

A Lovely Sleep: A Psychoanalytic Reading of *The Cement Garden* Through the Theoretical Lens of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva

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Abstract

Ian McEwan is the writer of the most controversial texts of the contemporary British fiction. One of the outstanding examples of his literature of shock, McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, is a challenging narrative in the sense that it depicts the disturbing experiences of a family, ranging from incest to death. The fact that these experiences are narrated through an adolescent boy's point of view makes these even more controversial in the sense that the depiction of events through this narrator's view is focalized. Through this focalization, the horrifying events experienced by children are narrated as if they were just ordinary experiences which creates a somehow disturbing effect on the reader. However, this disturbance also leads the reader to think that the actions of these children and their relationship to their parents and each other also refer to an underlying symbolism pertaining to their psychic conditions. This article aims to reveal and interpret the novel focusing on this underlying symbolism through the lens of Lacan's concepts of 'lack' and the Symbolic order and Kristeva's concept of 'semiotic chora'.

Keywords

Ian McEwan
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About Article

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Tatlı Bir Uyku: *The Cement Garden* adlı Romanın Jacques Lacan ve Julia Kristeva'nın Teorik Çerçevesinden Psikoanalitik Bir Okuması

Özet

Ian McEwan çağdaş İngiliz edebiyatının en çarpıcı metinlerinin yazarıdır. Onun şok edebiyatı olarak adlandırılan bu metinlerinin en öne çıkan örneklerinden biri olan *The Cement Garden*, bir ailenin ensestten ölüme uzanan rahatsızlık verici deneyimlerini anlattığı çarpıcı bir metindir. Bu deneyimlerin ergen bir genç erkeğin bakış açısına odaklanmış olması da metni tartışmalı hale getiren unsurlar arasındadır. Bu odak noktası üzerinden anlatılan ve çocukların deneyimlemiş olduğu dehşet verici olaylar, oldukça sıradan deneyimler gibi anlatılmaları açısından da okur üzerinde rahatsız edici bir etki yaratır. Ancak, metnin okur üzerinde yaattığı bu rahatsızlık, okuru, çocukların davranışlarının, ebeveynleriyle ve birbirleriyle olan ilişkilerinin aynı zamanda onların psikolojik süreçlerine işaret eden sembolik bir anlatı evrenine de işaret ediyor olabileceğini düşünmeye yönlendirir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, metne içkin olan bu sembolik düzlemi, Jacques Lacan'ın 'yoksunluk' ve Sembolik düzen ve Julia Kristeva'nın 'semiyotik kora' kavramları üzerinden çözümlenmesini ve yorumlanmasını amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Ian McEwan
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Semiyotik Kora

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Introduction

Ian McEwan is the writer of most controversial texts of the contemporary British fiction. His fiction revolves around contemporary issues such as class politics, problematic gender relations, the negative consequences of modernity and colonialism, ecological crises and more personal inquires such as the construction of identity, nature of love, family dynamics, innocence and ethics (Head, 2007, p. 2, 5, 15) in shocking, brutal and disturbing ways which caused McEwan to be referred to as "Ian MCabre" (Vajda, 2020, p. 66). That is why his fiction is widely classified as "literature of shock" (Head, 2007, p.30) but as Dominic Head (2007) argues he covers these shocking incidents through an "amoral view" (p.35). One of the outstanding examples of his literature of shock, McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, "a perverted bildungsroman" (De Coning, 2011, p. 98), is a challenging narrative in the sense that it depicts the disturbing experiences of a family, ranging from incest to death. The fact that these experiences are narrated through an adolescent boy's point of view makes these even more controversial in the sense that the depiction of events through this narrator's view is focalized. Through this focalization, the horrifying events experienced by children are narrated as if they were just ordinary experiences which creates a somehow disturbing effect on the reader "puctur[ing] the idealized representations of the child" (Dodou, 2021, p. 241). However, this disturbance also leads the reader to think that the actions of these children and their relationship to their parents and each other also refer to an underlying symbolism pertaining to their psychic conditions. This article aims to reveal and interpret the novel focusing on this underlying narrative through Lacan's concept of 'lack' and the Symbolic order and Kristeva's concept of 'semiotic chora'.

Lacan's Concept of Lack, The Imaginary and The Symbolic

Unlike Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan categorizes the developmental stages of a child as the imaginary and the Symbolic, the threshold of which is marked by the mirror stage. The first phase of the child's development, the imaginary covers the first 18 months of the child and Lacan evaluates this era as the mother's realm. In this stage the child tends to see itself as not separate from the rest of its surroundings and in this respect the child's mechanisms of identification is free from the domain of the binary oppositions. The child sees itself as one with the objects outside and a sense of self is not yet developed. Therefore the child's first experiences in the World take place in a rhizomatic plane, to put it in Derridean terms. Although this lack of a sense of self seems not to be an ideal situation, Lacan argues that this feeling of oneness with the rest of its surroundings, especially the mother, provides a sense of unity, comfort, security and thus peace which is yet to be disrupted by the mirror stage, when the child begins to recognize itself as a separate entity from the rest of the World (Lacan, 2007).

The mirror stage coincides with the child's integration into language and its integration in the system of binary oppositions which is encrypted into the cultural system that is embedded in language. Therefore when the child is integrated into this lingual structure, it is also introduced into the Symbolic set of relationships that is attributed to the father. Lacan points out that the child's transference to the Symbolic is accompanied by a feeling of anguish and a sense of 'lack' for the sense of unity and security that the child has in the imaginary is disrupted when it becomes a self and everything else becomes the other (Lacan, 2007). As a result of this process the child feels like it has been thrown into the social network of hierarchical relationships, which Lacan conceptualizes as the Big Other within the discourse of which the individual is encapsulated and absorbed. The child becomes the subject of the Other's desire

constantly feeling threatened and incomplete in the father's realm of the Symbolic and it never completely gets over its longing for the semiotic unity and security. Lacan further argues that this longing for the imaginary oneness persists for the rest of its adult life. According to Lacan this disruption that takes place in the child's experiencing of itself moving in from the imaginary to the Symbolic is a Symbolic castration and the rest of the child's experience from childhood into adulthood is marked by a sense of lack. The real castration complex, therefore, occurs when the bond between the child and the mother along with the rest of the World is broken with the child's integration into language, the father's realm, which is made by the concept of lack (Lacan, 1988).

The individual that goes through this disruption or division is haunted by this sense of lack for the rest of his/her life and endlessly struggles to reconstitute the primary imaginary oneness which has now become an unattainable ideal that is conceptualized by Lacan as the Real. So the Real is inevitably outside the Symbolic and therefore unrepresentable and appears as uncanny/unheimlich, both homely and unhomely, images as a result of the sublimation process of the author. It is a purgatorial site for the lost connection for the first object of oneness, the mother, which Lacan conceptualizes as 'objet petit a' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Objet petit a in this respect becomes the object of the unattainable desire and the individual struggles for the rest of his/her life to find substitutes for this first object of desire (Lacan, 1994, p. 168)

Kristeva's Semiotic Chora as Represented in *The Cement Garden*

Literature, in this sense, becomes a realm of sublimation for the representation of this unrepresentable Real and its objet petit a. The Real is the unattainable desire to resituate oneself within the heterotopic or rhizomatic plane of the semiotic chora, as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva borrows the term chora from Plato who uses the term as a no MAN's land, a third space, that is free from the predetermined boundaries of cultural spaces (Rickert 2007). Rickert further argues that Kristeva "theorizes, linguist, and semiotician, reaches back to Plato's chora in order to theorize a preverbal realm prior to and distinct from the Symbolic realm, one that is subversive of the Symbolic's masculine" (Rickert, 2007, p. 260). Inspired by Bakhtinian concept of the carnival and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva associates this rhizomatic space with the first 18 months of the child's development, or the Lacanian imaginary. According to her the semiotic chora, which is defined by Kristeva (1974) as a "prerequisite to the imposition of the Symbolic function and transversely related to it" (p. 35), is an egalitarian heterotopia that embraces all and everything at the same time without putting them on a hierarchical scale of the phallogocentric Symbolic. Therefore the semiotic chora is the rhizomatic realm of multiplicity and chaos that provides a sense of wholeness, security and comfort. In Kristeva's own words:

[T]he chora is a womb or a nurse in which elements are without identity and without reason. The chora is a place of a chaos which is and which becomes, preliminary to the constitution of the first measurable body... the chora plays with the body of the mother-of woman-, but in the signifying process" ["Le sujet en proces" 57]. (qtd. in Oliver, 1991, p. 46)

Kristeva in her 1974 article also discussed the possibility of "actualizing the semiotic chora within the system of the language" (p. 35) and one of the main arguments of this study is that Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* is a fictional attempt to actualize or restore the semiotic

chora. The novel tells the story of four siblings who try to survive the aftermath of the death of their parents going through a series of disturbing experiences such as incest and certain tensions within the family members through the perspective of Jack, the adolescent son of the family and an “unreliable narrator” (Nünning, 1997, p. 100, Malcolm, 2000, p. 48). As Dominic Head (2007) argues

Left to their own devices, the children’s games result in the infantilizing and gender transformation of Tom, the promotion of Julie to the maternal role, and the eventual incest between Julie and Jack, which is the culmination of the book’s Oedipal theme, since Julie is identified by all as a surrogate mother. One reading of this is that the over-dependence on the family unit as a source of reassurance and repair is an extension, merely, of the parents’ regime: by damaging the children emotionally, while simultaneously cutting the family unit off from outside contact, the parents have established a dysfunctional home in which emotional need and emotional damage have become inseparable. (p. 48)

Especially Jack’s desire to bury their mother’s body in cement and keep her in the basement can be interpreted as his phantasy, or jouissance in Lacanian terms, to conserve the mother and restoring himself within the semiotic chora as a realm of liberty, fluidity, security and peace free from the solidity, constraints and hierarchy of the Symbolic. David Malcolm (2000) also argues that “the entire text could be viewed as charting a passage from rigid male control, the cement garden, to a much freer, if anarchic, state, whose presiding deities are the mother and Julie” (p. 59) which can be interpreted further within the theoretical framework of Lacanian categorization of the semiotic and the Symbolic and Kristeva’s concept of semiotic chora.

The Symbolic Order of the Father

Within this light, the opening of the novel is quite remarkable in the sense that Jack’s Oedipal phantasy of erasing the father and his influence off the picture which, as Ababjeh (2012) argues, overlaps with “McEwan’s [own] Oedipal impulses of wishing the father to die and embracing the maternal” (p. 2). Jack openly declares that he “did not kill [his] father, but [he] sometimes felt [he] had helped him on his way” and that his father’s death “seemed insignificant” (McEwan, 1980, p. 9). He generally refers to his father as an authoritarian figure who has an oppressive influence over the rest of the family, especially his mother which can be read as the Symbolic repression of the semiotic. In this respect it is not a coincidence that the father’s influence over the family is embodied through the phallic image of his pipe: “He knew how to use his pipe against her” (the mother) and the pipe is referred to as a “a missing section of his own anatomy” (McEwan, 1980, p. 10). The rigidity and the solid and constructed nature of the Symbolic order of the father is also represented through the metaphor of the cement garden, an “insipid wasteland” (Dodou, 2012, p. 241) which is constantly protested by the rest of the family. “He had constructed rather than cultivated his garden according to plans he sometimes spread out on the kitchen table in the evenings while we peered over his shoulder” (McEwan, 1980, p. 14). To be able to resist the imposition of this constructed structure, the children employ the medium of sarcasm towards the father’s constipation and especially the solidity and artificiality of his order, which most of the time is ignored by the father: “I saw something out in the garden today that gave me a shock.’ ‘Oh,’ said Julie. ‘What was that?’ ‘A flower’” (McEwan, 1980, p. 15). The repressive effect of the Symbolic is further commented on through Jack’s memory of his father when

He liked to have the children stand in neat lines, quietly waiting their turn at some game he had set up. Noise and chaos, children milling around without purpose, irritated him profoundly. There was never a birthday party during which he did not lose his temper with someone. At Sue's eighth birthday party he tried to send her to bed for fooling around. Mother intervened, and that was the last of the parties." (McEwan, 1980, p. 33)

Obviously, the father, who is intentionally not named in the novel, is the embodiment of a larger phenomenon that has immense influence in the development of an individual, the Lacanian Symbolic which Lacan refers to as a lack, a Symbolic castration from the sense of unity, wholeness and security of the maternal identification. In this respect, the father's death as a result of a heart attack right after Jack's first ejaculation comes in as quite meaningful. As Mitra and Shrivastava (2014) also argue "The sudden death of the father literally coincides with Jack's sexual and corporeal awakening that result in the beginning of the erosion of patriarchal law" (p. 166). Jack's Oedipal phantasy and his resistance to the Symbolic repression of the semiotic is metaphorically actualized through the death of the father when he finds him "lying face down on the ground" (McEwan, 1980, p. 18) half buried in wet cement. The way the father dies is also quite ironic in the sense that he dies in the very structure that he himself is responsible for, the "insipid wasteland" (Dodou, 2012, p. 241) of the Symbolic order. Jack's desire to erase the father from the scene and restore the semiotic chora is represented in his picking "up the plank and carefully smooth[ing] away his [father's] impression in the soft, fresh concrete" (McEwan, 1980, p. 18) rendering him non-existent right after the ambulance takes his dead body away. Jack further justifies this phantasy of his by arguing that his mother and his father "secretly [...] had hated each other and that mother was relieved when father died" (McEwan, 1980, p.32), also highlighting the tension between the semiotic and the Symbolic.

Jack's castration anxiety as conceptualized by Jacques Lacan is continuously referred to on a metaphorical level through several incidents he goes through and through his dreams. In one incident, for instance, he comes home from school pretending to be ill, for the attention of his mother, or "to monopolize her" to put it in his own words (McEwan, 1980, p. 24). His mother takes care of him, she dresses him up in his pijamas and yet being close to her all day, Jack is horrified to realize "the obvious fact of her independent existence" (McEwan, 1980, p. 24) plainly representing his separation anxiety and his resistance to the feeling of lack and loss imposed by the Symbolic repression. The dream that he has about a box full of cigars also echo the same castration anxiety. In his dream he is being followed by someone that he cannot identify. This image that haunts him is carrying a wooden box that is full of cigars which signifies the phallogocentric order of the Symbolic father. Jack tends to run away as soon as the lid of the box is cracked open revealing the darkness inside. Then he finds himself in his bedroom where the box follows him to and he defines that moment saying: "I knew there was a small creature inside, kept captive against its will and stinking horribly" (McEwan, 1980, p. 26). He tries to shout to ask for help but unable to make a sound and the moment when he has no chance but to look inside the box, he wakes up upon the entrance of his mother to his room. It is more than obvious that the dream is a direct reference to the Symbolic castration that the individual is subjected to with the imposition of the Symbolic order of the father which is represented through the phallic image of the box of cigars. Jack resists the feeling of the loss of the semiotic sense of unity by running away from the box and when running away looks not possible anymore, the meaningful intervention of the mother enables it.

The death of the father, therefore, creates a sense of relief in Jack and his next impulse is to crush the cement garden to erase the final influences of the Symbolic order with a sledgehammer that he finds in a house in ruins.

I balanced it over my shoulder and carried it home, wondering what I could usefully smash up. In the garden the rockery was disintegrating and overgrown. There was nothing to lay into apart from the paving stones, and they were already cracked. I decided on the cement path-fifteen feet long and a couple of inches thick. It was serving no purpose. I stripped down to the waist and set to. A little concrete crumbled away on the first blow, but the next few produced nothing, not even a crack. I rested, and began again. This time, surprisingly, a great fissure opened up and a large, satisfying piece of concrete came away. It was about two feet across and heavy to lift. I pulled it clear and rested it against the fence. (McEwan, 1980, p. 38)

After the metaphorical disruption of the Symbolic order Jack stores the sledgehammer into the cellar (McEwan, 1980, p. 40). Different parts of the house can also be thought to embody different planes of the human psyche within this context. The upper story of the house, where the parents' room is obviously the Freudian superego or the Lacanian Symbolic whereas the cellar represents the unconscious mind, the storehouse of repressed materials, or the chaotic and unstructured semiotic. The representation of the house as a projection of the restrictive order of the Symbolic and its depiction as a gothic "unhomely" space (Sukdolova, 2019, p. 142) in this sense contributes to the general outlook of this study. In this respect it is no coincidence that the mother's dead body is preserved in the cellar, buried in concrete, representing the children's desire to eliminate the Symbolic repression and reattain The Real and/or the semiotic chora. This is the reason why the children are quite eager to bury the dead body of the mother in wet cement:

Julie was filling the shovel again, Sue hurried over to the pile, picked up as much cement as she could get in two hands and threw it into the trunk. And then she was throwing cement in as fast as she could. Julie was shovelling faster too, staggering to the trunk with huge loads, and running back for more. I plunged my hands into the cement and threw in a heavy armload. We worked like maniacs. Soon only a few patches of the sheet were visible, and then they too were gone. Still we kept on. The only sounds were the scrape of the shovel and our heavy breathing. (McEwan, 1980, p. 59)

In this light it becomes more meaningful that "the cellar seemed less frightening to [him] than the rest of the house" (McEwan, 1980, p. 56). Although Sistani et.al. (2014) argue that "[t]he children, in spite of the freedom which has been granted to them, find their lives empty and hollow... the state of being separated from the primal loved object is unbelievably painful" (Sistani, et al., 453), this study aims to propose another attitude towards the death of the mother. Koziol (2010) argues that "[a]fter her death and burial in the cellar, Mother seems to have acquired symbolic significance which by far surpasses her influence on them before her death – apart from the period of their early childhood" (p. 41). Within the theoretical framework of this study, this symbolic significance is that the unexpected death of the mother is not the loss or absence of the primal loved object, rather her preservation in the cement block in the cellar marks her timeless and unconditional presence as the primal loved object that makes the children feel like their "mother was in fact alive" (McEwan, 1980, p. 109) as obviously indicated in the novel. Furthermore, McEwan's own desire to set the semiotic chora

free can also be observed in his article "Mother Tongue" (2001), in which he indicates: "I developed a romantic notion that if the spirit of women was liberated, the world would be healed... In other words, pen in hand, I was going to set my mother free" (qtd. in Ababjeh, 2012, p. 2).

The Real and the Preservation of the Semiotic Chora

The preservation of the mother in the cellar, metaphorically referring to restoration of the semiotic chora marks the beginning of a new order in children's lives. To begin with, there are no solid categorizations in this rhizomatic realm, represented most obviously in Tom's cross-dressing and breaking up of the gender polarization that is imposed by the Symbolic repression: "he said he was tired of being a boy and he wanted to be a girl now" (McEwan, 1980, p. 43). This new unrestrained era in the children's lives is dominated by chaos and "a sense of freedom" (McEwan, 1980, p. 46) that entails it. Jack defines his experience in the semiotic chora through "a sense of adventure and freedom" and points out that "the house seemed to have fallen asleep" (McEwan, 1980, p. 64-5) signifying that the Symbolic function of the house as a phallogocentric construct is suspended with the preservation of the semiotic chora which also sustains this sense of freedom.

This liberated choric space, unlike the Symbolic, is also capable of harboring and embracing the opposites concurrently as represented by Tom's gender fluid characterization and Jack's emphasis on the ambiguous and/or contradictory emotions which also represent his phantasy of remaining in the embracing and polymorphic space of the semiotic chora. When the dancing Pan in the garden is broken, the idea that him and Julie are responsible for it fills him with "horror and delight" (McEwan, 1980, p. 16), a childhood memory of his concerning his mother simultaneously evokes feelings of "sadness and menace" (McEwan, 1980, 24) in him, as Tom declares that he is going to be a girl from then on he feels "horrified and fascinated" (McEwan, 1980, p. 43) at the same time, and after his mother's death he locks her dead body in her bedroom and he feels "close to blasphemous laughter" (McEwan, 1980, p. 48). The possibility of the coexistence of these opposing feelings resonates the rhizomatic multiplicity of the semiotic chora. As also highlighted by De Coning (2011), "semiotic materiality ... can further destabilise and subvert the oppositional structures, constructed in language, of inside-outside, feminine-masculine, and subject-object. (p. 13)

However, this relief does not last long and the semiotic chora is interrupted by Derek's infiltration into the family as Julia's boyfriend and as a substitute father figure which coincides with the occurrence of a crack in the cement block where the mother's body is conserved. The preservation of the cement block makes the children feel like their "mother was in fact alive" (McEwan, 1980, p. 109) yet Derek, as another Symbolic figure, continuously attempts to disrupt the semiotic universe of the children and their choric phantasy. Derek's commentary concerning the cement block makes more sense in this respect: "Whatever's in there is really rotten" (McEwan, 1980, p. 110).

Derek's intrusion in the semiotic chora as the substitute father disturbs Jack and he feels oppressed and kept in check. "Something heavy and dark was pressing down on [him] and [he] stared up at the ceiling again" (McEwan, 1980, p. 96). Derek functions in this respect as the Symbolic father and an authority figure, or the superego in Freudian terms, that attempts to repress the semiotic chora. From this perspective, it is not a coincidence that Jack looks at the ceiling when he feels the pressure. Derek's struggle to infiltrate into the family, disrupts

Julie as well as Jack which she declares saying: "He wants to be one of the family, you know, big smart daddy. He's getting on my nerves... He wants to take charge of everything" (McEwan, 1980, p. 122-3). The reappearance of the incest relationship between the siblings, within this context, signifies a kind of a resistance towards the Symbolic intrusion. As Patel (2018) proposes "Since the family unit implies man's most significant attempt at social order, incest signifies a foremost defiance of that order" (p. 65). However, the lawless semiotic unification between Jack and Julie as the surrogate mother and the sense of completeness that comes alongside it is doomed to be disrupted by Derek. The sense of oneness and his semiotic identification with the mother is echoed in Jack's following remarks: "I took her hand and measured it against mine. It was exactly the same" (McEwan, 1980, p. 125). The semiotic identification is especially highlighted through Jack's suckling of the semiotic breast:

She began to edge further up the bed till her large pale breasts were level with my face. I touched a nipple with the end of my finger. It was hard and wrinkled like a peach stone. Julie took it between her fingers and kneaded it. Then she pushed it towards my lips. 'Go on,' she whispered. I felt weightless, tumbling through space with no sense of up or down. As I closed my lips around Julie's nipple a soft shudder ran through her body and a voice from across the room said mournfully, 'Now I've seen it all.' (McEwan, 1980, p. 124)

This peaceful moment is interrupted by Derek's ambiguous remark "Now I've seen it all" which both signifies an actual act of seeing and a clear reference to the male gaze that conditions the Symbolic. This incident is followed by Derek's smashing up of the cement block with the sledgehammer, as a metaphorical disruption of the semiotic chora that the children have been trying to preserve. Finally, with the entrance of the police officers to the house to take away the children under state care, the symbolic repression of the semiotic chora takes place on the fictional level bringing an end to "a lovely sleep" (McEwan, 1980, p. 127). The coming of the police at the end of the novel echoes the Lacanian conceptualization of the Real as an unreachable ideal and therefore the children's endless struggle to conserve the mother represents the jousance to resist the Symbolic and to remain in the semiotic chora.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this controversial novel, which has been interpreted from multiple different points of view and critical lenses, reearns his alias, Ian MCabre. One of the outstanding examples of his literature of shock, *The Cement Garden* stands as an amoral bildungsroman depicting the disturbing experiences of a family through an adolescent boy's unreliable narrative point of view. The disturbing texture of the narrative leads the reader to focus on the pshchological conditions of the characters among the multiple other perspectives that the text can be evaluated. On a closer look, the psychological portrayals of the characters in the text obviously echo the Lacanian concepts of the Symbolic order of the farther and the ensuing feeling of lack and Kristeva's concept of 'semiotic chora' shedding light on one of the most powerful impulses of the human psyche.

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