

The grotesque body in Ian McEwan's short stories

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Abstract

The subject matter and imagery prevalent in Ian McEwan's early fiction are shockingly unpleasant and justifiably notorious for their portrayal of grotesqueries to the extent that their significance has been ignored or undermined compared to his later more successful works. In the present study, we discuss these grotesque representations and their implications in a number of his short stories from the two collections of *In Between the Sheets* (1975) and *First Love, Last Rites* (1978). Our discussion of the grotesque body in the aforementioned stories relies on a synthesis of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of grotesque realism and John R. Clark's view of the modern satiric grotesque, which involves grim laughter and degradation reinforced through scatological imagery. We thus argue that the loss of a communal and regenerative sense of human existence in the modern life style can explain the sadism, masochism, violence or fatality prevalent in contemporary fiction as exemplified in McEwan's short stories.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *In Between the Sheets*, *First Love, Last Rites*, Mikhail Bakhtin, John R. Clark, the grotesque

The imagination can lighten only that which it has been able to confront and depict. The modern era, in its prevalently wry and grotesque manner, has deliberately enabled its imagination to play upon the wicked and the paltry, the sordid and the mundane, in a concerted and even painful quest for comprehension and enlightenment.

John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque*

Introduction

Ian McEwan's short stories, dating back to an early period of the author's literary career in the two collections of *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), share the distinctive feature of the "Ian Macabre" phase in being associated with a dark, gloomy, and grotesque landscape.¹ In these stories, shocking images and subject

¹ McEwan acknowledges his early fiction to be "darkly comic" works, which deservedly earned him "the 'Ian Macabre' tag" and caused him to be at "an impasse" in the early 80s (Cook 2008: 130). The term 'early work' mainly refers to his two collections of short stories and his debut novel, *The Cement Garden*

matter are basically depicted in connection with sex and deviant sexuality and through scatological representations of the human body in a modern and gloomy setting. McEwan's writing of the 1970s has been described as "infamous ... for his gory plots, ahistorical scenarios, and fascination with sexual sadomasochism" (Garrard 2009: 697). Lynn Wells considers his short story collections as populated with "characters on the margin of everyday society", where "elements of sexual violence [... are] set in dreary, often claustrophobic, urban environments with no or little hope of social reform or individual compassion" (Shaffer et al. 2010: 250-1). Subject matter involving deviant sexuality in the form of "acts of sexual abuse, sadistic torment and pure insanity" are abundantly observed in these stories (Ryan 1994: 2). Numerous scatological images of "bodily fluid, excrement, genitalia, [and] unsavoury odours" are effortlessly traceable in McEwan's short fiction as well (Malcolm 2002: 40). Jeanette Baxter refers to McEwan's "shocking tales of incest, paedophilia, erotic violence, sex and death" as a "textual abyss" (2009: 13-14).

Due to these excessive portrayals of sex and violence, there has been a strong tendency to celebrate the shift in McEwan's narrative focus from these early works to his later literary maturity. As Wells indicates, it was Kiernan Ryan who hailed McEwan's fiction in the early 1990s for developing "away from the insular grotesqueries of his early fiction towards a broader, more morally relevant vision closer to the tradition of the great English novelists" (2006: 117). According to Ryan, McEwan gains literary maturity as he leaves behind "the claustrophobic menace" of his early works and moves from a type of fiction filled with "the perverse, the grotesque, the macabre" and from "the clammy feel of impending evil" to fiction enriched by "an emerging apprehension of the power of love and the possibility of redemption" (1994: 2). Brian Martin also is pleased that "the macabre, sordid, sadistic world" of McEwan's early "gothic adolescence" has shifted to more mature fiction (1987: 40). Referring to Martin's statement as well as the author's later works, *Comfort of Strangers* and *The Child in Time*, David Malcolm also indicates that McEwan's fiction has evolved since these second and third novels (2002: 90).

(1978). He then wrote *The Imitation Game: Three Plays for Television* (London: Cape, 1981), which he later called a practice "to step out into the world" (Haffenden 1985: 173).

Notwithstanding such views and the fact that McEwan himself admits his early works left him with a self-limiting choice of subject matter and that he had to distance himself from this “too tight a corner” (qtd. in Malcolm 2002: 5), his short stories are significant in their uniqueness of style and subject matter and readily offer critical challenges to scholarly discussion and interpretation. In fact, to appreciate McEwan as a major contemporary author, it is crucial to pay attention to his short stories both in their own right and for their role in the development of the themes and characters of his later novels. Malcolm believes that these stories are not only worth considering for commonalities in theme and characterization, which formed the sketch work for his novels, but they are also noteworthy in their entirety since each story of the two collections is “a unique text with its own configuration of narration, narrational technique, language, genre, subject matter, setting, and characters, and each requires and repays close individual analysis” (2002: 20). McEwan’s own concern about his stories is also expressed in an early 1980s interview in which he notes that he “took the stories very seriously” and “would always want to stand by them” (Haffenden 1985: 189-90).

Concerning the perplexing responses and contradictory sentiments that McEwan’s short fiction have given rise to, Ryan points out that McEwan’s best stories “oblige us to reflect on the mixed motives governing our own response as readers” (1994: 13). Baxter’s surrealistic reading of McEwan’s early works also suggests that we need to engage our imagination in these “tales of violent transgression” to deal with “our own shifting responses [...] when initial waves of shock, disgust and nausea give way somehow to feelings of confusion and fascination and laughter” (Baxter 2009: 13-14). Baxter suggests dealing with the “uncertainty of response” in McEwan’s short stories and debut novel by reading them as “experiments in a form of dissident Surrealism” in order to understand the “compelling detours into the more disturbing texture of the modern imagination” (2009: 13-14). The present work offers an alternative by drawing from certain discussions on the grotesque. In other words, it is attempted to demonstrate that these stories can be discussed for the prevalence of the grotesque in their imagery and subject matters. This is to be discussed with a focus on some of the relevant elements of the grotesque, namely grotesque realism, degradation and regeneration, as propagated by Mikhail Bakhtin. In this regard, John R.

Clark's study of the satiric grotesque in modern fiction and his discussion on degradation and scatological imagery are also taken into consideration for the present task.

The grotesque body, as viewed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, is explicable in terms of its communal and dynamic essence, which involves an ongoing process of degradation and regeneration through its material and physical life. Here, the essential point is that the grotesque body does not belong to the sphere of individual experience as it "is a body in the act of becoming" and "is never finished, never completed; [but ...] is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body; [...] the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (Bakhtin 1984: 317). The philosophy behind the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque body is drawn from the world view of medieval man that considered the human body as unfinished, as opposed to the Renaissance notion of humans as complete beings. Bakhtin relates the grotesque body to a much wider scope, which observes all bodies in a communal sense. The universality and longevity of the grotesque body is guaranteed by its own essence of material realism, i.e. its physical life. In this manner, grotesque realism involves the grotesque body which is "unfinished and open" and "exceeds its own limits in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation" (Bakhtin 1984: 26).

Regeneration is a constant positive force, which consolidates the comic essence of laughter in grotesque realism. As such, the body is degraded but positively struggles against the cosmic horror of annihilation through chances provided for regeneration. Instead of being taken in isolation, the grotesque body is thus believed to be part of a universal body. This universal body undergoes continual death and rebirth as the decay of the old and dying is always succeeded by the birth of the young, described by Bakhtin as "immortality of the ancestral body" (1984: 367). Such positivity has of course been neglected in "the modern image of the individual body", as a result of which bodies have receded into their confinements and lost contact with "the cosmic whole" (Bakhtin 1984: 321). For that reason, the modern era has reductively "transferred" the grotesque body to a "private and psychological" zone

devoid of regenerative laughter (Bakhtin 1984: 321).² To put Bakhtin's assertion in other words, the "joyful acceptance of the materiality of the body" has weakened throughout time and is totally lost in our time when "European history witnesses the fragmentation of the whole attitude, indeed its suppression and dispersal, under the baleful influences of rationalism and modernity" (Dentith 1995: 66). It is in the view of such a drastic change that Bakhtin articulates modern lifestyle as one in which "death never coincides with birth; old age is torn away from youth [... and] all actions and events are interpreted on the level of a single, individual life" (1984: 322).

As a contemporary view on the materiality of the grotesque body and its degradation, John R. Clark's perspective of grim laughter and scatological imagery in *The Modern Satiric Grotesque* (1991) echoes Bakhtin's description of the material body and its degrading life in the context of the grotesque. However, while viewing the images of the grotesque body as lowering man's presumptuous view of himself, Clark observes the experience as devoid of any sense of regeneration. To put it another way, his negative view on degradation is compatible with what Bakhtin describes, in terms of periodization, as the grotesque produced after European Romanticism. For Clark, modern grotesque literature invokes "the paroxysm of hopeless laughter and desperate, unnatural comedy" (1991: 13). Furthermore, this humourless comedy harshly satirizes the "proud, self-delusional man [who] ever aspires to elevate himself and his dignity" as downgraded to the status of a "defecating animal" (Clark 1991: 116). As viewed by Clark, the modern works of the grotesque rely on scatological representations to create the grim laughter which targets the individualistic man and shatters his illusion of self-esteem, poisoning him at the degrading depth of the material body.

In the present study, we view the modern grotesque body as conceived by Clark and portrayed in McEwan's selected short stories against the background of the early modern concept of the grotesque propagated by Bakhtin. All the selected stories involve failure in establishing adult relationships and are thematically concerned with both physical life and its grotesqueness and the absence of a regenerative view of the material body. While many of McEwan's short stories, especially

² Bakhtin uses the term 'modern' to refer to the works of the grotesque after European Romanticism.

in the first collection, deal with adolescents and their initiations into adulthood, others focus on the pitfalls of adult life. The stories selected for the present analysis specifically deal with adult experiences and relationship problems. This is mainly because the aim of this article is to discuss the material body and sexual violence in McEwan's stories in the light of the grotesque and to illuminate the fact that the appalling images and events, far from being a mere representation of the nasty and the macabre, portray the psychological complications of contemporary adult life. From *First Love, Last Rites*, three stories with such a concern are "Solid Geometry", "Butterflies" and "Conversation with a Cupboard Man". While "Solid Geometry" fully focuses on the difficulties of a barren relationship, "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" and "Butterflies" initially are cases of child abuse, but later move towards much more complicated experiences of adult life.³ "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" portrays a non-relationship and the failure to come to terms with a long-delayed adulthood, and "Butterflies" actually revolves around the lonely life of an eccentric chinless man and his being a social outcast rather than around the sexually molested young girl he murders. Among the stories in the second collection, "Dead as They Come" and "Reflections of a Kept Ape" are selected for their significant portrayal of the most unconventional types of relationship. The former story pictures a businessman in love with a dummy, and the latter is the story of an ape in love with his female owner.

The Grotesque Body in McEwan's Stories

The first story in *First Love, Last Rites*, "Solid Geometry", abounds in revengeful aggression as a couple struggles over the husband's weird obsession with his great-grandfather's diary of forty-five volumes, the great-grand father's talks with a friend about matters such as the

³ Along with "Disguises", Jeanette Baxter labels "Butterflies" and "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" as tales of child abuse (2009: 13). While "Disguises" starts as and remains a case of child abuse, the same can hardly be stated about the other two stories. In "Butterflies" and "Conversation with a Cupboard Man", the storylines develop from child abuse to later streams of events, which respectively go beyond the murder of a little girl and the cupboard man's problematic upbringing to complications and isolation in the lives of the eccentric chinless man and the lonely, psychotic cupboard man.

possibility of different sex positions, “gossip, numbers and theories” (2006:1). Also, he diligently keeps his great-grandfather’s other strange heirloom, the penis of a nineteenth-century criminal, Captain Nicholls, “bottled in a glass twelve inches long” (2006: 1). Despite his oddly sensual obsession suggested through the talks about the possible number of sex positions and the glass jar on his desk, he ignores his wife, Maisie, and her need to be seen and cared for. Her longing for his attention, affection and lovemaking are several times turned down with the cold-blooded excuse that he needs to concentrate on editing and publishing the diary, leading Maisie to the verge of hysterical outbursts in reaction to his indifference. It is ironic that, while the man neglects his wife and her longing for his attention, he obviously treasures the pickled penis of a long dead culprit as “an object of great value” (2006: 13).

The unnamed man⁴ displays a strong sense of attachment to the weird heirlooms making a connection between himself and his great-grandfather. In one instance he directly expresses such a bond about the penis in the jar by saying that the object “had stood in his study while he lived, and then it had stood in mine, linking my life with his” (2006: 13). As a medium between him and his grandfather, it seems that the penis confined and preserved in the glass jar represents masculinity, rationality and independence contrasted to female marginality and sentimentality. His grandfather was an eccentric man who had sex only “about half-a-dozen times in his entire life” and only in his first year of marriage, which may explain for his gradual indifference towards Maisie (2006: 4). As he takes such symbolism into his own life, his sense of contempt for Maisie is intensified to the point of reducing her motive for breaking the jar to the cold rationalization that “she wanted a penis” (2006: 16).

The image of a penis is a highly compatible one to grotesque fiction and can be linked to material life and regeneration. As Bakhtin asserts, grotesque imagery involves “a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole” as well as “organs and parts of the body” (1984: 315 & 318). This mainly includes the genitals and all the other bodily parts comprising “convexities and orifices” through which the limits of an individual body are transgressed, “the confines between bodies and the body and the world are overcome” and “the main events

⁴ The male character of “Solid Geometry” is called ‘Albert’ in the screen adaptation, but no name is given to him in the short story version.

in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of bodily drama [eliminations and copulation], take place” (1984: 318). However, to Bakhtin, “dismembered parts” are only to “play a minor role in the drama [...] unless they replace a leading role” (1984: 318). In this story, the penis in the jar is a dismembered body and lacks the regenerative power which is ultimately reflected through the man’s confession that it was “transformed from a treasured curiosity into a horrible obscenity” after the jar was broken (2006: 13). In fact, the breaking of the jar acts as a catalyst since it reveals to him the nonsensical behaviour of treasuring the obscene dead member. Once out of the glass confinement, the ridiculous impotency of a dismembered organ is brought to light. In this manner, the image achieves a focal effect which may be further explicated by setting a parallel between a dismembered organ cut from the body and the individual physical life isolated from the communal effect of the Bakhtinian ancestral body. Considering the aforementioned claim of the man that the penis connects his life to that of his grandfather, an urge for going beyond time and the confines of the body, his folly can be well observed in how this bond acts in reverse and paradoxically isolates him from the world outside, as epitomized in his gradual estrangement from his wife.

Despite the man’s awareness of the reason for her occasionally hysterical behaviour, he consciously deprives his wife of a normal relationship. Early in the story he admits that “part of her problem was jealousy” for his “great-grand-father’s forty-five volume diary” (2006: 3). As the story goes on, it is brought to light that her presence and her femininity are either ignored or scorned by his indifference. At one point in the story, she has to wait outside the bathroom because he is sitting there “writing out a conversation ... about the Tarot pack” and does not want to leave it even though she explains to him that she is having her period and needs to use the bathroom (2006: 4). He even deprives her of a soothing embrace when she wakes up from a recurring nightmare. Her nightmare is significant in that it hints at the barrenness of the relationship and juxtaposes the image of birth with that of death. In the Rabelaisian world of popular culture, as depicted by Bakhtin, the horror of death is always followed by regeneration because “where death is, there also is birth, change, renewal” (1984: 409), and the death of the old and the dying is always followed by the birth of the young. In Maisie’s recurrent nightmare, however, the order is reversed as the birth imagery

of babies crawling in a desert is followed by the threat of her emergency landing of a plane:

I was in a plane over a desert. But it wasn't really a desert. I took the plane lower and I could see thousands of babies heaped up, stretching away into the horizon, all of them naked and climbing over each other. I was running out of fuel and I had to land the plane. I tried to find a space, I flew on and on looking for a space. (2006: 2)

As observed through her nightmare, the image of birth associated with the new born babies, symbolising her desire for pregnancy, collapses even in her dream as she sees herself forced to make an emergency aircraft landing in a place where the babies are climbing over each other naked. Although she always wakes up at this point with the horror of the nightmare, it is sufficient to represent how the continuation of the circle of birth and death is aborted. Rather than promising pregnancy and birth, the nightmare foreshadows her death and a fatal end not only to her desires but also her life. Recounting the nightmare to her husband, she mentions that she sees herself "flying this plane over a kind of desert" (2006: 3) and feels like "being screwed up like a piece of paper" (2006: 16). As the story unfolds, Maisie eventually falls victim to the imaginary geometric principle of "the plane without a surface" (2006: 11). This is the fictitious concept her husband discovers in his grandfather's diary. As the grotesque in the story borders on the fantastic, the geometric principle is said to work as he first practises it on a piece of paper and manages to have it disappear by putting it into a certain position. After Maisie smashes the glass jar in a fit of rage brought on by his continued lack of response to her sexual invitation, he plans a similar mysterious revenge by literally removing her from his life. He talks her into letting him give her a massage, through which he does as he had with the piece of paper through the "positioning of her limbs", causing her to be "gone" (2006: 22). That he shockingly kills his wife for having broken the jar clearly demonstrates the symbolic significance of the bottled penis, the shattering of which reveals the folly of his abstract adoration of masculinity. In fact, the man's deliberate negligence of his wife is linked to his infatuation with his grandfather's lifestyle, symbolising an extreme case of masculinity as well as rationality, which is responsible for his consequent rejection of a normal relationship with his wife. This leads to her isolation, degradation and annihilation as well as his own alienation in an extreme case of

rationality mania. Quite contrary to the open bodies Bakhtin celebrates as having a regenerative potential, the bodies of these characters remain within their own confines, and Maisie is only swallowed within herself owing to her husband's extreme sense of individuality.

While the man in "Solid Geometry" is an oppressive male figure with an extreme sense of rationality and individuality, the chinless man in "Butterflies" is a victim of social exclusion and isolation, who in turn victimizes a young innocent girl. The unnamed man, who has inherited his chinless countenance from his mother, is friendless; he neither contacts anyone nor has a job to offer him the slightest chance for professional or private interactions. He is so desperate to have a social life that he feels his heart is "beating fast from the excitement" when a group of boys clap for him. As a matter of fact, the boys threw a stone toward him after he stepped over their ball and then simply cheered him as he happened to catch the stone (2006: 79). He is thrilled because "such opportunities are rare" for him, and he does "not meet many people" (2006: 79). It is therefore a "rare opportunity" when Jane, the little girl from the neighbourhood, agrees to accompany him on his walk to the canal. As he reckoned, "to have someone walking along [...] was something of an opportunity [...] even if it was only a little girl with nothing to do" because he "wanted her to be [...] his] friend" (2006: 79). In fact, he has always been deprived of companionship, especially that of women, for whom his chinless countenance "breeds mistrust" (2006: 74). That he suddenly feels aroused and cannot control his sexual excitement in the company of the girl is the outcome of emotional and sensual deprivation, which causes him, despite himself, to force her to touch his penis. He has always suffered degradation due to his facial deformity and the consequent social exclusion, which culminates in the murder of the little girl.

Once he fails to control himself and forces the girl to touch his penis, he ejaculates, feeling that "all the hours walking alone and all the thoughts" of his loneliness "came out into" his own hand (2006: 86-87). Here again, a mere case of sexual satisfaction and momentary sense of regeneration, barren as it is, is thwarted immediately as the short relief is taken over by the fear of the girl spreading the news of his act, which leads him to murdering and drowning her in the canal. Thus, death replaces both a rare chance for companionship and the transitory feeling of sensual gratification. Grotesque images devoid of any regenerative

element dominate the overall atmosphere of the story. Besides the murder, his own chinless face adds to the grotesqueness of the character. As generally defined, one category of grotesque characters are those both physically and mentally distorted (Kayser 1963: 105; McElroy 1989: 12). The man's chin and neck are practically "the same thing" (2006: 74), which is both repulsive and humiliating as his mouth can be extraordinarily highlighted. According to Bakhtin, the mouth is the most significant "human feature for the grotesque" and, "the grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth [...] this wide open bodily abyss" (1984: 318). That the mouth is thus directly linked to the neck and the digestive system provokes an image of a gaping mouth that is ready to swallow (physical side of human nature) rather than to speak (mental and intellectual side), a quality imposed on him by the world which ironically keeps him silent by rarely providing chances for human interaction. At different occasions in the story he is portrayed as silent and just listening as the few people in the neighbourhood do the talking once they meet, which further hints at his isolation and confinement within his own body.

Revolted imagery prevails all throughout this story, which has been referred to as the "most patently repulsive tale" (Slay 1996: 23) by McEwan. As James Lang mentions, shocking incidents are not only portrayed as central images but are also "scattered throughout [...] in less noticeable ways" (Maunder 2007: 152-3). Along with the imagery associated with the man's deformed face and the main event regarding Jane's murder, appalling images range from a dog's eyeball breaking open under wheels and a cat being burned alive in "a cage over the fire" to the chinless man ejaculating into his hands and washing the sticky semen off in the dirty water of the canal (2006: 85). Speaking about the first time he encounters death, the man mentions witnessing a dog being killed as wheels "go over its neck and its eyes burst" (2006: 74). The cat scene is described as nauseating enough for the man to take "Jane's hand and [walk] faster", with the little girl keeping "her eyes on the ground" and "her whole body shaking" (2006: 85). The semen imagery, both regarding his ejaculation and the washing of his hands, is a depiction of a degrading and humourless sexual act, which is more linked with images of body emission than eroticism. As Clark puts it, images of body emission are more degrading than sensual ones (1991: 116). At the same time, the image obviously conveys no comic regenerative body emission in a Rabelaisian sense, and is hence far more belittling.

As already mentioned, the prevalent atmosphere of the story is that of desolation and bleakness, which is not only noticeable in the incidents but also highlighted in the setting. Accordingly, the setting of London as a modern metropolis is gloomy and barren with its “reeking canal, [...] disused lots, abandoned scrap yards, and empty factories” (Malcolm 2002: 36). The man wants “to be near tree and water [but] there are no parks in this part of London, only car parks” (2006: 72). The weather is hot, and a monotonous pace of life can be perceived in the description of the houses with the same smell of food and the same radio program, and “cats and dogs” but “very few people” in the streets (2006: 72). The entire environment signifies barrenness, futility and lack of a communal sense of regeneration, similar to the image of Maisie’s nightmare in “Solid Geometry” where the bodies of crawling babies were likened to a *desert*. Like in many of McEwan’s short stories, the chinless man has to “move through the drab wasteland” and is “trapped in the entropic world” (Malcolm 2002: 36). He is so “completely ostracized by the city” that “his yearnings for company are drowned in the waves of his sexual desire” (Slay 1996: 26), and he loses his rare chance by murdering Jane.

Similar to “Butterflies”, the story entitled “Conversation with a Cupboard Man” portrays another unnamed man who is deprived of a normal physical and emotional life, though not by being a victim of physical oddity and consequent social abandonment. In this story, a psychotic claustro-maniac’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 [him] back up her womb” (91). His father’s death, occurring just before he is born, leaves him as being “all the children she had ever wanted”. She thus begins to treat him like a child, literally having him live his “first two years over and over again” (2006: 91). Once the mother begins going out with her future second husband, the son undergoes the severe mental and physical sufferings of a sudden initiation into adulthood, portrayed in the weirdest and most unimaginable way. With his mother’s ultimate desertion of him after her second marriage, he is forced into a desperately excruciating attempt and subsequent failure at an initiation into a suddenly imposed adulthood. As an out-sized baby, the cupboard man confesses that he still must think about ordinary actions which other people do unconsciously. He even believes that he can never be an adult and may just “pretend” to be one (2006: 91). The failure to enter

adulthood seems so definite that, despite the initial part of the narrative about the cupboard man's childhood, the story has not even been considered as a tale of initiation by some critics.⁵

The image of a womb, most directly associated with fertility and regeneration, is the most significant body image in Bakhtin's iconographic study of body parts. In this story, the image recurrently appears, albeit in a barren sense of being secluded into the safety of a womb-like dark place as echoed in the images of an oven and cupboard. Revengeful hostility between him and the chief cook at the restaurant where he works leads to his entrapment in the "enormous cast-iron oven", which eventually drags him back into the whirlpool of obsession with his earlier comfort of a too long infancy (2006: 97). And, eventually, the cupboard man's growing enthusiasm for the return into an infantile stage of life reaches its ultimate point as he secures himself with stolen baby blankets in the big cupboard in his room. A stranger to the world of normal adulthood, he ends up "a deeply alienated figure who finally feels happy only when he is locked up in a cupboard" (Malcolm 2002: 34). Voluntarily, even if subconsciously, he retreats into re-experiencing what his mother had once made him suffer. His self-imprisonment symbolically represents his inevitable urge for pushing himself into the safety of a womb-like confinement to evade dejection through further victimization, rejection and degradation. He ultimately develops an obsession with moving back into the womb, the only safe and warm place he is sure of not being intruded upon and tormented. The image of the womb, far from being regenerative, is indeed an epitome of self-confinement. Neither swallowing the world nor being swallowed by it, the cupboard man's seeking shelter in womb-like seclusion is very

⁵ Discussing McEwan's interest in adolescence as an uncertain stage between childhood and adulthood, David Malcolm refers to the stories in his first collection which deal with adolescent life and initiation into adulthood. Accordingly, he excludes "Solid Geometry", "Cocker at the Theatre" and "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" as those not "showing initiation of some sort" (*Understanding Ian McEwan*, page 32). Of course, while Malcolm's assertion about "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" is correct in that the belated and unsuccessful attempt at adulthood takes place for a poorly-grown adult, it would be equally justifiable to add "Butterflies" to the stories classified as not being a tale of initiation since the story basically deals with the life of the chinless man as an adult.

similar to Maisie's case in "Solid Geometry" in that it embodies disappearing within one's own confinements of the body, being swallowed within.

As Malcolm rightly asserts, "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" defamiliarizes the "vision of traditional notions of the benefits of growing up and of the sense of everyday adult activities" (2002: 42). The cupboard man's experience, his deprivation from normal upbringing, highlights the human need for physical growth through defamiliarized childhood and adolescence filled with repulsive, unconventional and partly scatological images. Initially, he recalls the incidents showing how his mother tried to block his growth in strange manners such as having him sit in a highchair at the age of fourteen, having him sleep in a crib once he became too big for a cot and tying a bib round his neck when he was two inches taller than her. He also mentions that she "even tried to stop me from being clean" (2006: 90). The shocking images become more appalling once the mother begins to ignore him after meeting a man. He refers to the shift of obsession in his mother by explaining that she "swapped obsessions and all the sex she'd missed out on caught up with her" (2006: 91), as a result of which he begins to suffer from uncontrollable fits:

My arms and legs would go right out of control, my tongue did things by itself as if it belonged to someone else. It was a nightmare. Then everything went as black as hell. When I came round my mother would have gone out anyway and I'd be lying there in my own shit in that dark house. (2006: 92)

Body emissions, namely feces and urine, were originally considered as "gay matter which degrade and relieve at the same time, transforming fear into laughter" (Bakhtin 1984: 335). As asserted by Bakhtin, the comic essence of such acts has been lost in modern times. The image of body emissions in the aforementioned extract, also observable in the next two stories under consideration, portrays the cupboard man lying in his excrement as an obviously agonizing experience evoking no sense of free laughter. More repulsive images emerge in the kitchen work phase of his life with the introduction of the nasty chief cook and the growing conflicts between the two, which culminates in his being confined in the cast-iron oven and later taking revenge by castrating the "dirty-minded bastard" cook by deliberately spilling hot oil onto his lap (2006: 96). Unconventional and disgusting images intervene again when he is later

imprisoned for theft, and a prisoner would “climb on his chair during meal time and expose himself” (2006: 102). The cupboard man begins to feel less shocked as the incident reoccurs and he witnesses the scene more often. These last two instances of repulsive body imagery picture dark and humourless comedy loaded with humiliating sexuality and obscenity. Similar to the image of the pickled penis in “Solid Geometry” and the chinless man’s ejaculation in “Butterflies”, these images highlight sexuality and physical life but in a humiliating manner and with no sense of regeneration and fertility or even eroticism.

Unlike the utterly lonely figures of the two preceding stories, “Reflections of a Kept Ape” bears some similarities to “Solid Geometry” in that it does focus on a relationship, albeit a very extraordinary one. The simian lover of a best seller novelist, Sally Klee, narrates a most unusual relationship between the pet ape and his owner. After eight blissful days of partnership, as narrated by the ape, he is sorrowfully deserted as his “tirelessness began to oppress Sally Klee” and “the friction of [their] bodies brought her out in a rash” (1997: 27). What adds to the strangeness of the storyline is that the ape is very much a human-like character for his oddly intellectual strain of thought and insight into the depth of his own predicament. He displays a weird and presumptuous human-like intellect in expressing his dissatisfaction with the fact that Sally Klee was actually attracted to his “unfamiliarity” rather than his “essential self” (1997:21). Therefore, his self-deceiving arrogance and emotional restlessness sound very real and understandable despite the incredibility of the whole scenario. In this manner, a hard-to-believe storyline full of “absurdities and unrealities” is brought to the level of “the ordinary, the commonplace” (Slay 1996: 53).

The ape’s main predicament is that he cannot bring himself into accepting his playfully short-lived attraction has worn away for his mistress, who is herself stuck in an intellectual and inspirational impasse after her first bestseller novel. Thus, they both suffer; he suffers ignorance and rejection, and she is utterly miserable for being drained of any new ideas to start her second novel. They are both suffering barrenness and degeneration; he feels deserted and useless, and she is entrapped in her desperate dead end and sterility in the milieu of creative power paralleled with the ultimate futility of her sexual deviance.

This story particularly abounds in scatological representations, starting with a description of the “repulsive inorganic stench” that

asparagus “lends the urine”, which is like a prologue as it appears in the initial scene with the ape “standing, urinating, reflecting in a small overheated closet” (1997: 19). If, for Clark, “the odours of sweat, urine, and manure coalesce to confer upon the evacuatory portion of our privy lives the more objectional flavour” (1991: 117), this story is the perfect example of such unpleasant coalescence. This striking image of body emission, which basically evokes shock and nausea, is later followed by similar images related to sexuality. The ape then goes into the details of their intimate relationship and quotes her saying things such as “‘funny little black leathery penis’ and ‘your saliva tastes like weak tea’” (1997: 21). Further references are made to their sexual oddities for each other, expressed through “her playful observations on the length, colour, texture of” his penis and his “fascination with her endearingly useless toes and coyly concealed anus” (1997: 26). Later, when sensual exoticism wears out, she loses interest in him.

While she is struggling with the impasse of her creative power to start a second novel, he is desperately entangled within his split character of simian nature and human intellect. Early in the story, he describes himself as being “a little too squat to be taken seriously” and having “arms a little too long” (1997: 20). However, after all his reflections into the depth of his relationship with Sally Klee and his intellectual talks about the effect of coffee on Balzac’s writing and his humming Lilibulero “in the manner of Sterne’s Uncle Toby” (1997: 21), one may be most involuntarily taken aback near the end of the story when he reminds us about his simian nature by referring to his standing on the staircase on his “hands and feet” (1997: 34).

In the modern lifestyle of cans of food and paper plates, a controversial ape lover and his beloved once-published best-selling novelist are confined within their individualistic fears and dead ends. They are alienated and degraded, devoid of any prospective sense of regeneration. As mentioned above, Sally Klee’s creative block parallels and highlights the barrenness of her intimacy with her pet ape. Concerning both issues as observed through the ape’s account, she represents the isolation and self-centeredness of the modern individual who “has elected to rely upon himself, and [...] fails to find his chosen topic continuously creative, reliable, or even interesting” (Clark 1991: 108). In the context of deviant sexuality, no regeneration can be expected and nurtured. The ape cannot reach the weird idealism of being her love

to boost his physical and emotional life nor is there any hope for Sally Klee to thrive on her barren lifestyle either physically or intellectually. While the individualistic “good-natured voyeurism” (1997: 22) of the ape, and perhaps that of his beloved Sally Klee, drag them into their own confinements, they respectively experience physical, mental and emotional degradation bereft of the regenerative material realism of their bodies.

Sexual deviance is also the main concern of “Dead as They Come”, which both focuses on another extreme case of adult relationship and portrays an aggressive male figure like the one in “Solid Geometry”. However, unlike the cold-blooded man in “Solid Geometry”, the successful and wealthy businessman of “Dead as They Come” oddly falls in love with a mannequin at a shop window. The unnamed businessman buys it from a boutique, takes it home, calls it Helen and begins treating it as a real woman. He then enjoys a blissful period of a few months living in perfect harmony with his inanimate mistress until he suspects, in his paranoia, that she has betrayed him by starting an affair with his chauffeur. Despite his psychotic attitude, he gives the impression of being an intellectual, with a remarkably sophisticated use of language throughout the narrative (Malcolm 2002: 26). Psychic turbulences of an utterly lonely modern man are thus juxtaposed with the absurdity of his lifestyle and the vanity of his attitude towards partnership, as a result of which the dummy becomes his artistic and sexual refuge.

The businessman is so well-off that he can lavishly furnish his house with a priceless collection including a Rodin statue, a copy of Shakespeare's First Folio and other such valuable items. His inanimate partner is one more artefact added to his precious collection. An involuntary seducer, the dummy is in one sense the “aesthetic object to be animated by the beholder” (Burwick 1990: 50). After the businessman has seen her at the shop window, he speaks of “the lines of her perfect body [which] played tender counterpoint with the shifting arabesques of sartorial artifice” (1997: 60). In his longing for ideal partnership, the businessman deceives himself with the fake perfection sought in his relationship with the dummy. Early in the story, he describes himself as “a man in a hurry” (1997: 61). Living his mid-forties, he worries about aging and the weakening of his sexual prowess which he has been openly bragging about with much certitude. He is concerned that “each throb of jism” is slackening his lifespan and thus wants a woman who does not

disturb him once they “have finished coupling” (1997: 61). He has been married three times, but no mention is made of any child or any personal link whatsoever in his life. Helen, the mannequin, actually represents the “perfect object”, which is in fact “the projection of his desires” (Slay 1996: 56). As an ideal partner, she becomes the refuge for his long exhausted but never fully satisfied desires, which is revealed as he refers to his series of failed relationships in his dialogue, or rather monologue, with Helen. As a good example of a “complete Chauvinist” (Slay 1996: 56), he shows contempt for women once they act beyond their limits as sex objects.

In discussing the image of the grotesque body, some critics have mentioned that Bakhtin’s emphasis on the physical life of the body including openness, body emissions and sexuality ignores the fact that such a description of the grotesque body mostly relates to the female body as basically involved in pregnancy and childbirth.⁶ Accordingly, the female body can be denoted as the primary site of sexual life, open to intrusion and degradation. In almost all the stories discussed here, the female body is first and foremost sexually degraded through the grotesque realism of physical life. In this story, the businessman’s misogynistic attitude, directed at women in general rather than only at his inanimate mistress, can be perceived all along the storyline and can be referred to as one which assumes “the most convenient type of woman is an object” (Malcolm 2002: 35). In fact, Helen embodies female degradation in being reduced to an inanimate dummy, a sex object, to be eventually annihilated. As such, scatological images of degraded male and female sexuality emerge from the reduction and objectification of a female partner into a dummy, which further adds to the sexual degradation of the female body in the world of grotesque realism.

As already mentioned, scatological imagery of body emission can be viewed as more degrading than those of sexuality: “what society normally considers low and sordid, as rhyparographic, are more frequently excretory than sexual” (Clark 1991: 117). In this story, the initial act of love making is in sheer contrast to the last scene in that the

⁶ See for example “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque” by Margaret Miles (1997: 92-93). Ewa Kuryluk’s *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex* and Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* are also noteworthy in highlighting the importance of the female body in the grotesque.

erotic depiction of the first lovemaking is replaced by vomiting over her *corpse* (as he takes her to be dead now) and urinating all over the place in the agony of an assumed murder. Humiliation then further dominates the last scene, and similar to the images of body emission in "Conversation with a Cupboard Man" and "Reflections of a Kept Ape", we witness agonizing physical degradation with no communal sense of humour and regeneration. With his most treasured object ceasing to please him once its novelty wears away, his urge for annihilation is extended beyond the dummy to other objects, i.e. the art collection. The businessman best exemplifies the "contemporary narcissistic man" whose "crux of [...] modernity" leads him "to mate with and to marry himself" (Clark 1991: 108). He eventually fails to satisfy himself with such a substitution and "remains isolated in a world of unlovable objects" (Slay 1996: 57). The final scene and its scatological imagery reveal ultimate humiliation, alienation and annihilation.

In *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Kenneth Gross observes that the "transgressive crossing of the living and the lifeless" inevitably carries "with it a hovering sense of something deathly, something threatening" (2006: 128). In "Dead as They Come", conscious confusion between life and lifelessness or reality and idealism obviously drags the businessman into isolation from normal life at an initial stage and leads him towards annihilation afterwards. At the beginning of the story, he describes himself as too bored to socialize with real people, with whom he "always felt conversions to be an obstacle course over ditches and fences of contradiction, competition, misunderstanding and so on" (1997: 69). After he takes the dummy home, he projects his self-imposed alienation onto Helen, whom he imagines to be as keen to keep away from social life as he is himself. Rhetorically, he poses the question "why should I begin to drag her round the tedious social circuits of wealthy London" (1997: 70). His voluntary deprivation from normal relationships is then worsened by his later estrangement from Helen, which terminates in his self-assumed murder of the dummy by smothering it during a final act of intercourse. His loneliness then reaches its utmost level as he is now alienated from himself and his dream of perfection. Rather than his paranoid assumption about his betrayal by the dummy, it is the man himself who has betrayed his own body through a deviant relationship. Regarding the weirdness and fallibility of sexual deviation, the businessman epitomizes what Wilson Yates's discussion of grotesque

sexuality posits as distortion of “the goodness of our sexuality, subjecting it to guilt and shame; violence and repression” (Yates 1997: 55).

Conclusion

It is a disturbing but undeniable fact that our dynamic bodies are inevitably subject to change through the natural cycle of life involving birth, growth, reproduction and death. As an even more disturbing case, the human body may be conversely denied its share in the natural biological cycle, or in another sense become rejected, either internally or by an external force. Most often, such occurrences result from an obsession with the unchanging, the flawless, the beautiful, the perfect or even the supernatural. An arrogant denial of the grotesque realities of the material body then becomes the path to degradation, alienation and annihilation. The material body, as represented in McEwan’s short stories, is the grotesque body which Clark attributes to the degraded self-delusional contemporary man and is thus in accordance with what Bakhtin considers as the modern man’s view of physical and material life. This body is isolated from communal life and is restricted within its own imperfect, troubled, ugly or deformed confinement of the flesh. It suffers and causes suffering on a private plane. There is no sense of regeneration and positivity in the utter loneliness or barren relationships which are more or less mercilessly or realistically portrayed.

As the quintessence of Bakhtinian thought suggests, the failure to come to terms with grotesque realism and the subsequent confinement within one’s individualized life is at the core of modern man’s loneliness. As a matter of fact, the grotesque realism depicted through scatological images and degrading life experiences have not only lost the Bakhtinian essence of regeneration and free laughter but also lack that sense of “secret liberation” with which even Wolfgang Kayser believed the grotesque “to subdue the demonic aspects of the world” (Kayser 1963: 188).⁷ Accordingly, McEwan’s short stories portray modern man’s individualized fear of physical life in the context of relationship failure

⁷ Despite his indisputable inclination to view the phenomenon from a basically demonic perspective, Kayser concludes his study of the romantic and early modern grotesque with the assertion that a liberating aftermath of the annihilating confrontation exists in the literature of the grotesque.

or lack of a normal adult life, which culminates in degradation, alienation, and annihilation. Here, the final annihilation is so absolute that it allows neither consolation nor hope for a prospective reconciliation with life in its broad sense. What makes these stories shockingly grotesque is the merciless and distorted representation of human beings with a profound sense of loss and the inability to relate to others. Most of the characters in McEwan's short stories are disoriented, sometimes physically distorted, either rejected by society or self-isolated, and entangled in deviant sexuality, self-confinement, sexual molestation, intellectual dead ends or psychopathic disorder. Rather than a mere representation of grotesqueries, these stories highlight modern man's inner turbulences and emphasize the fact that "the source of the grotesque has moved inward and is found in the fears, guilts, fantasies, and aberrations of individual psychic life" (McElroy 1989: 21). The prototype of all these unnamed, isolated and dejected characters in McEwan's stories can be conceived as individualistic and arrogant, but helpless and degraded as well. They are all experiencing emotional, sensual or physical complications in their lives; they are self-confined, aggressive, deserted, ignored, or betrayed. These unnamed men are either alienated because they fail to see the realities of their dynamic bodies or are forced into degradation due to their grossness and physical or behaviouristic deformities. Having dismissed a communal perspective of life, these modern men find themselves stuck in a self-imposed or socially-restrained individualism which they are unable to live through graciously.

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