



Review Paper

Psychoanalysis and Relational Conflicts in Ian McEwan's *on Chesil Beach*

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Abstract

Relational conflicts as a universal problem have always been a place of debate. McEwan as a contemporary author marked this through his fiction. McEwan's characters, in general, has problems in their relationships that come to the surface now and then and affect their connections with family members and others outside the family circle. This study is an attempt to analyze Ian McEwan's On Chesil Beach from the view point of psychoanalysis, particularly, Kleinian Object Relation Theory. Preventing them from achieving maturity and having satisfactory relationship with others, these problems push the characters disastrous ends. As a branch of psychoanalysis, object relation theory emphasizes the family relationships, particularly, those between the mother and the child. Based on this theory the failure or success of the child in later life depends on the early relationships and their influences on the person throughout life. Relying on this theory, this research attempts to explore the causes of the main characters' failure in their relationships with others. To achieve this aim, the character's early life and their relationships with their mother are examined. Findings bring to the light that, main characters suffer from the lack of satisfying early relation with their caregivers.

Keywords: Object relation theory, incompatibility, dysfunctional relationships, Klein.

Introduction

Having satisfying relationships has always been human beings major desire. Individuals with dysfunctional relationships have suffered from painful experiences throughout their lives. Understanding and solving the causes of human beings incompatibility invites investigation from many scholars. Literature tries to communicate and highlight this global problem in various ways. McEwan's fiction, in general, shows his persistent concerns about human relationships. "His characters deal with conflicts in their lives in a way that makes it clear they feel helpless and unable to solve their problems"¹. In his interview with Ryan, McEwan expresses his attitudes towards relationships by maintaining that "We are social creatures, and relationships are where we live, unless our lives are spent tragically alone"². *On Chesil Beach* is not an exception. Regardless of the socio-economic background and differences³ between Edward and Florence this study only focuses on their psychological barriers for having a satisfying life. Young educated couple (Edward and Florence) fall in love and consequently get married. Florence and Edward's early lives with their mothers showed through several flash backs in the story. This study is an attempt to investigate the novel through the lens of Psychoanalysis, but with special attention to Melanie Klein's theory of object relation. Klein, one of the main object relation theorists, emphasizes the impact of early relationships on later relationships. Relying on object relation theory helps us to gain a better understanding of the ways McEwan's characters interact with each other in their thoughts, behavior, and actions.

Object Relation Theory

As Clair explains psychoanalysis investigate the relation between past and present⁴. There are many branches in psychoanalysis and Object Relation is one of them. In her article "Object Relation" Laura M. Flanagan writes that: Object relations theory is based on the belief that all people have within them an internal, often unconscious world of relationships that is different and in many ways more powerful and compelling than what is going in their external world of interactions with "real" and present people. Object relations theories focus on the interactions that individuals have with other people, on the process through which individuals internalize those interactions, and on the enormous role these internalized object relations play in psychological life⁵.

This theory focuses on interpersonal relationship with someone or something. It emphasizes the family relationships particularly that of mother and child. According to this theory, the failure or success of the child in later life depends on the early relationships and this influences the person throughout life. To put it in Clair words "Healthy development means the infant distorts relationships less by its own rage, love, and greed... As the infant takes pleasure in this whole person-the mother –the infant increases its confidence and power to perceive and relate to other whole persons in the external world"⁴. Klein in *Envy and Gratitude A Study of Unconscious Sources* concludes that in order to understand adult's personality, their childhood must be examined. She explains that the child desire's for mother's breast it's not only for food, but also "to be freed from

destructive impulses and persecutory anxiety". The child's feeling for the mother as almighty who is able to protect and "prevent all the pain and evil from internal and external forces" is also raised in the analysis of adults⁶.

As Klein (1975) asserts a major source of the infant's anxiety arises from the operation of the death instinct. It takes the form of fear of being persecuted or destroyed. The fear of this destructive impulse within the self attaches itself to an object that becomes uncontrollable and overpowering in the fantasies of the helpless infant. As the infant takes pleasure and satisfies its needs from the mother, its confidence and power to perceive and relate to other persons in the external world is increased. All other relationships are built on this basic object relationship that begins with the mother's breast. So satisfying early relationships is leading to satisfying healthy relationships in the later life⁷.

Klein's thesis is that depressive anxiety and guilt already play some part in the infant's earliest object-relation that is in his relation to his mother's breast. The death instinct that comes from the bad object or no satisfaction of child's needs causes the child's inner anxieties and persecutory fears⁷. The problem that Klein encounters is that, her analytic observations show that there is in the unconscious, a fear of annihilation of life, and she assumes that in the deepest layers of the mind there is a response to the instinct in the form of fear of annihilation of life⁷. She believes that the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety. Klein disagrees with Freud who sees the origin of guilt arising as a sequel to the Oedipus complex. Klein asserts that conflict and guilt occur at a much earlier stage of life.

Her later findings are related to two kinds of anxiety: persecutory anxiety and depressive anxiety. Klein theorized that Persecutory anxiety relates to annihilation of the ego. She did not focus much on this anxiety in the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt. The main focus of Klein is on depressive anxiety. She theorized that depressive anxiety is related to the harm done to the loved object. When the good object is injured or lost and not existing any more, the child suffers from intensified depressive feelings. This is closely bound up with guilt and is a consequence to reparation tendency⁷. Klein's concludes that "a young child's perception of external reality and external objects is perpetually influenced and coloured by his phantasies, and that this in some measure continues throughout life"⁷. This theory helps to understand the deep-seated reasons for dysfunctional relationships. So by studying the childhood of the characters, and their relationship with their parents, particularly mother, the root cause of their personality problems can be identified.

Application of the Theory to the Novel

In this section we will explore the past relationships of Edward and Florence with their mothers and try to highlight them by relating them to their present feelings of anxiety, guilt, and their inability to have intimate relationships.

Edward as a main character of the story suffers the lack of motherly affection in his early life. There are many evidences in the book which shed light on this matter. The children are dirty and the mother is unable to take care of them; we are given an example when we read that "Edward's fingernails were too long, she must mend a tear in a frock, and the twins needed a bath"⁸. When Edward was fourteen, he realized that his mother became brain damaged when he was very young. The burden of responsibility of the mother falls to the father who is however unable to fully perform the functions of the mother in caring for the children. Edward remembers when his mother tried to act as a normal mother:

She would descend among them, fussing ineffectually, scolding, or hugging them to her, kissing their faces or doing all at once, making up for the last time. It was almost felt like love; they yielded to her happily enough. But they knew from experience that the realities of the household were forbidding- the nail scissors and matching thread would not be found, and to heat water for a bath needed hours of preparation. Soon their mother would drift away, back to her own world.⁸

Florence like Edward, fails to achieve a satisfying past relationship with her mother, so she is suffering from feelings of anxiety and guilt. Evidences show that she is unable to have desirable and intimate relationship with others. Florence expresses her lack of intimacy with her family when she feels hopeless encountering sexuality: "There was no one she could have talked to. Ruth, her sister, was too young, and her mother perfectly wonderful in her way, was too intellectual, too brittle, an old fashioned bluestocking. Whenever she confronted an intimate problem, she tended to adopt the public manner of the lecture hall"⁸. She has noticed how physically distant her mother had been: "She had never kissed or embraced Florence, even when she was small. Violet had barely ever touched her daughter at all. Perhaps it was just as well. She was thin and bony, and Florence was not exactly pining for her caresses. And it was too late to start now"⁸. She realizes her difficulties to have a desirable relationship with Edward. Based on the theory the first steps in love are learned in early childhood through the process of communication between the child and child's emotionally significant objects that are persons involved in child's care⁹.

Had it taken her this long to discover that she lacked some simple mental trick that everyone else had, a mechanism so ordinary that no one ever mentioned it, an immediate sensual connection to people and events, and to her own needs and desire? All these years she had lived in isolation within herself and, strangely, from herself, never wanting or daring to look back⁸.

They often talk of their childhood although it reminds them of their parental errors: "One of their favorite topics was their childhoods, not so much the pleasures as the fog of comical misconceptions from which they emerged, and the various

parental errors and outdated practices they could now forgive”⁸. Florence’s feelings about a sexual relationship cause her lots of trouble and she feels so trapped and preoccupied how to deal with it: “Florence’s anxiety was more serious, and there were moments during the journey from Oxford when she thought she was about to draw on all her courage to speak her mind”⁸.

Conclusion

Despite Characters’ deep love toward each other they are unable to have a satisfactory relationships and their marital life ends in a disastrous circumstances. Object Relation as a branch of psychoanalysis assists us to find the reason of character’s incompatibility. Klein theorizes that the result of unsatisfactory early relationships lead to dysfunctional later relationships. Besides, if a child grows up with the fear of losing its mother and the love object s/he will come to the anxiety and fails to make reparations. This will lead to the sense of guilt. By close reading of the text and focusing on characters relationships and feelings we find lack of satisfying early relationship between the main characters and their mothers due to sickness or other factors. These unsatisfactory early relationships eventually lead to feeling of anxiety and guilt and dysfunctional relationships. Through the scenes and moments of characters frustration for having desirable relationships and intimacy, the book pictures the depth of psychological damage and its effect throughout individuals’ life. This could be generalized to the whole society.

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