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## Passionate reading of a child character and its consequences in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*

Pasja czytania u dziecka i jego konsekwencje  
w *Betonowym ogrodzie* Iana McEwana

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This chapter discusses the child characters in fiction and investigates the influences of reading of the young siblings. British author Ian McEwan's first novel *The Cement Garden* published in 1978 has been chosen because it provides an opportunity to evaluate fictional child character's reading habits and its influences on them. Since reading habits of fictional characters have been a debateable subject among the scholars, they have been portrayed as such passionate, frightened readers. And the outcomes of these reading habits affected their social lives in different ways. In this sense, this chapter scrutinises the sibling(s) act of reading as a self-defense mechanism against the adult-dominant social life in fiction.

The author of the book *Theories of reading: books, bodies, and bibliomania*, Karin Littau, in one of the chapters includes the discussion anatomy of reading. She reveals that a book is not only a set of meanings (in her words "conveyor of meaning"), but also it is a *manufactured artifact* (2006, p. 1). One is material, the other one is ideational. *The book you hold in your hands is not one but two books* (Ibidem). Littau starts her discussion from the condition of reading. She asserts that even the position of our body and the form of the book we hold have an important function at the act of reading and perceiving what we read. She says:

*It is possible to see how material production impinges on meaning production. When we read we interpret semantic content and, insofar as poetic or narrative structure gives form to content, we enter into a deeper-layered meanings. Since a text is also, however, an embodied material object, this object's materiality and physical organization conditions our readings* (2006, p. 2).

According to her, reading habit changed from ages to ages. For instance, reading aloud is much more older habit than reading silently: *as a practice of reading [aloud] has a much longer history than reading silently, with our eyes only, which is the mode of reading most familiar to us in modern times* (Ibidem, p. 2). As McEwan's child characters read the fiction silently, their act of readings and its consequences lead us to the contemplation of the contemporary times as the novel reveals a dystopian world and the destiny of the orphaned child characters in it.

Reading as an activity has much importance in their lives especially in the oldest brother Jack's juvenile experiences. Yet before criticising the fictional characters, it is essential to clarify Littau's theory of reading in general. She suggests that reading too much is dangerous:

*When we examine the history of print culture, it becomes clear that the full effects of print were only felt several centuries after its invention. Once calibrated, mechanized, and more efficiently industrialized, the printing press had produced so many books, pamphlets, magazines, and other paper trails in the course of the eighteenth century that*

*Immanuel Kant complained of 'parchment-headed' men and women who, because they read so much, had lost the capacity to think for themselves* (2006, p. 4).

Although *it is universally acknowledged truth* that reading a lot is good to increase our intellectual capacity, Littau surprises us by declaring that reading a lot sometimes may cause an illness or symbolises an obsessive and consuming habit. De Bolla, in this sense, explains the term bibliomania:

*One form this sickness takes is the so-called reading-fever. It is an addiction associated with excessive and obsessive reading which hurries readers from one novel to the next. Its social manifestations include general idleness, workshyness, and lofty notions of romance. In the course of the nineteenth century its effects had become so alarming and widespread that it was construed as a disease to be treated by medicine – 'the novel reading disease' (Littau K. 2006, p. 5).*

This alienation and lack of introspection occur through the sickness called bibliomania. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is *generally regarded as the first modern novel, already contains a critique of the novel by featuring a character whose excesses of reading have flung him into madness whereby he mistakes fiction for reality* (Ibidem).

For some people, reading is accepted as an educational project, for others it is the opposite. While reading teaches some (such as *Oliver Twist*) how to become criminals, or to become human such as the Monster in *Frankenstein*, it may derive some insane like Don Quixote (Ibidem, p. 65). Considering all these reading-fevers of the fictional characters, the most appropriate question is under what circumstances does a character read a book, after asking what he or she is reading? Depending on the social and cultural experiences of the characters, their approaches to the text may differ.

Besides, for our concern, not only the reading habit but also the relationship between the children and adults is an important issue for our subject. In this sense, it is necessary to reveal the interaction between a fiction and children and adults' responses or reactions to this communication. Lloyd de Mause, the editor of *The History of Childhood* refers to three ways that adults can respond to children: the projective reaction, the reversal reaction, and the emphatic reaction. Mause's theory of reactions is significant since it points out the flexibility and versatility of adult treatments toward children. In the projective reaction, adults use children as a *vehicle for the projection of their own unconscious, that is the children become the repository of all the adults' unacknowledged bad feelings and fears about themselves* (1974, p. 8). Mause asserts that this projective reaction lies behind the idea of original sin. Moreover, he states that *this led to practices such as infanticide and abandonment and later to various actions aimed at suppressing the evil within the*

*child* (Ibidem). The physical forms of this unconscious are revealed in such practices as *the swaddling of babies, leading strings to restrain infants, and severe beatings for older children* (Ibidem). This overflow of powerful and physical restraint, Mause says, *was often accompanied and later replaced by mental restraints achieved through terrorising children with stories of ghost-like figures, corpses and witches* (Ibidem). This projective reaction of Mause clearly indicates the adult-authority over the children. Adults can, in this sense, easily exploit children with the thematic impositions of their own readings.

In the reversal reaction, adults use children as a substitute for an adult figure important in their own childhood, that is the parent becomes a child, and the child becomes a parent. Thus, parents look for love from their children (Ibidem, p. 9). According to Mause, the child satisfies parental needs and is seen as a source of love, protection and nourishment (Ibidem). Here the child is misused to fulfil the physical, emotional, sexual and economic needs of the parents. Foremost amongst these excesses are sexual abuse and child labour. An additional and interesting consequence of this interaction was infant deaths following overlaying.

The last one is the empathic reaction. Here adults empathise with children's needs, and attempt to satisfy them (Mause L. 1974, p. 9). In this reaction, the adult is *able to regress to the level of a child's need, correctly identify it and without imposing adult projections, satisfy it* (Ibidem, p. 10). The first two reactions – the projective and the reversal, are *adult-centered with the child existing as either an extension of the adult or to provide for the needs of the adult* (Ibidem). But in the empathic reaction the focus of attention shifts from the adult to the child.

Children, who were seen as evil or a mixture of projective and reversal, were both bad and loving. It is the empathic reaction that played a significant role in showing respect to children as individuals. The first two reactions do not indicate lack of love for their children by historical parents but rather an inability to accept the child as an individual separate from themselves. Children were viewed as bad and loving, hated and loved, rewarded and punished (Ibidem). Classification of childhood is truly a debateable point through history since childhood is a term that inevitably needs to be defined by adults. For adults, *childhood* is a representation of the experiences of the past as far as our memory allows. As Tim Morris says, it is *a form of Otherness, possibly its archetypal form* (2000, p. 9).

Yet, this chapter specifically focuses on the influence of obsessive and passionate reading(s) of child character(s) in Ewan's novel *The Cement Garden*. Therefore, it scrutinizes how reading habits of the children are regarded as their self-defence mechanism against the authority of the adults, as well as it may also underline that obsessive readings may cause disillusionment and mislead the children through catastrophic events. In this sense, Mause's theories will not be taken into consideration since they indicate the adult capacity to frighten, manipulate the children

through act of reading. But it is expected for the reader to keep in mind how adult authority over children can have a potential to treat the children in a violent way as Mause's projective reaction reveals that adults terrorise *children with stories of ghost-like figures, corpses and witches* (1974, p. 8).

To summarise the novel *The Cement Garden*, the siblings have to survive in their house after their mother and father die. Since they do not want to go to an orphanage, they decide to bury their mother under the basement into the cement tank. Besides, the oldest brother and the sister have incest relationship as representing a 'nuclear family'. Yet as the house gradually turns out to be a gothic atmosphere where they do not tidy up and clean, the changing point starts with the oldest brother Jack's passionately starting to read comics given by his sister to him as a birthday present. As Jack reads the book, he admires the captain (a father figure in the comics) which is just opposite character of Jack's tyrannical father.

McEwan's child character Jack who is in his juvenile age feels free after his father's and mother's death. The father portrays a tyrant authority over the children. The mother is passively helpless to react and protect the children against the father.

[The father] *was strict with Tom, always going on at him in a needling sort of way. He used Mother against Tom much as he used his pipe against her. 'Don't talk to your mother like that', or 'Sit up straight when your mother is talking to you.' She took all this in silence. If Father then left the room she would smile briefly at Tom or tidy his hair with her fingers* (McEwan I. 1994, p. 13).

The mother's smiling and tidying Tom's hair are passive intentions to conciliate Tom. After the father's coercion Tom still feels frightened and does not relax after the mother's frail conciliation. The father's brutal treatments towards his children cause lack of communication between the father and the children. They do not have an ideal father figure.

The siblings, in such an isolated and parentless situation try to hide themselves not to go to an orphanage. They inevitably create a nuclear family. Yet Jack, who is juvenile young boy, represents a character who does not care much about the rules, norms of the house. As Jack says:

[...] *at some point during the same period my spots were so thoroughly established across my face that I abandoned all the rituals of personal hygiene. I no longer washed my face or hair or cut my nails or took baths. I gave up brushing my teeth. In her quiet way my mother reproved me continuously, but I now felt proudly beyond her control* (Ibidem, p. 21).

Jack's irresponsibility continues till his sister gives him a book as a present for his birthday. Change in Jack starts with this book. The narrator Jack declares that *Sue gave me a science fiction novel. On its cover a great, tentacled monster was engulfing a space ship and beyond the sky was black, pierced by bright stars* (Ibidem, p. 35).

The book Sue gives him has an important function. Because through his second reading he starts to realise the things that he hasn't realised before. The book he reads is a science fiction. And he regularly reads it. It is the first novel he reads:

*Minute life-bearing spores drifting in clouds across galaxies had been touched by special rays from a dying sun and had hatched into a colossal monster who fed off X-rays and who was now terrorising regular space traffic between Earth and Mars. It was Commander Hunt's task not only to destroy this beast but to dispose of its gigantic corpse. 'To allow it to drift for ever through space', explained one scientist to Hunt at one of their many briefings, 'would not only create a collision hazard, but who knows what other cosmic rays might do to its rotten bulk? Who knows what other monstrous mutation might emerge from this carcass?'* (Ibidem, p. 36).

This book is the only thing which has the function of leading and developing Jack. Since the book is not given by an adult but by his peer, the book does not stand as a threat by an adult unlike Mause's projective reaction. Jack experiences what the Commander Hunt experiences at a certain point. For instance, like Commander Hunt, he has to dispose his mother's corpse. Besides, in his second reading the book has a leading function for him in which he will be realizing the tidiness of Commander Hunt's work place. In addition, he prefers to jump into this fascinating book instead of masturbating whenever he finds time. This science fiction is an effective case which takes Jack into the outside world. It reminds him of another way of life, another way of living and existence. In other words, it heals his selfishness. Before the book, he has been only interested in his desires and self satisfaction but with the book his tendency changes from selfishness to a more wide aspect of the world around him. Ironically the book educates him about his personality and his experiences. In this sense, the narrative of the book alludes to the educational and entertaining capacity of art through the function of this fantastic book. And ironically enough the book can reach the inside of a child that the parent fails to gain. Accordingly, we may say that the children create their own remedy without any help from adults. Sue, in this sense, represents a mentor role among the siblings. She leads Jack with her notes about him where he realises himself. Her diary is a mirror for Jack. Besides, the book she gives him has also a healing function for Jack. The siblings who are under an irreversible situation, in a way can solve their own problem. Jack explains how he is affected by the book he reads: *three weeks after Mother died I began to*

reread the book Sue had given me for my birthday (Ibidem, p. 82). This point of change is a rebirth for his identity:

*I was surprised how much I had missed. I never noticed how particular Commander Hunt was about keeping the ship clean and tidy, especially on the really long journeys through space. Each day, the old earth day, he climbed down a stainless steel ladder and inspected the mess room. Cigarette ends, plastic cutlery, old magazines, coffee cups and spilt coffee hung untidily about the room. 'Now that we do not have gravity to keep things in their place', Commander Hunt told the computer technicians who were new to space travel, 'we must make an extra effort to be neat'. And during the long hours when there were no urgent decisions to be taken, Commander Hunt passed the time 'reading and rereading the masterpieces of world literature, and writing down his thoughts in a massive steel-bound journal while Cosmo, his faithful hound, dozed at his feet'. Commander Hunt's spaceship sped across the universe at onehundredth the speed of light in search of the source of energy that had transformed the spores into a monster. I wondered if he would have cared about the state of the mess room, or about world literature, if the ship had remained perfectly still, fixed in outer space. As soon as I had finished the book I took it downstairs to give to Julie or Sue. I wanted someone else to read it (Ibidem, p. 82-83).*

His identifying himself with the protagonist of the book helps him to socialise as well. He wants to share his feelings with someone else. At the beginning of the novel while he prefers to be alone, now he is in need of sharing his emotions. Their enthusiasm comes back with his fresh effort. He suggests to 'clean up the kitchen' (Ibidem, p. 85). He finds the role model, a fictional father figure in the book that he cannot find in the relationship with his father. Jack finds the positive father figure that he needs in Commander Hunt. And they began *to sweep up the rubbish and stuff it into cardboard boxes which (they) carried out to the dustbins* (Ibidem, p. 82).

A child character can find his own way in a fictional text rather than the real father figure who represents the authority of the family, government and the other social entities which are always a burden on child character for their own benefit. In Jack's case, his passionate readings help him to cope up his juvenile age. Not his father's authoritative and didactive warnings but the fictional father figure Commander Hunt's life experiences influence him in a better way.

He is so passionately concentrated on his reading that *when Julie came into [his] room and told [him] that Mother was not getting up, and that [they] were having the cake round her bedside, [he] was so engrossed that [he] stared at [his sister] without comprehension* (Ibidem, p. 36). As this scene indicates his hypnotised-like concentration on the book, he cannot control himself while reading and tries to indentify himself as one of the characters in the fiction he reads:



*In the afternoon Tom and Sue carried the cake and cups upstairs. I locked myself in the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. I was not the kind Commander Hunt would have had on board his space ship. I was trying to grow a beard to conceal my skin, yet each of the sparse hairs led the eye like a pointing finger to the spot at its base. I filled the wash-basin with hot water and leaned with my immersed palms taking my weight against the bottom of the sink. I often passed half an hour this way, inclined towards the mirror, my hands and instead, this time about Commander Hunt. When the water was no longer hot I dried my hands and took from my pocket the little leather pouch. I cut my fingernails and combed my lank brown hair, experimenting with different styles and deciding at last to celebrate my birthday with a centre parting (Ibidem, p. 37).*

While many adult characters' reading habits have been portrayed as pathological problems, the child characters of McEwan represent just the opposite. Jack's passionate reading habit wakes and matures him. Unlike Littau's examples of bibliomania characters in fiction such as Madame Bovary, Jack and his younger sister Sue can overcome the difficulties of parentless life with the books. Littau underlines that Emma in Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary is busy reading novels, wicked books' suffers, but also slowly poisons her, a death only hastened when she takes arsenic at the end of the novel*. Besides, Emma not only reads novels and has no particular preference for any specific genre, as Catherine did [in Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*] her reading hunger is so ferocious and uncontrolled that she seemingly reads everything in print, from the Bible, advertisements, reviews of dinner parties and 'bizarre books, full of orgiastic set-pieces' bloodthirsty adventure (Littau K. 2006, p. 72).

Jack was not the only child character who created his own self-defence mechanism against the irresponsibility and tyrant actions of the parent. His younger sister Sue too has her own 'shelter' if we may say, constructed by her books in her room. *The floor of her bedroom was covered with books, some of them open and placed face downwards. Many of them were from the library* (McEwan I. 1994, p. 96). Sue, being a much more obsessive reader than Jack, does not engross in the fictions she reads but her own writings in her diary. She creates her own fictional world where she can console herself. In her diary we witness how she feels about her mother's death and how Jack behaves before his reading adventure:

*She took the book from under her pillow, opened it and looked for a page. I stopped laughing and waited. 'August the ninth... You've been dead nineteen days. No one mentioned you today'. She paused and her eyes ran down several lines. 'Jack was in a horrible mood. He hurt Tom on the stairs for making a noise. He made a great scratch across his head and there was quite a lot of blood. At lunch we mixed together two tins of soup. Jack did not talk to anyone. He has not changed his clothes since you died. He does not wash*



*his hands or anything and he smells horrible. We hate it when he touches a loaf of bread. You can't say anything to him in case he hits you. He's always about to hit someone, but Julie knows how to deal with him...' Sue paused, and seemed about to go on, but changed her mind and snapped the book shut (Ibidem, p. 96-97).*

Not only the fiction of Commander Hunt but also Sue's diary influenced him. A written text which is about himself makes him realise his corrupted situation and weariness.

*Not long after Sue read to me from her diary I began to notice a smell on my hands. It was sweet and faintly rotten and was more on the fingers than the palms, or perhaps even between the fingers. It was a smell that reminded me of the meat we had thrown out. I stopped masturbating. I did not feel like it anyway. After I washed my hands they smelled only of soap, but if I turned my head away and moved one hand quickly in front of my nose, the bad smell was just there, beneath the perfume of the soap. I took long baths in the middle of the afternoon and lay perfectly still without a thought till the water was cold. I cut my nails, washed my hair and found clean clothes (Ibidem, p. 109).*

Although Jack's and Sue's readings are passionate readings they use this activity as a medium to overcome their agony and pain. Since they lost their parents they are bounded to imaginary fictional world in the books and the diary. Reading is an escape from reality for them. But on the other hand, the action of reading heals them in a better way. Yet this does not mean that placing yourself in the fictitious world will always lead the characters in a better situation.

When we look at the big picture in the novel we see that reading passionately and obsessively can temporarily help them. Jack's reading only supports him in terms of tidiness and physical hygiene. However, after the parents' death there is no any other place to go. At the end of the novel, the older sister Julie's boyfriend understands that they buried their mother under the basement and brings the police.

Although the consequences of reading habits of the siblings are not catastrophic, they are traumatic in a sense. While Littau explains the danger of reading she states Nietzsche's definition *the pathological element in rapture* which constitutes the physiological danger of art (2006, p. 75). According to Littau, *reading then is dangerous because it is ingested by the body before it is chewed over by the mind, a danger which is linked to passive consumption, namely, over-identification, and the concomitant loss of self (Ibidem).*

At the beginning, it seems that the siblings can overcome the difficulties among themselves through sharing books and diaries. Their passionate and obsessive readings helped them in the short-run, in the temporary level. Yet, their passive

consumption prevented them to see the outside. They are imprisoned in their home but they could find a salvation to protect their nuclear family. While reading fulfils the lack of parent, it also caused them to keep in this abandoned house. They are so obsessed on reading but not on educating themselves that after the deaths of their father and mother, they give up going to the school.

This chapter, so far, aimed to discuss how the act of reading affects siblings in fiction. There is no doubt that socio-cultural conditions are the predominant items to evaluate. Yet, in McEwan's novel we see how parentless siblings try to find a way to consolidate themselves through the help of reading fiction. Although their metaphorically abandoned house seems as a grave for them, they try to regenerate their corrupted lives. Yet the novel implicitly underlines the adult-dominant atmosphere. They are afraid of going to an institutionalised orphanage by adults. Since the adults do not represent a good archetype figure, what remains for Jack is to imitate a fictional father figure. His passionate reading of the Commander Hunt may lead him to more catastrophic consequences, yet he accomplishes to overcome his domestic regulations not through an advice of an adult but through a fictional character. As the author Angela Synder states: *a good book makes you want to live in the story. A great book gives you no choice. The Commander Hunt was a great book for Jack in this sense.*

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## Abstrakt

Autor przedstawia zagadnienie wpływu obsesyjnej pasji czytania na charakter dziecka w powieści angielskiego pisarza Iana McEwana *Betonowy ogród* (*The cement garden*, 1978). Autor bada, czy nawyki czytelnicze dzieci można traktować jako mechanizm samoobrony przeciw władzy osób dorosłych, jak również podkreśla, że obsesyjny akt czytania może powodować rozczarowanie i wprowadzać w błąd dzieci podczas pełnych nieszczęść wydarzeń. W artykule została omówiona historia osieroconego rodzeństwa, które tworzy

rodzinę z dala od świata zdominowanego przez dorosłych. Tymczasowe rozwiązanie w celu przetrwania kończy się nieuniknionym posłuszeństwem względem zinstytucjonalizowanego dorosłego świata. Innymi słowy, dziecięcy akt pasji czytania może zapewnić lepsze samopoczucie, ale na krótko, ucieczka od ucisku dorosłych jest niemożliwa.

### **Abstract**

This chapter focuses on the influence of obsessive and passionate reading(s) of child character(s) in Ian Ewan's novel *The Cement Garden*. It scrutinizes how reading habits of the children are regarded as their self-defence mechanism against the authority of the adults, as well as it may also underline that obsessive readings may cause disillusionment and mislead the children through catastrophic events. To be able to investigate the statement, orphan siblings, who create their nuclear family with the help of their experiencing fiction they read, and far away from the adult dominant world, will be discussed. Yet their temporary solution to survive ends with inevitable obedience to the institutionalised adult world. In other words, their act of passionate reading can provide them better conditions in the short-run since the adult oppression is inescapable.