extreme painful and violent situations. The moral implication of the stories very often becomes problematic for the readers as well as for the critics. McEwan states that he has been highly influenced by the Theatre of Violence. These short stories are more like a 'laboratory'<sup>19</sup> for him. He experiments the effect of extreme violence on the readers and their reaction towards it. Sebastian Groes' comment on it is noteworthy, 'McEwan is not imagining transgression as a merely subversive act. Rather, he presents transgression and taboo as inherent components of one another. Transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends and completes it'

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<sup>19</sup> In his interview with Daniel Zalewski, McEwan states that his short stories are more a laboratory, where he can experiment with his first-person narrators and the impact of their personal life onto the society.