

Hard Science, Soft Emotions: Affection Value and Ethical Judgement in Ian McEwan's "Solid Geometry"

Lin Yuzhen

English Department, School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China

Email address:

linyuzhen3420@gmail.com

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Abstract: Ian McEwan's early works brought him the "Ian Macabre" tag because they narrate many horror stories. In "Solid Geometry", for instance, a husband intoxicated in mathematics mercilessly yet "scientifically killed" his wife through his exploration planes without a surface. This paper, first of all, admits that under the cover of a hard science, the story depicts violence in a soft way. Yet more importantly, enlightened by the affective narratology of Hungarian narratologist Patrick Colm Hogan and German narratologist Vera Nünning, we hold that McEwan's purposes of narrating such a story lies far beyond depicting violence through hard science. As a matter of fact, McEwan's sympathy toward women suffering from cold violence is conveyed through the story's three-layered narrative structure, the emotional conflict revealed between each two of the layers, and the narrative tension achieved through the affective narration within this short story. Moreover, the whole narrative progression conforms to the gender ethics of the author's writing period when an increasing awareness to the sexism in family relations captured the attention of intellectuals from various fields. In this story, the male protagonist's fancy toward mathematics is an excuse for his escaping from family duties including the sexual one. On the other hand, he also avoids social responsibility for as an assumed mathematician, he contributes his research finding to no social program of development, but utilizes it as a tool of murdering. In condemning this wrong ethic selection, McEwan proves his excellence as a responsible intellectual instead of a simple "pornographer" or a "macabre".

Keywords: "Ian Macabre", "Solid Geometry", Embedded Narrative Structure, Science, Affective Values, Ethics Judgement

1. Introduction

McEwan made his debut with two short story collections—*First Love, Last Rite* [1] and *In Between the Sheets* [2], however, because of much greater achievements in novel writing, his short stories have received much less academic interests, if not none, as was pointed out by Christina Byrnes [3]: there were few studies over McEwan's early works. Now more than two decades later, the situation has got much improvement and these works' significance in earning the nickname "Ian Macabre" for the writer has never been overlooked.

Of those studies over McEwan's short story collections, David Malcolm, in illustrating the arts of McEwan at "defamiliarizing what readers take for granted" [4], gives delicate perusal to those short stories' linguistic features, thematic orientations, sexual taboos, and metafictional elements while in general, holds that "perhaps the most

shocking aspect of McEwan's short stories is, paradoxically, their lack of moral judgment" [4] and "finally one is faced with the fact that many stories in both volumes lack any moral center at all" [4]. Richard Pedot offers an intertextual reading to short stories of Kafka and McEwan, emphasizing the latter's affliction to the former in the theme of metamorphosis through a comparative exploration into the fields of "becoming-animal" and "becoming-human" displayed in the two great writers' short fiction. [5] Different from Pedot, and aiming at exploring the early work's foreshadowing effect upon McEwan's later concerns and exposing these work's values as independent work pieces, Dominic Head inks much on the shocking aspects in these works—the defeat of sensibility in "Homemade", the blind self-interest of murderous narrator of "Butterflies", the instinctive and unstoppable life process represented in "First Love, Last Rites", the destructive consequences of the objectification of human sexuality in "Pornography", the narrating and thinking

ape in "Reflections of a Kept Ape", the personal insecurities and inadequacies of the protagonist of "In Between the Sheets", and the theme of human futility in "Psychopohs". [6] Monica Cojocaru also interprets several representative short pieces of McEwan's early works while singing high praise for the brevity of them. In her opinion, the historical, metafictional and supernatural elements in McEwan's short stories foreshadow the writer's interests in his later novel, hence it is worthwhile giving much talk to those early works of him. [7] Shahbazi Mghadam and Termizi give specific attention to the grotesque body in McEwan's early works. [8]

With a quick glance, no one would fail to notice that in these academic efforts, no much ink was given to another obvious element in both McEwan's early short prose and later novels—science, while this writer's deep interest in science has not only been acknowledged by himself [9], but also fathomably probed by a lot of scholars ([10-12]). Deryn Rees-Jones, for instance, explains why McEwan uses a poem "Dover Beach" as his novel *Saturday*'s focus and suggests that it does not help to make science and poetry so clear-cut from each other. [10] The same strain of thoughts can also be found in Carbonell's "A Consilient Science and Humanities in McEwan's *Enduring Love*", which by resorting to C. P. Snow's concept of Two Cultures, stresses the existence of a Third Culture in McEwan's depiction of the protagonists in *Enduring Love*. [11] Monica Cojocaru's opinion of a Third Culture in McEwan's fiction is on the basis of an investigation into whether "contending narratives" of science and the humanities can contribute to a reconciliation and convergence into a Third Culture. [12] As can be seen prominent here, more concerns over science in McEwan's novels than in his short stories have been paid by these scholars and more interests are laid on the resilient relations between science and the humanities.

However, science plays an important role in not only McEwan's later fiction, but also his early works, as can be most evidently seen in the title itself of "Solid Geometry", the very first prose in his first short story collection *First Love, Last Rites*. With this title, it implies that McEwan, with solid knowledge of science, starts his career of fictional writing from perspective of a rational scientist more than a sentimental literary man. As the aforementioned scholars have observed in McEwan's later novels, at an early stage of writing, McEwan also endeavored to reconcile science into the humanities while tinting the picture of his fictional world with certain subtle feelings such as sympathy and discontent.

This paper puts more interest in the function of science in conveying the author's emotions and ethical judgment. A perusal on one of McEwan's earliest short fiction is to reveal whether at McEwan's very beginning career of writing, science can be hard, but emotions underlying those serene and steady scientific elements are subtle and delicate sympathies that the author holds toward women at that time can be perceived from the story's embedded narrative structure.

In order to explore these, we need first of all be equipped with an analytical tool proposed by Hungarian narratologist Patrick Colm Hogan and furthered by German narratologist

Vera Nünning. In *Affective Narratology* [13], Hogan believes that "stories too are demarcated most significantly by emotion systems" [13] of our human beings. And through considering "the nature and development of happiness prototypes and the operation of these prototypes in generating the major cross-culturally recurring genres" [13], namely sacrificial, heroic, and romantic tragicomedies, he explains how different types of emotions could be elicited from representative works of these three major genres in various cultures. Moreover, he also gives detailed analysis to subtle emotions in the minor recurring genres as attachment, lust, revenge and criminal justice, all of which could be found in the story of "Solid Geometry". But his analysis is on the basis of a set prototype of audiences, whose emotions can be evoked as certain genetic elements of the concrete stories may agree or violate their happiness prototypes. In other words, Hogan's analysis, developed in line with cognitive narratology, stresses much on the readers' prototypes and responses, so less focused would be the narration's textual properties.

To our satisfaction, this deficiency gets complemented by Vera Nünning [14] because she, while never neglecting the reader's inferences as a necessary part of imbuing meaning to a piece of literary works, does lay more emphasis on how fiction presents and evokes emotions, and thus in turn influences our cognitive process. She uses Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* to explain how emotions are presented in fiction, while we can also find similar presentation of emotions in his short story "Solid Geometry". Moreover, Nünning points out some affective potentials of certain literature, paying attention to how they could influence readers' empathy, perspective taking and persuasion. In Nünning's idea, what enlightens this study most is its evaluation on fiction's affective effect. The eight aspects mentioned by Nünning could all be snugly applied into the reading of "Solid Geometry" and in the following parts, we will such a reading through observing these eight aspects. But before this act, some specific efforts should be paid to the analysis of this story's narrative structure, who stands out not only because of its conformity to the story title, but also for the insights that it can provide for figuring out the story's ethical judgment as well as affective structure.

2. Embedded Narrative Structure

"Solid Geometry" is narrated by an unnamed male character immersed in deciphering a geometrical puzzle left in a diary by his great-grandfather, who had solved the puzzle after learning of the truth of the puzzle from a friend M. According to the great-grandfather's diary, M told the great-grandfather that a Scottish mathematician named David Hunter years ago got the geometrical conjecture substantiated at the cost of his own life.

Very obviously, the story consists of three layers of narration with the mathematician's story embedded in the grandfather's embedded in the narrator's. Their contributions to the global narrative hierarchy of the story could be portrayed into the following diagram:

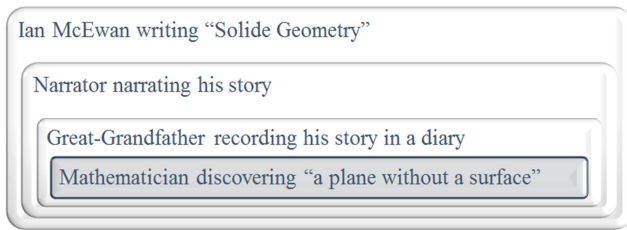


Figure 1. Embedded Narrative Structure of "Solid Geometry".

Ways of depicting the three layers of narrations are different. Words describing the mathematician read as follows, "These papers outweigh in importance the combined work of Marx and Darwin. They were entrusted to me by a young American mathematician, and they are the work of David Hunter, a mathematician too and a Scotsman. The American's surname was Goodman." [1] As the names of two protagonists in mathematician's story reveal, "Hunter" connotes the effort of exploring while "Goodman" may imply good intention and satisfying result. Considering that these names are actually the product of McEwan's writing, we may safely conclude that here McEwan favors the mathematician's performance here.

One big difference of great-grandfather's story from that of the mathematician, as one could readily notice, lies in the name of the two characters, too. One character is the narrator's "great-grandfather", also nameless because the narrator himself is unnamed. Another character is M, a letter rather than a whole name. If the purpose of great-grandfather's leaving blank here is to conceal his own guilt, then what is the intent of McEwan? What does "M" really stand for? Mystery? Missing? Or perhaps both.

At the higher narrative layer than the great-grandfather's, as we already know, the narrator's anonymous, but the female protagonist's name—Maisie—strikes readers as modern, young, healthy, spontaneous, beauty, smart, unique, optimistic and simple, though a bit stupid. This design is also purposeful. Similar practice—naming a female character—actually exists at the story layer of the narrator's great-grandfather, whose wife is known as Alice, also a beautiful name. With concrete names given to the female and the endeavoring scientists while anonymity or semi-anonymity given to the idling narrator and his also seemingly idling great-grandfather, McEwan's preference to the lesser sex and morality is demonstrated conspicuous.

The three layers of narration progress with a core issue: solving a scientific mystery—"the plane without a surface", but the way of getting the three layers interwoven help create much high narrative tension for the reads. Firstly, our narrator's routine arcs were made more complicated with two more layers of narration being added. While at first the narrator's major activity daily was reading his great-grandfather's diary, the mathematic mystery recorded in the diary stimulate him to make further exploration, during the process of which the great-grandfather's daily life also got complicated because of this mystery. On the other hand, the narrator's efforts paid to solving the mystery were so many that his relationship with his wife got affected. Such complications will drive the narrator to find solutions to both

the mathematic problem and his conjugal one.

Secondly, switching between layers of stories help the writer balance high dramatic tension with calmer scenes. This happens many times in the story. After a severe quarrel with Maisie, the narrator would immediately resort to the diary, as suggested in the following passages:

Maisie banged the table and screamed, "Damn you! Why are you always trying me out? Why don't you say something real?" And with that we both recognized we had reached the point where all our discussions led and we became bitterly silent.

Work on the diaries cannot proceed until I have cleared up the mystery surrounding M. After coming to dinner on and off for fifteen years and supplying my great-grandfather with a mass of material for his theories, M simply disappears from the pages of the diary. [1]

"Behold, gentlemen," said Hunter, holding out his empty hands towards the company, 'the plane without a surface.'

Maisie came into my room, washed now and smelling faintly of perfumed soap. She came and stood behind my chair and placed her hands on my shoulders. [1]

In the first scenario, the diary story follows immediately after one of the couple's quarrels. In the second scenario, story at the third layer—i.e., the story of the mathematician David Hunter—is interrupted by the wife's unexpected coming into the narrator's room. Skillfully, Ian McEwan lets his embedded stories flow at different layers without causing any dislikes, but rather rouses the audience's curiosity as a suspense is created when the narrator postponed to unveil the truth about "the plane without a surface".

Similar switches take place when the severest squabble broke out between the couple. While the wife slammed the door and left the house for calming down, the narrator once again resorted to the diary for soothing effect, though this process did not actually bring him serenity, but reinforced his anger and even hatred toward the wife. Being led to experience alternate situations of different tense polarity, we readers follow the ups and downs of the story.

The third effect of tension creating by subplots within "Solid Geometry" lies in their avoiding those tension-killers, i.e., this story does not overdo backstory of the narrator and keeps the end still mysterious. As a matter of fact, McEwan did not weigh too much the backstories at each layer of the stories. In the first layer, questions like what the narrator's former job was, why he had quit it, how he got the great-grandfather diary, how come his relations with Maisie got so poor are not specifically dealt with. In the second layer, how the great-grandfather developed his friendship with M is still unknown to us all. In the third layer, events after the international symposium are also unnecessary to be told. Rather the core mystery throughout the whole story—"how to create a plane without a surface"—keeps being a puzzle. What is clearly known to the readers all is that despite the good-intentions and arduous endeavors of scientists, solutions to scientific riddles can be exploited badly, resulting in deaths.

In all, the obviously three-layered narrative structure of

"Solid Geometry" indicates the author's preferences of the female and moral characters to the male and evil ones; and specifically, this type of narration helps to create a story of high narrative tension. But these are certainly not what the narrative effect that the story achieves. More importantly, the author has integrated into this structure his own affection and ethical judgement.

3. Affective Values of the Three-layers Narration

To analyze the subtle emotions underlying each layer of narrations in "Solid Geometry", we can resort to Nünning's analytical aspects. According to her, "[t]he presentation of emotions in fictional texts" can be readily identified in the explicit presentation of emotions with the work. [14] We readers of "Solid Geometry" can easily find these:

I had had little sympathy for her. [1]

I shrugged, and she began to get angry. She wanted to be disproved. [1]

... we became bitterly silent. [1]

I was angry, of course, but I smiled and said cheerfully. [1]

To restrain her I placed my right hand on her left, and, mistaking this for affection, she leaned forward and kissed under my ear. [1]

There was such a sudden ferocity in her silence that I found myself tensing like a sprinter on the starting line. [1]

All this time I tried to prevent my resentment towards Maisie filling my mind. [1]

... but the smell revived my resentment, which spread through me like the numbness. [1]

and as I looked at her my resentment merged into a familiar weariness of our marriage. I thought, why did she break the glass? Because she wanted to make love? [1]

Frankly speaking, McEwan utilizes very few emotional words in the fiction. Apart from these nine sentences that directly communicate the characters', especially the male protagonist's feelings, one can hardly find other passionate or radical expression about emotions. As a fictional work about certain science subject, "Solid Geometry" endeavors to maintain some objectiveness or detachment from the events. But we believe these sentences are sufficient to convey the work's affective elements, especially when the three frequencies of the word "resentment" is concerned. It, together with "little sympathy", "angry", refers the narrator's emotion, which are negative enough. While the only "affection" is a mistaken one by the heroine, who also becomes "angry" (twice) or even furious (once), the shared feeling of the couple is "bitterly silent". Moreover, extra attention should be paid to the word "tensing" here, which most probably refers to the narrator's physical condition rather than a certain emotion because the simile right after it—"like a sprinter on the starting line"—reads more physical than psychological.

Since most of the heroine's emotion is "angry", and the male protagonist's is "resentment", the story's tragic end of

the heroine's being murdered by the male protagonist has been rooted deep in these direct presentations of characters' emotions. Following the thought of Hogan [13], we could say that it is difficult to believe that Maisie merited death for sexual desire or lust. However, it is not difficult to understand what benefit the unnamed male protagonist gain could gain from his act of vanishing his wife into an echo—individual proud of achieving success in scientific researches. Moreover, it also turns less difficult to understand the purpose of the author's arranging the protagonist doing that—to implicitly convey his ethical judgment which would arouse the audience's reflection at whether rationality always surpasses passions, and women sentiments should always be ignored.

Nünning also lists the following eight reasons account for the affective value of fiction: Firstly, the reading process of immersion and transportation makes readers "temporarily forget their immediate surrounding and their own real-life concerns, goals, and aims" [14]. Secondly, immersed reading "fulfils conditions which, ... offers the chance to learn and to change one's attitudes and dispositions" [14]. Thirdly, "the feelings evoked by fictional narratives are relatively intense and pure" [14]. Fourthly, "fiction can enable readers to make experiences which are beyond their reach in ordinary life" [14]. Fifthly, "reading fiction encourages perspective taking" [14]. Sixthly, fictional stories "require a balanced and complex emotional response" [14]. Seventhly, "fictional stories often highlight ... breaches of the canonical expectations, and such breaches with regard to culturally condoned ways of dealing with emotions may be helpful in a variety of ways" [14]. Eighthly, readers' experiences of "the characters' emotions, their origins, and the way they are regulated" "can be of crucial importance as far as the understanding of emotions is concerned" [14].

This section will be devoted to applying each of these eight aspects into a close reading to the text of "Solid Geometry" to see if they can be elaborately supported by its textual details.

- 1) "Solid Geometry" provides an experience of family relations, in which the husband treats his wife coldly, ignoring all her requests for close contact, either bodily or spiritually. This problem may exist in our common people's life, too, but when reading the novel, readers does not feel any threat to their life, but rather know the feelings, thoughts and responses (or consequences) they would encounter. Domestic cold violence may result in death of one part. That is what has happened many times in reality, while the specialness of this fiction's experience lies at the specific way of committing a murder. It looms science-based and rational, but is it hence forgivable? Any sensible reader would give an answer of their own to this.
- 2) Willingly and affectively reading "Solid Geometry" would promote female readers to be no as furious and restless as Maisie, be cautious of a man too rational, too subject, to obstinate and too concentrative to care for women's subtle emotions.
- 3) Feelings depicted in "Solid Geometry" are intense and pure. Maisie's anger and the male protagonist's

resentment is so real that female readers couldn't help feeling sympathetic with her while male readers would also criticize the protagonist.

- 4) "Solid Geometry" extends common readers' "scope of experiences and enrich their knowledge about the way (unfamiliar) human minds work" [14]. Not everyone will have a wife like Maisie, or a husband like the protagonist. Their relations sound so extreme that common people expecting to live a normal life would avoid behaving in their ways. In addition, "Solid Geometry" "allow [s] readers to become aware of, observe, and share nuances of the feelings of narrators and characters" [14]. Those who got their best memories broken by their ruthless wife cannot help sharing the protagonist's resentment immediately, while women reading "[t]o restrain her I placed my right hand on her left, and, mistaking this for affection, she leaned forward and kissed under my ear" [1] would also say "yes" to Maisie's anger or ferocity.

"Solid Geometry" shed light on feelings "which, in daily life, remain obscure." (47) This can be prominently seen in the protagonist's final decision of punishing his wife through killing her in a scientific way. The moment he made this decision, what he demonstrate before Maisie, his wife, was not sudden loss of temper and acts immediately taken, but rather demonstrate an attitude of forgiving and laughed. Another obscure feeling that merits some analysis in this work should be the protagonist's phallicism, a topic that scholars [8] interested in the pornographic elements of McEwan's early work had done plenty of researches.

- 5) "[R]eading fiction encourages perspective taking" (48), particularly the "imagine-other" perspective. In "Solid Geometry", though the author does not make great efforts at showing his own support to either of the two protagonists, we could figure out his stance here from his assigning a less radical affection to the female one, whereas attributing a much in-depth sentiment to the male. To be more exact, the author offers more of his tenderness or softness to the woman, and hence his feminist or at least women-sympathetic perspective can be imagined by us readers.
- 6) Readers give "a balanced and complex emotional response" (48) to the conflicts between the respective emotions of the two protagonists in "Solid Geometry". When Maisie seeks in vain the intimate sexual affection from her husband, we will sense her wretchedness; but when Maisie strikes her husband with her high-heeled shoes for his refusing to spare the restroom immediately, and he does not say any abusive words toward her but keeps silent instead, we would in our heart criticize Maisie for her totally unprovoked anger. Why could not Maisie be tolerant enough as to feel gratitude for the husband, who at least makes the room finally? Such a criticism may not end until the story's end when Maisie gets killed, because only then would we the audience find excuse for Maisie sudden burst of temper: it must

be because of the special case of her body—menstrual period—that has rendered her so. Thus the readers' emotional responses to the various types of emotional conflicts in the story guides them to modulate and modify their empathies at times. Through this process of modulation and modification, the readers' cognitive abilities may get enhanced and therefore they become capable to deal this particular situation in their own lives.

- 7) "[C]omplex fictional stories often highlight ... breaches of the canonical expectations" (48). "Solid Geometry" must be a complex fictional story for it contains a three-layer embedded narrative structure, in which the most inner narration deals with the canonical expectation about the duty of a scientist, especially a mathematician; the second layer narration presents a not so common mathematician, who being amateur, devotes his findings to make his friend missing, perhaps unintentionally; while in the last layer narration, readers' expectations to one who makes scientific findings totally in breach of a normal scientist, because this researcher, [let's for the moment regard him so], the protagonist misuses his finding as a tool for murdering. Such progressive breaches to the normal expectations for a scientist will promote readers to conform to the rules of scientific researches, i.e., making the researches being conducive to the development of a society.
- 8) The concrete descriptions on Maisie and her husband's domestic life, though aiming at arousing readers' awareness of performing mutual tolerance, does not present this knowledge in abstract ways, but rather shows characters' feelings and emotions directly, making such knowledge textually and specifically understandable. Hence the readers get taught through "Solid Geometry" that family peace and concordance should be based on mutual care and tolerance; and scientists (or even those interested in science and coincidentally found some truth) should devote their findings to the progress of the subject, the society, or the whole human being.

With no exception, the eight reasons for the affective value of a fictional story could find their corresponding application in "Solid Geometry". In this sense, it would not be an exaggeration to ascertain that this work of Ian McEwan is full of affection, and the author's empathy can be handily caught when we give a deep exploration to things underlying the seemingly emotionless discourse.

4. Ethical Judgment Underlying "Solid Geometry"

Ethical environment of each of the three layers of narration should be taken into consideration when we are to seek out how in this work the author presents his ethical judgement, an element longed considered missing in Ian McEwan's early works by scholars on him. The following diagram displays the

occasions of each embedded stories with "Solid Geometry".

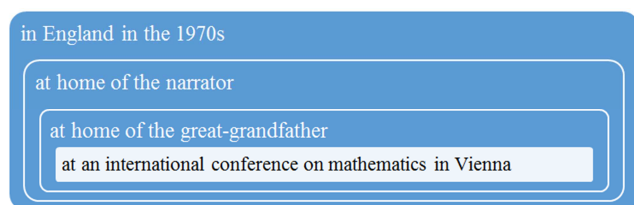


Figure 2. Occasion of each embedded story in "Solid Geometry".

Normally each ethical environment conforming to the above occasions could be judged as follows: the international conference on mathematics should be of a situation when every participant aims at contributing their brilliant finding in science and technology; the home of the great-grandfather provides him room to entertain his friend M; the narrator's home is expected to witness his harmonious relations with his wife Maisie; while England in the 1970s should be undergoing a radical progress of feminist thoughts. As the narrator's, the great-grandfather's and the mathematician's stories are embedded in McEwan's writings, we should be aware that it is McEwan that makes ethical judgements on the three embedded stories while it is us the readers that are judging McEwan's ethical contributions.

Layer by layer, we see that McEwan judges his characters' performances, rather implicitly. Firstly, he must be judging the scientific conference as positive because as the text indicates, though arguments and disagreements, or even denunciation, exist there, trust, assistance (offered by Goodman) and even sacrifice co-exist. David Hunter disappeared (in other words, sacrificed himself) before an audience of scientists and scholars in order to prove his theory. This solid or absolute way to pursuing a scientific truth should be what the author evaluates high despite that the fact that he gives no passionate or sensual descriptions to the acts of Hunter (the scientific explorer), but just records them like a camera.

Secondly, on the friendship of great-grandfather and M, McEwan's judgement is also implicit enough for there are no personal comments, only faithful recordings:

Undoubtedly encouraged by my great-grandfather, he had taken part that evening in a scientific experiment, probably in a spirit of great scepticism. For here my great-grandfather had drawn a series of small sketches illustrating what at first glance looked like yoga positions. Clearly they were the secret of Hunter's disappearing act. [1]

Although these words are few enough to supply a clear indication of McEwan's judgement on the morality of this issue, considering that "M simply disappears from the pages of the diary", and "[e]ven as a young man my great-grandfather preferred to theorize by the fireside; all he needed were the materials M supplied" while "M was in the world in a way which my great-grandfather, who left Melton Mowbray only once in his lifetime, to visit Nottingham, was not" [1], we are impressed that in the friendship between my great-grandfather and M, it is M who got sacrificed.

But up to this layer, McEwan's moral judgement is still not

so obvious, as the purposes of the two layer's characters are logically or morally understandable and acceptable—either for pursuing scientific truth or out of great skepticism. However, when the layer of the narrator's story is taken into consideration, readers would readily catch the emotional word "resentment" with its thrice appearance and logically infer that that later disappearance of the narrator's wife Maisie is a result of intentional crime—murdering. Expressions like "When we came home Maisie took a leisurely hot bath while I browsed in my study, checking on a few details" [1] confirm our judgement on the narrator's intentionality. Though he has not bluntly announced that the narrator does wrong, McEwan delivers his disagreement to the narrator's action through presenting subtle emotions before the audience.

This kind of disagreement actually agrees to McEwan's continual favor done to women. Zalewski [15] mentions this in his close observation to the English writer's art of unease, "McEwan reported that 'every young woman we approached . . . was eager and grateful to take a book,' whereas the men 'could not be persuaded. 'Nah, nah. Not for me. Thanks, mate, but no.' The researcher's conclusion: 'When women stop reading, the novel will be dead.'" In the same essay, when Zalewski mentions McEwan's disdain for Islamism, "lack of freedom for women" is just a reason among others. Such emphasis on women's freedom and rights also gets confirmed by Ian McEwan's friend Martin Amis, "Ian was saying things in the mid-seventies like the immediate future of the novel was to deal with the emancipation of women." [15]. As a matter of fact, McEwan not only says so, but he also writes with the same thoughts. This can be delicately perceived from his "Solid Geometry", where women—Maisie and Alice—have got concrete names while two major features of the story—the narrator and his great-grandfather—are nameless, and "never had a job, and never published a book" [1]. Though the quotation here in the text itself refers to the great-grandfather, readers can with ease figure out that the narrator is of same situation, because at least his great-grandfather "as an amateur mathematician" did experiments on horseshits to substantiate his certain hypothesis and "produced mathematical evidence that the maximum number of positions cannot exceed the prime number seventeen" while the narrator has "no mathematical whimsies or sexual theories to note down". The author's preference to women cannot be ignored at hand.

In this story, an unnamed male murdered a beautifully-connoted female, who in the end "was gone... and not gone. ... and all that remained was the echo of her question above the deep - blue sheets" [1]. This end is rather analogical. Maisie turns into an "echo", or "a plane without a surface". But were most women in the patriarchal not made the echoes of male's thoughts? The existence of women was only to reflect men, and hence weren't they the "plane without a surface"? So instead of simply presenting us a story full of pornographic descriptions, sexual desires, revenge and crime, McEwan shows such thematic concerns over science, sacrifice, and feminism. In a subtle rather than explicit manner, he sympathizes women's conditions. While discourses within the

passage presents McEwan as “macabre”, ethical judgments he made over each layer of his narration render him as a responsible writer with delicate feelings toward social issues and human progresses.

When McEwan said “I’m just criticizing illiberality” (see [15]), he meant it and means it. His ethical judgement over illiberality, a trait featuring both the narrator and his great-grandfather in “Solid Geometry”. We see that when the narrator’s wife tells him of her nightmare, his response was not comforting her with careful listening and tender concerns, but rather ignoring her feeling and curbing her desire of pouring out the negative moods. The narrator’s purposeful ignorance to his wife’s true feelings displays his trait of hardheartedness. Likewise, his great-grandfather, “who left Melton Mowbray only once in his lifetime, to visit Nottingham” and who “preferred to theorize by the fireside” [1] also displays illiberality in these acts. These objective records of men’s illiberality automatically elicit readers to reflect the author’s ethical stance and safely conclude that they should be criticized.

5. Conclusion

“All novelists are scholars of human behavior, but Ian McEwan pursues the matter with more scientific rigor than the job strictly requires.” [15] Such a reading can be made not only to McEwan’s later novels, but also to his early works—short stories. Focusing on only one of them—the three-layer embedded narration of “Solid Geometry”, we have found that in McEwan’s efforts of collocating science with literature, he makes science not so hard and solid, but literature not so illusionary because he incorporates certain subtle emotions to the characters, especially the female ones. On the other hand, underlying his personally uninvolved telling of how the husband soberly vanishes his wife, the author presents his criticism over the wrong ethical choice of the husband, a scientific aficionado, who abuses his scientific findings and becomes a murder.

All in all, although dubbed as “Ian macabre”, Ian McEwan does boast much responsibility as a scientist as well as a skillful writer. His affections paid to the victim and his critical attitude toward the wrong ethical choice have all proved how successful he had been in the very early period of his writing career. Such a conclusion can be safely drawn that skillfully, affectionately and ethically McEwan merits all qualities we can attach to a literary mogul, even when he was still young.

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