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Normal Abnormalities: Depiction of Sado-Masochistic Violence in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*

Hossein PAYANDEH¹

Abstract

Violence and death, being in one form or another a recurrent feature of every one of the contemporary English writer Ian McEwan's novels, have long been identified as the hallmarks of his work. Criticism of his work, however, has tended to screen off the many ways in which his fiction transcends the mere representation of violence to probe its innateness in all human beings. This paper aims to offer a critical study of McEwan's second novel *The Comfort of Strangers*. I postulate that literary critics' frequent reduction of McEwan's work to the topoi of violence and sex has typecast him as a writer of disturbing, salacious fiction; consequently, his thought-provoking engagement with cultural questions has more often than not gone unexamined. Arguing that McEwan writes to dissect and criticise contemporary culture, I offer a reading of one of his novels as a literary intervention into a cultural debate. I explore McEwan's penetrating analysis in *The Comfort of Strangers* of sado-masochism as a patriarchal distortion of sexual pleasure with brutal paradigms of dominance and subservience. By shifting the emphasis to McEwan's depiction of these abnormalities as potentialities in all human beings, I refute the view of critics such as Douglas Dunn, who argues that McEwan's novel assigns to the reader the "unwilling role of voyeur of abnormality". I conclude that violence and sex in McEwan's novel serve as a means: the end is to impart self-knowledge, to make readers more conscious of their desires, and ultimately more in control of their own predilection for violence.

Key Words: *gratuitous violence, sado-masochism, patriarchy, perversity, feminism*

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Ian McEwan is a controversial figure in contemporary English literature. Since the publication of his first books of fiction in the 1970s, he has gained notoriety as a writer obsessed with violence and sexual perversion. Dubbed “Ian Macabre” for the harrowing scenes of body violence in his short stories and novels, McEwan has been accused of writing deliberately to shock and disgust his readers.

The appearance of McEwan’s second novel, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), further fuelled the controversy over his depictions of violence. The novel aroused a spate of unprecedentedly harsh criticism and even moral condemnation by critics who believed it exemplified the typical elements of McEwan’s fiction: ominous setting, sexually deviated characters, gruesome climax involving murder. One such critic in *The New York Times* called *The Comfort of Strangers* “definitely diseased”, arguing that all aspects of eroticism in it were “sick”, and that McEwan’s sexual imagination had its “bloody excess” (Leonard 14C). Another wrote that to the question frequently asked about McEwan’s fiction, “When is he going to write something other than filth?”, *The Comfort of Strangers* answers “Not Yet” (Jones 24).

Yet perhaps no critic expressed in more explicit terms than Douglas Dunn the nature of the “moral” objections raised against McEwan. His remarks warrant quoting at some length because what he had to say on *The Comfort of Strangers* can be considered also as a summation of a recurrent accusation against McEwan’s work as such:

The menace in Ian McEwan’s new novel is entirely sexual. Admiring McEwan’s writing is one thing – his ability is beyond question – but the subjects which obsess him strike me as absolutely unwholesome. . . . [The *Comfort of Strangers* is] an exercise in minority sexual behaviour and I don’t think I can be the only reader of his novel who found himself in the unwilling role of voyeur of abnormality. . . . I don’t believe that the people characteristic of his novels and stories exist in any way that makes his writing socially informative. McEwan’s novel offers a kind of negative stimulus: it is to read a story about people one would run a mile from. . . . Most of the writing is beautifully taut and conducted with conspicuous skill, but extraordinary gifts, it seems to me, are being squandered in a search for sexual rarities. (51)

Although Dunn speaks of the menace “in” McEwan’s novel, his comments can be read as being about the menace of the novel. This menace stems from the way McEwan positions his readers with regard to the fictional world that he contrives: the reading process makes an “unwilling voyeur” of the reader, exposing him to the abnormal sexual behaviour of an apparently repulsive minority. Dunn suggests, then, that subscribing to the minority sexual world of *The Comfort of Strangers* is a prerequisite

for enjoying the novel. One has to be a willing voyeur to be able to read McEwan's novel through. Dunn's criticism of McEwan's fiction as obsessed with "sexual rarities" and "unwholesome" subjects seems to rest on a notion of literature that aims at general applicability. In order to be "socially informative", literature has to explore themes which are of interest to the majority of people.

Dunn's comments raise an important question concerning the general relevance of *The Comfort of Strangers*, which will be the focus of my reading of the novel in this paper: Is McEwan's novel about "sexual rarities", or does it investigate abnormalities in sexual behaviour which are so prevalent as to merit the oxymoronic designation "normal abnormalities"? I argue that remarks such as Dunn's illustrate critics' transference of their abhorrence of a subject-matter like sado-masochism to the novel in which sado-masochistic relationships between couples are probed. McEwan's fiction, in other words, is repudiated for its exploration of a subject chosen from the forbidden territory of adult sexual mores. As is often the case with the criticisms of McEwan, castigation for taboo-breaking replaces genuine critical engagement with the text. Moral condemnation makes it seem unnecessary to examine how McEwan explores his subjects.

The purpose of this paper is to defend McEwan against the accusations of gratuitous violence. I argue that criticism of McEwan's depictions of violence has tended to screen off the many ways in which his fiction transcends the mere representation of violence to probe its innateness in all human beings. I propose, therefore, to shift the emphasis to how McEwan manages to offer a persuasive study of sado-masochism by linking it to the patriarchal paradigms of sexual dominance and subservience, as well as by depicting it as a potentiality in all human beings.

The Comfort of Strangers is a brief narrative with only a few characters and a very short time-scale. It tells the story of a young English couple, Colin and Mary, holidaying in an unnamed tourist city. Colin has failed to become a singer or an actor and has a job in publishing. Mary is an actress who used to work with a women's theatre group and has two children from a former marriage. The couple have been lovers for seven years but have no great passion for each other. Unable to find restaurants or even their hotel, they frequently lose their way in the labyrinthine streets of the seaside resort. Late one night, they encounter Robert, a local who takes them to eat at his own bar. Later, Robert takes the couple home to meet his semi-invalid wife, Caroline. As the novel progresses, we learn that Caroline's disability is caused by the sado-masochistic sexual relations that she and her brutal husband have. The contact with the strangers provokes a sado-masochistic element in Colin and Mary's sex life. The novel ends with a graphic

account of how Robert murders Colin: he beats Colin up, daubs blood from Caroline's cut lip onto Colin's lips, kisses him deeply on the mouth, and then cuts Colin's wrist with a razor.

The main preoccupations of *The Comfort of Strangers* are signalled by its two epigraphs. The first, an extract from the poem "Sibling Mysteries" by Adrienne Rich, introduces McEwan's feminist concerns: "how we dwelt in two worlds/ the daughters and the mothers/ in the kingdom of the sons". The idea of women's world being essentially different from that of men's is foregrounded from the opening pages of the novel where Colin and Mary are introduced. Despite their long-standing relationship, the couple sleep in separate beds and are not on speaking terms. When they do attempt to communicate with each other, they fail to merge their separate discourses into a dialogue. The result is an alternation of monologues: each of them listens "patiently" to the other's dreams, but only "in exchange for the luxury of recounting their own". Their dreams, too, suggest distinct desires and concerns: Colin dreams "of flying, . . . of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger", whereas Mary dreams of her two children complaining that she has gone away without them, or of "her ex-husband steer[ing] her into a corner and [beginning] to explain patiently, as he once had, how to operate his expensive Japanese camera, testing her on its intricacies at every stage" (McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* 12). By juxtaposing his protagonists' dreams, McEwan emphasises their alienation from each other. McEwan seems to be availing himself of Freudian dream interpretation to suggest the couple's distinct concerns: preoccupied with sexual desire, Colin does not share Mary's maternal concerns or her feminist irritation at being treated like an imbecile. Their dreams are thus reflective of their disparate worlds.

Illustrating the alienation of Colin's and Mary's worlds is their inability to agree on the direction they should take in the maze of the tourist city's streets in order to find a place to satisfy their most basic human feeling — hunger. The couple constantly lose their way because either they forget their street maps, or — when they do have the maps — they are unable to decipher them: "[I]t was easy, Mary and Colin had found, to get lost as they walked from one page to another" (10). McEwan makes it clear, however, that the couple's disorientation is to be understood as being emblematic of the more important gender conflict between them. As the narrator explains, "Alone, perhaps, they each could have explored the city with pleasure, followed whims, dispensed with destinations and so enjoyed or ignored being lost. . . . [T]ogether they moved slowly, clumsily, effecting lugubrious compromises, attending to delicate shifts of mood,

repairing breaches. As individuals they did not easily take offence; but together they managed to offend each other in surprising, unexpected ways” (14-15). Their inability to read the street maps can be construed not as “incompetence” or “ineptitude”, as has been suggested by some critics,² but as symptomatic of their fundamental incompatibility.

Something else that Colin and Mary try to decipher while wandering in the streets are feminist posters calling for convicted rapists to be castrated. Through the couple’s reactions on seeing the posters, McEwan introduces his feminist concerns more directly:

Mary had climbed the first steps of the palace and was reading the posters. ‘The women are more radical here,’ she said over her shoulder, ‘and better organized.’

Colin had stepped back to compare the two streets. . . . ‘They’ve got more to fight for,’ he said. ‘We came by this way before, but can you remember which way we went?’ Mary was translating with difficulty a lengthy proclamation. ‘Which way?’ Colin said slightly louder.

Frowning, Mary ran her forefinger along the lines of bold print, and when she finished she exclaimed in triumph. She turned and smiled to Colin. ‘They want convicted rapists castrated!’

He had moved to get a better view of the street to the right. ‘And hands chopped off for theft? Look, I’m sure we passed that drinking fountain before, on the way to this bar.’

Mary turned back to the poster. ‘No. It’s a tactic. It’s a way of making people take rape more seriously as a crime.’

Colin moved again and stood, with his feet firmly apart, facing the street on their left. . . . ‘It’s a way,’ he said irritably, ‘of making people take feminists less seriously.’ (23-4)

The passage portrays Mary as a woman with a high degree of sexual consciousness. Her quick recognition of the fact that the women of the city are “better organized” and are pursuing “radical” demands, suggests her feminist sensibilities. That, by contrast, her partner does not appreciate these sensibilities is evident from Colin’s response; he ridicules Mary’s reasoning about the tactical nature of the militant feminists’ demand, implying that they do not deserve serious attention. Colin’s attention is directed to comparing two streets, a pragmatic and relatively easy task when compared with Mary’s

² Jack Slay, for example, describes Colin and Mary as “incompetent tourists, failing to explore the area with any degree of proficiency” (Ian McEwan 73).

contemplative evaluation of the women's movement. Whether in their dreams or in wakefulness, then, Colin and Mary have discrete, irreconcilable concerns.

Providing a foil to feminist Mary is the other main female character of the novel, Caroline. Typifying the battered wife, Caroline is first introduced felicitously as a phantom: "a small pale face watching . . . from the shadows, a disembodied face" (60). This impression of Caroline as an incomplete human being, as a woman reduced to certain aspects of her physique, is reinforced in another passage where her facial features are detailed: "Her small face . . . was featureless in its regularity, innocent of expression, without age. Her eyes, nose, mouth, skin, all might have been designed in committee to meet the barest requirements of feasibility. Her mouth, for example, was no more than the word suggested, a moving, lipped slit beneath her nose" (67). As the novel progresses and we come to know Caroline better, it becomes clear why McEwan describes her in terms of diminished bodily features: she is a miserable, obedient wife frequently beaten by a husband who has reduced her to a mere object used for satisfying his sadistic desires. Severely maltreated by Robert (she speaks of her body having been covered in bruises, cuts and weals; three of her ribs have been cracked; one of her teeth has been knocked out; one of her fingers have been broken; and she has been hospitalised for months after her back was broken), Caroline is in fact a semi-invalid, unable to bend down. So wretched is she that, ironically, even joyfulness causes pain to her: "It hurts when I laugh" (68). As Caroline herself points out, she is "just another beaten wife", "a virtual prisoner" in Robert's house of terror (109, 111).

McEwan throws light on the reasons behind Caroline's submission to patriarchal dominance in another scene between the two main female characters of the novel in which Caroline speaks about her childhood and the early years of her marriage. Caroline describes her childhood as both "happy and dull". The only child of a Canadian diplomat, she was the object of her father's excessive care and affection. She reciprocated by obeying him and, together with her mother, "worked hard looking after Dad, 'backing up the ambassador' " (108). It was with this mentality of subservience that, at the age of twenty and with no prior experience of sex, she married Robert. Caroline's account of her married life is a terrifying tale of love and hate:

Robert started to hurt me when we made love. . . . One night I got really angry at him, but he went on doing it, and I had to admit, though it took a long time, that I liked it. . . . It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it and being reduced to nothing by it. It's pain in a particular context, being punished and therefore being guilty It was as if I was discovering something that had been with me all my life. . . . Robert began to really hurt me. He used a

whip. He beat me with his fists as he made love to me. I was terrified, but the terror and the pleasure were all one. . . . Instead of saying loving things into my ear, he whispered pure hatred. . . . He made love to me out of deep loathing, and I couldn't resist. I loved being punished.

. . . . [T]he madness of what we were doing, and my own acquiescence in it, terrified me. . . . Robert confessed one night that there was only one thing he really wanted. He wanted to kill me, as we made love. (108-10)

The sequence of Caroline's accounts of her childhood and her early years of marriage suggests a consequence, too: Caroline's passive yielding to sadistic ill-treatment is shown to be the logical extension of the patriarchal creed of female devotion to the male, instilled in her by both parents. Caroline had been led to believe that a woman has to be grateful for the treatment she receives from the male head of the family, her gratitude essentially consisting in obeying and supporting him. It is this attitude that makes it easy for Caroline to submit to Robert's sadism. Hesitation in giving in to the patriarch's brutal demands provokes a sense of guilt, which in turn intensifies the desire to be punished even more. McEwan, then, links masochism to patriarchal values — the one creates the other at the same time as being reinforced by it.

Also linked to patriarchal values is the other form of sexual pleasure derived from inflicting pain: sadism. Robert, the arch-misogynist in the novel, is brought up to view men's position in the family and in society as one of domination over women. Like Caroline who cannot tell the story of her life unless she bases it on the roles played by male authority figures (her father and her husband), Robert cannot explain how he met his wife "without first describing his sisters and his mother, and these in turn could be explained only in terms of his father" (30). This reminds the reader of Adrienne Rich's poem in which daughters and mothers dwell in "the kingdom of the sons": femininity is only explicable in terms of masculinity. Robert's account of his childhood reveals how patriarchy was inculcated in him. He describes his father, a diplomat stationed in London, as a domineering figure of whom everyone was afraid, members of his family and his colleagues alike. The apple of his father's eye, Robert was often played off against his sisters: " 'Here is the next head of the family. . . . Robert, may the girls wear silk stockings like their Mama?' And I, ten years old, would say very loudly, 'No, Papa'. 'May they go to the theatre without their Mama?' 'Absolutely not, Papa.' 'Robert, may they have their friends to stay?' 'Never, Papa!' " (33). The tyrant sets an example of the imperious patriarch when he calls his son to his study to witness how he beats Robert's elder sisters with a leather belt for having secretly put on their mother's make-up. Like

Caroline's masochism, then, Robert's sadism, his insatiable desire to manipulate others, to stalk and even go as far as murdering his victims, is the consequence of the misogynist behaviour to which he was exposed and which he was encouraged to emulate.

McEwan combines his explorations of the internalisation of patriarchal values and sado-masochistic patterns of behaviour with the theme of travelling. The first hint about this theme is given in the novel's second epigraph: "Travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and you lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. . . ." Cesare Pavese's description of travelling as a situation in which people are compelled to rely on strangers is particularly applicable to Colin and Mary's plight. After their first encounter with Robert, the couple are unable to find their way back to their hotel and so spend the night in the street. The following morning, they are tired, thirsty and unable either to locate their hotel or even to find a glass of water. Therefore, when they encounter Robert again, Colin and Mary can hardly resist his insistent offers to take them to his apartment for some rest. "I will make you so comfortable you'll forget your terrible night," Robert tells the couple and they trust the stranger (53).

Colin and Mary choose to rely on the comfort provided by the strangers despite obvious indications that their relationship with Robert and his wife may expose them to grave danger. For example, when the couple wake up in the guest bedroom of Robert's apartment, they are surprised to find themselves naked with Caroline silently staring at them. When they demand that their clothes be given back to them, Caroline refuses to do so until they agree to stay for dinner. In the "family museum" that Robert keeps of his father's and his grandfather's possessions, Mary finds "several cut-throat razors arranged in a fan" which resemble the gold imitation razor-blade that Robert wears round his neck (59, 60). Also in this scene Caroline remarks that she would be prepared to kill her beloved if she were a man. Robert, too, makes derogatory comments about women; already, in their first encounter, Robert had said about militant feminists demanding castration for rapists that "These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. . . . They are too ugly" (28), but this time he speaks scornfully about women in general: "Whatever they might say they believe, women love aggression and strength and power in men. It's deep in their minds. . . . [W]omen long to be ruled by men. . . . They talk of freedom, and dream of captivity" (72). Significantly, while making these comments, Robert keeps "massaging Colin's shoulder gently"; he also strikes a heavy blow to Colin's stomach, "expel[ling] all the air from Colin's lungs", and winks at him (72, 73). Finally, as Colin and Mary leave Robert's apartment, they hear "a sharp sound that, as Mary said

later, could as easily have been an object dropped as a face slapped” (76). Through his protagonists’ condoning of all the patent indications of misogyny and violence in Robert and Caroline’s speech and behaviour, McEwan hints that the gap between the two couples is perhaps not as wide as it appears to be.

This hint is reinforced in the subsequent rekindling of Colin and Mary’s sexual desire for each other. What was missing in their sexual relations before meeting Robert and Caroline, was precisely passion: “Their lovemaking had no clear beginning or end and frequently concluded in, or was interrupted by, sleep” (18). However, their contact with the sado-masochistic couple results in the awakening of their somnolent passion. So immediate is the strangers’ impact on Colin and Mary’s relationship that, “[w]alking back from [Robert’s] apartment to the hotel, they had held hands all the way; that night they had slept in the same bed. They woke surprised to find themselves in each other’s arms. Their lovemaking surprised them too” (77). Their re-discovery of each other affords them such joy that they feel as if they have just met. In contrast to the early days of their holiday when they could hardly go beyond reciprocating accounts of their dreams, they are now so eager to talk with each other that they stay awake until four o’clock in the morning. Fascinated by their sexual rejuvenation, Colin and Mary barely leave their hotel room for four consecutive days.

However, the details of Colin and Mary’s renewed sex life suggest that McEwan sees little difference between them and the perverted strangers they have come to know. It is not only Mary whose intellectual interests in feminism are emphasised in the novel; her partner, too, is characterised as an intellectual, albeit with somewhat different, Marxist attitudes. For example, the narrator points out that, like “many times” before their holiday, the couple talk about the politics of sex. But, whereas Mary regards patriarchy as “the most powerful single principle of organization shaping institutions and individual lives”, Colin argues that “class dominance [is] more fundamental” (79). McEwan advances a cynical view about these intellectuals by suggesting that they share the same streak of sado-masochism that Robert and Caroline do. “You might well have grown up,” McEwan states in an interview, “deciding that you accept certain intellectual points of view, and you might also change the way you behave as a man or as a woman, but there are also other things – vulnerabilities, desires – within you that might well have been irreversibly shaped in childhood” (“John Haffenden Talks to Ian McEwan” 32). It is as an expression of such desires that, at the height of their sexual pleasure, Colin and Mary take to muttering to each other erotic fantasies which, ironically, involve mutilation and bondage:

[T]hey joked about handcuffing themselves together and throwing away the key. The idea aroused them. . . . Mary muttered her intention of hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin's arms and legs. She would keep him in a room in her house, and use him exclusively for sex, sometimes lending him out to friends. Colin invented for Mary a large intricate machine. . . . [which] would fuck her . . . till she was dead and on even after that, till Colin, or his solicitor, switched it off. (81)

These fantasies are reminiscent of the "pure hatred" which Caroline says Robert whispered into her ears while they made love (109). Both Robert and Colin derive erotic pleasure from the fantasy of inflicting pain on their partners, as Caroline and Mary take pleasure in subjugating to sadistic desires. Thus the turn in Colin and Mary's sex life brings their relationship closer to Caroline's definition of love: "By 'in love' I mean that you'd do anything for the other person. . . . And you'd let them do anything to you" (63).

The congruence between the two couples' conceptions of sexual pleasure provides a context for considering the climactic scene of the novel. Colin and Mary return to the strangers' apartment, where Caroline serves Mary with drugged tea and starts fondling and pinching Colin before Robert cuts Colin's wrist with a razor. Such a fatal event would have been predictable from Robert and Caroline's portentous behaviour, and yet Colin and Mary return to seek comfort from the strangers, McEwan suggests, because, like their hosts, they do not distinguish between pain and pleasure. It is precisely their failure to do so that makes them assume that Caroline takes delight in being maltreated:

'She's a kind of prisoner,' said Colin, and then, more certainly, 'She is a prisoner.'
'I know,' Mary said. . . .
After a prolonged silence Colin said, 'Perhaps he beats her up.' Mary nodded. 'And yet . . . she seemed to be quite . . .' He trailed away vaguely.
'Quite content?' Mary said sourly. 'Everyone knows how much women enjoy being beaten up.'
. . . . 'What I was going to say was that . . . she seemed to be, well, thriving on something.'
'Oh yes,' Mary said. 'Pain.' (91)

Significantly, in the above passage as well as in other similar passages where Colin and Mary discuss sexual politics, what is excluded from their conversation is their own relations. McEwan makes a point of stressing that, as intellectuals, the couple prove competent at scrutinising Robert and Caroline's behaviour, censuring the strangers for having patriarchal and sado-masochistic inclinations, but that ironically they overlook the same shortcomings in themselves. For example, we are told that "[w]hen they talked

of the politics of sex . . . they did not talk of themselves”; after their sexual regeneration, “they could not talk about the cause of their renewal. Their conversation, in essence, was no less celebratory than their lovemaking; in both they lived inside the moment”; and “[t]hey conversed rather than talked. . . . They avoided references to themselves. Instead they mentioned mutual friends” (18, 81, 96). By exempting themselves from the faults that they find in others, Colin and Mary vainly try to deny the very desires which they find themselves unable to suppress in their most intimate moments. Their return to the strangers’ apartment at the end of the novel is, therefore, symbolic of their willingness to associate with the people who share their (hidden) perversions. The two couples’ potential for forging a strong bond is also suggested by Robert, who remarks, “We knew you would come back. We were waiting, preparing. We thought you’d come sooner”, as well as by Caroline, who, just before Colin’s wrist is slit, tells him, “Mary understands. . . . Secretly, I think you understand too” (103, 119). Caroline’s claim concerning the two couples’ secret understanding of each other’s perverse desires for cruelty is borne out by Mary who, at the end of the novel, has a “theory [about] how the imagination, the sexual imagination, men’s ancient dreams of hurting, and women’s of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth” (125). Whereas Mary in the past believed that patriarchy was the “single principle of organization”, she now assumes that sado-masochism has this function. Even more alarming is Mary’s generalisation of this “principle” to all human beings, suggesting that deriving pleasure from sexual cruelty has always been universal among all men and women. This suggestion is corroborated by the police, who refer to Colin’s abuse and murder as “obscene excesses”, “describ[ing] the crime back to [Caroline] as wearily common, belonging in a well-established category” (123). The strange is not only familiar, but also commonplace.

The *Comfort of Strangers* bears all the hallmarks of McEwan’s fiction. McEwan startles and repulses his readers with a narrative of nightmarish atmosphere, bizarre characters and grisly events. As with his previous fiction, morbidity and violence pervade *The Comfort of Strangers*. It is not difficult to see why so many of McEwan’s critics have accused him of writing deliberately to shock. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that there is nothing beyond the morbidity and the violence. In his second novel McEwan offers a penetrating analysis of how patriarchy warps our sexual behaviour, distorting our conceptions of sexual pleasure with brutal paradigms of dominance and subservience which, at times, can be fatal. He traces unconscious perverse desires back to these paradigms and demonstrates that sado-masochistic fantasies are the expressions of the same desires. McEwan states that, when writing *The Comfort of Strangers*, he

was aware that “it wasn’t enough to talk about men and women in social terms, I had to address myself to the nature of the unconscious, and how the unconscious is shaped. It wasn’t enough to be rational, since there might be desires – masochism in women, sadism in men – which act out the oppression of women or patriarchal societies but which have actually become related to sources of pleasure” (“John Haffenden Talks to Ian McEwan” 32).

As in most of McEwan’s previous fiction, it is pessimism about human nature that prevails in *The Comfort of Strangers*. What he demonstrates with this novel is the ubiquity of evil, the universality of perverse desires in all humans. Unappealing as McEwan’s characters are, they nonetheless draw our attention to the disparity between people’s public images and their private, hidden selves. Displaying a shrewd understanding of this disparity, McEwan exposes the cruelty behind everyday civility, the agony behind seeming comfort. McEwan defines as one of his areas of interest “the way people’s unconscious brings them into conflict with their social structure or the gap between people’s presentation of themselves in the outward world and the inner one” (Stephen 38). *The Comfort of Strangers* is, in the end, about the necessity of acknowledging this conflict as the first step towards its resolution.

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