

Glimpses of Id Domination and Abreaction in Ian McEwan's *First  
Love, Last Rites*

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Abstract

*First Love, Last Rites*, a collection of short stories by Ian McEwan was published in 1975. This was the first work written by McEwan that consist eight short stories with estranged and perplexed themes. Ian McEwan received a mixed reaction of criticism as well as appreciation by the readers. The stories are usually of fifteen to twenty pages with the following titles – “Solid Geometry”, “Homemade”, “Last Day of Summer”, “Cocker at the Theatre”, “Butterflies”, “Conversation with a Cupboard Man” and “First Love, Last Rites” and “Disguise”. The author has also included a short story named after the title of his collection. There are numerous aspects in the stories where either the narrators or the protagonists talk about their suppressed emotions or fulfilled desires without being concerned about the societal norms and environment around them. This paper will analyse eight short stories of McEwan in light of the psychoanalytical terms, ‘Id Domination’ and ‘Abreaction’.

Keywords – Id, Abreaction, First Love Last Rites, Psychoanalysis, Ian McEwan

“Culturally, we are neither puritanical nor ‘liberated’. Just profoundly confused”.

-Ian McEwan (First Love, Last Rites xii)

Ian McEwan was born in 1948 in the British military town of Aldershot. He was the son of David McEwan and Rose Lilian Violet. He spent his early childhood in the British military bases in England, and then later in Singapore and Libya. From 1959 to 1966 McEwan attended a government-funded boarding school for boys in Sussex. He studied English and French at the University of Sussex from 1967 to 1970. At the university he developed a taste for literature, and wrote plays and adapted a Thomas Mann short story for television. In 1970, he completed his Master of Arts at the University of East Anglia. McEwan also read a lot of modern fiction at East Anglia, including Mailer and Nabokov. He also wrote about twenty-five short stories, several of which were included in his two volumes of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*. After East Anglia and after a trip by bus to Afghanistan in 1972, McEwan began to pursue a literary career. Ian McEwan’s oeuvre includes two volumes of short stories- *First Love, Last Rites*(1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978). Apart from the short stories, he has also written fifteen novels- *The Cement Garden* (1978), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), *The Child in Time* (1987), *The Innocent* (1989), *Black Dogs* (1992), *Enduring Love* (1997), *Amsterdam* (1998), *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012), *The Children Act* (2014), *Nutshell* (2016) and *Machines Like Me* (2019); *The Daydreamer* (1995), a collection of stories for children; two plays- *Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration* (1976), *The Imitation Game* (1980); and five screenplays, including *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983),

*Soursweet* (1988), *The Good Son* (1993), *On Chesil Beach* (2017), *The Children Act* (2017), of which the last two were adaptations of his own novels of the same name.

*First Love, Last Rites* was republished in 2015 with an Introduction in which Ian McEwan has penned down his thoughts based on his journey in the literary field. Since the time he started his writing career, he had found negative and grotesque themes quite persuasive. The author states that the themes of drugs, perversion, sex, violence and haunting voices were never new for literature. His first work received critical comments, though McEwan always clarified that he found himself unhappy with the title ‘Macabre’ given to him due his focus on morbid themes. He believed that strange things have always existed amongst us but were never talked about or written in books, and if ever written, it was subjected to heavy criticism. The intention of Ian McEwan was always moral, he emphasized on the moral aspects various times in his interviews. He puts an example to justify his point of view that his themes are not strikingly negative and dark but only repetitive, He says:

When a Jilly Cooper novel was reissued recently, the original cover of thirty years ago was altered to suit modern tastes- a man’s hand was politely raised from a woman’s buttocks to her waist. (xii)

After being in the literary field for forty five years, McEwan feels that a writer is bound to write about various innovative themes. His first collection of stories was re-published in the year 1997 by Vintage (the first edition published in 1975 by Jonathan Cape). Ian McEwan is one of those British writers whose major works have been converted into visual art.

*First Love, Last Rites* was adapted into a movie in the year 1997 with the same title whereas the stories like “Butterflies” and “Solid Geometry” have been presented in cinematic form separately. McEwan won the Somerset Maugham Award with his very first story collection, though he was criticised too by his readers.

This paper will analyse the first short story collection of McEwan in the light of the Id Domination which is considered as one of the parts of human psyche and Abreaction, a psychoanalytical process to release suppressed emotion. The existence of the Id Domination and Abreaction in all eight stories of the collection is the primary reason to select it as theme of this paper. Ian McEwan has very beautifully expressed in his first story collection the existence of the above mentioned emotions among human beings, especially in the age of adolescence. McEwan too was at the age of adolescence when he penned down this work. He believed that this was the most perplexing and exciting phase of life. Having been in a Boys' school and hostel, McEwan must have been observed the actions and reactions of this age quite closely which turned up in literary words in the form of stories.

Abreaction is a psychoanalytical method in which a person releases his/her suppressed painful experiences that are at times accompanied by emotions like weeping and crying. A person tries to bring his/her traumatic experiences into the conscious so that he/she can feel relief by releasing it. In other words, we can understand it as a form of catharsis. In this paper, abreaction is being looked not only as the release of painful experiences or suppressed emotions, but also how suppressed desires can take a violent form in reality if it is not guided or understood in a proper manner.

As per Freud, Id is one of the parts of human's psyche that depicted by an Iceberg model. Psychoanalytical theory of human psyche divides human's thought process into three parts that are id, ego and super-ego. Id is being considered as the most dominant part of human mind which is completely based on principle of pleasure. The domination of Id regulates a person to fulfil his desires/will at any cost disregard to social norms. This is the mental process that available in human being since his birth. In his 1933 book *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud defines id as the "dark, inaccessible part of our personality."

In the first story, named, “Solid Geometry”, the narrator, Ryan finds reading his great-grandfather’s diary so interesting that he starts avoiding his wife who yearns for some love from his side. The diary contained the mathematical theories and sexual ideas of his great-grandfather, and the narrator of the story reads each page with a lot of interest as if it was the holy book of his family. On the other hand, his wife has quit her job, and spends her time on tarot-cards and books on psychology, and having frequent nightmares that disturb the narrator’s (Ryan) sleep. Moreover, she becomes so jealous of his interest in reading the diary than spending time with her because Ryan prefers to read it in the privacy of the toilet. He becomes weary of her constant demands of attention, and when Ryan discovers a method jotted down by his great-grandfather about making a person disappear, he decides to test it on his wife. Pretending to be testing his great-grandfather’s formula of numerous sexual positions, he gives way to his wife’s nagging a situation of making love, and gets her into the special posture that sends her in another dimension. Ryan’s increasing interest to read his great grandfather’s diary was so intense that he overlooked his wife’s regular desires. The idea of Id-domination is reflected in Ryan’s personality when he actually stopped difference between his interest and real life and applied the advices printed in diary in his personal life.

The story titled, “Homemade” is an appropriate example of Id domination and lack of guidance in the age of adolescence. Raymond, a fifteen year old boy and his ten year old sister, Connie, are alone at home as their parents are gone out. Raymond is so much indulge and in control of his id that he just wants to become a complete adult at any cost and take his mind to the level of thinking about being not virgin. According to his idea, losing his virginity is the only thing left for him to attain full adulthood. He had already done the adult activities of smoking cigarettes, marijuana, watching horror films, got drunk, worn adult clothes, shoplifted, masturbated etc. Finding no other way to achieve this, he decides to have sex with his ten-year old sister, and pretends to play a game of “Mummies and Daddies”. He

feels proud of having attained “full manhood”, and says that even if it had been a “crippled mountain goat”, he would have been proud to have been able to say “I have fucked”.

The above lines show the domination of Id over Raymond’s mind in reality where he is least concerned about the social and familiar norms and even fucking his own sister is not considered a sin by him and He says, “I had made it into the adult world finally...” (52). The thought process of Raymond is manifested in his satisfaction of the sexual desires that was the utmost goal for him, as he was a desperate boy who just wanted to jump into the complete adulthood.

“Last Day of the Summer” is the simplest and Cocker at the Theatre is the shortest story in the collection. “Last Day of the Summer” revolves around a twelve year old narrator and various other characters like Peter, Kate, Jose, Sam, Sharon, Janet, Jenny and Alice. The story is mainly based on Jenny, the narrator’s step mother and Alice, the baby of his sister Kate. The whole narration is about various mundane activities though it actually revolves around Jenny, who is not liked by the narrator at all, mainly due to her body type of being fat. In afternoon, while the narrator, Jenny and Alice are on the small boat (as called by the narrator), the boat tips over due to Jenny’s weight. However, other than shouting out their names, he makes no efforts to save them. This shows the hidden crude disliking of the narrator towards them, which is otherwise not shown at his conscious level in the whole story. In Cocker at the Theatre, ten pairs of actors were told to role-play the act of sex on the stage. They were given specific directions, but one couple started to have sex in reality and the story concludes with the others stopping them to do that act in reality. Characters like Mr. Cleaver, Jasmin, Jack and Dale very openly talk about the autoerotic activities like masturbation etc. as if these activities are legally valid in our societal norms though to perform it in public is not valid. The couple’s act of having sex in reality displays their inner desire of copulation and complete control of Id which make them start fulfilling their will

through this pretension.

The fifth story of the collection, “Butterflies”, is an outstanding example of height of Id-domination and keeping moral values aside. This story has been adapted for cinematic presentation twice. “Butterflies” is a heart-breaking story of a man and Jane, a young girl who is nine years old. In the beginning, the narrator admires the beauty of Jane and enjoys the conversation with her but gradually his thoughts take a horrible turn and he persuades Jane to come and see some beautiful butterflies along the canal. Being allured to see the natural beauty of butterflies, and having been warned by her parents not to walk near the canal, Jane feels scared but decides to follow the narrator. After reaching at a certain dark place, quite lonely and far from the town area, he forces Jane to touch his private parts. She resists at first, but he forces her. After that, he drowns Jane into the canal at the end. The narrator’ slack of feeling and his devilish side can be seen in the following lines when he says, “My mind was clear, my body was relaxed and I was thinking of nothing... I ... eased her quietly into the canal.” (103-104)

The selfish and Id dominated attitude of Charlie to complete his desire is clearly evident when he switched from being a personality of a gentleman to a culprit and murderer. His relaxed feeling after this act shows his weak moral and social values. In the beginning, he was only appreciating the beauty of Jane; his immorality present in his subconscious immediately rose after engaging in a conversation with this beautiful girl, however, gradually the atrocious thoughts overpower him, and he succumbs to the temptation, sexually abuses her, and not wanting to be found out, murders her.

“Conversation with a Cupboard Man” is a beautiful narration of psychoanalytical theory of abreaction. The narrator shares his traumatic and painful experience of his childhood spent without father. He tells that his mother treated him as a baby even when he became an adult. He did not learn to speak till eighteen, got no schooling, had to sleep in a

crib instead of a real bed, was given only baby food, and did not know how to wash himself. He says that he had to pretend to be a baby to make her happy and this attitude of his mother crippled him from learning anything on his own. But as soon as his mother finds a man and she marries him, she throws her son out of the house and shows the least concern towards him, which not only hurts him but also fractures his life practically as well as emotionally. The sudden change in narrator's life can be sensed when he mentions the following sentences on the next morning after his mother's remarriage: "You've no idea how much a person can change in such a short time. When I saw that look I realized she was as much a stranger to me as my father". (111) In the next part, he manages to find a job at a hotel, washing dishes. But after being shut up in a hot oven by the cook, and retaliating by pouring boiling oil on him, he is unable to continue working, and resorts to petty theft. He is caught and put in prison for three months. He describes it as, "those three months were the best since I left home", and attributes it to "a deeper pleasure of feeling safe". (124) He finally gets a job at a factory, and he starts to live inside a cupboard and rarely emerges outside of it. He wishes to be one-year old again.

The seventh story, titled after the name of the collection "First Love, Last Rites" is a story of an unnamed narrator and his young lover named Sissel who wants to make most of the summers by love making. She gets a job at a canning factory, but starts to lose her individuality and becomes listless. She just lies on the bed. This story is intertwined with the image of a pregnant rat that actually disturbs and diverts the couple's mind while making love with each other by scratching at the wall. The narrator finally kills it and discovers five unborn rats inside her. The pregnant rat and its death are juxtaposed against Sissel who is also pregnant. At the end of the story, Sissel decides to give up her job at the factory, and they talk about going for a long walk.

"Disguise", the last story in the collection, focuses on the transitional period and

suppressed confusion of masculinity. The narrator, Henry, tells the reader about his strict aunt Mina who brings him up after the death of his mother. Mina, a former professional actor, used to make him wear some bizarre costumes at the dinner time, stating that it was “good training” (147). Henry too was not offended about it in the beginning. But one day when she donned him as a girl, and pretending to be a male soldier, Henry gradually becomes confused between his inner masculinity and outer pretended femininity. His real personality hits and affects him more when he falls in love with Linda. The thought of confusion takes place of abreaction and he thinks it to turn into a rebel, but stops due to various reasons.

Id domination and Abreaction are two significant concepts in psychoanalysis and plays a vital role in human beings' lives. It is at times important for us to get relief by clamping down emotions as mental peace is the ultimate happiness. Ian McEwan has portrayed the dazzling and captivating emotional turmoil of human psyche in his very first work. The way he covered human conscious and subconscious issues of all ages in his eight short stories shows his capability and promising attitude as a successful writer of British Literature. On one hand the writer has left readers shocked with rebellious actions of the characters, and on the other hand has aroused sympathetic feelings for those who become victims of this materialistic and selfish world. The conclusion of most of the stories is vague and unresolved which made the readers to think about their actions that are ruled indirectly by their subconscious thoughts. In this short story collection, layers of human personality are peeled with the tools of id domination and abreaction but much more is still left to analyse in this bewilder world of McEwan's story.

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