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Psychoanalytical Tensions and Conflicts of Characters' Interactions in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*

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Abstract

The Cement Garden, first published in 1978, is mainly centred on four traumatized siblings whose parents die suddenly, first the father, then the mother. Encountering this bitter emotional deprivation in their relationships with their primary loved objects, their parents (particularly the mother), the children struggle with their surroundings they reside in in order to survive both physically and emotionally. The novel goes beyond the normal limits in investigating the impact of abnormal situations on human relationships. In this paper, we present a close reading of *The Cement Garden* by elucidating some of the psychoanalytical reflections of Jack, the narrator, and his siblings concentrating on the mother-child theory and interactions between them. Earlier psychoanalytical studies have acknowledged the conflicts in McEwan's works. Nevertheless, in this study, we trace the psychoanalytical origins of the psychic anxieties and tensions into childhood and also highlight a much earlier female (mother) influence. This research aims to explore these psychic anxieties and the influence of this early female figure on the siblings' relationship in the light of object relations theory of the psychoanalysis attributable to the Fairbairnian, Kleinian, and Winnicottian analytic traditions. We will show how deprivation from the establishment of an unsatisfying contact with this primary love object (mother) can wreak havoc in the characters' psyche and cause their ego to move towards establishing relations with their internal objects instead of natural, real objects in their external world.

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1. Introduction

The following discussion consists of a close and detailed reading of *The Cement Garden*. In this analytical discussion, we elucidate some of the psychoanalytical preoccupations of Jack and his siblings. We trace and map out a route to the origin of the emotional and psychic anxieties in the light of object relations theory of the psychoanalysis attributable to the Fairbairnian, Kleinian, and Winnicottian analytic traditions which will be weaved in through the discussion of this study. This involves a careful investigation of the mental conflicts ascribed to the fictional characters in *The Cement Garden*.

The Cement Garden centres on a small family in a derelict working class home concentrating on four traumatized siblings (Julie, Jack, Tom, and Sue) whose parents die suddenly, first the father, then the mother. The novel goes beyond the normal limits in investigating the impact of abnormal situations on human relationships. It is narrated from the viewpoint of the adolescent boy, Jack, who recounts the events that occurred to him and his family, especially his siblings. After their mother's death, the children decide to bury the body in a trunk, which they later seal with the cement mix left over from their father's unfinished garden project, in the basement. After their parents' death, Julie and Jack find themselves sexually attracted to each other. Sue, the younger sister, is withdrawn and given to writing in her diary and Tom, the younger brother, regresses into his infantile world and likes to be mothered. Without any parent or caregiver, the children live by their own rules in their microcosm. Assuming the role of Mother and Father to their younger brother and sister, Sue and Tom, and Jack and Julie's relationship becomes progressively sexualized.

2. Autoerotic Anxieties (Masturbation)

In *The Cement Garden*, McEwan presents Jack, the narrator, as an individual who keeps experiencing frustration and conflicts in his relationships with others. In his object relations contacts (the relationships between the child and the significant people in his life particularly the mother) and within the process of his own sexual development, a large part of Jack's life and dreams have been haunted by his "autoerotic activities", in Fairbairn's terms (1941:33), they refer to masturbation. Deep in his psyche, his consciousness has been preoccupied by guilty sensations. In his strivings to identify himself with his father, and his object relationships with him, Jack is mostly confronted with past traumas due to his father's obsessional characteristics and lack of "emotional assurance" through the communications he has established with his children and particularly with Jack. Based on Fairbairn's ideas, in the absence of such "emotional assurance" the individual's relation with his object both emotionally and sexually is marked by a great deal of psychic tensions. Failure in establishing a satisfactory relation with the objects in outer world, the child will turn to his internalized world to reactivate a safe set of contacts in his psyche with his incorporated objects (Fairbairn, 1941:39).

Jack describes his father as a "frail, irascible, obsessive man" (*The Cement Garden*, 9). In fact the father is an authoritarian who does whatever he likes. He controls the children's behaviours and is only good at making the family members afraid by ordering them around. He feels contempt for them and looks down on them. He orders 15 bags of cement without informing his family, especially his wife. He wants to fence and surround the garden with cement bags and makes a particular world for himself. Finally, the father's last moment, after a heart attack, is ironically in the wet cement patches that he himself created in his garden. His death "seemed insignificant" (*The Cement Garden*, 9) and with little or almost no emotions, his status in the family is expunged from its history. Jack describes the moment his father fell, due to a heart attack, on the newly cemented ground impassively: "I did not

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